

In the Angels' Keeping



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A Killian Kendall Expanded Universe Story

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Cover Design: Josh Aterovis

But all lost things are in the angels' keeping, Love;

No past is dead for us, but only sleeping, Love

Helen Hunt Jackson

Chapter 1

“Where do you want this?” I asked.

“I’m a little busy here, Killian.” Steve said around a nail he was holding in his mouth. He was on a ladder in the parlor, carefully measuring to find the exact center of the wall over the fireplace.

“You should ask Adam or Judy, anyway. I’m just doing what they tell me.”

I put down the heavy wooden side table I was carrying.
“What’s going there?”

“Amalie’s portrait. I thought she deserved a place of honor.”

“You already named the place after her. Isn’t that enough?”
The portrait crept me out.

Steve marked the wall with a pencil, then quickly nailed a picture hanger into place. “If I’m calling the place Amalie’s house, it seems logical to hang her portrait over the fireplace. Maybe this is where it hung originally. It just feels right.”

Steve had bought the mansion, originally owned by Captain Marnien and his wife Amalie, a few months before with the intention of turning it into a bed and breakfast. The captain had built the enormous house for his young bride in the 1850s. Local legend claimed she died while he was out at sea. A few former owners claimed she never really left, claiming to have seen her spirit. I’d even had a few unnerving experiences of my own when Steve was first viewing the property.

I’d found Amalie’s portrait stored in a room full of junk on the second floor before Steve even bought the house. I’d also heard footsteps in the hall outside the room, but when I investigated, there was no one there. It may or may not have been Amalie herself — I didn’t stick around to find out. I’d been uneasy in the house ever since.

The upside was decades of ghost stories meant that Steve got a great bargain when he bought the place. Since then, he’d launched several months of extensive renovation and restoration. The grand opening was just two weeks away, and it was all hands on deck as we worked to get the place ready.

Adam, Steve's partner and my surrogate father, and our family friend Judy, an interior designer, were calling the shots. The rest of us were just manual labor. Painters were still working on the second floor, and an electrician was finishing up some wiring for the new appliances in the kitchen. The house was bustling with activity, which helped put my nerves at ease.

Just then, Judy charged into the room carrying the portrait. "Don't come down," she ordered Steve. "I'm bringing you Amalie."

She handed Steve the portrait, which he carefully placed on the newly installed hanger.

"The left side is a little high," Judy advised, and Steve made a slight correction. "Perfect." She turned to me. "That table is going in one of the guest rooms upstairs but they're being painted. Why don't you run it up to the third floor for now?"

"Oh sure, why not carry it up an extra flight of stairs?"

"That's an antique," she shot back. "I don't want paint to get on it. Besides, climbing stairs is good exercise. Great for your glutes."

"I don't get any complaints about my glutes," I muttered under my breath. It was pointless to argue, though, so I hefted the table and started up the stairs.

My arms were starting to burn by the time I reached the third floor, so I picked the closest room and stashed the table inside. The third floor wouldn't be open to guests. Eventually, it would be converted into an apartment for the family, but that was phase two of the renovation. Phase one was getting the B&B up and running.

I hadn't taken two steps back toward the stairs before an eerie sound made me freeze. Somewhere in the distance, I heard what sounded like the faint cries of a distressed infant. The crying continued for perhaps a full minute before my fear released me. I took the stairs down to the second floor two at a time.

One of the painters came out of a room holding a paintbrush, a confused look on his face.

"Did you hear that?" I gasped.

"Hear what?"

"That sound, did you hear it?"

The other painter entered the hall. "Only thing I heard was a herd of water buffalo stampeding down the stairs."

The first guy shrugged. "What did you hear?"

“It sounded like a baby crying.”

“Is there a baby in the house?”

“No.”

“It was probably just a cat,” the second guy offered. “Or a mockingbird. Those things can make some strange noises.”

I tried to force myself to accept his explanation. While it was infinitely more logical than an actual baby crying, somehow I couldn’t convince myself that what I’d heard had such a simple rationalization.

“You’re sure you didn’t hear it?” I asked again, just to be certain. Maybe the creepy old house was getting to me, playing tricks on me.

They both shook their heads. “Nope.”

I nodded and looked over my shoulder at the stairs, then continued down to the first floor.

Judy was in the front hall wrestling a hall tree into place. She glanced up at me and stopped. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“You look like you saw a ghost.”

I made a face at her choice of words. “Heard one maybe...”

Judy perked up. “What did you hear?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing, but when I was up on the third floor, I thought I heard a baby crying.”

“A baby crying? Is that part of the house’s lore?”

“Not that I know of. The painters said it was probably just a bird or something.” Even I could hear the doubt in my voice.

I shrugged it off and headed out to the moving truck packed with furniture for the house. There was too much to unload to worry about weird noises.

As I was coming back in with a dining room chair, the electrician was on the porch taking a cigarette break. He was an attractive, young guy — late twenties, black, well-built, with a well-groomed beard. He’d done all the electrical work for the renovation, and considering the age of the house, that had been quite a lot.

That gave me an idea.

I waited for him to finish lighting up, then approached him. “Hey, can I ask you a weird question?”

He exhaled a cloud of smoke. “I guess.”

“You’ve been working in the house a lot, right?”

He gave me a look, as if to say, "You know I have," then nodded.

"Have you...experienced anything weird while you've been here?"

"Weirder than this conversation?"

I blushed. "I mean like have you seen anything odd or heard strange sounds."

He took another drag on his cigarette before answering. "It's an old house. You hear stuff."

"Like what?"

"Just things like footsteps when you think you're alone in the house. Doors slamming upstairs. Nothing too out there. Just...a little creepy."

"You never heard a baby crying upstairs?"

His eyes grew round. "No, and I wouldn't still be working here if I did. A door slamming, that could be a breeze. Old houses are drafty, you know. But a ghost baby crying? Fuck that. Only white people hang around for that shit."

I laughed. "Okay, thanks."

"Hold up. Did you hear a baby crying?"

"It was probably just a bird," I said over my shoulder.

We finished unloading the truck a little after dark.

Eventually, my little brother Kane arrived with his best friend Ty and they gave us a hand, making the work go much quicker. By that time, we were all starving though.

"Who's ready to go get some pizza," Adam asked.

"Me!" Kane and Ty replied enthusiastically in unison. The rest of us were too tired to muster up much energy.

"Let's stop at Naples Pizzeria on our way home."

Kane and Ty left first to reserve grab a table while the rest of us finished up in the house. Steve was locking the front door when Judy realized she didn't have her keys.

"Oh, for god's sake," she muttered, digging through her purse. "I was using the mini measuring tape on my keychain all day. I must have set them down somewhere." She glanced up and smiled apologetically. "Sorry guys."

Steve opened the door back up, and we all filed back in. A quick search of the downstairs didn't turn anything up. Adam

suggested we all split up to search quicker. Being the youngest, I got assigned the upper floors.

Going upstairs alone was about the last thing I wanted to do, but I couldn't very well say no. A quick search of the second floor revealed nothing. There weren't many places to leave anything since the painters had been working there all day.

"Found them yet?" I called down before going up another flight.

"No, still looking," she called back.

I sighed and headed for the third floor, turning lights on as I went. As soon as I stepped into the hallway, I noticed the door to the cupola was slightly ajar. Had it been open when I was up there earlier? I wasn't sure. There was no reason for Judy to have gone in the cupola, so the keys couldn't be there, but I remembered Steve realtor saying the door sometimes opened on its own.

Intending to close it, I took a few steps before a soft creak echoed from the cupola above. I froze, heart pounding, but quickly shook it off. I was being ridiculous. Old houses made noises all the time. Steeling myself, I squared my shoulders and strode purposefully down the hall.

I yanked the door open the rest of the way and looked up the narrow staircase. Nothing. Just shadows and silence.

Enough was enough — I was determined to put all this ghost nonsense to rest once and for all. I started up the stairs, but halfway up, a sudden wave of dizziness hit me. I stopped, bracing myself against the wall. The feeling passed as quickly as it came, but it was enough to make me take the rest of the climb slowly and carefully.

I paused just below the top, nerves jangling, then forced myself to peek over the edge. Relief flooded through me, and I almost laughed. The tiny room was empty, bathed in the silver light of an almost-full moon.

I climbed the last few steps and stepped inside, taking in the view. The property stretched out before me, beautiful and serene under the moonlit sky.

As I turned to leave, I glanced towards the foot of the stairs and froze.

A woman stood in the hallway, gazing up at me with an expression of deep sorrow etched into her features. She had once

been beautiful—might still have been, if not for the heavy burden of sadness that seemed to age her. Her long, dark dress was plain and unadorned, and her hair was pulled back in a severe bun. Though she looked older and more worn than I remembered, I recognized her instantly. She was the woman from the portrait we'd hung over the fireplace earlier that day.

She was Amalie.

I stood paralyzed on the top step, staring down at a woman I knew had been dead for well over a hundred and fifty years. My entire body wanted to scream out in sheer terror, but somehow, as long as she held me in that mournful gaze, I couldn't make a sound. If she could speak, she chose not to, but I could feel sadness emanating from her in almost palpable waves. My throat closed, whether from fear, sorrow, or a mixture of both, I wasn't sure.

I don't know how long we stood staring at one another before she reached a hand out toward me, almost as if she were trying to tell me something. Instinctively, I recoiled, even though there was an entire staircase between us. Her expression darkened, and her sadness became tinged with a deep, seething anger.

Fear twisted into raw terror. Was she going to hurt me? Could she hurt me? I wanted to run, but the only way out of the cupola was down the stairs, and she was standing at the bottom. Panic rose, tightening my throat, until I couldn't hold it back any longer. I opened my mouth and screamed.

Immediately, Amalie vanished. Moments later, I heard what sounded like the entire combined U.S. Armed Forces storming up the stairs. I collapsed on the stairs, my heart pounding.

Adam, Steve, and Judy skidded to a halt in front of the door.

"Killian!" Adam yelled, fear in his voice at seeing me sprawled on the stairs. He took them two at a time to reach my side. "Are you hurt? Did you fall?"

I shook my head. "I, uh, slipped on the top step."

I felt enormously stupid, but it was better than saying I'd seen a ghost.

"Are you hurt?" Adam asked again.

"No. I'm fine. It just...surprised me."

Adam pulled me to my feet and helped me down the stairs.

“What were you doing up there anyway?” Judy asked in confusion. “We didn’t even go up into the cupola today.”

“The door was open, and I thought I heard something.”

That got Steve’s attention. His expression immediately went from concern to curiosity. “What did you hear?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. It could have been anything.”

“Well, just be careful,” Adam chided gently. “Now come on. We still have to find Judy’s keys.”

Judy was eying me suspiciously, though she didn’t say anything. I had a feeling I’d hear from her later.

We finally found her keys on the kitchen counter hidden behind a paint can, so we all left in our respective vehicles to catch up to Kane and Ty at the local pizza parlor.

After dinner, everyone started piling into their vehicles again to head home. Judy caught my arm as I opened my car door. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure, if I can manage to stay awake that long,” I replied with a forced laugh. I had a feeling I knew what she wanted to talk about.

“What exactly happened in the cupola tonight?”

I tried to seem as nonchalant as possible. “What do you mean? I fell on the stairs.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Maybe Adam bought that because it’s what he wanted to believe, but you were as white as a ghost.”

I flinched. Why did she have to keep referencing ghosts?

“What exactly did you hear?” she pressed.

“It was just a creak. Old houses make noises. It doesn’t mean anything.”

She studied me carefully. “What happened, Killian?”

“Nothing, really.”

I don’t know why I didn’t just tell her about Amalie. Judy of all people would understand. She was the one who told me I have supernatural gifts, one of which seemed to be seeing dead people. Lucky me! Part of me just wanted to avoid talking about it at all, as if that would somehow make it more real. I was still deeply disturbed by the experience.

She frowned but shrugged. “Okay, but if you decide you want to talk about it, you know where to find me.” She gave me a hug and headed for her car.

I drove home and went up to the room I shared with Kane, who was already sleeping like a baby. I was jealous of his ability to fall asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. I, on the other hand, lay awake in the dark for over an hour staring at the ceiling thinking about Amalie and wondering if I should have told Judy.

After much internal debate, I decided that I needed to talk to someone about what had happened, and Judy was the obvious candidate. I resolved to talk to her the next day, and with that issue laid to rest, I was finally able to get some rest of my own.

The next morning, we were all out at the B&B again bright and early. As soon as Judy arrived, I pulled her aside. "Do you think we could talk for a minute?" I asked.

"Of course. What's wrong?"

I glanced around at the others. "Let's take a walk."

We went around the house into the backyard and walked along the stream that ran along one side of the property. "I wasn't completely honest last night."

"I know."

I gave her a sharp look. "Your gifts?"

"Sweetie, I didn't need my gifts to know you were full of shit. I figured you'd come to me when you were ready."

I took a deep breath. "I saw Amalie."

Her eyes grew wide. "You actually saw her? When? Where? What did she look like? What did she do?"

"She looked just like her portrait, but...sadder and more haggard. She just sort of looked at me, like she wanted something."

"Do you have any idea what she wanted?"

"No."

"I can't believe you saw her. What was it like?"

"Terrifying."

I cast a nervous look at the house. The way the sun was glinting off the glass in the cupola, someone could have been up there watching us and I'd never know.

A chill ran down my spine.

"I wonder how she knew to seek you out?"

"I don't know that she did. To be honest, she seemed almost as surprised as I was that I could see her."

“Really? Then you must have particularly strong gifts, to see her when she isn’t trying to make herself visible.”

“Ghosts have to try?”

“From what little I understand — and remember, I’m not an expert — some do. By definition, ghosts are spiritual beings with no physical body. By the way, we use the term ghost pretty broadly. Some are spirits left behind from a sudden, often violent death. They’re confused and don’t fully realize they’re dead. Some seem to have unfinished business to attend to and can’t move on yet. Some are simply emotional impressions left behind after someone dies, echoes of a person often created by violent or intense circumstances.”

“Which of those do you think Amalie is?”

“I don’t really have enough information to say. Although, if she showed emotion and was surprised to see you, that sort of rules out an emotional impression. Do you know anything more about her?”

I recounted as much of the story the realtor had told us as I could remember. When I finished, Judy frowned. “That sounds romanticized to me. I’d like to hear the actual history of Amalie and her sea captain.”

As we were talking, we were approaching the edge of the lawn, where it butted up against an overgrown wooded area. Steve had asked the previous owners to clear the underbrush, but it was one of the few things they’d refused to do. It seemed they’d made some small effort, though. While the undergrowth was still heavy at ground level under the trees, they had mowed down most of the high weeds, small shrubs, and wild blackberry bushes that had made up a kind of thicket around the perimeter of the woods. As a result, we were able to get closer to the trees than I’d ever been before. We were skirting the edge of the woods when something caught my eye.

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Judy peered into the woods, trying to see what I was talking about.

“There.” I pointed to an oddly shaped lump covered in vines. “It looks like a statue or something.”

“I don’t see any— Oh, I see. Are you sure it’s not just a tree stump?”

"I don't think so..." I found myself oddly drawn to the vine-entangled form.

"Do you think we can get to it?"

"I'm going to try."

I started into the tangled mass of brambles that made it almost impossible to move under the trees. The thorny vines scratched and clawed at me with every step, pulling at my clothes and tearing at my skin. I ignored the scratches and cuts, disentangling myself as necessary, and kept pushing forward.

As I drew nearer, I could see my initial impression was right.

"It's definitely some sort of statue," I called back.

"Why on earth would there be a statue this far away from the house?" Judy wondered aloud. "Could it be an old formal garden, maybe?"

I didn't answer. The question was rhetorical, and I was concentrating so hard on the statue that I wasn't watching my step. Suddenly, I ran into something about knee high and found myself falling face first into the briars. I scrambled up to see what I had tripped over. It was a low grave marker — not a headstone, but the kind often used to mark the foot of a grave. A chill ran up my spine as I realized I wasn't in a garden.

It was a cemetery.

Chapter 2

“Killian, are you okay?” Judy called.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I replied. I’d almost forgotten she was there. A trickle of sweat dropped into my eye and I swiped at it, then wiped my hand on my shorts.

Now that I knew I was in a graveyard, I looked for the headstone. I spotted it a few feet away, not far from the statue I’d been so intent on. I moved closer and pulled the vines away. The top of the marker was dome-shaped, with a relief carving of a ship at full sail in a circle. The inscription was worn and overgrown with moss, but I could still make it out: “Captain Elijah Marnien. Born October 16, 1795, Died October 15, 1860.” He’d passed away the day before his sixty-fifth birthday.

“Killian? Did you find something?”

“Just a minute,” I mumbled distractedly.

I looked around and noticed a second headstone a few feet away. I made my way to it and ripped at its vine covering. “Amalie Marnien. Wife of Captain Elijah Marnien. Born May 5, 1833, Died March 16, 1855.”

She’d died so young, only twenty-one years old.

I turned my attention to the statue. I began tearing the vines off the stone, but it was a different story than with the smooth gravestones. The vines were surprisingly strong and stubborn, and they had more surface to cling to. I realized that to really clear them away, I would have to cut them. I did manage to pull enough of them aside to figure out what the statue was. It was a beautifully carved angel, arms raised in a silent benediction, wings unfurled majestically behind.

“Killian?”

“I’m coming.” I pulled out my phone and took a few photos, then fought my way out through the thorny growth.

“Oh my God!” Judy gasped when she saw me. “What happened to you in there?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re all bloody.”

"I am?" I looked down at my hand and saw drying blood smeared across my fingers. I realized the sweat I had been wiping out of my eyes was actually blood. "I guess I got a little torn up by the briars."

"You look like you barely escaped alive. Adam is going to kill me. What was in there? I hope it was worth all that."

"Graves. The captain's and Amalie's, along with a statue of an angel."

Judy's eyes widened. "Very interesting." She took a closer look at me. "Those scratches are going to start stinging very soon, if they haven't already."

They hadn't, but she was right. By the time we got back up to the house, my skin felt like it was on fire.

Adam was coming out of the front door as I reached the porch. "I was wondering where you guys disappeared—" He stopped mid sentence and did a double-take that would have been comical if I hadn't been so distracted by the stinging. "Dear God! What the hell happened? Is that blood? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It just stings."

"What stings?" Steve asked, appearing behind Adam.

"Whoa! What happened to you?"

"That's what I'd like to know!" Adam exclaimed.

"Judy and I needed to talk so we walked around back."

"And tangled with a homicidal, weed-whacker wielding skeleton?" Steve asked.

"Talk about what?" Adam asked at the same time.

I decided to skirt the ghost issue for the moment. "I found a cemetery with Captain Marnien and Amalie's graves."

"You found Amalie's grave?" Steve asked, my scratches momentarily forgotten, at least by him.

"Yeah, in a briar patch in the woods, where the underbrush hasn't been cleared. I saw something back there, and when I went to see what it was, I found this." I showed them the pictures on my phone.

Steve was still reeling from the news. "I can't believe Victoria didn't mention this when she was showing the house."

"Maybe she forgot," I suggested.

"It's more likely she didn't know about it," Adam observed. "We'll worry about that later. Right now, let's put

something on all those scratches. You look like you were pulled backwards through a hedge. I think I have a first aid kit in the trunk of my car."

After fetching his first aid kit, Adam proceeded to basically sterilize every exposed inch of my entire body with disinfectant wipes. The scratches weren't as bad as they looked after he washed all the dirt and blood away. That's not to say they didn't sting like crazy just the same.

Once that was done, it was time to get to work unloading even more furniture and arranging things in the newly painted rooms on the second floor.

My boyfriend Micah joined us around noon. He texted me when he arrived, and I met him on the front porch.

As soon as he saw me, his jaw dropped. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Early morning exploration."

"Of what? A cave full of angry cats?"

"A cemetery I found in the backyard."

"Oh really? I want to see."

"Later maybe. Need to finish up the house first. I'm so tired of moving furniture."

"I heard that," Steve yelled from inside.

"It's hardly a secret," I yelled back.

We were just wrapping up for the day when Judy asked us all to gather in the foyer. "I'd like to spend the night here tonight, if that's okay."

We all looked at her in confusion.

"We're not open yet, you know?" Steve joked.

"I know. But after what happened yesterday, I'd like to spend the night, see if I can get any more information."

"What happened yesterday?" Adam asked with a frown.

"More information about what?"

Judy turned to me with an arched eyebrow. "You didn't tell them?"

I tried to will myself out of sight, but, of course, I couldn't have a practical superpower. Seeing dead people? Check. Terrifying nightmares that occasionally came true? Also check. Turning invisible on command? Not a chance.

"Tell us what?" Kane asked.

Even Micah was watching me expectantly.

I'd have to thank Judy later for blowing my cover. With gritted teeth, I admitted, "I...may have seen Amalie yesterday."

"As in the woman who lived here when the house was built?" Micah clarified. "The dead woman?"

"You actually saw her?" Steve breathed reverently.

Adam looked skeptical. "You're saying you saw a ghost?"

I nodded.

Kane's eyes were wide. He looked thoroughly horrified.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"I dunno." I shrugged. "I was embarrassed. I felt like I was losing my mind, seeing things."

"How do you know you weren't just seeing things?" Adam asked.

"See. Now you think I'm crazy. This is why I didn't tell you."

"I don't think you're crazy. I just—"

Judy interrupted. "For the record, I believe Killian saw exactly what he said. That doesn't mean he's crazy. It means he has gifts."

"Gifts?" Steve and Kane asked in unison.

I sighed. I was getting tired of hearing about this. I didn't want anything to do with my so-called gifts. Besides, I still wasn't entirely certain that I wasn't simply sliding down the slippery slope to insanity.

Judy launched into her spiel about how psychic abilities were like talents and how she thought I had a gift for interacting with the dead. When she finished, Steve blinked owlishly, as if he wasn't quite sure he understood everything. Adam looked skeptical, Micah looked interested, and Kane looked more frightened than ever. I never would have pegged him as someone who would be so easily spooked.

"Why are we just standing around casually if this place is haunted?" Kane demanded.

"I don't think we have anything to be afraid of, Kane," Steve said. "From what I've been able to gather, Amalie has never been violent or dangerous."

"Yet..." Kane said ominously.

"I hate to sound like a Doubting Thomas," Adam

interjected, "but I have to admit I'm finding all of this a little hard to swallow. Aren't we a bit old to believe in ghosts?"

Judy arched an eyebrow. "Oh, they're real, but they aren't like the ones you see in horror movies. Often they're simply the spirits of people who died violently or suddenly, with something important left unfinished."

"Unfinished business," Kane said.

Judy flashed him a smile. "Yes, unfinished business."

"Will they go away if their business is finished?" Micah asked.

"Sometimes, but not always. I'm not sure why they don't. Maybe they're trapped in this plane, unable to cross over because of some decision they've made. Or maybe they simply prefer to stay here."

"I hope she leaves if we figure out what she wants," Kane said emphatically.

"Why?" Steve objected. "Is she actually harming anyone?"

"A ghost could be bad for business," Adam pointed out pragmatically. "Not that I necessarily buy any of this." He turned to Judy. "And you want to spend the night here because...?"

"I just want to sleep here," Judy explained. "Sometimes I pick up things in my sleep that I miss when I'm awake. Or perhaps it's just my subconscious pointing out things I overlooked the first time. Either way, I find it helpful."

Steve nodded. "I guess it can't hurt anything, but the beds aren't made up yet."

"No worries. We can rough it."

"We? Sorry, but I need to go home," Adam said. "I have a project due in the morning that needs a few finishing touches."

"I have, uh, homework," Kane added quickly.

"It's summer, school's out," I pointed out, and received a nasty look for my effort.

"It's not necessary for everyone to stay," Judy said. "Except for Killian."

"Me?"

"Yes. You've mentioned before that your gifts extend to dreams, and, for reasons as yet unclear, Amalie seems partial to you. You may pick up things I don't, or she may show you things she won't show me."

I frowned. After seeing Amalie, spending the night in this place was the last thing I wanted to do, but before I could argue, Micah asked, "Would it be alright if I stayed too?"

"I don't see why not," Judy replied.

"I'll stay, too," Steve announced.

This was quickly spiralling out of control.

"It's a supernatural slumber party," Kane said with a snort.

"You can do each other's hair." He'd cheered up considerably as soon as he'd learned he didn't have to stay the night.

"Maybe I'll just leave you here," Adam said warningly.

That shut him up.

"Well, I'm all dirty and sweaty from working all day, so can we at least go home and shower and change before setting up Camp Wannaleave?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Why don't we meet back here at eight?" Steve suggested.

"That way we'll have time to get dinner too."

Micah turned to me. "Why don't I pick you up after I shower and grab my sleeping bag? We can get dinner together."

I nodded. If I had to spend the night, at least Micah would be there too.

I took a quick, stinging shower after we got home, then threw a few things in a backpack, grabbed my sleeping bag and went downstairs to wait for Micah. When he rang the doorbell, Kane somehow managed to get there before I did.

"Micah's here," he yelled unnecessarily, considering I was standing three feet away. "Hope you guys are ready to star in your very own horror movie."

I glared at him. "Why are you so irritating?"

He batted his eyelashes. "I annoy because I care."

"I'm sure everything will be fine," Micah inserted, looking amused at our antics.

"Are you?" Kane asked ominously. "You have all night for your souls to be sucked from your bodies."

"Ghosts don't suck your soul out," I snapped. "That's demons."

"Bite me."

"That's vampires, and if you don't shut up, you'll be a ghost soon." I almost added 'just like your brother,' but caught myself just

in time. Kane didn't know about Seth's appearances, and I thought it was best to keep it that way.

"Okay, you two," Micah jumped in with a grin. "You guys fight like brothers."

Kane and I simultaneously turned mock glares on him. "Are you ready for dinner?" he asked me.

"Yeah, although I don't have much appetite."

"We'll go get your favorite pizza," Micah offered. "Maybe that'll help."

"Hey, it's my favorite too," Kane complained.

"Well, you can always still come along..." I teased, already knowing the answer.

Kane grimaced. "No thanks. Not even pizza is worth spending the night in that house waiting for the icy hand of Death to grab me by the shoulder."

"Icy hand of Death?" Micah gave me a disbelieving look. "Is he always this melodramatic?"

I laughed. "Yeah, and he's the straight one." I pushed Micah out the door. "Let's go before Kane drives me insane."

"Too late," Kane yelled as I shut the door in his face.

As promised, we stopped at my favorite pizza place, and I was surprised that my appetite returned once I saw that melted cheesy goodness, despite my nerves.

After dinner, we drove out to Amalie's House only to discover that we'd somehow beat everyone back.

"How about you show me that graveyard while we wait?" Micah suggested.

I shrugged. "Sure."

It didn't take long to show it to him. I wasn't up to climbing through the briars again, and, with the evidence of my last visit still quite obvious on my skin, neither was Micah.

"Is that the statue?" he asked, peering into the gloom caused by the rapidly darkening sky and thick grove of trees.

"Yeah, it's an angel," I answered distractedly. The wind had picked up as we walked across the yard. I stared warily at the foreboding black clouds gathering on the horizon. "Is it supposed to storm tonight?"

Micah followed my gaze, then pulled out his phone. "My weather app says yes, and, judging by that sky, I'd say it's right for a change."

"Great, the perfect setting for contacting the dead in a haunted house," I grumbled. "Judy couldn't have ordered better weather."

"It's just a summer storm." Micah took my hand and tugged me towards the house. "It's not an omen or anything. It'll be over in no time, probably before Steve and Judy even get here."

I glanced once more over my shoulder and fervently hoped he was right.

We hadn't taken more than a couple of steps when a drop of water landed on my shoulder. I looked up at the heavy sky and another drop hit me on the cheek. "Here it comes," I said. "Let's go!"

I tugged Micah's hand and we picked up our pace, but we were only halfway across the yard when the sky opened up and the rain fell in torrents. Laughing, we dashed to the front porch, where I noticed Steve's car in the drive and lights on inside.

Lightning arced jaggedly across the sky and a deafening crash of thunder followed almost simultaneously. I threw myself through the door with a yelp.

Steve was in the foyer as I exploded inside. He jumped as the door flew open, clutching his chest. "Are you trying to kill me?" he exclaimed.

I tried to compose myself as Micah joined us, closing the door behind himself. "I don't think it's me you have to worry about."

"Very funny. Where were you guys? I saw your car when I pulled up, but you were nowhere to be found."

"Micah wanted to see the graveyard."

"I did, too." Steve sounded disappointed. "Any sign of Judy?"

"Not yet, but that's a pretty serious storm that just blew in," I reported. "I hope she makes it before it gets much worse."

Just then, another bright flash of lightning lit up the windows and a huge crash of thunder shook the whole house.

"It was a dark and stormy night..." Micah muttered under his breath.

Suddenly, the door burst open again, and everyone jumped. We relaxed when Judy rushed in, pushing the door closed behind

her. Her hair was damp and her dark shirt was speckled with water droplets.

"Hello, everyone. It's raining," she announced unnecessarily.

"Thanks for the weather report, Captain Obvious," I commented dryly.

She chuckled. "It appeared out of nowhere. The wind is really gusting. Should be an interesting night." She rubbed her hands together eagerly.

"So what's the plan?" Steve asked.

Judy took a deep breath. "Okay... For purposes of full disclosure, I've never really done anything like this, which means we're going to be feeling our way along."

Another loud crack of thunder made us all jump. There was an almost constant rumbling at this point, and the storm only seemed to be intensifying.

"That's not very reassuring," I said.

"Just because this is all new to me doesn't mean I haven't been thinking about it a lot. I do have a plan. First, we need to figure out if there's any common thread connecting all of the manifestations."

We all thought for a few moments, but no one volunteered anything. The only sound in the room was the thunder and rain pounding against the windows.

"I can't think of anything," Steve said finally. "Although I've been here every time something happened, I've never seen or heard her myself."

"That's something, though. If you've been here every time..."

"But I've also been here lots of times when nothing has happened."

I hated to draw the attention back to myself, but I knew I had to speak up. "Something has happened every time I've been here."

"Aside from seeing her yesterday, what else has happened?" Steve asked.

"Remember the door slamming the first time we were here? And then the second time, for the walkthrough, I heard footsteps in the hallway but nobody was here. Then earlier yesterday, I thought I

heard a baby crying. And that was all before I ran into Amalie."

"Okay, we may be getting somewhere," Judy said.

"What do you mean?"

"You might be some sort of catalyst, Killian," she explained. "Certain people seem to draw supernatural activity. No one knows why. It's usually a young child right around the age of puberty, but a few people seem to attract it throughout their lives. And then there are sensitives."

"Sensitives?" Steve asked.

"A sensitive is someone who is receptive to other planes of existence. Some people call them mediums or psychics. It used to be known as the sixth sense."

"Are you a sensitive?" Micah asked Judy.

She nodded. "To a small degree, but more importantly, it seems Killian has a much stronger gift."

"If Killian's presence is what's causing Amalie to act up, then why did things happen before we ever came to the house?" Steve asked. "According to Victoria, reports of strange goings on have been around almost as long as the house itself."

"The more I think about it, the more I think that it isn't so much that Killian is causing her to act up. I believe she's trying to get our attention for some reason. Maybe she can sense that Killian is a sensitive so she's stepping up her efforts when he's here, but it sounds like she's been attempting to make some sort of contact for a long time."

Just then, a sharp flash of lightning lit up the room, followed almost instantaneously by an ear-shattering crack of thunder. The whole house seemed to shudder as the power flickered.

"Do you have a flashlight in case the lights go out?" Judy asked Steve.

"Oh great, just what we need," I grumbled. "Being in a haunted house during a storm just isn't complete without the electricity going out. I swear I've seen this movie."

"I don't think I have a flashlight here," Steve said, sounding a little nervous.

"We all have flashlights on our phones," Micah pointed out calmly.

"Of course," Judy said with a laugh. "Does it make me old that I always forget that?"

"We're definitely not old," Steve said with a frown.

"Okay, fogeys," I interrupted. "Judy, you said you had a plan?"

"Yes. Well, sort of. Doesn't Amalie have a fixation on the cupola? That's where you saw her, right?"

"She was at the foot of the stairs leading up to the cupola."

"Perhaps she has some connection there. I think we should check it out, see if we sense anything now that we're intentionally looking."

My eyes grew wide at the idea of climbing up to the cupola again — in the middle of a storm, no less — but I took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay, but we should all go."

"Why?" Judy asked.

"We shouldn't split up. None of that stupid horror movie, 'pick 'em off one at a time' stuff."

Judy laughed. "I don't think that's necessary. She's not hostile."

"You weren't there. She felt sad at first, but then, it was like she was...angry at me."

"Angry? At you?" Judy asked.

"Or angry at something, anyway."

"You didn't mention that before," Steve said.

I shrugged.

"Either way, I'd rather Killian and I went alone," Judy said firmly. "I want to recreate the setting when he saw her as closely as possible."

Steve looked disappointed, and I could tell Micah was dying to accompany us, but he leaned back against the wall without a word. His eyes followed us as we left the room.

I switched lights on as we went, although not every fixture had a bulb in it yet.

Almost as soon as we were out of the room, Judy started talking to me in a low voice. "Killian, I know you're still unsure, but I have no doubt that you are a sensitive. Now we just need to figure out how strong your gift is. Your impressions and feelings could be invaluable to figuring out the reason behind this haunting."

"But I don't have any impressions, and my only feeling right now is carefully controlled terror."

She laughed. "I know this must be somewhat scary,

considering it's all new to you. Describe to me what happened the time you heard the footsteps and the time you actually saw Amalie."

I quickly told her both stories, which didn't take long since there wasn't that much to tell. When I finished, she asked, "What were your impressions when you were in the hallway, or in the cupola?"

I thought back. "The time in the hallway, I felt...it was almost as though a presence was there with me, but I couldn't see anyone — or anything. I felt nothing in the cupola. Well, I got kind of dizzy on the stairs going up, but that was all. Actually, come to think of it, that happened the other time I was on those stairs, too."

"Very interesting. Maybe you felt something in the staircase, some latent emotions."

By then we'd reached the hallway on the third floor. I flipped the switch and a single light bulb lit the corridor. It was enough to see that the cupola door was closed. We walked down the hall and stopped in front of the door. I felt a chill as Judy reached out and lifted the latch before turning the knob. The door swung open with an eerie creak, the perfect sound effect for a B-movie scene.

She stepped back. "Light?"

It suddenly seemed as if we had run out of words, or maybe we were too preoccupied with our own thoughts to waste energy, or perhaps Judy felt the same sense of tension and foreboding that I did.

I reached around her, keeping her in front of me, and threw the switch. Nothing happened. I flicked it up and down a few times, but it was obvious the bulb had burnt out. The dim light from the hall hardly reached past the first couple of steps. Beyond that, there was just an inky gloom punctuated by the flashes of lightning.

Judy turned her phone flashlight on. "Good thing Micah reminded me this existed."

Her phone cast a weak path up the worn wooden steps. I wasn't at all eager to go up there, but I was even less keen on staying in the hallway by myself. When Judy started mounting the stairs, I turned my own phone light on and followed close behind her. About halfway up, she stopped abruptly with a sharp intake of breath.

"What is it?" I whispered hoarsely.

Instead of answering, she rushed up the last few stairs with

me close on her heels. Once in the cupola, she turned and stared back down the stairs.

Flickering, blue-white light lit the room as one streak of lightning followed after another with almost no pause in between. The roll of thunder was almost deafening up there, like a passing freight train. The window panes rattled from the wind, rain, and thunder. If I hadn't been so terrified, the sheer majesty of Nature's fury would have been awe inspiring. It was as if we were in the very heart of the storm.

Judy spoke, her voice jerking my attention back.

"Something happened on these stairs."

My throat was tight with fear, but I managed to croak,

"What?"

"I'm not sure. I felt a wave of pain, physical pain, and I sensed...death."

I had to gulp several times before I could speak again.

"Amalie?"

"No, I don't think so. It felt...different. I felt mourning, too.

And..."

"And what?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, it's a part of the steps now, like a psychic stain."

We were both quiet for a minute. "Why would she come to this room?" she asked, almost to herself.

"She came to watch for her husband," I answered. "The realtor said that in those days, you could see quite a ways up the river from here. He was a sea captain. She would come up here to wait for him. When he didn't come back when she expected him, she thought he had died at sea." I was babbling and I knew it. I'd told her this story before, but it was preferable to the silence. "Maybe that's why she keeps coming back. She's still waiting for her husband. And that's why she's mourning. Maybe she even committed suicide by throwing herself down the stairs."

"Utter bullshit." Judy waved away my suggestion. "That kind of melodramatic romantic crap only happens in old Victorian gothic novels. No real woman strong enough to run a house like this by herself would pine away waiting for a husband she barely knew to come back."

"Barely knew?"

"He was much older than she was, right?"

"Yeah..."

"And he was away at sea for months at a time, probably for much of the year. No doubt she did keep watch for him, if for no other reason than to be ready for him when he arrived, welcoming him the way a good wife was expected to, but I seriously doubt that she was so in love with him that she killed herself when he failed to appear on schedule.

Besides, your story never mentioned her dying tragically, and, trust me, the newspapers of the time would have mentioned it if she had. My guess is that she died of some illness. There is the taint of death on these stairs, though. What is it that draws her here?"

I was about to suggest we go back downstairs and discuss things with everyone else when lightning hit somewhere close to the house. The accompanying sound was like an explosion that left my ears ringing. The flash itself temporarily blinded me. When I blinked away the spots, I realized that the hall light was out now, too. Until it was gone, I hadn't realized how the dull glow had been a sort of safety blanket. The only illumination left came from our flashlights and the ever present lightning.

"That was close by," Judy commented. She was trying for a casual tone, but her voice was a little shaky. "Maybe we'd better go check on the others."

"Sounds good to me," I agreed weakly. "I doubt this is the safest place to be right now."

She started down the stairs with me right behind. Again she stopped abruptly about halfway. I reached out to steady her, but she didn't seem to need it. Her body had gone rigid. I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. I couldn't see anything, but I somehow knew we were no longer alone.

Judy sat down with a heavy thud, revealing Amalie standing in the exact same place where I'd last seen her. Our eyes locked, and, despite having seen her once before, I found I was far from prepared to come face to face with her again. Even in the flickering lightning, I had no trouble making her out.

I was struck by how different she looked from the ghosts you see on TV or in movies. She wasn't some wispy apparition or pale, transparent figure — and yet there *was* something insubstantial

about her, something that let me know she didn't belong in this world.

She was wearing the same dark mourning dress and the same intense expression. There was no mistaking the look in her eyes — she wanted something.

A wave of anguish crashed over me, so powerful and raw that I knew it wasn't mine — it was hers. Whatever had happened to her, the heartbreak and fury still clung to her, undiminished by the passage of time. The intensity of her emotions settled heavy in my chest, squeezing my heart with its weight.

The apparition turned away abruptly, shattering the spell. My knees buckled and I sat down heavily on the steps behind Judy.

Chapter 3

Judy recovered before I did. She stood and took the remaining steps in one graceful leap. She looked up and down the hall almost frantically, waving the phone's beam back and forth.

"She's gone."

I realized that the hairs on my neck and arms had settled back to their normal state. I knew without question that Amalie really was gone, at least for the time being. I pushed myself to my feet and joined Judy in the now empty hallway just as the lights flickered and came back on.

Judy looked closely at me. "You saw her too, right? I didn't imagine that?"

"I saw her."

"I don't understand. I thought she wanted us to follow her, but then she was gone when I got down here."

I hugged my arms around myself. "Can we go downstairs now?"

She agreed and we rejoined the others where they were waiting in the ballroom.

"You missed all the excitement!" Steve exclaimed as we walked through the door.

I snorted. "I seriously doubt that."

"The electricity went off and then we heard footsteps," he plowed on. "We thought it was you at first, but whoever it was kept going down the hallway. Next thing we knew, we heard a door slam shut. Before we could go investigate, the lights came back on. We were trying to figure out what happened when you came back downstairs, so we knew it wasn't you."

I looked at Judy. "Amalie? Do you think she came down here after we saw her?"

"Where were the footsteps heading?" Judy asked, a sharp intensity in her voice. "Could you tell which door slammed?"

"Wait a minute! You saw her? What happened up there?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, we saw Amalie again, but she disappeared before we could follow her."

"You both saw her?" Adam asked.

"Yes. But where did the footsteps go?" Judy persisted.

"It sounded to me like they stopped at the door to the basement," Steve finally answered, "but I can't be sure."

"The basement?" Judy repeated. "Show me."

Steve led the way to the door tucked away under the staircase in the hallway. The rest of us trailed behind like ducklings. I knew the house had an old-fashioned, dirt-floored cellar, but I'd never been down there. From what I understood, once all the safety regulations were met, not much else was done to it.

Steve opened the door and flipped on his flashlight. "The light is at the bottom of the stairs," he explained, "so we'll have to use this going down."

"Anybody else want to wait up here?" I asked hopefully.

Everyone wordlessly filed down the stairs, so I heaved a sigh and fell in behind Micah. The four of us gathered at the bottom of the stairs while Steve pulled the chain that lit the single dim bulb hanging from a rough wooden beam.

Except for the wires and pipes passing overhead, the basement must have looked much the way it did when Captain Marnien built the house. The dirt floor gave off an earthy, dank smell, and moss covered the brick walls. Someone had constructed a wooden, bench-like counter along the back wall — for vegetable storage in the days before refrigerators, I guessed. As damp as it was, it wasn't a suitable place for storage, so it didn't take long to realize that there was nothing much to see.

A collective sigh of relief went up. I hadn't even realized I'd been holding my breath.

We all stood around staring at each other uncertainly until Micah spoke up. "What now?"

Judy sighed. "No sense standing around here all night. If Amalie wants to communicate with us, she'll have to try a little harder. Why don't we set up our sleeping arrangements while we still have power? This storm seems to be settling in for the long haul."

We trooped back up the stairs, and Steve closed the basement door before asking, "Where should we sleep?"

"What room was Amalie's? Do we know?"

Steve jerked his head toward the second floor staircase.

"I'm assuming the largest bedroom, although whether or not Amalie actually slept in there, we have no way of knowing. But that room has furniture in it already. I don't think there's room for us to spread out. Are we all sleeping in the same room?"

"Yes!" I answered emphatically. Everyone turned to look at me. "Safety in numbers, remember?"

"I suppose it doesn't really matter," Judy said. "How about the ballroom, then?"

The decision made, Steve pulled out a wooden card table and some folding chairs and we all sat down to snack on the chips and salsa he'd thoughtfully brought from home. While we nibbled, Steve demanded to know exactly what had happened in the cupola. We quickly filled him in, then chatted for a while about everyday stuff, dropping the subject of the supernatural by unspoken mutual consent. After a while, Micah pulled out a deck of cards and we played Rummy for a few hours.

"I have to pee." I announced a little before midnight.

"Thanks for the newsflash. You know where the bathroom is," Steve said.

"I don't want to go by myself." I turned to Micah. "Come with me?"

He grinned. "What? Are you afraid Amalie will catch you with your pants down?"

I smiled and batted my eyelashes. "Maybe, but if a certain big, strong man would protect me..."

"Oh please," Judy groaned. "You're making me nauseous."

We all laughed, but I was relieved when Micah followed me from the room.

As I emerged from the bathroom, he grabbed me and gave me a gentle kiss. "Mmm. I've been dying to do that all night."

"Interesting choice of words," I said softly, and he gave an ungentlemanly snort. "So, what do you make of all this ghost stuff? Do you think I'm crazy?"

"It's been interesting, I'll give you that. I definitely don't think you're crazy. I kinda hoped I'd get to see her."

"Believe me, it's not all it's cracked up to be."

"Still, I'd like to experience it for myself, at least once."

"How about if I give you my next experience for free? You think they're transferable?"

"You seem pretty confident you'll have a next experience."

"According to Judy, it's inevitable. I'm a sensitive, remember?"

"Ah, yes. Killian the Great—Seer of Wonders, Friend of the Dead," he teased with a dramatic flourish.

I stuck my tongue out at him.

"Hey, on the bright side, at least we get to spend the night together for the first time," he added, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"With two chaperones," I added.

"It's a start."

I smiled. "Yeah, it is that."

"Have you ever spent the night with a guy before?"

"Um, I...uh..." I looked away, feeling awkward.

Micah caught my chin in his hand and made me look him in the eye. "You don't have to be embarrassed to mention your ex around me, Killian. I understand you had a life before me, just like I had a life before I met you."

I eyed him with interest. "Was there ever anyone special?"

It was his turn to look away. "Yeah."

"Will you tell me about him?"

"Eventually, yes. Maybe not right now. It's...not easy to talk about."

"So, are you saying when you came out of the closet you left some skeletons in there?" I asked lightly, trying to brighten the mood.

Micah frowned. "You could say that."

That piqued my curiosity. I hadn't expected a serious answer. "Like what?"

"Like I said, I'd rather not talk about it right now. Sometime, I promise, just not right now."

I nodded and leaned in for one last kiss before we rejoined Steve and Judy. Just then, a thin, low sound made a shiver run down my spine. I jerked away as if I'd been shocked.

"Did you hear that?" I hissed.

"Hear what?"

Before I could answer, it came again, louder this time, and unmistakably the sound of an infant crying.

As the chilling sound washed over me, every fiber of my

being was screaming "run," but my feet were frozen in place. Micah seemed similarly affected as he didn't move so much as a muscle. The sound of clattering footsteps broke our immobility. Judy burst into the foyer looking remarkably like a dog straining to locate the source of a noise.

She charged down the hall and skidded to a halt in front of us. "Do you hear that?" We nodded in unison.

"Come on, Killian," she called and darted off in the direction the noise was coming from.

I stared for a moment at Judy's retreating back before pulling away from Micah and following her with a little more caution. I found her standing in front of the basement door, her gaze fixed intently on the knob as if willing it to open of its own accord. I didn't want to open it either, so we both stood there listening to the crying that was inarguably coming from the other side.

With a sudden flash of movement, Judy yanked open the door. The crying stopped immediately. I looked at Judy, who was staring intently down the dark stairs. "Are you really going down there?"

She glanced over her shoulder at me, then turned on her phone flashlight and started to descend. I heaved a ragged sigh before following her.

At the foot of the stairs, she pulled the chain and the dim bulb came on, swinging eerily without doing much to dispel the gloomy darkness. It was enough, however, to show that nothing had changed since we'd been down earlier.

Despite the normalcy of the appearance, I felt a tightness in my chest that threatened to choke me. It was the same thing I'd felt earlier with Amalie. I gasped.

"You feel it too?" Judy asked. I nodded and eased myself onto the first step as she said, "Something here is connected to the cupola stairs. The pain feels familiar, but I can't figure it out. There's a sense of...fear and...and helplessness. I can't quite explain it."

"You don't have to. I feel it too. I felt the same way upstairs with Amalie."

Judy turned to look at me. "What happened up there?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I just...felt a connection to her. She wants our help."

"I figured that much. Do you have any idea what she wants

us to do?"

"No. It wasn't anything that clear, but it must be linked to the basement as well as the cupola."

Judy nodded. "I think you're right. Come on, I've seen enough down here." I breathed a sigh of relief and took the remaining steps two at a time.

Micah was waiting in the hall. "Find anything?"

I shook my head. "Nothing concrete," Judy confirmed as she shut the door carefully. "Just some almost indescribable emotions. It's difficult to put them into words."

"So what do we do now?"

Judy smiled. "We go to bed, just as planned. I'm hoping we'll get some messages in our sleep. The planes tend to converge in dreams."

"I'll be lucky if I can sleep at all," I complained, and Judy gave me a comforting pat on the back.

We made our way back to the ballroom, where we began to get ready for bed. Judy and Steve set up in opposite corners of the room, and Micah followed their lead, choosing the third corner.

I was in no mood to be off by myself in the fourth corner, though, so I unrolled my sleeping bag right next to Micah's. Nobody commented, but Micah gave me a warm smile.

Steve stood by the door until everyone settled in, then turned the light off. He made his way to his own spot using his phone flashlight as a guide and tucked himself in.

After his flashlight flicked off and complete darkness settled over the room, I reached out my hand and fumbled for Micah's. His strong fingers laced with mine, and I instantly felt comforted. Almost without thought, I found myself snuggling into his chest. His arms wrapped around me and, much to my surprise, I soon dozed off.

Strange and disturbing images filled my dreams, but when I awoke the next morning, only two of the odd visions remained with me.

In the first, I found myself standing in the backyard at night, except everything looked different. The trees around the house were much smaller, and the forest surrounding the property was much deeper. All of the trees were bare, as if it was winter.

As I watched, a small rowboat glided silently up the inky-black creek. Its lone occupant was shrouded in a heavy, hooded wool cloak that concealed his face, but, I knew, with that unexplainable certainty that dreams sometimes bring, it was a man.

He secured the boat to the rough wooden dock and hurried toward the house, its windows dark except for the faint glow of light emanating from the cupola.

A knot of dread twisted in my stomach, though I couldn't say why.

The second dream was far more disturbing. A woman was on her knees in the dirt, digging frantically with her bare hands. Her thick dark hair hung down, covering much of her face. She was surrounded by utter darkness, except for the flickering light of a single candle stuck in the earth. It was obvious she was distressed. The candlelight suddenly reflected off something on her bosom, and I recognized the intricate gold brooch that Amalie had worn in the portrait. As I watched helplessly, I realized that there was something just on the edge of the candle's light — a baby, wrapped in a blanket.

I was lying half asleep, still thinking about the haunting image from my dream, when I remembered that I wasn't in my bed at home. Then I realized who was attached to the arm draped across my body. I sat up with a jolt, waking Micah in the process.

He blinked up at me with bleary eyes as I looked wildly around the room. Steve was still asleep in his little nest of blankets, but Judy's was empty.

"Good morning," Micah greeted with a sleep heavy voice. He reached up and gently pulled me down for a kiss, then asked, "Did you sleep okay?"

"I had some strange dreams. I need to go find Judy and tell her about them."

"Okay. I think I'll just lie here and rest some more." His eyes fell shut.

I kissed his forehead and made a quick detour to the bathroom. After that, I began looking for Judy. I found her in the backyard, staring out at the creek.

"Good morning," I said quietly, not wanting to startle her as I walked up.

She glanced back at me with a small, half smile. "Did you

dream?" I nodded. "Tell me about them."

"I only remember two."

"Then those are the important ones. Tell me yours, and I'll tell you what I saw."

I took a deep breath and related the dreams as well as I could recall them. When I finished, she stood thoughtfully for a few seconds before speaking.

"It's all coming together now." She spoke so softly I almost had to lean in to hear her. "The second dream connects to what I saw. The first...well, I don't understand how it fits just yet, but I'm sure it must."

"What did you see?"

"I saw Amalie. She was in the cupola and she was holding a baby in her arms. The baby was crying, and she was trying to comfort it."

"The next part of the dream is confusing. I feel as if I'm missing a part, because she was suddenly rushing for the stairs. She was very frightened. She must have stumbled, and then suddenly she was falling down the stairs with the baby under her. I woke up at that point, but the baby was almost certainly killed in the fall."

"Oh my God!"

We stood for a while in a kind of horrified silence. Judy was the first to break out of her reverie. "So now we know what happened, or at least part of it. Let's go tell the others what we've pieced together."

I wasn't entirely sure we had pieced together anything — and I was supposed to be the detective — but I followed her back into the house. We found Steve and Micah in the foyer, on their way out to the cars with a load of blankets and sleeping bags.

Steve gave us a sunny grin as we entered the room. "Who's up for some breakfast?" He stopped when he saw our expressions. "Is something wrong?"

"We have an idea of what happened," Judy told him.

"You do? How?"

"Killian and I saw some visions last night in our sleep. I believe they were images of what happened in this house over a hundred and fifty years ago. I think Amalie became pregnant and had a baby here in the house, possibly while the Captain was out to sea."

"If the Captain was out to sea, whose baby was it?" Micah asked.

"She could have been pregnant when he left, and they simply didn't know it. Or it wouldn't have been that uncommon for a beautiful young woman left alone for much of the year to have a lover. There's no way for us to know, although maybe that has something to do with Killian's first dream."

She told them about the man in the boat, and then finished up with the big news. "My dream and Killian's second dream are the ones that really brought the picture into focus. One night, after the baby was born, it seems Amalie was up in the cupola for some reason, perhaps watching for the Captain's return. She fell down the steps while holding the baby. We think the baby died. Killian saw her digging a hole, probably to bury the baby in."

"Holy shit," Steve hissed.

Micah wasn't quite ready to accept what she had told him. "How do you know this really happened and isn't just a bunch of dreams brought on by circumstances?"

While Judy had been explaining our dreams to Steve and Micah, several pieces of the puzzle had fallen together for me. "It fits the facts we know and the feelings Judy and I have been having," I spoke up. "Actually, I think she buried the baby in the basement."

"What?" Micah and Judy exclaimed at the same time. Steve stared at me in silent horror.

"Why would she do that?" Micah gasped.

"It was winter, probably very cold outside. The grounds might have been frozen, or maybe she just wanted her child close to her. I got the impression she wasn't thinking very clearly."

"Killian's right," Judy said thoughtfully. "The baby I saw was very small, obviously not very old, and postpartum depression isn't a new phenomenon, even if they didn't call it that back then."

"So...you're saying there's a baby buried in the basement?" Steve sounded shaky, and he looked as though he might keel over at any second.

"It seems likely."

"How does this explain Amalie's haunting?" Micah asked.

"Usually what we call a ghost is really a spirit caught in this plane, unable to move on for whatever reason. Maybe by choice

or maybe because it doesn't fully realize it's deceased. Often a great trauma is to blame, and what greater trauma is there than losing a child?"

Micah shook his head. "But I thought Amalie didn't die right away. Would she still be that...emotional about the death of her baby months or years later?"

"Her baby died in her arms. She probably blamed herself," I suggested. "That would be hard to get over."

"You never fully get over losing a child," Steve said quietly, and I suspected he was referring to Adam.

Micah still wasn't convinced. "But what's her unfinished business?"

Things were still falling together in my head. "Maybe she didn't intend to leave the baby buried in the basement. The stories say the captain found Amalie dead when he returned. Maybe she died before she could rebury it. The captain might not have known about the baby or, if he did know she was pregnant, he might have assumed she miscarried. That happened a lot back then, right? So he buried her in the cemetery, but she couldn't stand to leave the baby alone. Maybe that's what she's been trying to tell us. She wants us to know about the baby."

The words had barely left my mouth when the sound of door after door slamming shut began to reverberate through the house. It continued for several seconds before a sudden silence descended.

Steve's eyes were as wide as mine felt. "Was that a sign?"

A creaking sound from behind us caused us all to spin around in time to see the basement door slowly swing open.

We looked at each other in silence, fear and shock mirrored in our expressions, before Judy finally nodded slowly. "I think we can assume it was."

A few days passed before Steve caught me on my way to work one morning. "Why don't you invite Micah over for dinner tonight," he said.

"Um, sure, but why?"

"I have something I need to discuss with everyone. Judy is coming too."

“Let me guess. This has something to do with Amalie and the baby.”

Steve gave me a wan smile. “You got in one, bucko.”

“What’s going on?”

“You’ll see. I’d rather wait and explain it once.”

“Ugh. You know how much I hate not knowing what’s going on!”

Steve laughed. “You’ll live.”

I quickly texted Micah with Steve’s invitation, and Micah agreed to come. His curiosity was every bit as piqued as my own. Journalists and private investigators were more alike than different.

When I came home from work, I bugged Steve to tell me what he had up his sleeve until he banned me from the kitchen, where he was busy preparing enchiladas for dinner. Finally, Micah and Judy arrived, and they joined Adam, Kane, me, and Steve around the kitchen table.

“So what’s this all about,” I asked before anyone had even taken their first bite.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Obviously, I’d better tell you all now or Killian will never let us eat in peace.” Everyone chuckled.

“I have to admit I’m curious as well,” Judy said.

“Me too,” Micah chipped in.

Kane shoved half an enchilada in his gullet. “Not me,” he said around his mouthful.

Adam shook his head. “I’ve done such a great job raising you.”

Kane showed his half-chewed wad of food and crossed his eyes.

“Anyway,” Steve said, regaining our full attention, “I spent the last couple of days making phone calls concerning our discovery this weekend. I’ve decided to excavate the basement.”

Everyone froze, forks stopped in midair.

“What?” Kane was the first to react. “You’re digging up a dead baby?”

“Assuming there really is a baby,” Adam said. “I mean, I have no reason to doubt what Killian and Judy saw in their dreams, but we don’t know anything for sure yet. I mean, they were just dreams, after all.”

Judy opened her mouth to argue, but Steve rushed in. “You weren’t there, Adam. Amalie made herself pretty clear. And if there is a baby buried down there, we can’t just leave it under the basement floor. I mean, it seems like that’s what Amalie has been trying to tell us. Maybe this will help lay her spirit to rest.”

Judy nodded. “I think that’s likely, depending on what you do with the baby after it’s exhumed. Do you have a plan?”

“Yeah, I do. Tell me what you think of it. The first thing I did was check on the local laws concerning human remains found on private property. I found out that we’ll have to arrange for the county coroner to examine the bones to determine how old they are, whether foul play was involved in the death, and if they are Native American or not. He gets forty-eight hours to look them over, and, as long as he rules that the bones are old but not native, they’ll be returned to us for reburial.”

“Returned?” Kane asked, aghast. “Why do you want them back?”

“I want to rebury them in the private cemetery on the property, next to Amalie.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Judy said.

“So when were you thinking about doing all this?” Adam asked.

“Well, here’s the crazy part...”

“You mean digging up the basement of the house you just bought because a ghost told you there’s a dead baby buried there isn’t crazy?” Kane commented dryly. “This oughtta be good.”

Steve ignored him. “I want to do it before the grand opening. Hopefully, this will put Amalie to rest and she’ll just be fun story to tell guests instead of an actual spirit haunting their rooms.”

“So, when are you thinking?” Adam asked.

“The coroner said this weekend is the only time he’d be available for the next two weeks.” Steve turned to me. “You’ve been awfully quiet through this whole thing, Killian. What are you thinking?”

I took a deep breath. “I think reburying the baby is probably the right thing to do. But I’ve got to admit this whole thing freaks me out a little.”

“Nobody *has* to be there, but I’d like it if you were. After

all we've been through, it just seems appropriate that we'd see it through to the end together. What's freaking you out exactly?"

"I mean, I've never seen a dead person dug up, let alone a baby. Do I really have to go?"

"You're an adult. I can't force you to go if you really don't want to," Steve said. "But as the person who seems to have the closest connection with Amalie, it would be nice to have you there in case she makes an appearance."

Kane frowned. "Well isn't this shaping up to be a fun little party? Will we be serving refreshments? Maybe baby carrots? Or baby corn? Oh! How about baby back ribs? I'm sensing a theme coming together here..."

"Kane..." There was a sharp warning tone in Adam's voice. Kane wisely shut up. "Maybe we should just leave him home."

"I'd really like everyone to be there," Steve said.

"What time is this supposed to happen?" I asked.

"The medical examiner is free any time after six in the evening, so he agreed to meet us there around 6:30 on Saturday."

On Saturday, we divided into two cars — Adam, Steve, and Judy in one, and Micah, Kane, and I in the other. Once at the house, Adam and Kane waited for the medical examiner, while Steve, Judy, Micah, and I went down to the basement to set up the lights for the dig. We were borrowing four 1000-watt light stands from the contractor who'd been working on the house. After we'd set one up in each corner, it made the small room as bright as day.

Once that was done, Judy turned to me. "Do you remember where Amalie was digging in your dream?"

I shook my head no. "It was too dark to tell."

"Well, we can't just start digging up the whole floor. Do you think you can pinpoint where the baby might be?"

"How?"

Judy gave me a sheepish look. "I'm not really sure, to be honest. Just trust your instincts, sweetie. And your gift. Maybe walk around, see if any place draws you. Maybe you'll feel a pull."

"You make it sound like divining," I said, a bit more testily than I intended.

"Sort of the same thing? I'm just grasping at straws here. This is far outside of my own experience."

“Well, it’s far outside of mine, too. Not to mention, also far outside of my comfort zone.” I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I stood still, just sort of listening, waiting for something to indicate where we should look. Nothing happened.

I looked up to find three sets of eyes watching me expectantly.

“So, uh, I think maybe I’d perform better without an audience. Would you guys mind waiting upstairs with Adam and Kane?”

“Oh, of course,” Steve said quickly.

Micah gave me a hug of encouragement, and then the three of them tramped up the stairs.

And then I was alone.

At least the room was much less intimidating as brightly lit as it was. I walked around a little, but still felt nothing. I was beginning to think it wasn’t going to work. Then I had an idea.

I felt a little silly, but it was worth a try. “Amalie? We want to help but we don’t know where to look. Can you show me where you buried your baby?”

The silence stretched out until I began to feel even sillier. I really was losing my mind. What was I thinking, trying to talk to a ghost?

I was just about to give up when I felt her before I saw her. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck and, a few seconds later, there she was, standing stock still, arms hanging at her sides, eyes locked on mine.

Just as quickly as she appeared, she vanished. For a moment, I wondered if I’d imagined her. But as I stepped toward the spot where she’d been standing, the room seemed to waver, like a ripple across the surface of water. For the briefest instant, it was as if I were seeing two versions of the room overlaid like a double exposed photograph, one current and one long past. I saw Amalie, but not as a ghost this time. She was alive, crouched on the floor and digging frantically, just as I’d seen in my dream. And then the effect ended as suddenly as it had begun.

I crouched down where I’d seen Amalie and touched my palm lightly to the ground. Somehow, I knew with certainty that it was the right spot. Using my fingertip, I drew an X in the dirt.

With that finished, I tuned in to the voices upstairs. I heard several people talking, including a voice I didn't recognize. I went upstairs to let them know we were ready.

"Ah, this is Killian," Steve said when I appeared. "Killian, this is Dr. John Jones, the medical examiner who's doing us a huge favor tonight."

I shook Dr. Jones's hand. The ME was as bland as his name, short and dark with an egg-shaped, shiny bald dome sticking up out of a thin ruff of graying hair. He looked to be in his mid- to late-fifties, and was definitely on the portly side. He wore a bored expression along with dung brown polyester pants and a beige button-up shirt.

"Are we ready to get started?" Judy asked me, and I nodded.

"Great!" Steve clapped his hands together nervously. "Then let's head down."

As we followed Steve down the stairs, I suddenly wondered how Steve had gotten the ME to agree to this. What had he told him? We think there's a baby buried under our basement floor? The obvious question would then be, what makes you think that? If he'd told the truth, I doubted the doctor would have been there. He would have simply called the men in white coats to cart us all away.

Once we were all in the basement, Judy noticed the symbol I'd drawn. "Is this where we should dig?" she asked.

I nodded. "X marks the spot."

"How should we do this, Dr. Jones?" Steve asked.

Dr. Jones frowned. "I don't have a clue. This is all rather unusual. When you said you'd discovered something that led you to believe there was someone buried in your basement, I assumed you'd already found bones."

"Ah, no. Just some...information."

Dr. Jones shook his head. "If you dragged me all the way out here for nothing, I'm going to charge you for my time."

Steve gave him a half-hearted smile. "Only one way to find out. I guess these will have to do." He picked up two small trowels from the bench and offered one to me. "Killian?"

"No thank you!" I said quickly, holding up my hands as if to ward off a blow.

“I’ll help,” Judy said, stepping forward and taking the second trowel.

“If you actually find anything, I’ll step in and assist,” Dr. Jones said in a tone that clearly suggested he didn’t expect us to find something.

Judy and Steve knelt on the ground on either side of my X. We all watched in tense anticipation as the two of them carefully began scraping away the packed earth. We didn’t have to wait long, Amalie hadn’t buried the baby very deep. The collective gasp at the sight of the first tiny bones, shockingly white against the dark earth, was easily audible in the oppressive stillness. For a few heartbeats, silence reigned, thick and unyielding. Then, a shuddering gust of wind swept through the silence, as if the house were heaving a sigh of relief.

Chapter 4

Several hours later, the ME had laid out an almost complete — if very small — skeleton on a piece of tarpaulin next to the shallow hole. Of those gathered around, only the medical examiner, Kane, and Adam were really surprised by the pitiful find. I'd had to turn away after they found the tiny skull. It was partially crushed, and I couldn't bear to look at it.

The coroner took a few minutes to examine the bones while Judy kept poking in the dirt. Suddenly she jumped to her feet with an exclamation of surprise, cupping something in her hands.

"More bones?" Kane asked in horror. His color had just started returning. He'd looked a bit green during the excavation.

"No!" Judy definitely sounded excited.

We all crowded close to see a dirt-encrusted brooch in her palm. Even as dirty as it was, I recognized it immediately. I'd seen it before — on the portrait I'd found in the storage room.

"Amalie's brooch," I said in a soft voice.

"Well, that cinches it," Steve agreed with deep satisfaction.

"Cinches what? Who's Amalie?" Dr. Jones asked in confusion.

"She was the wife of the man who built this house back in the 1850s," Steve explained. "We think the baby was hers. We found her portrait upstairs, and she's wearing the same brooch in the painting. That would seem to confirm our suspicions."

Dr. Jones shook his head. "I must say, this has been one of the most bizarre chapters of my career. I don't know how you found out about the baby or why you thought to dig down here in this exact spot — and I'm not sure I want to know — but it's obvious these bones have been in the ground for a long time." He gathered up the remains in the tarp and stood up, tucking the heart-wrenchingly small bundle under his arm.

"This isn't official," he continued. "I'll have to run some lab tests to confirm my gut feelings, but I think it's safe to say this isn't a matter for the police. If you still want to re-enter the remains on your own, I should be able to release them back to you on

Monday, barring any suspicious findings. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to salvage something of my evening."

Steve jumped to his feet. "Of course! Thank you for coming out, Dr. Jones." He brushed the dirt from his palms so he could shake the ME's outstretched hand.

Once Dr. Jones left, we all stood around looking at each other with the same unspoken question written on our faces: Now what?

"Well," Adam said, looking a little shaken. "I don't know about you guys but I think I could use a drink."

"I'd like a whiskey on the rocks, please," Kane muttered.

"Make mine a double," I agreed.

Everyone chuckled nervously while avoiding looking in the direction of the shallow grave.

"Maybe we should all head back to our house. I think we all need to decompress a bit," Steve suggested.

We all filed upstairs, with Steve staying behind long enough to turn off the lights.

We caravanned back to the beach house, where we all gathered on the back deck. Adam produced a large pitcher of lemonade, and generous shots of vodka were added to everyone's but mine and Kane's.

Adam sighed heavily as he leaned back in his chair. "I'm glad this is all behind us and we will finally put Amalie to rest."

"Hopefully," Judy added warningly.

The others laughed off her caveat, and the conversation turned to plans for the reburial, but I found myself distracted by the idea that Amalie's haunting days might not end with the discovery and reburial of her child. I'd hoped I would be done with ghosts, or that particular ghost, anyway. The idea that we might not have heard the last of her disturbed me more than I'd like to admit.

I shook off those unsettling thought and tried my best to rejoin the conversation, which had moved on to more mundane topics. Eventually, Judy said she should probably get home to check on Jake. Micah sighed and said he should probably get going as well.

I walked him to his car, mostly as an excuse to have a few seconds alone with him to properly say goodnight.

“Well, Mr. Gerber, still want to date a guy who talks to dead people?” I asked as he wrapped his arms around me for a tight hug.

He squeezed me back. “You already know the answer to that. I have to admit, though, while I never doubted that anything you guys saw was real, it was still quite a shock when Judy and Steve found those first bones. It just made it seem...I don't know, more real somehow.”

I laid my head on his shoulder. “It was all too real for me even before that.”

“Yeah, but you'd actually seen Amalie. I only heard the baby crying and the doors slam shut. Which, I mean, is plenty, don't get me wrong, but it's not the same as coming face to face with a ghost. I kind of wish I knew what it was like to see her myself.”

“It's horrible. I hope it never happens to me again.”

He pulled back and gave me a lingering kiss. “Well, hopefully Amalie will be put to rest with the baby.”

“Hopefully.”

He gave me one last kiss, and then we broke apart.

I watched him drive off before heading back inside to get ready for bed. I was completely drained, but no matter how hard I tried, sleep wouldn't come. I lay there listening to Kane's steady breathing, silently wishing — for once — that Seth would show up. I had so many questions. But, of course, there's never a dead guy around when you actually need one.

As predicted, the baby's remains were returned to Steve within a few days. Dr. Jones confirmed the bones were from the mid-nineteenth century. The baby, a boy, was likely only a couple of months old.

Steve quickly made arrangements to re-inter the tiny skeleton that weekend. We made a very somber assemblage when we gathered on Saturday evening. The six of us — Adam, Steve, Kane, Micah, Judy, and me — gathered in a semicircle around a small, open grave next to Amalie's plot.

Steve had hired a crew to come in and clear the copse of the thick undergrowth. Without the vines and brush, it was much less intimidating. The sky, on the other hand, was appropriately threatening. Although the forecast hadn't called for rain, the clouds

were dark and dramatic. The freshly revealed and exquisitely carved angel statue stood over us, as if blessing the occasion.

A tiny, simple casket was already in the grave. A headstone would be installed in a few weeks. Since we didn't know what name Amalie had given her child, all the marker would say was, "Here lies the son of Amalie Marnien – Died 1858."

Steve cleared his throat and began. "I'm no writer, but I, uh, prepared a few words." He took a deep breath and unfolded a piece of paper.

"Life is a precious gift, given to each of us," he read. "What we do with that gift is a choice we all make. But until we're old enough to make those choices for ourselves, our parents hold that responsibility. They are our caretakers, our stewards.

"The life we're honoring today ended far too soon. I can only imagine the pain his mother must have felt — pain that, I believe, only another parent who has lost a child could truly understand."

Adam sniffled quietly beside me. When I reached over and slipped my hand into his, he gave mine a grateful squeeze.

Steve continued. "While many of us may not be able to fully comprehend that kind of loss, perhaps we can understand the deep sorrow that comes when something precious is taken from us before we're ready. And maybe we can take some small comfort in knowing this innocent child is remembered now.

"There's no question he was loved — fiercely, and even beyond the grave. His mother's spirit remained with him here for almost one hundred and seventy-five years, refusing to let him be forgotten."

He paused briefly before going on. "While searching for something that felt right for a moment like this, I came across a poem titled *At Last* by Helen Hunt Jackson. She wrote it around the same time this child lived and died. And standing here beside this angel statue, it strikes me as more fitting than I could have imagined. Mrs. Jackson wrote:

"All lost things are in the angels' keeping, Love;

"No past is dead for us, but only sleeping, Love.

"This baby may have left too soon, but he is not dead, only in the arms of the angels. May he rest in peace."

In the silence, I heard Judy whisper, "And his mother, too."

With the burial complete, our focus returned to the grand opening, which was only a week away. Everyone was relieved when Amalie didn't make herself known during the final preparations. We began to cautiously believe she really had been laid to rest with her baby.

Finally, the night of the grand opening party arrived.

The house looked incredible, aglow with lights in every window. All of the furniture was in place, art hung on the walls, and Adam had arranged fresh flowers in each room. Steve had laid out hor d'oeuvres in the ballroom, along with two old-fashioned punch bowls filled with fruity concoctions, one with rum and one without. Classical music played from speakers hidden behind potted palms.

Guests began arriving a little before seven. Adam and Steve were leading small tours giving the history of the house, while Kane and I were in charge of making sure the hor d'oeuvre trays and punch bowls stayed filled.

I saw many familiar faces, but there were quite a few people I didn't recognize as well — locals and curious looky-loos, I supposed. Steve had done a great job of marketing the opening.

Everything was going great until an ear-piercing shriek broke through the party chatter. I felt my stomach drop as the room fell silent and everyone turned toward the foyer. I pushed my way through the crowd in time to see a blond woman I didn't recognize careening down the stairs, her face pale and her eyes wide with fright.

Steve met her at the bottom, practically catching her in her headlong flight. "Are you okay? What happened?" he asked.

"A woman..." she gasped. "Oh dear God, the woman..."

"What woman?" Steve asked.

A sense of dread washed over me. I had a very bad feeling I knew who the woman was.

"She just appeared. It was so horrible. I was so scared..." the blond woman was babbling, on the edge of hysteria. "She was so angry..."

A man pushed through the crowd and the woman rushed into his arms. "What the hell happened?" the man asked.

"There was a ghost," she sobbed, and the crowd gasped.

Steve looked around the room until his eyes found mine. He looked scared, but I didn't know what to do. I was scared, too.

Luckily, Judy stepped in. "Well, friends, what's a historic mansion without a few ghosts?"

The guests chuckled nervously.

"That's right," Steve said, his bright customer service smile back in place. "Amalie's House is so great, some people never want to leave."

Judy turned to the stricken woman, still clinging to her gentleman friend. "Why don't you come with me. I'm sure after that surprise you could use a stiff drink."

The woman pulled away, nodding vigorously.

"Why don't you join us, Killian," Judy added rather pointedly.

"Oh, no, I'm fine. I don't need a drink," I replied quickly, but Judy gave me a look as she led the couple away. With a heavy sigh, I trailed down the hall after them.

Judy took the woman into the kitchen, where she poured a generous shot of whiskey into a crystal glass and pressed it into the woman's shaking hand.

"I don't think we've met," she said smoothly. "I'm Judy Cassara."

"I'm Phylicia Hopkins, and this is my husband, Trevor."

"It's lovely to meet you, although I'm sorry you had such a scare."

"What happened anyway?" Trevor asked.

Phylicia took a gulp of the bourbon and shuddered. "I... I wandered away from my little tour group," she began. "I just wanted a closer look at one of the rooms. I went in, but then I felt a...a sensation, as if I wasn't alone, almost like there was someone behind me. I spun around but there was no one there. But then, when I turned back around again, there was a woman standing in the middle of the room."

"It was probably just someone else from the tour," her husband said dismissively.

"No!" Phylicia insisted. "It was like one second no one was there and then she just appeared out of thin air."

"People don't just appear, Phylicia," he said.

"No, but ghosts do!"

"There's no such thing—"

"What did she look like?" Judy asked, cutting him off midsentence.

Phylicia shook her head. "I only saw her for a split second before I screamed and ran, but she was wearing a long, old-fashioned black dress. And she looked angry."

Before I could stop myself, I whispered "Damn it," under my breath.

Everyone turned to look at me as if they'd forgotten I was there.

"Is this some sort of prank?" Trevor demanded.

Phylicia's eyes were wide. "You know who it is, don't you?"

I looked to Judy for help, unsure of what to say.

She came to the rescue once more. "I suspect it was Amalie," she said matter-of-factly.

"As in...Amalie's House?" Phylicia said as she grew a shade paler.

"Yes, the wife of the man who built this house."

"Did you know she was still...here?" Trevor asked.

"We thought she'd been laid to rest," she replied. Then her eyes found mine. "Obviously, we were wrong."

It took several more minutes, and a second glass of bourbon, to get Phylicia calmed down. The whiskey helped, but she and Trevor left soon after she polished off her drink.

On their way out, Phylicia spotted the portrait of Amalie over the fireplace and stopped in her tracks. Pointing a shaky finger, she exclaimed, "That's her! That's the woman I saw!"

Trevor quickly escorted her from the building, followed by several other guests who'd been unnerved by her declaration.

Thankfully, the rest of the evening proceeded without a hitch, though I remained tense, waiting for Amalie to make another unplanned appearance. I'm sure Adam, Steve, and Judy were just as nervous.

When the last guest finally left, Adam reeled to face Judy and me. "What the hell happened tonight?"

"Amalie happened," Judy said in a resigned tone.

Steve and Kane rejoined us. Steve looked tired and strained, and Kane just looked scared.

"I thought she was gone," Steve said.

Judy rubbed her temples. "We all did."

"I thought this was all behind us," Steve continued. "We found the baby and reburied him next to his mother in the cemetery. You said that would allow her to move on, but here she is, still going bump in the night."

"Hey," I said, softly. "None of are thrilled to hear she's back, but it's not Judy's fault."

Judy gave me a weak smile. "I hoped she'd move on after we moved the baby, but it was only a guess, not a guarantee. We assumed that her haunting had something to do with the baby, but...maybe we were wrong. Maybe that was just part of a much bigger picture."

"What do you mean?" Adam asked. "What's the bigger picture?"

"I don't know...yet. That's what we need to find out." Judy locked eyes with me.

"I was afraid you were going to say that," I said with a sigh. "Can't you do it without me? I've had enough ghostbusting to last me a lifetime."

"I'm afraid not. Like it or not, you're involved. You're one of the threads of this tapestry. Amalie has shown in the past, for reasons of her own, that she's drawn to you. I think if we're going to get to the bottom of this, it'll take all of us working together."

I turned to Steve. "You were all excited about having a ghost at first. I thought a friendly ghost was a draw."

"I was excited at first," Steve said, "but Amalie isn't exactly a friendly ghost. You saw how that woman reacted to seeing her. She said Amalie was angry. Just imagine if that happened to a guest when all the rooms were full. If that gets out, no one will want to stay here."

"Steve has put a lot of money into this project," Adam spoke up. "If the business fails, he loses everything."

"Can't we just have an exorcism?"

"First of all, she's a ghost, not a demon. And exorcisms? Just a bunch of religious mumbo jumbo. What really matters is that we *do* something. There's too much at stake to sit around with our fingers in our ears pretending nothing's happening."

She was right, of course, and I was out of arguments. I knew I had to help, which meant I'd have to seek out my old pal Amalie again. I sighed, and my body slowly released some of the tension as I accepted the inevitable.

"What do you want me to do?"

"We're going to try to contact her."

"And do what?" Adam asked.

"I want Killian to ask her why she's still here now the baby is gone. I'm hoping she'll communicate in some way."

"And if she doesn't?" Steve asked.

"She will," I said, sounding more confident than I felt.

"How are we going to do this? In the cupola again?"

Judy shrugged. "It's as good a place as any. Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Then let's go."

"Can I just wait down here?" Kane asked plaintively.

"By yourself?" Adam asked.

Kane blanched. "Never mind, I'll come with you guys."

When we reached the third floor, I stopped and faced Adam, Kane, and Steve. "Maybe you should wait here." I suggested, and they nodded. Kane looked relieved.

I turned and faced the door to the cupola. "Here goes nothing."

"I'll go first," Judy said as she started up.

As I followed Judy, the same sense of loss and despair I'd felt the other times washed over me again.

When I reached the top, a small scuffing sound came from behind me. I spun around, thinking someone had followed after all, but there was no one on the stairs, just three anxious faces staring up at me from the hallway.

As I stared back, their features began to blur, slipping out of focus. A strange sensation washed over me — not quite dizziness, but a disorienting feeling, as if I were somehow slipping out of sync with my own body.

"Killian?" Judy's voice seemed to come from far away.

I started to turn toward her, but the feeling suddenly intensified. It was much more defined than the vague sense of dread I'd had on the staircase.

My vision wavered, and the already dim room seemed to sink further into shadow. The staircase faded until the bottom riser disappeared from view, leaving only the steps directly in front of me faintly lit by a flickering, sickly glow.

My feet felt rooted to the floor, yet a terrible, almost overwhelming fear surged through me. I wanted to flee, to hurl myself down the stairs just to get away, but I couldn't move. It was as if time itself had frozen around me. Somehow, I knew — deep in my bones — that I wasn't myself anymore. I was Amalie. And just as surely, I knew I was clutching a small baby to my chest.

There was someone behind me. Something. A presence that filled me with dread. I didn't need to see it to know I had to escape. That thought had barely formed when I was shoved — hard — from behind. For an instant, I was suspended in the air, weightless. Then I plummeted into the inky darkness of the stairwell.

Chapter 5

“Should I call an ambulance?” I heard Adam ask in a strained voice.

“I don’t know,” Judy said. “Wait...I think he’s coming around.”

I opened my eyes to find myself lying at the bottom of the stairs on the hall floor. Judy, Adam, Steve, and Kane were standing around me in a football huddle. Everyone looked a little fuzzy.

“Killian, are you okay?” Adam asked anxiously.

“I was pushed,” I mumbled.

“What?” Steve, Judy, and Adam demanded in chorus.

Steve and Adam turned disbelieving stares on Judy, who looked stunned and a little afraid. I’d never seen that expression on her face before, and I found it rather disconcerting.

“There was no one up there except me and Killian,” she said quickly.

“The ghost pushed him?” Kane asked.

“No,” I said as things began to come into focus and my thoughts cleared along with my vision. “Amalie was pushed. Not me. I think I fell. I got really dizzy.”

Everyone stared at me as if I’d lost my mind, but I didn’t care. I was too excited by the scenario forming in my head to worry about my sanity.

When I struggled to get off the floor, Steve quickly pushed me back down. “Lie still, Killian. You might have a concussion.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted, nudging him aside and sitting up. Although my head spun for a moment, it quickly settled into its proper place. “Don’t you see? Amalie didn’t fall with the baby. She was pushed.”

“Are you sure?” Judy asked.

“Yes. It was like a memory. No, that’s not quite right. It was like it was happening to me, but I knew it wasn’t me.”

I saw realization light up Judy’s eyes. “You experienced it through Amalie.”

“Like an out-of-body experience?” Steve asked.

“Kind of...?”

Judy stepped in. "It seems another one of Killian's gifts is to relive certain emotions and events from someone else's life, as if they're happening to him in real time."

Adam frowned. "I don't get it."

"In addition to being a sensitive, it appears Killian is also an empath," Judy explained. "An empath can absorb and experience another person's emotions as if they were their own. But Killian goes a step further — he can actually tap into past events, especially those tied to death or powerful emotions. Those kinds of moments leave the strongest imprints, which he's able to sense and, sometimes, relive."

"Wait," Steve said. "So you're saying he felt Amalie being pushed down the stairs?"

"No, I felt like I was Amalie being pushed down the stairs," I broke in. "I knew I was holding the baby, even though I couldn't see it. It was like I was there, inside her body. I couldn't move, I was frozen, but I was aware of someone else in the cupola with me, someone I was afraid of. And then I felt someone shove me from behind and I was falling. The next thing I knew, I was down here with all of you standing over me."

Adam turned his attention to Judy. "You never said these gifts could be dangerous!"

"As far as I know, they aren't. If Killian had been on solid ground he probably wouldn't have fallen."

"Well, he wasn't on solid ground. He was standing at the top of a very steep staircase. He could've been killed. And what do you mean, as far as you know? Are you saying you don't really know how dangerous this stuff is? And you've been encouraging Killian to pursue it?"

"Adam, calm down," Steve said, laying his hand on his arm. Adam shook it off angrily.

Judy was all business again. "Nobody knows everything about the gifts, and anyone who tells you otherwise is either a liar or a fool — and probably both. Every person's experience is unique to them. The gifts come in different strengths and combinations, and who knows how many variations. I'm not an expert, and I've never claimed to be."

"She's right, Adam," I said as I stood up shakily. I felt like a newborn giraffe, wobbly and unsteady, not quite sure where to put

my feet. Steve moved quickly to support me, and I leaned against him gratefully. “She never promised me anything, and it’s not like she gave me the gifts. I already had them. All she’s ever done is try to help me understand them and encourage me to learn more about them. If I have them and don’t learn about them, that would be dangerous. People have gone insane because they didn’t understand what was happening to them. I’ve even wondered more than once if I was losing my mind, and I knew what was happening — well, for the most part.”

Adam sighed as his rush of adrenaline slowly drained away, leaving him looking even more tired than he had before. “It’s just that I’ve never thought about all this as really being risky.”

“We still don’t know if it is,” Judy said. “It might have been a coincidence this particular time because of where Killian was standing when it happened. We don’t know that his...experience was the cause of his fall.”

“I was disoriented. I probably just lost my balance,” I said, but I don’t even think I convinced myself. Still, the white lie was preferable to believing something pushed me.

“It definitely looked like you were pushed to me,” Kane added unhelpfully.

I turned a glare in his direction, and he had the grace to look sheepish.

Adam clearly wasn’t satisfied with my explanation, but before he could argue further, Judy began to question me about the experience. “What exactly did you see?”

“Not much of anything, really. I thought I heard a noise behind me on the stairs, so I looked, but there was nothing there. Then, just as I was about to turn back around, it was like time stopped. I couldn’t move or speak. The stairs got darker and darker until the only light came from behind me and seemed to be cast by a candle. I just...knew somehow that I was Amalie and I was holding a baby. And I knew I was in danger, that there was someone behind me I was trying to get away from...but I didn’t know who it was.”

“You didn’t know, or Amalie didn’t know?” Judy said.

I shrugged. “I seemed to be thinking separately from Amalie. The thoughts were my own, but I understood certain things, like in a dream. You know how you don’t always need to have things explained, you just...know somehow?” Everyone nodded.

“All I can tell you for sure is that I wanted to get away, but I couldn’t move. Then I was shoved roughly. That seemed to break the spell, because the next thing I knew I was falling.”

“So you *were* pushed!” Adam said.

“I didn’t say that. I might have just been dizzy,” I insisted again.

“Maybe we should finish this conversation downstairs,” Judy suggested, as much to distract Adam as anything. “I think we’re done here.”

We trooped back down the stairs and, once I was settled on the couch in the parlor, Steve decided to make everyone a cup of tea to “calm our nerves.” Judy offered to help, and Kane followed them to the kitchen, leaving Adam and I alone.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“Physically, yeah. A little sore maybe. I might have a few bruises in the morning, but I’m fine. I’m more concerned about how to get rid of Amalie, once and for all.”

“How are you supposed to do that? We don’t even know why she’s still hanging around. We found the baby and moved it out next to her grave, and she’s still here. Now it seems as if someone pushed her down the stairs. What does she want, justice for the person who killed her baby?”

“I don’t know what she wants. But I intend to find out.”

“I think Judy is putting too much pressure on you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Who else is going to do it? You? Steve? Kane?”

The last one made him snort. “Kane almost peed his pants when you fell down the stairs. What about Judy?”

“She’s doing what she can. It’s not her fault that her gifts lie elsewhere.”

“I know. I just can’t help but worry. Promise me you won’t do anything stupid?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Steve, Judy, and Kane returned carrying steaming mugs, each with a tea bag steeping inside. Judy handed me mine.

I stared into my cup. “No tea leaves to read,” I said jokingly.

“No, you need loose tea for that,” she replied.

I glanced up, surprised. “Do you really read tea leaves?”

She just winked at me and sipped her tea serenely. After a few moments, I asked. "Who do you think pushed her?"

"Amalie? I've been wondering about that. The captain is the most obvious suspect."

"Wasn't he away at sea when Amalie died? I thought he came back and found her dead of a broken heart because she thought he was lost at sea."

Judy rolled her eyes. "Whether he came home and found her dead or not, I don't buy the whole death from a broken heart bullshit, especially after everything we've learned so far."

"Maybe she died from the fall."

"No, we know she lived long enough to bury the baby in the basement."

"Oh yeah, right."

"Do we even have any proof that the story you got from the real estate agent is accurate? What if she didn't have all the facts straight? Even if she simply was recounting it as she'd heard it, stories have a way of changing over time. I think some research is in order."

"Research?" I asked. "How would you do that now? It all happened so long ago."

"The library has an extensive genealogy and local history research room. They have tax records, vital statistics, censuses, collections of old letters, and so on. Hopefully, we'll be able to find something about the Marniens. The captain must have been a prominent citizen of the area, so the old newspapers may have published something, too. A lot of that stuff has been digitized now so it's searchable."

"Now that you mention it, I vaguely remember the agent saying something about a book that included some of Amalie's letters to her sister or something like that."

"Sounds like a good place to start. Nothing better than going right to the source."

"Have you done this sort of thing before?"

"A friend of mine back in California was a genealogist, and sometimes she'd get me to help with research. It's not all that hard. It just takes a lot of patience."

"Sounds like detective work."

Judy laughed. "It's the same thing, really. Anyway, it doesn't seem likely that Amalie is going to make another appearance tonight. Are you guys staying here or going home?"

"Staying here," I said, at the same time Kane blurted out, "Going home!"

"I think we were planning on going home tonight," Adam said, giving me a funny look.

Kane breathed a sigh of relief.

"If it's okay, I think I'd like to stay here, at least tonight. That way I'll be on hand in case she does decide to show up again. Besides, I'm closer to work and school here."

"What about clothes?" Adam asked.

I shrugged. "I'll just wear these again tomorrow. I'm not that dirty, just maybe a little dusty from rolling down the stairs."

Judy gave me a thoughtful look. "You're really serious about getting to the bottom of this now, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Well, you're not staying here alone," Adam said emphatically.

"I can stay," Steve said. "All the rooms are made up."

"Well, let's clean up a little before we head home," Adam said.

We put the leftover food away, collected stray cups, and turned off all the lights in rooms that were no longer in use. Once that was finished, we all said our goodnights and Adam, Kane, and Judy left. Steve locked up after them, then turned to me.

"I'll show you to your room now, sir. Right this way."

I laughed. "Practicing for the paying customers?"

"Assuming there will be any."

"There will be. We'll figure this out."

The room Steve assigned me was beautiful, just like every other one in the house. Adam and Steve had furnished the entire place with 19th century antiques. My room was decorated in shades of blue with white accents. Very soothing. Rich, heavy, blue velvet curtains hung at the window over sheer white drapes. A large, comfy-looking chair with carved wooden arms and legs had been upholstered in the same blue velvet. A tall mahogany dresser stood against one wall with an oil lamp and a silver-framed mirror on its

top. Framed watercolors hung on the wall, and a beautiful hand-painted glass shade covered the overhead light bulb.

Despite the beautiful decor, there was only one piece of furniture I was interested in at that moment: the bed. It had a mahogany frame with carved spindle-posts and a mattress that came up almost as high as my waist. I barely registered any of those details, however, as exhaustion suddenly overtook me. It had been a stressful night. I turned off the light, pulled off my clothes, and tumbled into bed.

I drifted off fairly quickly, but awoke suddenly a few hours later with the tingly awareness that there was another presence in the room. I sat up with a start and froze. Amalie was standing in the center of the room looking ghostlier than ever, illuminated only by the moonlight coming through the window. As she stared at me with an anguished expression, I felt terror wash over me like ice water.

“What?” I couldn’t help responding to her expression.
“What do you want?”

For a moment, she seemed almost surprised I’d spoken to her. Then she turned and took a few quick steps toward the door. She paused at the door, turned back to give me a pleading look, then walked through the door...without opening it.

I didn’t even hesitate, I just slid from the bed and followed — although, being solid and all, I had to open the door to exit the room. I found Amalie waiting in the hall.

As soon as she saw me, she moved silently through the hallway to the stairs. I hurried to keep up. I followed her down the stairs to the first floor, where she went directly to the cellar door.

“We’ve been down there before,” I said, coming to a stop. I wasn’t keen on entering the cellar alone. It was dark, dirty, and spooky — not to mention cold — and I was only wearing a pair of boxer-briefs.

When Amalie realized I was no longer trailing her, she stopped and stared at me, her eyes pleading.

I sighed. I’d made a promise to find out what was happening, and if that meant risking my life entering the cellar in the middle of the night alone in my underwear with a ghost, then so be it. I’d have to take the risk. I started forward and Amalie melted through the door.

I unlatched the safety catch and opened the door to reveal the pitch-black stairwell stretching out before me like the throat of some giant monster, waiting to swallow me whole. I was reluctant to plunge into the inky darkness. At least so far, I'd had enough moonlight and a few nightlights to illuminate the way. Beyond where I stood there was no light apart from a bulb that turned on with a pull chain at the bottom of the stairs. Steve had intended to have an actual switch installed at the top since before the place opened, but it just wasn't high on his list of priorities. Hardly anyone ever went down there.

Wishing I'd grabbed my phone, I gritted my teeth and started down the wooden steps, carefully feeling my way along, and hoping with all my heart that Amalie stayed well ahead of me. I'd never touched her and didn't want to start in the middle of the night on a rickety set of stairs.

My progress could best be described as a snail's pace, but, at last, my bare feet felt cold, slightly slimy dirt under them instead of the rough planks of the stairs. I began waving my hands about in the dark, searching for the chain that turned the light on. I must have looked quite a sight, flailing my arms around like a blind man in a cave full of bats. I was glad it was dark, so Amalie couldn't see me — although why I thought she couldn't see perfectly well in the dark or, more importantly, why I cared if a dead woman saw me was beyond me.

I found the chain and gave it a tug. Dim light flooded the space, barely illuminating the small room. It was enough light to make out Amalie waiting for me by the far wall. As soon as she was certain she had my attention, Amalie turned and walked directly through the wall.

"Now what am I supposed to do?" I asked aloud. Somehow, I knew Amalie was gone. The feeling of her presence vanished as soon as she went through the wall. "You know," I said to her anyway, "there's no door in that wall. I can't follow you. I'm not a ghost."

I waited a few minutes, but it soon became obvious she wasn't returning. Whatever she'd led me there to see, she'd shown me. I decided it was time to wake Steve up — after I put on some more clothes. I realized I was freezing in just my underwear.

I turned off the light and padded back up the stairs. I returned to my room where I pulled on my clothes, then I tapped softly on Steve's door. He must have been sleeping lightly, because he answered almost immediately.

"What's wrong?" he asked in a tight voice.

"Amalie came back."

Steve rubbed his face. "Already? What happened?"

"She led me back to the basement...then walked through the wall."

"What do you think it means?"

"I have no idea. It was clear she wanted me to follow her, but I'm a little more solid than her."

"Should we call Judy?"

"It's after three o'clock in the morning," I said. "It'll wait until morning. Let her sleep. We should get some rest, too."

Steve nodded wearily. "Assuming I *can* sleep."

"Yeah. I wasn't exactly having a restful night even before an insistent dead woman appeared in my room." I turned and started back to my room. "Goodnight," I called over my shoulder.

I laid awake for quite a while before I was able to fall back to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, it was almost ten. I got dressed and went downstairs to find Adam and Judy were already there.

"It's about time," Adam said when I appeared. "I brought doughnuts and coffee."

I gratefully grabbed a glazed doughnut and dug in.

Judy let me swallow my first bite before she started in.

"Steve said Amalie visited you during the night. What happened?"

"At least let me get some coffee first," I said. I made myself a cup and then quickly filled her and Adam in on Amalie's appearance and my subsequent adventure in the cellar.

"You went down there alone?" Adam asked in horror.

"I didn't see where I had much choice. Besides, she was pretty insistent."

"I'm really proud of you, Killian," Judy said.

"Proud of him for risking his life?"

"How did he risk his life?" Steve asked. "Amalie's never had a history of hurting anyone."

"Have you all forgotten how he fell down the stairs?"

“Why don’t I show you the wall she went through,” I said, to head off any hysterics. We went down to the cellar, where I pointed to the place Amalie had made her dramatic exit.

“Why would she walk through the wall?” Steve asked.

“What could she be trying to tell us?”

“Maybe it wasn’t a wall when she was alive,” Judy said.

We all turned to stare at her in surprise.

She walked over and scraped at the moss growing on the bricks.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked.

“Just what I said. If she walked through this wall, she did it for a reason. There’s something on the other side she wants us to know about. Maybe the baby was never the reason for leading us down here in the first place — or at least not the only reason. Aha! See?”

“See what?” Steve and Adam said in unison.

“The outline of a door,” I answered for her.

“You see it too?” Judy asked.

“Yeah, if you look closely, you can see how the pattern of the bricks inside the outline is different from that outside.”

“Oh, I see it now,” Adam said. “It must have been bricked up sometime after the wall was built.”

“Maybe there’s a secret room,” I said. “Or like a tunnel.”

“Do you think it was part of the underground railroad?”

Steve asked almost reverently.

“Or it could be a smuggling tunnel,” Adam said. “He was a sea captain, after all.”

“Which, I guess that would be cool too,” Steve conceded.

“Either way, we don’t know why it was bricked up,” I said.

“Or why Amalie wanted us to know it was there.”

Steve walked over and ran his hand over the bricks. “We’ll have to open it.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Adam asked.

“It’s a historic landmark,” Steve said firmly.

Adam frowned. “Who knows what we’ll find in there.”

“Amalie knows,” Judy pointed out. “And she wants us to know too.”

A few weeks later, we were all once again gathered in the cellar, waiting for the contractor Steve had hired to start work on reopening the bricked-up doorway. He was busy tightening a masonry blade into his saw.

Kane and Micah had joined Adam, Steve, Judy, and I — Kane mostly against his will, and Micah because he was considering writing an article about the house and Amalie. Steve was hopeful that the article could stir interest in the B&B, especially if the ghost story had a nice, neat ending.

There was an air of apprehension in the small room. What would we find? What did Amalie want us to see?

The contractor looked up. “Okay, folks, we’re about ready to get down to business here. You might want to step back and watch your eyes. All of you really should be wearing safety goggles, but I didn’t know I was gonna have an audience.”

“Just tell us if we’re in the way, Bob,” Steve said as we obediently moved to the farthest wall away from where he was going to be working.

Bob shrugged. “Hey, it’s your house. You’re not in my way.” He started the saw and slowly eased it into the wall. The abrasive disk cut through the old mortar with surprisingly little difficulty. We watched in silence while he sliced around the outline of the old doorway. Although the loud roar would have drowned out any attempt at conversation, those of us gathered in the basement suddenly found ourselves so tense that no one would have spoken even if we could have.

When he finished cutting and the cloud of brick dust began to settle, he grabbed a sledgehammer and hoisted it over his shoulder in one smooth motion.

“Wait!” I blurted out suddenly, panic squeezing my lungs as the heavy hammer started its downswing.

The sledgehammer shuddered to a halt in midair. Everyone spun around to look at me.

“What?” Bob asked.

“You...you can’t do it like that.”

Odd, disjointed images were shifting across my vision, confusing me. At first, I thought the lights were flickering, until I realized it was the cellar that was wavering — between the current scene and a much darker version lit only by a single candle in a

sconce on the wall. The darker room was empty except for a few wooden barrels against one wall. Floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with glass jars of canned fruits and vegetables stood where the bricked-up doorway was in the present room.

Just as suddenly as the strange flickering sensation began, it stopped, leaving me blinking owlishly at the concerned faces staring back at me.

Micah grabbed my arm. "Killian, are you okay?"

"Did you see something?" Judy asked.

I nodded.

"What did you see?"

"What's going on?" Bob asked nervously. "Is he okay?"

"The room was changing. I think I saw how it used to be. And...I don't know. I just had this feeling..." I turned to look at Bob, who was staring at me as if I'd lost my mind. "Is there some other way to open the wall?"

"Not really. If I had someone on the other side they could push it out, but since I don't, it's gotta go that way."

"Can you be gentle?"

"Gentle? It's a sledgehammer and bricks. How gentle can you be?"

"Can you just try?" Steve asked politely.

Bob shook his head as he turned back to the wall. He changed his grip on the hammer and began to use it like a battering ram. The first few bricks tumbled down on the other side with a dull thud as if hitting bare earth. I'm sure it took longer to do it that way, but the panicky feeling didn't return.

Soon he had an opening big enough to see through. He shifted one of the lights he'd brought along so that it shined through the hole. He leaned in and peered intently into whatever lay beyond the opening, then jerked back suddenly, his face going alarmingly pale.

"Do you see something?" Steve asked excitedly.

"Amalie," I muttered with inexplicable certainty.

Bob pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face. "There's a...a skeleton in there," he said shakily. He looked over at me. "How did you know?"

"Just a feeling," I said, sounding a lot calmer than I felt.

Steve turned to me. "You think it's Amalie?"

Judy had taken Bob's place in front of the hole. "Who else would it be?" Her voice sounded eerily hollow as she spoke into the aperture.

"What happened? How did she end up there?" Adam asked in confusion.

"I think it's safe to say it wasn't an accident." Judy turned to me. "Killian?"

I shook my head.

"If we want to know what happened, only you can tell us," she insisted.

"I...I can't."

"Will somebody just tell me what the hell is going on?" Bob asked, sounding more angry than anything. "Who is Amalie? If you knew there was a body behind this wall, you should have told me upfront. I would've never agreed to do this. I have half a mind to call the police."

"Bob," Steve said, "if we're right then that skeleton has been here for about a hundred and seventy-five years. There's nothing the police can do. We'll handle things from here. Why don't you go ahead and leave? I'll pay you for the time we agreed on."

"You don't have to tell me twice. This is all too weird for me." He grabbed up his saw and a few odd pieces of equipment, then paused. "I'll get the rest of my stuff later," he said and made his exit.

"Can we widen the hole enough to get through?" Judy asked.

"I'll do it," Micah offered quickly.

He picked up the sledge hammer and began to carefully knock away more bricks.

"Can I go upstairs?" Kane asked. "Two dead bodies in this basement? This is too much for me."

"If I'm not needed here, I'll go with him," Adam said.

No one protested, and they climbed the stairs, leaving just four of us in the cellar — five, if you counted Amalie. A shiver went up my spine at that thought. All this time she'd been entombed behind the wall instead of in the marked grave in the backyard. How did that happen? Someone had to have known. Was it intentional?

"You have to go in there," Judy said.

"I'm scared," I said hoarsely.

“I think that’s why Amalie brought you down here. I think she wants to show you what happened.”

“Why me?”

“Your gifts are strong, stronger than anyone I’ve ever known. She communicates with you in a way she hasn’t been able to with anyone else before now. She’s waited so long to tell someone what happened to her. We thought it was just the baby, but there was more to the story. That’s why she didn’t go away after we buried the baby next to her grave. She wasn’t even there. She was here the whole time. But how? What happened?”

Micah stepped back and dropped the hammer, wiping sweat from his brow. “I think the hole is big enough now.”

Judy took my hand. “It’s time for Amalie to tell us her story.”

I took a deep breath. In my heart, I knew all my arguing was in vain. If I was honest, I wanted to find out what happened all those years ago as much as anyone. Maybe I even needed to know. I took a tentative step toward the enlarged opening.

Micah stepped forward to help me. “I’ll be right here, Kill.”

I approached the hole and took my first look at what lay beyond. The light from the lamp showed what appeared to be the beginning of a low, narrow tunnel that extended perhaps ten feet from the doorway before it ended in a pile of rubble where the roof had apparently collapsed. The walls looked to be blackened, slime-covered bricks, shored up with rough-hewn timbers. About halfway to the rubble lay a pathetic heap of bones, all that was left of Amalie. I took another deep breath and climbed over the broken bricks.

The world shifted as my feet touched the ground. Immediately, I knew on some deep level that I was no longer in my own body. Unlike last time, I remained aware of myself while at the same time being fully integrated with my new body — Amalie’s body. But just like the time in the cupola, I wasn’t just feeling Amalie’s emotions — on some level I was Amalie.

Terror surged through me as she — I — stumbled forward. I sensed movement behind me and instinctively twisted around, crouching low. A sharp pain flared in my side, confirming I’d been struck there. In the now-clear doorway stood a man, his features

obscured by the darkness. Still, I knew with chilling certainty that he was Amalie's husband, Captain Marnien.

"You are nothing but a common whore," he snarled.

He moved again, and candlelight turned his face into a horrifying mask of rage and hatred. Even distorted by the dim lighting, the part of me that remained Killian recognized him as the man from my vision, the one hurrying into the house from the boat.

A rush of foreign memories flooded into my consciousness.

I was standing in the cupola. It was night outside the windows. I was cradling a crying infant in my arms. I'd gone up there because, for some reason, it usually calmed the baby. But not that night. I was so distracted with my son that I didn't hear the footsteps until they were upon me. I spun around, my heart in my throat.

"Captain!"

He wasn't supposed to be there. I'd been told he was lost at sea. He couldn't be...but there he stood, water dripping from his graying hair.

Astonishment spread across his face as he stared at the baby in my arms. Dread swept over me — I knew it wouldn't take him long to calculate the months in his head and realize the child I held couldn't possibly be his.

Seeing his expression start to shut down, I began speaking quickly. "I thought you were dead. I thought you were lost at sea. Your ship... I was told it went down in a storm. I mourned you. Look, I'm still wearing black."

"You must not have mourned me for long," he said, the first words he'd spoken since he appeared.

"I... It's not..."

"Turn to another man for comfort, did you? Even if I had drowned, I would hardly have gone under before you took another man to bed."

"Where... Where were you? If you were alive, why didn't you send word to me?"

"Does it matter now?" He moved menacingly forward.

"Let me see the little bastard. Does it take after its daddy?"

I pulled the blankets protectively over the baby's face, and his cries settled into a mere whimper. "Please no," I begged. "The child bears no fault. He is innocent."

“No, the fault is all yours. You, my faithless wife.” He spat the last two words, but then his voice chilled. “The child will go.”

“No! Please! We can raise him as your own.”

“You think I would have another man’s child raised under my roof?” he bellowed. “You would have me thought a fool?”

“No one else knows, except the servants.”

“Servants talk. The child goes.”

“Then I’ll go as well,” I shouted defiantly.

His hand shot out so quickly I had no time to get out of his way. His fist drove into my side, throwing me back against the windows behind me. My head hit one of the panes of glass, shattering it outward. Cold wind whipped into the room as I struggled to maintain my grip on the baby, now crying again.

“You’re not going anywhere.” His voice was frighteningly calm.

A sudden terror gripped my heart, and instinct took over. I had to protect my baby. I had to get away. I dove past him toward the narrow stairs, a move so unexpected he barely had time to react.

He lunged after me, his large hand striking between my shoulder blades as I took the first step. I stumbled down several more before catching my balance, but he was still right behind me, and suddenly gave me a violent shove.

For a few seconds, I felt as if I was suspended in midair. Then I was falling into the inky blackness of the stairwell.

For the briefest moment, I was myself again. I was crouching in the dirt of the dank passage, staring blankly at the partially opened doorway. Micah peered anxiously in at me, Judy visible just over his shoulder. “Killian, are you okay?” he asked.

Then they were gone.

I sat up with a start and looked wildly about. I was in the cellar, lying on the dirt floor. The room was lit only by a single candle. I hurt in so many places, but especially my side.

The scene in the cupola came back to me in a flash.

My baby! Where was my baby?

I spotted the little body lying a few feet away in an undignified heap, silent and still — much too still. I crawled frantically toward him, ignoring my pain, already sobbing, knowing the worst.

He was dead, his tiny body growing cold.

How long had I been unconscious? Could I have saved him if I'd been awake? Did he die in the fall or had the captain killed him in cold blood?

A grief such as I'd never felt before overtook me, and for some unknown amount of time, I simply held him to my chest and rocked back and forth, weeping so deeply I didn't make a sound.

Eventually, I stopped crying. I knew I had to bury him. My husband wouldn't afford him that much dignity. I removed my mourning shawl and wrapped my son carefully in it, laying him tenderly aside. I quickly began to dig into the hard-packed earth floor. I didn't know how long I had, how long the captain would leave me alone. I dug and dug with only my bare hands until my nails bled and my fingers ached with the cold, and still I dug. Finally, I had a hole large enough to hold the little body. He was so small.

I once again began to cry silent tears as I lifted the tiny bundle and laid him in the hole as gently as possible. I stared down for a moment at his beautiful face. I could almost imagine that he was only asleep. He looked so peaceful I could hardly bear to cover him with the dirt, but I knew I must.

First, though, I fumbled with the brooch at my neck, a wedding present from my parents. Finally, the clasp gave way to my numb fingers, and the brooch dropped into my palm. Placing it lovingly on my son's chest, I leaned forward and kissed his forehead, then quickly swept the small pile of dirt over him before I could change my mind, before it was too late.

I cried while I smoothed the dirt over his grave, my tears mixing with the earth. When I had hidden the evidence of my digging to my satisfaction, I curled up in a ball over the spot and wept bitterly.

I was still crying when I heard the captain speaking at the top of the stairs.

I suddenly hated him with a depth of emotion I hadn't known I was capable of. I wanted him to suffer the way he'd caused me to suffer. I lurched to my feet and began to look madly around the room for something to use as a weapon, but the cellar was empty except for a few wooden barrels against one wall, and a set of shelves well-stocked with the canned food the women had put up in the fall. A ham hung from the rafters in one corner.

The door at the top of the stairs opened, and the captain descended with ominous purpose. I pressed myself against the far wall. He stood staring at me, his eyes filled with hate and disgust. Neither of us spoke for what felt like an eternity. Then he unexpectedly swung around and grasped the edge of the shelves. Even in my grief-stricken state, I was shocked to see the shelves slowly swing away from the brick wall to reveal a dark doorway.

The captain turned back to me, an unpleasant grin on his face. "It is a tunnel I commissioned for...certain business dealings. It emerges near the docks. If you're so intent on leaving, best you go now."

I stared at him in disbelief. Did he really intend to let me go? It seemed too good to be true.

"Go!" he shouted. "Leave and never return!"

I threw myself away from the wall and dashed toward the door. He pushed me as I passed him, making me stumble into the darkness. I stopped dead when I saw that the passage only went a few feet before ending in a heap of rubble.

A cold laugh came from behind me. "A pity the flood brought down the tunnel more than a year past."

I spun around, crouching down into a feral position of defense as I did.

"You are naught but a common whore," he said. His face was lost in darkness, but his voice was filled with cold hatred. "Did you truly believe I would allow you to escape? You will never leave this house. Never! You shall die within these walls like the wretched dog you are, you miserable bitch!"

He started to close the camouflaged door. Belatedly, I realized he meant to lock me in the collapsed tunnel, leaving me to die. I threw myself at the door, but the captain was quicker. It closed with a sickening thud, shutting out all light.

I began to scream and claw at it, pushing against it with all my weight, but to no avail. I pounded the wood with my fists, begging for mercy, but my only answer was utter silence. The darkness pressed in around me until I couldn't breathe. I dragged myself away from the door, crumpling to the ground where I began to will myself to die.

"Killian!" a voice shouted.

I opened my eyes and saw light. I wasn't locked in the tunnel, left to die. I moved my hand and realized that I was once again back in my own body. I was curled into the fetal position on the dirt floor of the tunnel.

"Killian, are you okay?" Micah asked.

When I didn't answer, he began to scramble through the opening, which, while plenty large enough for me, was almost too small for him.

I turned my head slowly to one side and found myself staring into the empty eye sockets of Amalie's skull. One bony arm was stretched out in my direction, almost as if she was reaching for me. I slid my hand over and rested it gingerly on hers.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

Epilogue

A couple of weeks later, I stood next to Amalie's grave, watching my breath puff out into the cold air. The small funeral we'd held to give her a proper burial had been over for some time, but I couldn't bring myself to go indoors just yet. My visions, my out-of-body experiences — whatever you want to call them — had affected me deeply. Experiencing the horribly traumatic events of Amalie's final night left me very troubled and, ever since it happened, I'd been quiet and withdrawn to the point where my family had begun to worry.

I looked over at the angel statue. I was somewhat comforted by the idea that the angel was there to watch over Amalie at last. It was ironic that Judy's research had revealed that Amalie herself had it placed there in memory of the captain, whom she had thought lost at sea. The angel looked so sad. I knew how she felt.

"You're going to have to let it go, you know," a voice said from behind me, causing me to jump.

I turned to find Judy leaning against a tree, watching me with a concerned expression.

"It's not so easy."

"No, I don't imagine it is." She walked slowly to my side. "It's the past, Killian. It all happened almost two hundred years ago. There's nothing that can change it now. We've done what we could. And I believe it's what Amalie wanted. She can rest in peace at last."

"I know in my head that it all happened a long time ago, but feeling it, living it the way I did...it's hard to convince my heart that it's ancient history. It hurts just as much as if I'd lost a close friend...again."

She took my hand. "I'm sorry, dear heart. I know so little about your sort of gifts. I wish I could have prepared you better for what happened. I had no idea it would be such a powerful experience. We need to get you trained as quickly as possible. You must understand your gifts if you hope to control them instead of them controlling you. If you did, maybe they wouldn't have taken you over so completely." She looked into my eyes. "You have

powerful gifts, Killian. We're still learning just how powerful. It's not something you want to leave unchecked."

I nodded. I knew she was right.

Judy slipped her arm around my waist. "Come on. Let's go inside with everyone else."

"I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay, but don't stay too long." She kissed me softly on my temple and walked away, leaving me alone with my thoughts once again.

I stood for another minute and then turned to leave. I'd only taken a few steps before I felt a presence behind me.

Amalie stood in the shade of the trees, holding the baby.

The hair stood up on my arms, but I wasn't afraid. The energy was different. She felt like an old friend.

She smiled at me for the first time ever, then she and her son slowly faded away. A profound calm settled over me, certain they were finally reunited.

"Rest well, Amalie," I whispered.

I turned and started toward the house, to return to the living, leaving the dead and the past behind me, where they belonged.

About the Author

Josh Aterovis is the award-winning author of multiple LGBTQ+ novels blending mystery, romance, suspense, and the supernatural, including seven novels and multiple short stories in the acclaimed Killian Kendall Mysteries series. His work explores themes of identity, chosen family, grief, healing, and queer resilience, often centering flawed but deeply human characters navigating extraordinary circumstances. Known for emotionally grounded storytelling and vivid atmosphere, Josh's books have earned a devoted readership among fans of queer fiction and genre-bending narratives.

In addition to his work as a novelist, Josh is an immersive theater creator and producer with Submersive Productions in Baltimore, Maryland, where he develops original, site-specific experiences that blur the line between audience and performer. His storytelling across both page and stage is driven by a passion for creating meaningful, transformative experiences that invite audiences to connect, reflect, and imagine new possibilities.

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