



NEVER ALONE

Jacy's Story

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Never Alone

A Killian Kendall Expanded Universe Story

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Chapter 1

Sometimes, I lie awake at night thinking about how our lives are shaped by external forces beyond our control. I don't just mean the big things. Sure, a comet crashing to earth obviously causes an extinction level event. But often, it's more like the rivers that carved the Grand Canyon — a series of little, seemingly unrelated events that come together to alter the course of your life.

Those individual points might be hard to recognize at the time. Things that seem unimportant in the moment might gain significance only in retrospect.

Other times, there's no mistaking a life-altering incident. You know as it's happening that things will never be the same.

And sometimes, circumstances out of your control and specific decisions combine to create a cataclysmic event.

I was sixteen years old when my cataclysmic event occurred.

It was also a series of seemingly unrelated events...but they were all building toward one thing. I just didn't know it at the time.

The first incident came on a Saturday afternoon in September, when summer refused to loosen its grip on Maryland. The heat was thick and heavy, the kind that made the air shimmer above the pavement and drove people indoors to huddle by their air conditioners, curtains pulled tight against the glare.

I was stuck behind the counter of Scoops, a local ice cream parlor that happened to thrive on this kind of misery. The place had been buzzing all day with sweaty families wrangling sticky-fingered toddlers, teenagers on awkward dates, and parents bribing their kids with sprinkles just to keep them from melting down. By mid-afternoon, the crowd had thinned enough that I could actually hear the hum of the freezer cases. My manager had vanished into the cramped back office to tackle inventory, leaving me to man the counter alone.

That was when the door swung open, a bell chiming above it, and two teens wandered inside. I recognized the girl immediately — she was in a couple of my classes, though for the life of me, her name slipped my mind. She was striking, in that polished, put-

together way that made her impossible not to notice. Her skin was smooth and dark, her curls pulled back with a scarf patterned in jewel tones.

She pushed a pair of oversized sunglasses up on top of her head. Her style was always impeccable, even in the swampy heat — short cut-off jeans showed off her long legs, a plaid sleeveless top tucked in just so, and sneakers that somehow managed to look brand-new despite actually being vintage. She had this aura of confidence, almost too much for high school, and a reputation to match. Her sharp tongue could cut like a razor when she was bored or unimpressed, and most people tried to stay on her good side because of it.

She looked out of place in the ice cream parlor — the squeaky-clean linoleum, the humming coolers, the faint perfume of waffle cones drifting through the air — but it was the boy trailing a step behind her who really caught my attention.

He looked like he'd stepped out of some sun-drenched ad campaign. He was tall but he moved with a dancer's grace, his dark hair falling in waves that looked almost too deliberately tousled to be natural, and beneath the heavy fringe of impossibly long lashes his deep brown eyes gave him an intensity that struck me immediately as both alluring and a little dangerous.

His shorts were cut scandalously high, even shorter than the ones the girl wore, and they revealed legs that were not only long and lean but also tanned to a warm golden brown that suggested hours spent outdoors. A loose tank top clung to his broad shoulders, showing off the lean muscle in his arms, toned without being bulky, and the merest hint of the side of his pecs — with an occasional flash of a brown nipple.

I was certain I'd never seen him before. Someone like that didn't just fade into the background. If he'd walked the halls of my school, I would have remembered.

For reasons I couldn't explain, I couldn't seem to tear my gaze away from him as they moved toward the counter. My pulse picked up, a mix of curiosity and something sharper, something I didn't want to name.

Thankfully, neither of them looked my way. They were too wrapped up in their own world, voices low and clipped, locked in

some private argument that made the air between them buzz like static.

"I don't know why it's such a big deal," the girl was saying.

"All I said was that I didn't want to meet him," he snapped back. "You're the one making a big deal out of this."

"Two chocolate chip cookie dough shakes," she ordered, still without looking in my direction. "Why don't you want to meet him?" she demanded.

As I scooped the ice cream, I continued to shamelessly eavesdrop. Hey, if you're going to have a loud argument in a public place you should expect to be overheard.

"Why do I have to give you a reason?"

"Because I'm your best friend. You owe me that at least."

"I don't own anybody anything, Jazz. You should have never told him I would go out with him without at least talking to me first."

Him calling her Jazz triggered my memory. Her name was Jasmine.

"But I did," she said. "And now I look like a damn fool."

"God, don't be such a drama queen."

"*I'm* the drama queen? If that isn't the pot calling the kettle black! I just don't understand. He's such a nice guy."

"I didn't say he wasn't a nice guy."

"Then why won't you go out with him?"

"Because I don't want to. Can we just drop this? Please?"

They lapsed into an uneasy silence. Since there was no melodrama to eavesdrop on, I seized the chance to start blending the milkshakes. The roar of the machine filled the room while I thought about their conversation. It sounded like she was trying to set him up with somebody. A guy.

Which meant...he was probably gay. Or bi.

Which meant I had a chance.

In my dreams.

I'd known I was gay for a while now — or, at least, I was mostly sure. Definitely more interested in guys than girls, though it was all theoretical. Even at sixteen, my aunt still thought I was too young to date, and even if she hadn't forbidden it, who would I have dated?

I'd never so much as hinted about my sexuality to anyone. Especially not to my aunt who'd taken in my brother and I when our parents died in a motorcycle accident when I was six and my brother was four. She wore her religion like armor. Definitely not the kids in my church youth group, who'd have quoted scripture at me until I drowned in shame or died from boredom. And not to anyone at school, where I drifted along the edges of things with no close friends.

The blender rattled to a stop, and for a second, the silence pressed in again. I risked a quick glance over my shoulder — and froze.

He was watching me. His gaze was direct, bold, lingering in a way that felt both curious and appraising, like he was sizing me up.

Heat rushed into my face, blooming hot across my cheeks. My head snapped forward so fast my neck twinged. I focused furiously on the very important and difficult task of pouring milkshakes as if my life depended on it. My heart thudded in my ears.

He probably knew I'd been listening. I wanted to sink through the floor, vanish behind the counter, anything to avoid facing him again.

But there was no escaping it. I had a job to do, and they were paying customers.

"It's because he's chubby, isn't it?" Jasmine snapped just as I was turning around with their finished shakes.

The guy let out a long, beleaguered sigh. "Look, your cousin just isn't my type, okay?"

Then, as if flipping a switch, he turned his attention on me. His lips curled into a slow, smoldering smile that made my knees feel like they'd forgotten how to function.

"But you are," he said, his voice low and deliberate.

His eyes locked onto mine, holding me captive for a charged beat before they drifted downward to my nametag. He took his time reading it, then looked back up, grin widening.

"Hi, Jacy," he said, savoring my name. "You're delicious."

If I hadn't set their cups down already, I'm pretty sure I would have dropped them. My brain had sputtered to a stop, and I

couldn't seem to remember what came next. I looked around, but he was definitely talking to me. I mean, my name *was* Jacy, after all.

I'd never really given much thought to how other people perceived me. Objectively, I knew I wasn't ugly, but I'd always assumed I was invisible, or at least forgettable. I was the Native kid in the off-brand clothes from that poor family. Thin bordering on skinny, average height, black hair falling to my shoulders, with dark eyes and high cheekbones.

Michael, my younger brother, liked to say I looked like a walking stereotype. We were Native American — or Indigenous, as I preferred. My mom was Mocatan and Dad was Nanticoke, both tribes local to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, though we hadn't been raised in the culture...at least not since my parents died.

But this stranger, this impossibly hot guy, was telling me I was delicious. Was he just messing with me?

I stood there, frozen and stupid, until Jasmine finally knocked sharply on the counter, her eyes narrowing.

"How much do we owe you?" she asked, speaking slowly, almost as if she were addressing an especially dim child.

I snapped back to reality and fumbled through ringing them up, my hands shaking so badly I almost pressed the wrong buttons.

"I'll get it," the guy said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a slim, designer wallet.

He counted out some bills and handed them over, his fingers scraping slowly over my palm as he did. The touch lingered just long enough to make my heart stutter.

That same slow, confident smile returned. "Keep the change."

"I don't know why you do that," Jasmine hissed as they turned toward the door.

"Do what?" he asked innocently, shooting me one last glance over his shoulder.

"Mess with poor boys' heads like that," she grumbled.

"Don't start," he said, a warning in his voice, but there was a spark of amusement there too. "You're just mad I won't take Jayden on a pity date."

The door closed, cutting off the rest of their bickering. I watched them leave, my stomach twisting and my mind spinning.

My pulse hadn't slowed, and I felt the lingering heat of his attention on my skin. I was rattled, shaken, and maybe just a little thrilled.

Someone else stepped up to the counter, and I mechanically took their order, but my eyes never left the two of them as they walked across the parking lot.

I turned to scoop some butter pecan, trying to force my mind to focus, when a sudden prickling ran down my spine. My instincts screamed, and I spun back around.

Jasmine had stopped walking, and the boy was slowly backing away from her, gesturing angrily with one hand. My stomach dropped as I realized he hadn't noticed the curb behind him.

Time seemed to stretch. The next moment, he stumbled into the road just as a bright red car going far too fast came barreling toward him.

I watched in frozen horror as the car hit him at full speed. He was thrown into the air like a rag doll. For a horrifying second, I imagined the sickening thud as his body slammed to the pavement, unmoving.

A strangled scream tore from my throat, and the ice cream scoop slipped from my hands, clattering across the floor. My pulse was racing, my breath caught in my chest.

The customers at the counter stared at me with alarm, but they didn't even react to the accident just outside. How had no one else noticed? How was this happening right in front of me?

I leaped over the counter, bursting out into the sweltering heat. My feet skidded on the asphalt as I came to a halt. They were both there, standing in the middle of the parking lot, still arguing.

Had I hallucinated the entire horrifying scene?

I rubbed my eyes, heart pounding, trying to make sense of it. But when my hands fell, the same scene was repeating. He was backing away, gesturing angrily, the curb looming.

A chill ran over my entire body, hair standing on end.

"Hey!" I yelled, my voice cracking. "Watch out!"

He stopped mid-step, both of them turning toward me. The red car flew by harmlessly behind him, missing him by mere inches, but my mind barely registered the vehicle. My eyes were locked on his.

"What?" Jasmine demanded; irritation clear in her voice.

I stammered, floundering for words.

“I...you...be...careful?”

My cheeks burned, and I felt dizzy with embarrassment.

He raised one eyebrow, a slow, sultry smile curling his lips.

“I think I know how to cross the street,” he said, his voice low and teasing. “But thanks for the reminder...daddy.”

My face went hot enough to feel it through my scalp. I’d never been so mortified in my life.

He continued watching me, that same infuriating smirk in place. “If that was your attempt at flirting, you might want to work on your technique. Not saying it’s not working...just that there’s definitely room for improvement.”

I wanted the ground to swallow me whole. Great. Now he thought I was an idiot. Maybe I was. I still couldn’t figure out what had just happened.

Without a word, I spun on my heel and stormed back inside, ignoring the very confused and annoyed customers.

I couldn’t ignore my manager, however. She was waiting for me behind the counter, arms folded, eyes narrowed. “What was that about?”

“I...” The word caught in my throat. Once again, I had nothing.

What was I supposed to say? That I’d just had some kind of freak psychic vision where I saw a guy get mowed down by a car so I bolted outside to stop it from happening? Even I didn’t believe it, so why would she?

“I thought I was going to be sick,” I blurted finally.

And honestly, it wasn’t far from the truth. My stomach was still rolling.

Her expression softened. I must’ve looked as bad as I felt, because instead of arguing, she pressed the back of her hand to my forehead. “You are clammy. Maybe you should just go home for the day, get some rest.”

Relief swept through me. I nodded quickly, tugged off my apron, and handed it over. “Thanks.”

“Drink some water,” she called as I escaped out the door, but I barely heard her.

“What are you doing home early?” Aunt Daisy’s sharp voice met me the second I came through the back door.

I sighed. Aunt Daisy wasn’t cruel, just...brusque. Efficient. Not the kind of motherly figure who fussed over you when you were sick. Life had made her that way. When my parents were killed in a car accident, struck by a drunk driver, she’d taken us in, even though she and Uncle Harley already had four kids. Then my uncle died of lung cancer after a long, painful struggle, leaving her a single parent raising six kids alone on just a teacher’s salary.

Yeah, maybe she was strict, but that was how she kept us in line. Her rules didn’t really bother me that much anyway, but then again, I rarely got in trouble. Michael claimed I was the “good” one, but our cousins were all pretty well-behaved too. Michael was the only rebellious child, which meant he got the brunt of the punishment.

“I felt sick at work, so they sent me home,” I explained.

Her eyes narrowed, suspicious as always. “Then you’d better go up to your room,” she said briskly. “I don’t want some virus spreading through the house.”

I didn’t argue. Alone time sounded like exactly what I needed. I trudged upstairs and closed my bedroom door behind me with more relief than guilt.

Being the oldest had its perks. I was the only one with their own room. Michael, fourteen, shared one small bedroom with our cousin Raphael, fifteen, while the three girls — thirteen-year-old twins Gabrielle and Ariel, and Dina at ten — were crammed into another. My space felt like a sanctuary by comparison.

I collapsed face-first onto my bed and finally let myself replay what had happened at work, trying to make some sense of it.

Except there was no making sense of it. I hadn’t seen the future. That wasn’t real. It couldn’t be.

And yet...

Something had happened. I’d felt it — the hair rising on the back of my neck, the way time seemed to fracture for just a second. That wasn’t imagination.

Maybe my brain was just imagining possibilities, like when you picture dropping a glass before you actually do. Maybe it was a coincidence that a red car had shown up at the exact moment. That had to be it.

I told myself that over and over until I almost believed it. It didn't matter anyway. I'd never spoken to Jasmine before, and chances were slim I'd ever see him again.

That thought left an unexpected ache in my chest.

Not that it mattered either way. Even if I were allowed to date — which I wasn't — there was no universe in which I could date a guy. Aunt Daisy would absolutely lose it.

While they'd always been religious, after Uncle Harley died, she'd thrown herself headfirst into being a born-again Christian. Now church was our second home. We were there three times a week, no excuses. Michael fought her on it every single time, but she always dragged him along.

For my cousins, church was just the air they breathed. But Michael and I remembered before. We remembered powwows with Mom and Dad, the pride in their faces when they told us our culture mattered. Dad had been a champion dancer when he was younger, before we were born, and he'd wanted us to grow up knowing who we were.

All that had ended with them.

Aunt Daisy had found comfort in religion. Michael rejected it. And me? I just...kept my head down. I'd never been one to rock the boat.

I dozed off thinking about Jasmine's hot friend and didn't wake up until someone tapped on my door.

"Huh?" I grunted groggily.

The door opened, and Michael stuck his head in. "Daisy wanted me to see if you want dinner."

Michael often called our aunt by just her first name when she wasn't around. They had a strained relationship most of the time. She'd overheard him once and grounded him for a week for being disrespectful. It hadn't fazed him in the least.

I blinked at him for a second before his words sank in. "Yeah, I guess," I said, sitting up.

He pushed the door open and came in with a plate piled with food. "Thought you might, so I made you a plate," he said with a grin.

"I can't eat all that," I protested.

His grin grew wider as he held up two forks. "I know. I'll help."

I laughed. He was at that age where his stomach was basically a bottomless pit. He could pack away ridiculous amounts of food and still look around for more.

"She still doesn't want me around the rest of the family?" I asked as he climbed onto the bed with me.

"Nope. As far as she's concerned, you're patient zero and she's not taking any risks. Apparently, I'm an acceptable loss."

I laughed again. Aunt Daisy and Michael were always butting heads. It wasn't that he was a bad kid, just stubborn, determined to do things his own way. I kind of admired that about him, even if he was my little brother. I only wished I had the guts to stand up to bullies the way he did.

"So," he said with a mouthful of chicken, "are you really sick or did you just want to get out of work early?"

I chewed my food while I considered my answer. Michael was probably my closest friend, but I wasn't sure I was ready to tell anyone about what had happened. I swallowed and decided to stick to the truth but avoid the details.

"I'm not sick like the flu or something, but I had some sort of...episode. I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"I just said I don't know."

"I mean, like, did you have a seizure or something? A fainting spell?"

I raised my eyebrows. "A fainting spell? I'm not a Victorian lady, Michael."

His eyes narrowed. "You're avoiding my questions. What happened? Did you get diarrhea and shit your pants?"

I spit a mouthful of chewed peas everywhere. "No!"

"Pop a boner in front of a crush?"

"Michael! No! Nothing like that."

"Then what?"

"I just... I don't know. It was weird. I thought something happened. Like, I thought I saw something happen, but then it didn't actually happen, but then it almost did happen."

Michael stared at me like I was speaking Hungarian. "What the hell are you even saying?"

I laughed again. "I don't know. Don't worry about it. I'm fine."

He stared at me for a few moments, then shrugged.
“Whatever. Are you going to eat that mac and cheese?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, okay! Don’t get your panties in a twist, Nostradamus. But I get the last piece of chicken.”

It was several days later when the next life-altering event took place. Funny how something so huge can sneak in under the disguise of ordinary. At the time, it couldn’t have seemed less significant. Just another school assignment: Research your family history and write a ten-page paper about your findings. We were supposed to interview older relatives, track down names, stories, and traditions — build a family tree that stretched back as far as possible.

Piece of cake, right? Yeah, I thought so too.

My first stop turned out to be like hitting a brick wall.

“Hey, Aunt Daisy,” I said as she stood at the kitchen counter, dredging pork chops through flour and dropping them into an egg wash. “Do you know much about Dad’s family?”

Her hands stilled for half a second before resuming their rhythm. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I know his parents died before I was even born, but what about the rest of them? Siblings? His grandparents...anybody?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think he had much family by the time Rose met him. He was an only child. I think there was a great-aunt somewhere. Never met her. She’s gone now, I’m sure.”

“No cousins or anything?”

“Not that I know of.”

So much for that side of the tree. I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “Okay...well, what about your family?”

“What about them? You know Grandma. You remember Grandpa. And you’ve met my sisters.”

The sisters were legendary in our family, more for their feuds than the flowers they were named after — Daisy, Violet, Rose, Lily, and Iris. Mom had been squarely in the middle, and the peace broker of the bunch. Without her, the surviving sisters barely spoke except at Christmas dinners, weddings, or funerals. And they still managed to argue every time.

“Yeah, I know about them,” I said, pushing. “But what about your grandparents?”

“What about them?”

I blinked at her. “Who were they? What were they like? What were their names?”

“Grandma Allen's parents were Gene and Margaret Prior. They were good people. Farmers.”

I jotted that down. It was something at least.

“And what about Grandpa Allen's parents?”

Her jaw tightened. “I don't know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I don't know.”

“You never met them?”

“No.”

“Did they die when you were little?”

She slammed the tongs down a little too hard on the counter. “What's with all these questions?”

“It's for a school project,” I explained, trying to keep my tone light. “We have to go back as many generations as possible.”

“Well, you've gone back as far as you can.”

“But—”

“Jacy, I'm trying to make dinner. Leave the past in the past. Just do the best you can.”

That tone meant the subject was closed. Permanently.

I tried one last desperate angle. “But what about my grade on this project?”

For a moment she said nothing, just pressed breadcrumbs into the pork with more force than necessary. Then she exhaled sharply through her nose. “They can't fail you if you just don't know.”

But I did know — at least enough to read the truth in her hesitation. She knew something. She just wasn't going to tell me.

My curiosity, already awake, flared into something sharper. If she was hiding it this hard, it had to matter.

I wanted to keep digging, but I also knew better. With Aunt Daisy, pushing too far only made her dig in deeper. For now, I let it drop. Out loud, anyway.

Inside, though, the questions were only multiplying.

I turned to find Michael leaning against the doorway, arms crossed and a mischievous gleam in his eyes. I knew that look all too well. It was the same one he'd worn when he convinced me we could raise money for a game console Aunt Daisy said we couldn't afford by selling our cousins' toys in a "yard sale." We had a table set up on the front lawn before she even noticed. We were both grounded for a month.

Or the time he talked me into skipping youth group to hang out at the mall instead. That stunt had cost us two months.

So yeah — nothing good ever came from that look.

"What?" I asked warily.

He flicked his gaze toward Aunt Daisy, then back to me, and shook his head with exaggerated innocence. "Nothing."

I rolled my eyes and squeezed past him. Naturally, he followed me into my room and shut the door behind us.

"Why wouldn't she tell you about her family?" he asked, lowering his voice like we were plotting a heist. "That was weird, right?"

"Yeah. It was," I admitted.

He rubbed his hands together like a cartoon villain. "Then we need to go over her head."

"Huh?"

"She's hiding something. But you know who else would know? Grandma."

I groaned. "Michael, every time I go along with one of your schemes, I get in trouble."

He grinned, unabashed. "But we always have fun, right? And besides, just don't let her find out."

"She always finds out."

"Not always. She has no idea I hang out with David."

That gave me pause. David was Aunt Violet's youngest son — same age as Michael — and the two of them went to school together.

"I didn't even know you hung out with David," I said.

"See? It can be done."

I chewed my lip. "What if Grandma tells her?"

Michael sighed dramatically, like I was the slowest student in class. "Has Grandma ever narced on us? Ever?"

"Well, no..."

“Not even that time she caught us shoplifting candy from the convenience store.”

“Caught *you* shoplifting candy,” I corrected.

He smirked. “Details. Point is, she still didn’t tell on me.”

“I don’t know...” I hedged. The truth was, he was wearing me down and he knew it.

“Look,” he said, eyes gleaming with triumph in sight, “do you want to learn the truth or not? Don’t you want to know what the big family secret is?”

“Fine,” I muttered. “I’ll talk to her.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have at least an hour before dinner. That’s plenty of time.”

“What’s the rush?”

“Because I know you,” he said, poking me in the shoulder. “If you’ve got too much time to think, you’ll talk yourself out of it.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Jeez. Okay. I’m going.”

His grin spread ear to ear. He knew he’d won.

He trailed after me as I headed for the garage, as if he was afraid I’d chicken out if he didn’t watch me every step of the way.

“I’m going out for a ride,” I called to Aunt Daisy. “I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

“You’d better be. We’re not waiting for you.” She still sounded peeved. I knew it wasn’t an idle warning.

In the garage, I pulled the tarp off my pride and joy — Dad’s old Honda CB250. The black paint still gleamed like new, though the bike was nearly an antique. Some of my happiest memories were of clinging to his back on winding roads, the roar of the engine drowning out everything but the thrill of being with him. After he died, I’d inherited it but it sat in a corner of the garage like a ghost, until I finally convinced Aunt Daisy to let me claim it at fifteen.

I couldn’t even drive it then, and it didn’t run even if I could have, but I taught myself how to bring it back from the dead, one busted gasket and YouTube tutorial at a time. By sixteen, I had my license — and a motorcycle that represented more than just a tiny glimmer of freedom.

“Okay, I’ll let you know what I find out after dinner,” I told Michael as I buckled my helmet.

“You’d better,” was all he said as he turned and went back inside.

I drove myself over to Grandma’s house. She was your typical grandmother type, complete with wrinkles and shoulder length white hair. I’ve always thought she was quite beautiful. She carried herself with a kind of elegant grace. She lived alone in a small well-kept house on a quiet tree-lined street. Grandpa had died a few years ago from a heart attack.

“Jacy! What are you doing here?” she asked when she answered the door.

“I had some questions I wanted to ask you for a school project.”

“Little old me?”

She ushered me inside, and we sank into a big, comfortable couch in her tidy living room. The whole house radiated an easy warmth, a quiet sense of peace that always seemed to settle over me as soon as I stepped through the door.

“What’s this all about?” she asked after we were seated.

“We have to create a family tree going back several generations, and I was hoping you could help me fill in the blanks.”

A shadow fell over Grandma’s face and her expression became more guarded. “What blanks?”

“Well...all of them, to be honest.”

“What has Daisy told you?” she asked delicately.

“Almost nothing,” I answered. “She told me the names of your parents, but then clammed up when I asked about Grandpa Allen’s parents. She said I should leave the past in the past.”

Grandma sighed. “That sounds like her. She never could seem to understand that we have to learn from the past to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.” She reached over and patted my hand. “I’d like to tell you the things you want to know, but your aunt and I have struggled with our relationship over the years. We’ve found a sort of peace in recent years, and I’d hate to do anything to upset that.”

I nodded, but my face must have betrayed my disappointment.

“However,” she said with a small smile. “I know someone who wouldn’t hesitate a second to go behind her back.”

I raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

“Why don’t you talk to Lily?”

I blinked in surprise. Aunt Lily was the youngest sister, and to say she and Aunt Daisy didn’t get along would be putting it mildly. Out of all her sisters, Aunt Daisy seemed to especially dislike Lily — and the feeling was mutual. I never knew why. At family gatherings, they went out of their way to avoid each other, their hostility humming just beneath the surface. It wasn’t the usual sibling rivalry. It felt heavier, sharper, like there was some weird history between them no one wanted to talk about.

“She could help me?”

“She’s done a lot of genealogy work. She probably knows the family better than I do.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Why would you? She and your aunt are like oil and vinegar. Always have been, but it definitely got worse after...” She stopped short, then asked, “Do you know where she lives?”

I knew what she hadn’t said — after my parents died. Everything had gotten worse then. Mom’s absence was still a raw wound in the family, a hollow space they all carried and rarely acknowledged aloud.

“No, I’ve never been to her house.”

She stood up and left the room for a minute. When she returned, she was carrying a small notepad and a pen. She sat back down and began to write. After a few seconds, she ripped off the page and handed it to me. I looked down to find detailed directions to Aunt Lily’s house.

“You could have just given me the address,” I said. “You know I have GPS on my phone, right?”

Grandma shook her head. “You kids and your gadgets these days. You rely on them too much. What would you do if you lost it? You couldn’t find your own backside without that thing telling you where to go.”

I barked out a surprise laugh. “Well, thanks.”

“Do you think you’ll go today?” Grandma asked.

“Probably not,” I told her. “I need to get home for dinner.”

“But you will go see her?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Good. I don’t like how Daisy has cut you off from your family. It’s time for you to reconnect with your heritage.”

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Lily will tell you what you need to know. What you do with it is up to you. Now, you should probably get going so you won’t be late for supper.”

“But, Grandma—”

She gave me a look that I’d seen many times from Aunt Daisy, and my protest died in my throat.

“Okay. Thank you again for Lily’s address.”

“You’re welcome. Just don’t let your aunt find it. She’d recognize my handwriting and I’d never hear the end of it.”

It was Friday after school before I managed to get to Aunt Lily’s house. Grandma’s directions turned out to be quite easy to follow. Lily lived in the country in a big two-story white farmhouse. She had a huge lawn with towering pecan trees scattered around. As I pulled into the driveway, I noticed a large barn in back.

I was out of the car and halfway to the front door when a large, wooly white bear came barreling around the corner. At least that’s what I thought when I first saw it. I quickly realized it was just an enormous shaggy dog, but I wasn’t sure if that was any better.

I froze in place, trying to remember the advice for dealing with dogs. Did you stand your ground or run for safety? I seemed to remember something about making yourself look bigger, but that was going to be a tall order since this creature looked like he outweighed me by at least thirty pounds.

When he caught sight of me, the colossal canine came to a shuddering halt. He eyed me uncertainly from beneath a heavy fringe of hair for a few moments. He must have concluded that I was no threat however, because his entire rump — he didn’t seem to have a tail — started to wiggle back and forth as he lumbered over to me, mouth agape in a friendly doggy grin. I rubbed his head and was surprised to find that his fur was quite soft.

“I see you’ve met Elmo,” a voice said, causing me to jump.

I looked up to find Aunt Lily watching us with a crooked smile. Looking at her, it was hard to believe she was related to Aunt Daisy. Lily had this effortless cool about her. She was in her thirties, with long straight dark hair pulled back into a braid that hung almost to her waist. She was a little taller than me — even barefoot, as she was now — and wore a plain, white T-shirt and jeans streaked with what looked like mud mixed with splotches of paint.

At the sound of her voice, the dog — who was apparently named Elmo — amped up his wriggling, looking back and forth between us as if he couldn't decide who to smother in slobbery kisses.

As if she had read my mind, Aunt Lily continued, “Ironically, his name means ‘protector’, but your only worry with him is that he might lick you to death. He’d be the first to run and hide if you posed any real threat.”

By now she’d reached the two of us and she rubbed Elmo’s head affectionately. He beamed up at her with a look of total devotion.

“He’s gigantic,” I said. “What kind of dog is he?”

“Shh,” she said with a wink. “Don’t let him hear you call him a dog. He thinks he’s people. He’s an Old English Sheepdog.”

I’d stopped petting him, which apparently didn’t sit well with him since he suddenly butted me with his huge head, causing me to stumble.

Aunt Lily laughed. “He likes to be the center of attention. Come on back to my studio.”

She started back the way she’d come, and Elmo and I followed. It occurred to me that she didn’t seem the least bit surprised that I was here. I assumed Grandma must have let her know I’d be coming.

She led us to the old barn in the back yard. I was expecting to find a typical dusty barn, but as we stepped inside, I was surprised to find she’d completely remodeled it to be her studio. The space was open all the way to the rafters, where several expansive skylights had been installed, letting in lots of natural light. The floor was polished, poured concrete, and the walls had been covered with sheetrock. The whole place was air conditioned. A large potter’s wheel stood in the center of the room. A table nearby held an assortment of small metal tools that looked like a cross between

dental instruments and torture devices. A counter built along the wall held several unglazed pots, a large lump of clay, and various bottles and jars. A shiny metal, barrel-shaped contraption stood against the back wall.

Aunt Lily followed my gaze. "That's my kiln," she said. "I was just about to start my last pot for the day. If you don't mind, I'll work while we talk."

"That's fine," I said, looking around for somewhere to sit. I found a stool by the counter and brought it closer to the wheel.

Aunt Lily slammed the lump of clay into the center of the wheel and started it spinning. Elmo flopped down nearby and started snoring almost immediately.

"So talk," she said as she dipped her hands in water and began to shape the clay with her fingers.

"I, uh, had a couple things I wanted to talk to you about," I said nervously.

She glanced up at me. "Calm down, Jacy," she said with amusement. "Contrary to what my sister has probably told you, I don't bite."

"Did Grandma...?"

"Warn me you were coming? Yes. She said you had some questions for me."

I nodded. "About our family."

"It must be pretty serious if you came to see me behind Daisy's back."

I filled her in on my school project and the way Aunt Daisy had avoided all my questions, how I'd gone to Grandma, and how Grandma had directed me here.

Aunt Lily shook her head. "Why does our family have to make everything so damn complicated."

As I'd talked, a short, round pot had formed on the wheel under Aunt Lily's hands.

She paused and looked up at me. "Have you ever been to a powwow?"

I blinked at the sudden change of subject. "Years ago, when Mom and Dad were alive. They used to take us every year."

"But not since he died?"

I shook my head no.

She pursed her lips in a subconscious imitation of her mother. "Figures. It's a part of your heritage, but I guess there's no evidence Jesus went to a powwow, so Daisy wouldn't care."

I snorted.

"Sorry. I don't mean to be disrespectful if you're also religious."

"I'm...not. Not really."

Lily cocked her head to one side and studied me. "Really?"

I shrugged.

"That surprised me."

"Why?"

She gave a little half shrug. "Michael strikes me more as the rebellious type."

"Oh yeah, he hates church. He and Aunt Daisy fight about it every week."

"But you're not that into the whole church thing either?"

"I guess not."

"You still go a lot."

"We don't really have a choice."

"That makes sense. But you don't buy in?"

I was a little uncomfortable with this line of talk. I shifted nervously. "You could say that."

"How come?"

I took a deep breath. "It just never seemed...real."

"Real as compared to what?"

I was quiet for a second as I struggled to pull my thoughts together. This wasn't how I thought this conversation would go.

"I don't know. It's just...it's hard to believe in a god who would take our parents like that. And then watching Uncle Harley die. And Grandpa. It all feels...pointless. Cruel. I don't really want to worship something like that."

She nodded as if what I'd said made sense to her, which was good because I wasn't sure what I was even saying.

Then, suddenly, she mushed the half-formed pot back into a pile of clay on the wheel.

I gasped. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I can work on this later. You are much more interesting." She stood up and moved to an industrial sink, where she washed her hands.

I nervously cleared my throat. "With all due respect, Aunt Lily—"

"It's Lily, not Aunt Lily," she barked over her shoulder. "I've never been your aunt in any real familial sense and calling me that makes me feel old. Go on."

I took a deep breath and started again. "I didn't come here to talk about my religious beliefs, and as interesting as it is...or...isn't, I don't have much time before I need to get home for dinner."

Lily laughed as she picked up a towel and dried her hands. "Direct and to the point. I think we're more alike than your aunt would like to think. Fair enough. You're here to learn about our family."

"I know there's something Aunt Daisy doesn't want me to find out, but I feel like I have to know. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "I probably understand better than you think. I wasn't sure I was going to tell you either, but now that you're here and I'm getting to know you a little better, well, I think you deserve to know. More importantly, I think you're ready to know."

Suddenly, I felt nervous, as if something momentous was about to happen. "Know what?"

Lily paused. "Do you trust me?"

I shrugged. "I guess."

She laughed again. "That'll have to do. You're going to need to have a little patience with me. If you want to learn about your family, you need to start by understanding where we come from. You need to reconnect with your roots. The Mocatan powwow starts tomorrow. Can you get away to meet me there?"

"Where is it? And what time?" I asked, trying to keep up with her.

"It's not far from here, at the state park. The opening ceremony is at ten in the morning, but it goes all day. What time can you meet me?"

"I get off work at three."

"That's perfect. Some of the crowd will have thinned out by then. Meet me there at three-thirty."

"How will I find you?"

"It won't be that hard, but I'll probably be in the arts and crafts tent. I help run it. Does that work?"

I nodded.

“Great, then it’s settled. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Aunt...I mean, Lily, my paper is due in two weeks.”

“Right. It’ll be a crash course then. But, Jacy, this is a lot bigger than just a paper. Do you understand?”

I nodded and glanced at my phone. “Sure, but, uh, I need to go. I don’t want to be late for dinner and have to explain to Aunt Daisy where I’ve been.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Neither of us want that. Get going.”

“Yeah. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I stood up and shifted awkwardly, trying to decide how to say goodbye. Lily solved my dilemma by throwing her arms around me in a hug.

Elmo jumped up and tried to wriggle in between us. We both laughed.

“He can’t stand to be left out. See you tomorrow, Jacy,” she said with a smile.

Tomorrow. In just one day, I would begin learning about the part of my heritage that my aunt had decided not to teach me. Hopefully, I’d also learn the big secret everyone seemed to be determined to hide.

A feeling of anticipation was building inside me that I couldn’t explain. I had a hunch that something big was coming and nothing would be the same again once it arrived.

Chapter 2

After work the next day, I rushed home to shower and change. Standing in front of my closet, I hesitated. What exactly was the dress code for uncovering your family's deepest, darkest secret? For that matter, what was appropriate for a powwow? It had been years since I'd last been to one, and my memory was hazy — drums, dancing, the smell of frybread drifting through the air — but I couldn't recall what anyone had worn besides regalia.

I stared at the handful of clothes I owned, none of them particularly ceremonial, and sighed. Fashion wasn't exactly in my budget. With six kids, Aunt Daisy barely kept us all clothed, and every spare dollar I made went straight into keeping my bike alive. After a minute of indecision, I just grabbed a clean T-shirt and a pair of jeans. It wasn't much, but at least it was me.

Once dressed, I slipped quietly downstairs. I was hoping to make it out of the house without Aunt Daisy giving me the third degree since she would demand to know where I was going and would no doubt flip out if I told her I was going to a powwow. I hated lying. I was no good at it anyway, so there really wasn't much point. I lucked out and she was on the phone gossiping with one of her church friends, so I was able to make a clean escape.

Or so I thought.

I slipped into the garage to grab my bike — and froze.

Michael was there, tangled up with a girl in a passionate embrace. Against my motorcycle.

"What the hell?" I gasped.

They scrambled apart in a panic, yanking at clothes and tucking stray body parts back into place.

"Jacy!" Michael yelled. "Don't tell Daisy!"

"Seriously? Here? In the garage? On my bike?" My voice shot up an octave with each word.

"Shhhh!" he hissed.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded, though the second the words left my mouth, I realized how pointless they were. It was obvious what they'd been doing — and knowing Michael, he'd probably give me play-by-play if I gave him the chance.

“Never mind,” I cut in before he could open his mouth.
“Forget I asked. But Aunt Daisy will kill you if she catches you.”

“That’s why you need to keep quiet,” he said with a grin that only made me angrier.

I risked a glance at the girl for the first time. She was staring at the floor like it might open up and swallow her whole, but I recognized her immediately. Andrea — though everyone called her Drea — lived a few houses down. She had a reputation as a bit of a wild child, which made her a natural fit for my brother. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost. This had to be mortifying.

Not that you’d know it looking at Michael, who wore the smug expression of a cat that had not only eaten the canary but gotten away with it.

“This isn’t funny,” I snapped. “Both of you need to get out of here. And next time, pick somewhere else to fool around — or you won’t live to graduate high school. And I don’t just mean Aunt Daisy. If you knock my bike over, so help me God—”

That finally got through to him. He winced, the grin faltering.

“I’m sorry, Jacy,” he said, sounding almost sincere. “It won’t happen again. Promise.”

“I know it won’t, because if it does and I find out, you won’t have to worry about Aunt Daisy killing you — I’ll do it myself.”

“Don’t be so uptight, Jace,” he said, the grin sneaking back. “We were just fooling around. Just ’cause you don’t—”

“Finish that sentence and I’ll tell her myself,” I cut him off.

That shut him up fast. His face paled, and I knew I had him.

I folded my arms. “Find a bed next time. Or at least a car. Leave my bike out of it.”

Drea seemed to have had enough. Without a word, she turned and walked out of the garage.

“Drea, wait!” Michael called after her.

“Go fuck yourself,” she snapped as she flipped him a rather rude and dismissive gesture and kept walking.

I chuckled. “I guess that’s all you’ll be doing tonight,” I said as I hopped on. “I have to go, but this isn’t over. We’ll talk about this later.”

Michael groaned. “Great, just what I need — a sex talk from my freakishly prudish big brother.”

“If you prefer it came from Aunt Daisy...”

He sighed. “We’ll talk later.”

I kick started my bike, which roared to life with a sputtering cough, and I was on my way.

Michael’s sexual escapades had momentarily distracted me from my worrying, but now that I was alone, my anxiety came back with a vengeance. I had no idea what Lily was going to tell me, but my overactive imagination had been busy coming up with all sorts of horrible scenarios.

The theory that seemed to make the most sense, given what little I knew, was that I’d been adopted. Honestly, that one didn’t sound so bad. It would at least explain why I’d always felt like the odd piece in the family puzzle, the one that never quite fit. The problem was, every time I looked in the mirror, I saw Mom’s side of the family staring back at me — the same eyes, the same cheekbones, the same stubborn jaw. Hard to argue with genetics.

Which left the other possibility. Maybe Dad wasn’t really my dad. The thought hit harder than I expected, a knot tightening in my stomach. It was the kind of idea that once it crossed your mind, you couldn’t stop poking at it, no matter how much you wanted to.

My mind wouldn’t stop churning the whole drive, serving up one grim possibility after another, each darker than the last. By the time I finally pulled into the state park, my nerves were shot.

The powwow grounds were tucked back in the woods, but I knew I was close when the steady pulse of drums reached me even through the trees. Volunteers in bright safety vests guided cars into neat rows on the grass, while others took admission at a folding table.

Lily hadn’t mentioned paying to get in. I dug out my wallet, praying I had enough. I did — though just barely — and handed over a few crumpled bills before joining the flow of people heading deeper in.

The closer I got, the stronger the atmosphere became — like walking into another world. The drumbeat rolled through the trees, steady and alive, matched by the rise and fall of voices singing in a language I didn’t know but somehow understood in my chest. Smoke from food stands drifted on the breeze, carrying the scents of

frybread, roasting corn, and grilled meat. Children darted between adults, laughing, while friends caught up.

Large white tents stood around the perimeter forming a rough circle, echoing the one in the center, each marked with signs, some were filled with vendors, some held tables for eating in the shade, and some were restricted to performers only.

Lily had said she'd be in the arts and crafts tent, but the steady thrum of the drums tugged at me, insistent and alive. I'd come back to the tents later.

Then the trees opened up into a wide clearing, and I stopped dead in my tracks.

The crowd was enormous — hundreds of people surrounded the central dance ring. An inner circle sat in camp chairs, ready for the full day, with an outer band of standing observers. Dancers in brilliant regalia filled the space at the center, their feathers flashing in the sun, beadwork glittering with every turn. The air jingled with the sound of bells sewn to their outfits, a rhythm layered over the heartbeat of the drums. Color, movement, sound — it all swirled together into something bigger than I could process at once.

My childhood memories of coming here with Mom, Dad, and Michael were faint at best, but I was sure it had never been like this. Back then it had seemed smaller, almost intimate. Maybe the powwow had grown over the years. Or maybe I was just seeing it with different eyes.

In the center of the large roped-off circle, some sort of demonstration was underway. A group of drummers sat to one side, pounding a huge hide-covered drum and chanting in a steady, hypnotic rhythm. The beat seemed to reach into my chest, tugging at me like a current, and I found myself edging closer to the circle, weaving between other spectators.

I stopped just short of the rope and watched a young man, not much older than me, whirl around the circle. He wore little more than face paint, leather, and feathers — barely enough to cover anything — but it was his dancing that held me spellbound. His feet moved so quickly they were almost a blur, executing intricate steps with precision and energy, every movement perfectly in sync with the drumbeat.

"He's good, isn't he?" a voice asked nearby.

I turned to see an older woman sitting in a folding lawn chair. Her face was weathered and lined, but her eyes were warm and kind. Gray hair was pulled back with a simple leather thong, and she wore a brightly patterned cotton dress. She smiled at me and nodded toward the dancer.

"He's amazing," I said, my eyes drawn back to the young man in the center.

"He's my grandson," she said, pride glowing in her voice. "It takes years of practice. And heart," she added, eyes glinting. "Not too many of the young ones dance these days. There are only a few others in his league. He has a good chance of winning this year."

"It's a competition?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she said, sounding surprised. "Not right now, of course. This is just exhibition dancing. Is this your first time here?"

"I haven't been in a long time."

She looked confused for a minute. "You're blood though, right?"

It was my turn to look confused.

"You're Indian?" she clarified.

"Oh. Yes."

She smiled again. "Thought so. At least I'm not that feeble yet. You look a bit familiar. Do you have a name?"

I blushed at my bad manners and extended my hand. "I'm sorry. My name is Jacy Elliott."

She took my hand as her eyes widened. "You're James and Rose's oldest?"

"You knew my parents?"

"And your aunt. I know your whole family. Your grandparents and I go way back. Let's just say I'm no longer surprised that you haven't been to a powwow lately," she said with a kind smile. "I'm glad you're here now, though. It's good that you are trying to learn about your heritage. And we still miss your mother and father."

I decided not to enlighten her that it had been Lily's idea and simply nodded.

She watched her grandson for a few seconds, then said, "You know, your father used to be quite a competitor."

"I remember. Well, I don't remember him dancing, but I remember he told me about it."

She nodded. "He was even better than my grandson. When he danced, you could feel the ancestors dancing with him."

"But you don't with him?" I asked, tilting my head toward her grandson.

She laughed. "Nobody shares the spotlight with him. When he dances, he dances alone."

"Well, it was nice to meet you, but I should go find my aunt now," I told her.

She smiled at me again. "The pleasure was mine. And by the way, my name is Celia Vessey. Tell Lily I said hello."

I stopped, startled. "How'd you know Lily is my aunt?"

She smiled, and her eyes sparkled. "I said I know your whole family, didn't I? Besides, Lily's the only one of those girls that still comes to the powwows."

Feeling rather foolish, I said goodbye and went to find the arts and crafts tent. I wandered through a couple of tents on my way, checking out the vendors as I passed. Many of the booths held various Native-style jewelry, clothes, and books. Some of the jewelry was high quality, but some of it looked as if it had been mass-produced in China.

The food tent smelled incredible, but above all was the smell of fried dough. I desperately wanted a piece of fry bread, preferably sprinkled liberally with honey and powdered sugar, but I'd used almost all my money just to get in and couldn't afford to buy any.

I finally found the arts and crafts tent, which was slightly larger than the others and marked with a sign that read: "Local Artists and Craftspeople. A portion of all proceeds goes to the tribal association."

I slipped inside and found that the tent was mostly empty except for Lily, a few other artists chatting to each other, a middle-aged man who was browsing, and the dancer from earlier, Miss Vessey's grandson, his tanned bare back arched gracefully as he bent to look closer at one of Lily's pots.

Lily spotted me right away. "Jacy!" she said, obviously pleased to see me. "I wasn't sure you'd actually come."

The young man stood and turned to face me as well and, up close and without his headgear, I recognized him. I felt my face flush as I realized he was the guy from the ice cream parlor, the one I'd seen get hit by a car. Or didn't see get hit by a car. Whatever.

He arched an eyebrow. "Fancy meeting you here, Crossing Guard."

"Crossing guard?" Lily asked. "You two know each other?" She sounded very surprised.

"No," I said quickly.

"We've not been formally introduced," he said after a beat. "But we've met."

"Jacy, this is Skye Morgan. Skye, this is my nephew, Jacy Elliott."

Skye held out his hand, and I didn't have a choice but to shake it. It felt like an electric shock as his hand touched mine.

"So what's this about a crossing guard?" Lily asked.

Skye laughed. "Jacy stopped me the other day to tell me to be careful crossing the street."

I don't think I could have been any more embarrassed at that point. Lily looked at me with a questioning gaze, but I couldn't even meet her eyes. I was wishing fervently that I'd never come to this stupid powwow.

"Well, I'd like to stay and chat but I have to go get ready. The competitive dancing starts soon," Skye said, his eyes never leaving my face. "Come see me. I'm good."

With a final smile, he left the tent. I stood staring after him, my mouth agape and my heart pounding.

"Smug bastard," Lily said as soon as he was gone, but she was grinning as she said it. "He is good, and he damn well knows it. Still, you can't help but like him." She turned back to me, and her grin widened. "I see you're not immune to his charm."

I felt my blush deepen.

"Don't sweat it," she said thoughtfully. "But do tell me the whole story behind that crossing guard thing."

"There is no story," I mumbled, unwilling to tell anyone about the strange occurrence.

"Bullfeathers," my aunt scoffed. "Give me a little credit. Unless you expect me to believe you just go around telling random

strangers to be careful crossing the street. Or maybe it's just the cute strangers?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said through gritted teeth.

"Jacy, you're going to have to trust me."

I threw a meaningful glance in the direction of the two older women closest to Lily's booth. They were pretending not to listen but obviously were. Much to my relief, Lily understood immediately.

"Let's go for a walk," she suggested. She turned to the two women. "You two can hold down the fort while I'm gone, right?"

They agreed, and Lily and I made our exit. Once outside, we walked aimlessly into the trees.

"Okay, now let's hear it," she said.

I sighed. There was going to be no getting around it. I quickly told her the whole story, trying to gloss over the vision as much as possible. When I was finished, she walked quietly for a few minutes.

Finally, she said, "I think I made the right decision bringing you here today."

I looked over at her. "What do you mean?"

She stopped walking. "Jacy, since your parents died, you've been raised white. Daisy has never been very connected to our heritage. She married a white man and dove head first into his religion. Don't get me wrong, Harley was a nice guy, but to him, our beliefs were just pagan nonsense, and after he passed, well, she became almost fanatical.

As an adult, that was her prerogative, but it also denied you your culture. You know nothing about who you are, but, as the saying goes, blood always tells. Just because you don't know about your heritage doesn't make who you are go away. There are...let's just say there are certain hereditary traits awakening in you right now."

"I don't understand."

"No, you wouldn't, but if you want to, I'll try to help you understand."

I didn't have to think about it for long. "I do want to understand," I said slowly. "I think...I think I have to understand."

She smiled. "That's what I was hoping you'd say. It won't be easy though. And you'll have to keep it a secret from Daisy."

I nodded — that one I knew without being told.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get back to the powwow. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

We made our way back just in time to hear the emcee announce that Skye Morgan was next up to compete in the category of fancy dancing. I found myself trying to see through the crowd to the dance circle.

Lily couldn’t help but notice.

“Go watch him,” she said. “I’ll go make sure the person I want you to meet is still here.”

I stood indecisively as the drumming began until Lily gave me a gentle push in the direction of the circle. I glanced back to see her weaving away through the crowd, so I turned back to the circle and eased my way forward again, slipping between shoulders and strollers until I reached the rope.

Skye had just begun to dance. Even with my limited knowledge, it was obvious he was extraordinary. Every movement flowed into the next, his body a seamless extension of the drumbeat. His feet struck the earth in dizzying patterns, fast and precise, while his upper body seemed to ride the rhythm like a wave. There was a kind of effortless grace in him, something fluid and alive that drew every eye to the center of the circle.

Watching him, I found myself believing that dancing might really be a kind of magic — an ancient language carried in the body, a way of speaking to the gods. Or maybe not so ancient after all. Nothing about Skye’s movements felt primitive. They were powerful, commanding, almost otherworldly. At times they even bordered on sensual. Whatever it was, it held me captive.

Transfixed by his dance, I watched unblinking while he moved faster and faster as the drums swelled to a heart-pounding crescendo, then stopped suddenly as Skye leaped impossibly high into the air, his body arched, his arms flung over his head. For a moment, it seemed as if he might keep rising, but gravity exerted its hold, and the drummers thumped the drum one last time as Skye’s feet touched the earth once more. The reverberation of the final beat still thrummed in the air as Skye raised his eyes, found me in the crowd, and gave me the same slow, smoldering smile he’d given me at work that day.

He stayed in the center of the circle until the applause began to die out, then walked directly toward me. He ducked under the rope and stood in front of me, breathing heavily. He was too close for my comfort, so close I could feel his body heat rolling off him like steam. I tried to keep my eyes on his face, but his glistening chest heaving only inches away kept drawing my eyes south.

"You didn't clap," he said.

I blinked several times. "Sorry?"

"Was I that bad?"

"No!" I gasped. "You were incredible." I bit the inside of my cheek when I heard the awed tone in my voice.

He grinned. "You really think so?"

I nodded.

"Come on," he said with a jerk of his head. "I need something to drink after that."

I followed him as he made his way toward the food tent, but our progress was slow as people kept stopping him to compliment him on his dancing. We finally made it to the booth, and he bought a bottle of water. The smell of the fry bread was enough to distract me from Skye momentarily.

Skye, of course, noticed right away.

"You want anything?" he asked.

"No, I'm okay," I said quickly.

"Have you ever had fry bread before?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but I haven't had it since I was a kid."

"You gotta be kidding me. That's just unacceptable. We're going to fix that right now."

I tried to protest but he ignored me, instead ordering a piece of fry bread, and a steaming plate was handed over.

"What do you want on it?" Skye asked, moving toward a small table set up to one side. It held an assortment of toppings: powdered sugar, honey, and jellies.

"I don't know. Just fix it how you usually do," I said shyly.

He poured on some honey then dusted it liberally with the powdered sugar.

"Follow me," he said, once he had it garnished.

He led me a short distance from the hubbub to a picnic table that was lightly screened from the rest of the park area by a small stand of trees. He sat down on one side and patted the bench

next to him. I obediently sat to his right. He tore off a piece of the bread and popped it in his mouth.

"You really haven't had fry bread in years?" he asked.

"No," I answered shortly.

It was all I could manage. For some reason, my heart was hammering at my chest like it wanted out. It left me feeling tense, as if I sensed something was about to happen but didn't know what.

"Why not?"

"We stopped coming to the powwow after my parents died."

His eyes widened slightly for a second, but then creased back into his usual confident smile. "But you're back now. That's what matters."

He locked eyes with me as he tore off another chunk of bread and deliberately lifted it to my lips. Without thinking, I parted my lips and he slid the piece into my mouth, letting his fingertip trace across my bottom lip as he pulled away. It was incredibly sensual, and I felt a stirring in my pants.

I chewed automatically as he brought his fingers to his own lips and licked off the sugar and honey, his eyes never leaving mine for a second.

I almost forgot to swallow.

"What do you think?" he asked after a moment.

"Huh?"

His mouth twitched. "About the fry bread."

"Oh, uh..." I hadn't even tasted it. "It was good."

He grinned knowingly. "Want more?"

I nodded.

Before I could reach for it myself, he'd broken off another piece and fed it to me. I was aching hard by now and desperately hoping that Skye wouldn't look down at my lap. I made a point to taste the bread this time and childhood memories flooded back. It was similar to the funnel cakes served at carnivals, but better.

"So, Lily Snyder is your aunt?" he asked, startling me with the suddenness of the question.

"Yeah," I answered softly.

"Then why did you stop coming to powwows?"

I shrugged. "I live with my aunt and she doesn't really get along with her sisters. She's pretty religious."

“So?” He frowned. “What’s that got to do with anything? It’s not like we’re out here worshipping the devil. They pray and read scriptures at the opening ceremony. We worship the same God. I even go to church...sometimes.”

I shrugged again. I didn’t have the answers and even if I did, I didn’t feel like defending my aunt.

“Does she know you’re here?” he asked after a minute.

“Aunt Daisy? Nope,” I said.

He grinned. “Cool. The crossing guard is a rebel.”

I flushed again at the reminder of our first meeting.

The grin vanished in a blink and he was all earnest sincerity. “Hey look, I’ll stop teasing you about that if you’ll explain what it was all about.”

I shook my head no.

“Come on. It’s been driving me crazy ever since it happened. I’ve almost come back to ask you a couple times. Jasmine, my friend who was with me that day, thinks I’m being stupid and it’s only because you’re so cute...” My blush deepened at that. “...but that’s not it. Or at least it’s not all of it. I felt something really weird that day when I was looking into your eyes.”

I looked away now and shook my head again. “I can’t,” I whispered.

“Why not?”

“I don’t even understand what happened.”

He watched me for a minute, then seemed to decide that I was telling him the truth. “Then why don’t you tell me what happened and maybe we can figure it out together.”

A tingle went up my spine at the word ‘together’ and, suddenly, I did want to tell him.

“I...after you left...I thought I saw you get hit by a car.”

The expression on his face froze as I spoke the words. “When I ran outside though, you, uh, you weren’t even near the road. I was really confused, but then you started backing toward the road just like I thought I’d seen you do a few seconds before, so I yelled for you to stop. And then the car that I’d just seen hit you drove by.”

I shuddered at the memory.

The drums stopped behind us and Skye sat staring at me expressionlessly in the sudden hush.

I started to babble to fill the silence. "I know, it sounds stupid. I shouldn't have even told you. Now you probably think I'm some sort of freak. I'll just go."

I stood to leave, but Skye's hand shot out and caught me by the wrist, pulling me gently back down.

"You really don't have any idea, do you?" he said in a quiet voice.

"About what?"

He shook his head slightly, almost to himself. "Never mind," he said, his voice so soft I almost couldn't hear him.

He was looking at me differently now, with a new respect. He smiled suddenly.

"What?" I asked defensively.

"You just look so cute sitting there with that powdered sugar on your lips."

I swiped at my mouth, but his smile just grew. "You missed." I wiped again. "Missed again. Here. I'll get it."

He leaned slowly toward me. I knew what he was about to do and wasn't at all sure I wanted him to, but at the same time, I seemed unable to move. His lips met mine and for a moment, we were kissing. Then I snapped out of whatever spell I'd fallen under and jerked away.

"I'd better go find Lily," I gasped as I leaped up. I was breathing as heavy as if I'd just finished a marathon. "She's probably looking for me," I gibbered as I backed slowly away. "There's someone she wants me to meet. It was nice meeting you and thanks for the fry bread. It was really good."

Skye just watched me make my ungraceful exit with a half-smile on his lips.

"Bye," I blurted as I spun around and practically ran away.

"See you later," he called after me.

I threw myself back into the crowd, which had thinned out significantly since I'd first arrived but was still large enough to lose myself in. As I walked, scanning the faces for Lily, I tried to calm myself down. That was easier said than done since I could still feel his lips pressed against mine.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I almost walked right into Lily.

“There you are!” she said, grabbing me by the shoulders. “I’ve been looking all over for you. Where’ve you been?”

“I was with Skye,” I said. I couldn’t read the expression that flickered across her face, but I quickly explained. “He bought me fry bread.”

“That was nice of him,” she said carefully. “Jacy...” she started, then stopped.

“What?” I asked.

“Just...be careful with Skye.”

I tried hard not to reveal anything with my face. “What do you mean?”

She paused and seemed to be thinking about her next words. “Just that Skye is a very...compelling person. He’s from a good family, but... Oh, just be careful, okay?”

“I don’t understand, but I’m always careful.”

She gave me a sad smile. “Yeah, I can believe that. Well, come on. The person I want you to meet is still here.”

She set off at a purposeful pace and hurried to keep up.

She wove through the crowd with ease, making me feel clumsy in comparison, until we reached a small booth tucked between two larger vendors. A hand-lettered sign swung gently in the breeze, its words painted in uneven but careful strokes:

Handmade Soaps, Essential Oils, Teas, and Herbal Remedies.

The booth smelled of earth and spice — lavender, sage, and something sharper I couldn’t place. Behind the table sat an old man surrounded by his wares: neat rows of soaps wrapped in brown paper, tiny glass bottles filled with liquids, jars of loose tea. At the back, another table was stacked high with books, their spines worn with use.

He was finishing up with a customer when we arrived, which gave me the chance to take him in. He looked to be in his seventies, his face weathered into the texture of creased leather, but there was nothing frail about him. His snow-white hair was pulled into a single braid that hung down his back, bound at the end with a bright red strip of cloth. Thick, unruly eyebrows shaded dark eyes that were still sharp as a hawk’s, missing nothing. His hands, steady and strong, handled the customer’s money with ease before passing over a bundle of small brown vials — essential oils, I guessed.

Transaction complete, he turned toward us, and his face softened into a smile that radiated quiet warmth.

“Hello again, Lily,” he said, his voice deep and kind, carrying the weight of someone who didn’t need to raise it to be heard. Then his gaze shifted to me, keen and unflinching. “Would I be correct in guessing that this young man is Jacy?”

Something in the way he said my name — like he already knew me — made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

“You would be correct,” Lily said with a smile. I could tell she was genuinely fond of the old man. “Jacy, I’d like to introduce you to Fletcher Snyder.”

Snyder? That was Lily’s last name. I glanced between her and the older man, trying to puzzle out the connection — or was it just coincidence?

As far as I knew, Lily had never been married, though I couldn’t say for certain. She must have been, though, I realized. Otherwise, her last name would have been Allen, like Grandma’s. Which meant this man could be her father-in-law.

Lily watched my face carefully. “This is my father,” she said softly.

I blinked in confusion. “What?” I asked, thinking maybe I’d misunderstood.

“Fletcher is my father.”

“But Grandpa Allen...”

“Grandpa Allen was my stepfather.”

I shook my head, trying hard to understand. “So wait, you and Mom have different fathers?”

Lily shook her head. “No. Fletcher is your mom’s father as well.”

“But that means...”

I turned to the old man.

He nodded, still smiling gently. “I’m your grandfather.”

I stared at the stranger across from me, my thoughts tumbling over each other in disbelief. My grandfather? How could that possibly be? I had never met him, never even heard his name before today. As far as I’d always known, Grandpa Allen was my grandfather — end of story. That had been the truth for as long as I’d been alive. And now, with a single sentence, the ground under me shifted.

My brain balked at the idea, refusing to take it in. If this man was truly my grandfather, then what did that make everything else I'd been told? It was too much to swallow, too much to believe that everyone I loved and trusted had been keeping something like this from me all my life.

Lily and — what was I supposed to call him? Mr. Snyder? Fletcher? *Grandpa*? The word lodged in my throat like a stone. Whoever he was, they were both watching me now with nearly identical expressions, their concern etched plain across their faces.

Finally, after what felt like forever, I managed to push a word past the tightness in my chest. "How...?"

The question came out raw, unfinished, but they seemed to understand anyway. They exchanged a look, quick but loaded, the kind of glance that carried an entire conversation in silence.

"Not here," he said after a moment.

Lily nodded. "Jacy, this is a conversation we should probably have somewhere else. Fletcher lives nearby. Would you be okay with going there to talk?"

I nodded woodenly as some small part of my brain registered the fact that Lily called him Fletcher. Is that what they would expect me to call him too? I decided it would do for now anyway. At least I'd have something to call him in my own mind.

I stood in shocked immobility while the two of them quickly packed his wares into cardboard boxes. It only took two boxes to pack his herbal items and a tarp was thrown over the book table. Lily plopped one of the boxes into my arms, picked up the other one, and started walking in the direction of the parking lot.

I stared dumbly after her for a few seconds. My brain seemed to be having trouble keeping up.

"Better follow her, Jacy," Fletcher said with a hint of humor in his voice. "Lily waits for no man."

"What about you?" I asked.

"I'll meet you at my house. I'm parked somewhere else."

I nodded and rushed to catch up with my aunt. I was halfway to the parking lot when Skye and I spotted each other at the same time. He took a few steps in my direction, but something in my face must have warned him off.

He gave me a small wave, which I couldn't return for the box in my hands. We maintained eye contact until a group of people surged between us, cutting him off from my view.

Something else to figure out, I thought wearily. As if I don't have enough going on.

Lily wove her way through the thinning crowd and stopped beside a beat-up pickup that looked like it had been on the road since before I was born. The faded blue paint was sun-bleached almost to gray, and patches of rust gnawed at the wheel wells. A cracked Orioles bumper sticker clung stubbornly to the dented tailgate.

Without a word, she hoisted her box as if it weighed nothing and slid it into the bed of the truck with a practiced ease. Then, before I could protest, she reached for mine. I still had a decent grip on it, but she tugged it free with a raised eyebrow that dared me to argue, and dropped it neatly beside the first box.

"Hop in," she said.

"My bike..."

"I'll bring you back later. I'll drive for now. Just get in."

I mutely did as she ordered as she climbed into the driver's seat and started the truck.

"Jacy, I'm sorry to have sprung this on you all at once," she said as she drove. "Maybe that wasn't the best decision, but I didn't know how else to tell you."

"I just don't understand," I said weakly.

"I think we'd better wait and let Fletcher explain."

"Why do you call him Fletcher?"

She paused. "I never really knew him as a father until I was an adult. By that time, I already had a father, the man who'd raised me."

"Grandpa Allen," I supplied.

"Right. When I became closer to Fletcher, it just felt natural to call him that."

"Why didn't you see him as a child?"

"Like I said, I think I should let Fletcher explain."

We fell into silence and soon after, Lily pulled into the driveway of what I assumed to be Fletcher's house. It was set well back from the road, trees liberally dotted the front yard and the forest seemed to crowd right up to the back of the small dwelling.

With its weathered cedar siding and redwood deck, the house itself looked less like it had been built and more like it had simply grown from the soft mossy ground it sat upon.

The landscaping could best be described as naturalistic. Sunlight beamed through the canopy above to create small pools of warmth where wildflowers and what looked to me like unattended weeds competed for attention. The total effect was quite enchanting. It looked like something out of a fairy tale.

We climbed out of the truck, and Lily immediately shoved a box back into my arms. She had just hefted the other one when the quiet evening shattered with the roar of a huge red Harley Davidson pulling into the drive. Fletcher sat astride it like some modern-day conquistador claiming new land.

My mouth fell open as I gawked at the sight, the rumble of the bike still vibrating in my chest. At least now I knew why we'd taken the boxes.

Lily caught my expression and grinned, clearly enjoying my shock.

Fletcher pulled the bike up next to Lily's truck and shut it off. He pulled off his helmet to reveal a grin that matched Lily's watt for watt in intensity.

"Not what you expected, eh?" he asked.

I shook my head "no" since words seemed to have failed me yet again.

"Let's go inside. I'll brew up some tea while we talk."

He started off for the house with Lily and me trailing behind. I was surprised at the agility with which he moved. Both he and Grandma Allen had to be in their seventies, but he moved like a young man while Grandma Allen's movements were stiff and slow. He unlocked the door and led us into the house's interior.

The first thing that hit me was the scent — warm and layered, faintly spicy with a subtle sweetness, threaded through with that same indefinable aroma I'd noticed at his booth. It clung to the air, earthy and comforting, like something old yet alive.

As my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light inside, the space began to take shape around me. The entryway opened directly into the living room, and it felt like stepping into a strange crossroads between a cozy southwestern lodge and a wing of the Natural History Museum. An invitingly plump leather sofa and matching

chairs anchored the room, their worn cushions softened by years of use. Pine end tables held sturdy cast-iron lamps while vibrant pieces of southwestern pottery added splashes of color.

The walls drew my gaze next. Glass-front cases displayed a staggering array of artifacts — arrowheads glinting like tiny shards of history, tomahawks worn smooth by long-forgotten hands, and other relics whose stories I could only guess at. A deep, sprawling bookshelf dominated one corner, crammed to bursting with stone tools I couldn't begin to name. Nestled between them were an assortment of skulls and bones that made my stomach tighten when I looked too closely. Behind all of it, row after row of books strained against their shelves, as if the stories themselves were trying to push into the room.

"Just set those boxes anywhere," Fletcher said.

"I'll make the tea," Lily offered, placing her box on a rustic bench near the door, where a jumble of shoes had been kicked off in no particular order. "You two can get started talking. Jacy has a lot of questions."

Before I could protest, she slipped through a doorway, and I caught a fleeting glimpse of a dining table stacked high with papers and notebooks.

"My home office," Fletcher said, following my gaze with a wry smile. "I don't get much company. Come on in. Put that box down and make yourself comfortable."

I set my box beside Lily's and trailed him into the living room. The leather chair nearest the entry seemed to beckon, and when I lowered myself into it, I was surprised at how soft and enveloping it was — like the chair had been waiting just for me. Fletcher settled easily onto the end of the couch, leaning back with the air of a man completely at home, his smile warm and unhurried.

"This furniture is my biggest luxury," he confided. "Well, that and my bike."

"The chair is very comfortable," I mumbled.

Fletcher grinned. "Yes, it is, but you're not here to discuss my furniture."

I stared back at him without comment.

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" he asked after a moment.

"I don't even know where to start," I said quite truthfully.

He sighed. "That makes two of us. I guess the beginning's as good a place as any."

For a moment, he stared past me, his eyes fixed on something only he could see. When he finally spoke, his voice took on a faint, sing-song cadence, like he was slipping into an old story.

"I spent a lot of time with my grandfather when I was a boy. Back then, we called him a medicine man. Today, people might say shaman, though he would have hated that. He knew the woods better than any survivalist you'll see on TV. Every plant — whether it was food, poison, or medicine — he could name it and tell you its use. He could look at a trail and know exactly what animal had passed, how long ago, and where it was headed. He recognized birds from the sound of their wings, not just their calls. To me, it seemed like there wasn't a thing in the world he didn't know."

He paused, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Of course, I was just a kid. I didn't pay as much attention as I should have. But some of it stuck. What he drilled into me most, though, was respect — for the land, for the life around you, and for yourself. I wish I'd listened more closely to the last part. About always being proud of who you are."

I wondered where he was going with this meandering storytelling, but I didn't interrupt.

"When I was a young man, I met and married Vida, your grandmother."

"Grandma Allen?" I asked, surprised.

He nodded. "Yes. We had five beautiful daughters together, but I still wasn't happy. I felt like something essential was missing. I started exploring the Old Ways my grandfather had tried to teach me, and in that search, I began to find myself. It became clear, to both Vida and me, what we needed to do."

He paused, letting the weight of his words settle. "The divorce was amicable. Truly. No hard feelings. I was genuinely happy for her when she met Bob Allen and they married. It was the girls who struggled. We couldn't tell them the whole story at the time, and they couldn't understand. They felt abandoned — especially the older girls, Daisy, Violet, and Rose...your mother. It probably hit Daisy the hardest. She was older and she'd always been a daddy's girl. Later, when the truth came out, it only deepened her

resentment. I'm fairly certain that's why she chose not to tell you I even existed."

He leaned back slightly, his gaze fixed on me, waiting, as if my reaction would confirm something he'd been carrying for decades.

I sat in silence, studying his face. It was obvious he was leaving out a large portion of the story...but why? Was it some sort of test? Was I supposed to challenge him? To accept it blindly? My pulse quickened as I decided.

"What aren't you telling me?" I asked, my voice steady despite the knot in my stomach.

At that moment, Lily returned, carrying a small silver tray laden with steaming teacups and a sugar pot. She set it carefully on the coffee table and handed Fletcher and me each a cup. The aroma of the tea — subtle with a hint of sweetness — filled the space, grounding me slightly, though my mind was still racing with questions.

Fletcher sniffed his appreciatively.

"Clover catnip?" he asked.

Lily nodded as she sat down next to him on the couch.

"Good choice," he said approvingly. Then to me, "Clover catnip tea has very cleansing, soothing qualities."

"You're avoiding my question," I said somewhat impatiently.

I sat the cup down on the table next to me, untouched.

Fletcher and Lily exchanged another glance laden with subtext. Lily gave an almost imperceptible nod, and Fletcher turned back to me.

"Jacy, the reason your grandmother and I separated — and part of the reason your aunt tries so hard to pretend I don't exist — is because I am two-spirit."

Chapter 3

I blinked at him, confused. “What does that mean?”

He frowned, as if he’d expected me to understand immediately. “I see you truly do have a lot to learn,” he said with a soft sigh.

There was no blame in his voice, but I couldn’t help bristling. He noticed instantly.

“That’s not your fault, Jacy,” he said gently. “You can’t know what you weren’t taught. This will be a simplified explanation, but our ancestors believed most people are born with either a male spirit or a female spirit. However, some are born with both — a combination of male and female spirits. They existed beyond the binary, combining aspects of both genders, often taking partners of the same sex. These people were held in the highest regard because they were seen as closer to the Creator. They took on roles of authority and respect within their communities: healers, mediators, shamans. Many had spiritual powers that set them apart.”

My brain scrambled to catch up. “Wait,” I blurted. “Do you mean you’re...gay?”

He blinked, momentarily thrown off by my bluntness. “Well, some might put it that way,” he said. “But being two-spirited is so much more than simply being gay or bisexual. Not every gay person is two-spirited, but all two-spirited people are gay, bisexual or transgender.”

“But you’re gay?” I repeated, needing to hear it again to make it real.

He nodded.

The realization hit me in a rush. No wonder Aunt Daisy had refused to acknowledge him. Not only had he left their lives when she was young, but he was also gay. That combination would never have fit with her strict religious worldview.

But according to Fletcher, our ancestors had not only accepted this identity — they had revered it. And then it struck me in a sudden, dizzying flash: My grandfather is gay.

The thought flattened everything else in my mind. The grandfather I’d never known existed less than an hour ago...was gay.

My thoughts immediately went to Skye and the kiss he'd given me. Is it hereditary? I quickly skittered away from that thought. I wasn't prepared to deal with that just yet — one major revelation at a time.

"You're gay," I said again.

"Just to get it all out at once, so am I," Lily added with an amused expression on her face. "But much to Fletcher's disappointment, I'm not a two-spirit, just your regular old garden variety lesbian."

My brain was on overload. "Does Aunt Daisy know?" I asked numbly.

"It never came up in conversation," she said drolly. "But I'm sure she does. One more reason for us to not get along."

We were all quiet for a few seconds.

"Explain the difference to me again," I asked after a minute.

Fletcher beamed like I'd just passed some sort of test. "As I said, not all gay and lesbian people are two-spirited. The difference is that two-spirited people are given certain other...let's call them gifts for lack of a better word. These gifts bring with them a certain level of responsibility. In most Indigenous cultures, people who were two-spirits had very specific roles."

"It wasn't just in our culture? It was also in other cultures?"

"Oh yes! Almost all North American tribes were aware of the existence of two-spirit people, though they would have had different names for them. Two-spirit is a modern umbrella term. The Navaho called them *nàdleehé* — one who is 'transformed'. The Lakota Sioux called them *winkte*, the Mohave *alyha*, the Zuni *lhamana*, the Omaha *mexoga*, the Aleut and Kodiak *achnucek*, the Zapotec *ira' muxe*, the Cheyenne *he man eh*. You get the picture. They all believed that two-spirit people were born that way, and they not only saw them as normal, but as a necessary part of society. They almost always became spiritual leaders in their villages."

"You keep using the past tense," I said cautiously. "It's not like that anymore?"

Fletcher's face darkened slightly, the sadness settling in his eyes. "Unfortunately, no. As with so many things, we've been shaped — and limited — by Judeo-Christian influences. There's a

small resurgence of the two-spirit tradition lately, but it's very much an uphill battle."

"So...our tribe doesn't accept it?" I asked, trying to understand.

Lily laughed, a bright, easy sound that broke some of the tension. "Fletcher hasn't exactly given them a choice. He's been so active in tribal life since coming out that people have mostly just accepted it. Even the most conservative elders tend to ignore it. You can't really argue with someone who's that influential."

Fletcher opened his mouth, clearly ready to object, but Lily held up a hand. "Don't argue, Old Man. You know it's true. You mediate conflicts, preserve the old ways, teach the young ones — and don't think I've forgotten — you even heal with your herbal remedies. You've become the tribe's unofficial medicine man, whether you like it or not."

He gave her a rueful smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I prefer the term herbalist," he said with dignity, though his voice carried a quiet pride beneath the understatement.

Lily just grinned at him.

Their little exchange allowed some of what I'd just learned to sink in, and I discovered I had a lot more questions.

"So are you saying that you have magical powers?" I asked suddenly.

They both turned to look at me with surprised expressions.

"Excuse me?" Fletcher asked.

"You said earlier that two-spirit people had magical powers."

"No, I said they had spiritual powers."

"What's the difference?"

"There's a huge difference. Magical powers imply that I cast spells and keep a pointy hat in my closet. I'm not Professor Dumbledore. Spiritual powers can come in many different forms. For some, it's just a heightened perception that allows them to see more clearly. Some are dreamers. Some are healers. Some are seers. Some are all or a combination of these and other gifts."

"What are you?"

"A little of each."

"So you can see the future?"

He smiled. "It's not like gazing into a crystal ball. I get glimpses of what is to come, sometimes clearer than others. I see what the Creator wants me to see."

Lily was studying me closely. We made eye contact, and I knew without a doubt that she was thinking about my vision of Skye getting hit by that car.

I shook my head "no", but she just lifted an eyebrow. I knew what she was trying to imply, and I was having none of it.

"Look, this is a lot to take in. I didn't even know I had a grandfather before today, and then I not only find out that you exist, but also that you're gay and some sort of...psychic. I think I need to go home and think about all this for a while."

Fletcher nodded. "I can understand that. It was a lot to dump in your lap all at once. I'm here if you have any questions. Lily, could you get him one of my cards, please?"

Lily left the room through the door into the home office/dining room again, returning less than a minute later with a cream-colored business card, which she handed to me. In large letters across the top, it read "Fletcher Snyder – Herbalist". Under that was his address, phone number, and, to my surprise, his email address and website.

"You have a website?" I asked.

"That's how I make most of my sales," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I may practice the old ways in some things, but I'm very much a part of the twenty-first century as well."

"Are you ready to go?" Lily asked. "I'll give you a ride back to your bike."

Fletcher perked up. "Bicycle?"

"No, motorcycle," I said. "Nothing like yours though. It's just an old Honda."

"Still, something we have in common," he said with a pleased smile.

If you only knew, I thought, and exchanged another meaningful glance with Lily.

I nodded and stood up, slipping the card into my pocket.

"It's been...interesting," I said with a half-smile, which was as much as I could muster.

"Don't be afraid to contact me with your questions," Fletcher said.

I nodded and followed Lily out to the car. Neither of us spoke for a while, but finally she cleared her throat.

"You know you can talk to me any time too, Jacy," she said gently. "About *anything*."

I nodded.

"I'm serious. Don't just close yourself off to Fletcher and me. You need to talk about all this with someone."

"I'm not really ready to talk yet," I said.

"I guess I can understand that." She paused. "Are you okay with the fact that I'm gay?"

I glanced over at her and shrugged. "I haven't really had time to think about it, but I guess that doesn't really matter to me. I'm not as hung up on church and stuff as Mom is. It's a little weird though. I've never really known anyone who is gay, and then I meet two people in one day."

"Three," she corrected absently.

"Three?"

"Skye," she said.

I felt myself start to blush and quickly turned to look out the window.

"You can talk about that with me too, if you want," Lily offered tentatively.

"There's nothing to talk about," I said quickly with what I hoped was a note of finality.

We fell into silence as we drew closer to the powwow grounds. I could see campers and tents among the trees through my side window. I assumed that was where the powwow participants from out of town stayed. There were clothes hanging outside, barbecue grills wafting smoke, and children running and playing among the temporary dwellings. It reminded me of a modern version of what a tribal village must have been like hundreds of years ago.

Suddenly, something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. I looked up in time to see a small child dart into the road in front of our car. I only had time to gasp and throw my hands out toward the windshield. I blinked and the child was gone.

"Stop," I gasped with an intensity that startled even me.

"What?" Lily asked with confusion.

“Stop the car.” Panic was squeezing my chest so tightly I could barely breathe. “Now!”

Lily slammed on the brakes and the car screeched to a shuddering halt just as a little girl no older than two toddled into the road in front of us, giggling, blissfully oblivious to how close she had come to death. A young woman, probably the child’s mother, rushed out after the girl, scooping her up and waving apologetically to us, only marginally more aware of how close she had come to losing her child.

Lily sat unmoving, staring out at the road and sucking in short, shallow gasps of air. A car pulled up behind us and honked its horn, but still Lily didn’t move. The car finally pulled carefully around us, the driver staring over angrily at us as he passed.

“Lily?” I asked after a few minutes.

She turned slowly to face me, her dark eyes unreadable. “Jacy, we have to talk.”

“I know. I just...I need to think first.”

“I understand,” she said, her voice firm but gentle, “but you can’t put this off forever. You have some very strong gifts, and now that they’re starting to manifest, they won’t be easy to ignore. Fletcher can help you understand what’s happening — if you’re willing to let him.”

“Okay, but I need some time.”

“Are you okay?”

I shrugged. “Sure. I’ll talk to you soon. My bike’s right over there.” I threw open the car door and climbed out, then stopped awkwardly and leaned back in. “Uh, thanks for, um...telling me the truth and everything.”

Lily sighed. She looked tired all of a sudden. “Sure, Jacy. Sorry to have dumped it all on you at once. Call me if you need me.”

I nodded and waved goodbye. I shut the door and walked away, pushing everything from my mind as best as I could. As I swung my leg over my bike, I briefly wondered if Skye was still there, among the tents and campers, then I decided I wasn’t up for dealing with that just yet either.

I avoided thinking about the whole messy subject for the rest of the night. It helped that I had some distraction in the form of

Michael. He showed up at my bedroom door later that night with a hesitant knock.

“Come in,” I called from my bed.

Michael slid into the room. “So,” he said expectantly.

I looked up at him. “So?”

“You said you wanted to talk to me tonight.”

It took a few seconds to remember the incident from earlier that day. It seemed like a millennium had passed since then. It somehow seemed much less important now.

“Oh, that.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “I’ve been waiting for my lecture all night, and now all I get is an ‘oh that’? You were pretty pissed this afternoon.”

I shrugged. “A lot has happened since then,” I said simply. Then, as an afterthought, added, “But stay away from my bike.”

He stood there for a few beats. “So that’s it?”

“Yep,” I replied.

“You’re not going to tell Aunt Daisy?”

“Nope.”

“And no lecture about the dangers of unprotected sex?”

“God no.”

He stood there a minute longer.

“Hey Jay, is everything okay?” he asked suddenly.

I rolled over and looked up at him. He almost never called me Jay anymore; it was his nickname for me when we were kids. “Why?” I asked guardedly.

“You said a lot happened today, and you’re definitely not yourself. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Okay. Well, uh, if you change your mind, you know where I am,” he said awkwardly.

He shuffled his feet, then turned to leave.

“Hey Mikey,” I called, also using his childhood nickname. He stopped and faced me. “Thanks, but I’m just not ready to talk. Okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah. It’s cool. And I’ll stay away from your bike, I promise.”

I gave him a weak smile and watched as he slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind himself with a soft click. I buried my face in my pillow and the next thing I knew it was morning.

It wasn't until I was at church sitting in the pew listening to the pastor's sermon that everything suddenly swirled back into the forefront of my thoughts. He'd picked that day, of all days, to rant about the dangers of homosexuality in our community.

While he stood behind the pulpit gravely intoning all the ways the evil gays were trying to unravel society, I was thinking about the fact that just the day before I'd learned that my grandfather, who I hadn't even known existed, was gay, and so was my aunt — not to mention Skye.

And me.

There was no denying how much Skye had excited me. Or how much I'd liked his kiss, however brief it had been.

Suddenly, Fletcher's words came back to me: *"Not every gay person is two-spirited, but all two-spirited people are gay, bisexual, or trans."*

I thought about Lily's conviction that I might be two-spirited, and the memories of the visions I'd had pressed in on me. There was no way to deny them. Twice already, I had seen events unfold before they actually happened. And each time, I had been able to step in and prevent a tragedy.

The weight of it settled over me, equal parts awe and unease. If this was part of who I was, if these gifts were real, then ignoring them wasn't just foolish — it could be dangerous. And yet, admitting it meant stepping into a world I barely understood, one that carried both responsibility and risk.

Several things clicked into place at once as a sense of certainty settled over me — and with it a sense of Zen-like peace.

I'm gay and I'm two-spirit.

It was easier to accept than I'd thought.

Just then, the preacher's words cut through my thoughts like a blade. "Homosexuality is an abomination before the Lord!" he thundered, his voice shaking with righteous fury. "And yet, Hollywood parades that lifestyle before us as if it were completely normal. Every week, they force their filth into our homes on television and in movies. It's time we stood up and made a stand

against this immorality before our children are seduced by their lies!”

My stomach turned at the venom in his voice. Not for the first time, I wondered why some people felt the need to shove their beliefs onto others, how anyone could feel threatened by love in any form. I was sickened by the hypocrisy, the glaring contradiction of professing devotion to a God of love while spewing such hatred.

The longer I sat there, the heavier it felt in my chest, like the air itself had turned toxic. I had to get out. I would stand up, yes — but not in the way the pastor expected.

I rose to my feet and began making my way past my family towards the aisle. I’d sat in the center of the pew, so it was quite a production with Michael and my cousins looking startled and my aunt glaring daggers at me.

I finally made it to the aisle and walked out the back door of the sanctuary and out of the church. I knew I’d be in a lot of trouble later, but at that moment, I just didn’t care. I had to get out of there.

I took several deep breaths of fresh air and waited for my stomach to settle.

As usual, we’d all driven in one vehicle, so I was stuck until church let out. Either that or I could start walking. I opted for walking. I set off down the road without a clear destination in mind. It was too far to walk home, but it didn’t matter. More than anything, I just needed to be moving.

I don’t know how long I’d been wandering aimlessly down the street, lost in thought, before the low hum of a car pulling to the shoulder caught my attention. A sleek black sportscar eased to a stop just ahead of me. I froze, wary, my stomach tightening, until the driver’s door opened.

Out stepped Skye.

I couldn’t help it — I laughed out loud. If there was a God, it seemed he had a sharper sense of humor than most of his followers ever gave him credit for.

Skye’s brow furrowed, a flicker of confusion on his otherwise easy, attractive features.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, shaking my head, still grinning. “What are you doing here?”

"I was on my way to a friend's house," he said, running a hand through his dark hair, "when I thought I saw you walking. Figured I'd turn around and see if you needed a ride."

Relief and warmth bloomed in my chest. "That would be great. Thanks."

"No problem." He gestured toward the car.

I slid into the passenger seat, the faint smell of leather and cologne wrapping around me. Dance music pulsed from the speakers, Skye's fingers tapping the beat on the steering wheel as he settled back behind it.

"So where to?" he asked, lowering the volume a notch.

I shrugged. "Nowhere in particular. I was just walking."

He gave me a once-over, his smile crooked. "You always go for walks dressed like that?"

I glanced down at my navy dress pants and light blue oxford shirt, and laughed. "Fair point. I walked out of church."

That earned me a curious look.

"It's a long story," I said with a grin.

For the first time in what felt like forever, I realized I was smiling without effort. A crushing weight had lifted, and the world seemed lighter, brighter, full of possibility.

"So...tell me," Skye said. "I've got time."

"Nah. I'm good."

He rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. "You're a riddle wrapped in mystery, Jacy."

"You don't know the half of it," I said, and the happiness in my voice surprised me.

"I'd like to," he said, and this time there was no teasing in his tone.

A flutter of nervous heat stirred in my stomach. I looked out the window, suddenly aware of every inch between us — and how much I wanted it gone.

"So where am I taking you?" he asked after a moment.

I hesitated. "I don't know. Want to...hang out or something? Unless you need to get to your friend's."

"That's not a big deal," he said easily. "We didn't have real plans. I'll just call her."

"You don't have to—"

"I know I don't have to. I want to." He grinned and said, "Alexa, call Jasmine."

When she picked up, he dove right in: "Hey girl. Change of plans. Picked up a hitchhiker, and we're going to the zoo. I'll call you later. Love you, bye." He hung up before she could reply.

Almost immediately, her photo lit up the screen again.

"You gonna answer?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Nope. Let her wonder."

I shook my head, amused. "The zoo, huh?"

He nodded. "Unless you have a better idea."

"That's fine," I said, smiling despite myself.

The drive passed in companionable silence, except for the times I caught him sneaking glances at me.

Finally, I couldn't stand it. "What?"

"What?" he echoed innocently.

"Why do you keep looking at me?"

He laughed. "Besides the fact that you're really cute?"

Heat rose in my cheeks. "I am not."

"You so are," he said with a grin. "But the real reason? You're different today. Yesterday, you looked like you'd seen a ghost. Now, it's like you can't stop smiling."

He wasn't wrong. I could feel the change.

I nodded. "I feel different. I am different. A lot's changed since yesterday."

"How can things change so much in one day?"

"It's all in how you look at things," I said. "I know things now that I didn't know yesterday. I've...accepted things I was still fighting."

"Like what?" he asked, curious but gentle.

I hesitated, then offered a half-truth. "I found out yesterday I had a grandfather I never knew about."

His brows shot up. "Whoa. That's intense. How does that even work? How come you didn't know?"

"My mom never told me. I grew up thinking my Grandpa Allen was my actual grandfather, but turns out he was actually my step-grandfather, and my biological grandfather was still out there."

"So how'd you find out?"

"My aunt introduced us. Lily."

"Wait! Fletcher Snyder is your grandfather?"

“Apparently.”

“Wow. If you’re gonna get an instant granddad, you could do worse. Fletcher’s a cool guy — and kind of a big deal. Isn’t he one of the tribal elders?”

I gave a short laugh. “You’d know better than me. I only met him yesterday, remember? What does that even mean — tribal elder?”

Skye glanced at me, surprised. “You really don’t know?”

I shook my head. “Not a clue. My aunt made sure I grew up knowing nothing about any of this.”

He was quiet for a moment, then said, “The elders...they’re like the council. They help guide the chief, advise on tribal issues, settle disputes. They carry the stories and wisdom of the tribe.” A proud note crept into his voice. “My grandmother’s an elder too. People listen when she speaks.”

I let that settle, a strange heaviness pressing into my chest. Fletcher — my grandfather — wasn’t just some guy selling herbs and tinctures. He was someone people turned to, someone with history and authority. Lily had said as much, but hearing someone else say it made it feel more real.

And all this time, I hadn’t even known he existed.

A part of me swelled with pride, like I had inherited something rare and valuable. Another part of me burned with anger — at my aunt for keeping this from me, at the lost years I could never get back, at myself for feeling both excited and guilty all at once.

“Sounds important,” I murmured, more to myself than to him.

“It is,” Skye said as a sly smirk crossed his face. “And let me tell you, there are perks to being the grandson of an elder.”

I stared out the window, chewing on the word lifetime. Fletcher had lived his whole life steeped in something I was only now brushing against, and it was supposed to be mine too — my heritage, my story. But I was a stranger here.

And yet, for the first time, I wanted to belong.

By the time he pulled into the Salisbury Zoo parking lot, I was buzzing with a strange mix of nerves and anticipation. We wandered through the exhibits, watching otters tumble and monkeys chatter, pausing at the sleek black jaguar pacing its enclosure.

Skye's arm brushed mine now and then, casual, unintentional — but every time, my skin buzzed with electricity.

When my phone rang and Aunt Daisy's name flashed on the screen, I declined. I'd face her wrath later. At that moment, I wanted...whatever it was we were doing. Was it a date? Two friends hanging out? I wasn't sure, but I knew I liked it.

After the zoo, Skye suggested a walk on the park trail, and I agreed instantly. Anything to keep the day from ending.

We passed a playground alive with children's laughter until the sounds faded behind us. A small wooden bridge arched over a tributary, and we stopped in the middle, leaning against the railing. I watched fish dart below the water's surface, their scales catching the light like quicksilver.

Then I felt Skye's arms slip around my waist, his chin resting on my shoulder.

Instinct tensed every muscle, my eyes flicking around for witnesses. But the path was empty, the world ours alone. Slowly, I let myself relax into his embrace.

"Something else is different about you," he murmured.

"What's that?" I asked, my voice dropping to match his.

"You would have freaked out if I did this yesterday."

I turned in his arms until I was facing him, my breath catching at how close he was. "That was yesterday."

"So what's different?" he asked, leaning in.

"Everything," I whispered, closing the space between us.

Our lips met, and the rest of the world fell away.

All good things must come to an end, and my idyllic afternoon with Skye was no exception. I knew I had to go home and face Aunt Daisy eventually, and I'd put it off long enough.

"I guess you should take me home," I said as Skye gave me a playful push on one of the swings at the far end of the park.

After our kiss on the bridge, we'd spent the next hour walking and talking, trading life stories, pretending the rest of the world didn't exist. It felt like something out of a dream. But the shadows were growing longer, and reality was waiting.

"I wish this afternoon didn't have to end," I added with a sigh.

“We’ll see each other again,” Skye said easily. With one last push, he circled around to stand in front of me. “At least, I’d like to see you again. And I can’t imagine why you wouldn’t want to see me again.”

He flashed that cocky grin I’d already grown to love and held out his arms.

I grinned back and jumped from the swing into him. “You know I want to see you again,” I said, suddenly serious. “I’ll probably be grounded until I’m eighteen after today, though.”

He frowned. “Just for walking out of church? Just say you felt sick or something.”

“Then she’ll want to know why I didn’t wait for them and where I’ve been all afternoon. And why I ignored her phone calls.”

“She called?”

“Several times.”

He snorted. “What’re you going to tell her?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know yet. The truth maybe?”

“Really?” His tone shifted, cautious. “And what would that be?”

“That I was with my boyfriend,” I said with a smile.

The word boyfriend felt solid, real, like it had been waiting for me to claim it. But instead of returning my smile, Skye’s expression faltered. He stepped back, letting his arms fall away.

“Jacy...”

The warning in his voice made my stomach sink. “I was just kidding,” I said quickly, though we both knew I wasn’t.

“Jacy, I think you’re really sweet, and I like hanging out with you. You’re definitely cute. But I’m not looking for a boyfriend. We’re young. We should have fun before we settle down. You know, sow our wild oats.”

“I didn’t ask you to marry me,” I snapped. The sharpness in my tone betrayed how badly his words stung. Not looking for a boyfriend? So what was I — just some fling?

He shifted, uncomfortable. “Look, I’m sorry if you got the wrong impression. Don’t crash out. We had a good time, right?”

I wanted to scream that it was more than a “good time.” But instead, I gave him a grudging nod.

“And maybe we’ll have more good times together again. I’d like that. Maybe even naked good times.” He wagged his eyebrows. “We just won’t be...you know...boyfriends.”

His casual dismissal scraped raw against something tender inside me. “So what would we be, Skye? Acquaintances? Bros? Fuck buddies?”

He blinked in surprise, clearly not expecting the bite in my words. “Why do we have to be anything? Who needs labels?”

I turned away from him, walking toward the riverbank. The water rippled with late sunlight, calm where I felt anything but. Maybe I was a naive kid or a hopeless romantic, but I’d thought our kiss meant something. That he meant something. Clearly, he wanted something very different than I did.

When I looked back, Skye was still standing where I’d left him, arms crossed, wary and defensive.

“Can you take me home now?” I asked flatly.

He nodded.

We walked back through the zoo, but the spark between us had died. The playful nudges, the easy laughter — all gone. We kept our distance, as though afraid to brush too close.

In the car, silence pressed down until Skye finally broke it. “Hey, sorry if you feel like I led you on. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t lead me on,” I said softly. “I led myself on.

You never promised me anything. I was warned to be careful around you, but I didn’t listen.”

His head snapped toward me. “Who warned you about me?”

I waved the question away. “It doesn’t matter. The point is, you’re entitled to want what you want. But so am I. And I want more than this. I want my first relationship to be special. I want romance. I want a boyfriend.”

He shook his head, exasperated. “Jacy, we just met. Don’t you think you’re moving a little fast?”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “But I thought there was something real between us.”

“That’s attraction. Sparks. You’re hot, I’m hot. Can’t we just enjoy that?”

The words hollowed me out. “But I want...more.”

"You want a fairy tale, some Wattpad romance. That doesn't exist in real life."

"No," I said firmly. "I don't want a fairy tale. I just want to feel like I matter. And I don't wanna just sleep around. I'm not just a slut."

He flinched. "So what, you're saying I'm a slut?"

"What? No! I mean... We just...want different things. That's all."

The rest of the drive was thick with silence, every mile widening the gap between us.

When he finally pulled into the dirt lane that led to my house, relief and dread crashed together in my chest. I wanted out of the car, out of this conversation, out of the hollow ache gnawing at me. But I also dreaded what was waiting for me inside.

I climbed out, then turned back to him. "Thanks."

He gave a short nod, his face unreadable, but just as I shut the door, he called out through the open window.

"For the record, Jacy...not everything has to mean something. Sometimes a kiss is just a kiss. Grow up."

The words hit harder than a slap. I stood frozen in the dust as he drove away, watching his taillights disappear.

Just then, the back door flew open and Michael spilled out, staring after Skye's car, already hidden by a cloud of dust.

"Dude, you are in so much trouble," he said, confirming my worst suspicions. "Where have you been?"

"I just needed to get away," I said simply.

I started toward the house, figuring I might as well get this over with now instead of putting it off any longer.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"A friend." I walked past my little brother, ruffling his hair as I went.

"You don't have any friends."

"Not now, Michael. It was nice knowing you," I added as I opened the door.

"Who was it, Michael?" Aunt Daisy called from the living room. "Is Jacy home yet?"

"It's me," I called back.

"Jacy!" Her voice was so harsh that I flinched.

She rounded the corner into the kitchen with her jaw set and her eyes flashing. She was a few inches shorter than me, but the anger twisting her face made me take a step back.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "What were you thinking, just up and walking out of church! Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was for me and the family? I had to lie to the pastor and tell him you weren't feeling well."

"I never asked you to lie to anyone, and besides, it wasn't a lie. I was feeling sick to my stomach and I had to get out of there."

"Don't get smart with me. Why didn't you wait outside, and where on earth have you been?"

"I went for a walk, and a friend drove by and offered me a ride, so we went to the zoo for a while."

"I can't believe you would do that without telling me. Do you have any idea how irresponsible that was?"

I noticed Ariel, Gabriel, Raphael and Dina crowding around the door, all the better to hear me getting in trouble. I was sure Michael was still at the back door listening as well. It was a rare enough event that I could understand their interest.

"We didn't know whether to wait for you or come home," she continued, still working up to her full head of steam. "We had no idea where you were. Who was this friend, anyway?"

"I'm sorry you were worried," I said, doubting very seriously that she'd been all that worried. It was much more likely that she was just embarrassed and pissed. "My friend's name is Skye."

Her eyes narrowed. "Skye Morgan?" she asked.

I blinked in surprise. I hadn't expected her to know who he was.

"Yeah."

"How do you know him? He doesn't even go to your school."

I quickly tried to think of a plausible lie. I couldn't very well tell her that I'd met him at the powwow while I was there with Aunt Lily to meet the grandfather she'd never told me about. At the thought of Fletcher, I began to get angry all over again, but I tried to suppress my resentment.

Then I remembered the first time I'd seen Skye at work. "He comes in to get ice cream with someone I know from school," I said.

She eyed me suspiciously. I could tell she suspected there was more to the story.

"How long have you been friends with him?"

"Not long," I said. "I don't really know him that well."

"Did you know he's a homosexual?"

My mouth dropped open in shock. How did she know that? True, Skye didn't exactly hide the fact, but I didn't even know my mother knew who he was, let alone that he was gay.

"How do you know that?" I gasped before I could stop myself.

Her face grew red. "So, you did know. I can't believe you would associate yourself with one of *them*."

She said "them" as if she was referring to a pile of animal dung in which she'd just stepped. I felt my own face growing red with stifled emotions.

"Weren't you listening to the pastor this morning?" She stopped as she put two and two together. "Is... Is that why you walked out?"

Her expression was so horrified that I almost laughed, except there was nothing funny about this situation. I had to make a choice, and I had to make it quickly. Would I back down and insist that I'd walked out simply because I was feeling sick, or would I take a stand and admit that it was the pastor's words that had made me sick?

While I was trying to decide what to do, Aunt Daisy's expression became even more revolted — if that was possible — as a new thought occurred to her.

"Oh God, Jacy! Please tell me you're not involved with that...that...pervert."

Suddenly, the events of the last few days boiled over and I lost it. "And what if I was?" I said in a deceptively calm voice. "Would you just write me out of your life and pretend I didn't exist? It wouldn't be the first time you've done that, would it?"

She froze. "What are you talking about?" She searched my face.

"I know everything," I told her, challenging her with my stare.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she bluffed, but her eyes gave her away.

"Remember that school project you wouldn't help me with?"

She shook her head, not to say that she didn't remember it, but that she didn't understand.

"When you wouldn't help me, I went to Grandma Allen, but she wouldn't help me either. So then I went to Aunt Lily."

Mom's eyes grew wide. "She...she told you?"

"Not at first. She wanted to be sure I was ready to know. Yesterday, she introduced me to my grandfather. You know the one. The one you've lied to us about all these years, the one I didn't even know existed."

"That man is not your grandfather," she spat. "He lost the right to be called your grandfather the day he walked out on us. Lily had no right to tell you about any of this. How dare she?"

She was practically shaking with rage at this point. I took a step backward just to be out of her reach. She'd never hit one of us kids before, but then, I'd never seen her this angry either.

"Don't be angry at Lily. She just told me the truth."

"That was my decision to make, not hers. You're my responsibility. It was better you didn't know about that worthless excuse for a human being. What has she been telling you? She's probably filled your head full of lies, making him seem so noble and romantic."

"You're the one who's been filling my head full of lies," I interrupted heatedly. "You lied about Grandpa Allen being my real grandfather."

"I was trying to protect you."

"From what? My true heritage?"

"Heritage? I can tell you've been talking to Lily and *him*."

She couldn't even bring herself to say his name. "What exactly is your heritage, Jacy? A bunch of grown people jumping around in ridiculous costumes trying to recapture the past, worshiping pagan gods, and pretending to be something they're not? You're better than that. You know the truth."

“You wouldn’t know the truth if it bit you on the ass.” I’d crossed the line and I knew it as soon as the words left my mouth.

“That’s it,” she snapped, biting off each word. “You’re grounded for six months. You’re not to see Skye Morgan anymore. You’re not to see Lily again. And you’re certainly never going to see *him* again.”

“They’re my family. You can’t stop me from seeing them.”

“Oh yes I can.”

“I’ll go when I’m supposed to be at work.”

“Then you’ve worked your last day. You can quit your job tomorrow.”

“You can’t control every second of my life.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. As long as you live under my roof, you’ll obey my rules.”

“Fine, then maybe I won’t live under your roof anymore.”

“And where do you think you’ll go?”

“I can live with Aunt Lily or Fletcher.”

She flinched at the mention of his name. “Maybe that’s the best place for you,” she sneered, “with other queers.”

My breath caught in my throat. I guess that answered the question of whether or not she knew Lily was a lesbian.

“You know,” I said quietly, “for years I’ve felt so guilty about being attracted to guys that I blocked it out of my head completely. This weekend, though, it was like having a veil lifted from my eyes, and for the first time in my life I saw things clearly. I had an epiphany as I sat there in church this morning listening to the pastor preach hatred. It felt so wrong that it made me sick to my stomach. I couldn’t sit there and listen to it anymore. I had to get out. It’s funny how you can’t bear the lie once you’ve been introduced to the truth. Kind of like how I can barely stand to look at you now that I know you lied to me for so long.

“Oh, and just so you know, I wasn’t involved with Skye. I was telling the truth when I said that I barely knew him. I had a great time with him today. I felt freer than I think I’ve ever felt before, but I don’t know him well enough to even call him a friend. But I did kiss him today, and you know what? I’m not sorry.”

The look of disgust on her face spoke volumes. “Get out,” she commanded in a strangled voice. “Get out and don’t come back. You don’t have a home here anymore.”

I shrugged. "I'm not sure I ever had a home here. You provided for us — shelter, clothes, food — but that's it. Michael and I were always the outsiders, the poor orphans you took in out of some sense of obligation or, worse, Christian charity."

"I sacrificed for you," she snapped, face red, eyes blazing.

"And I thank you for that. But you also lied to us and tried to brainwash us with your hateful religion, all while keeping us from our own culture."

"How dare you?" her voice trembled with barely contained rage.

"How dare *you*?" For the first time, my calm exterior cracked just a bit, and the venom I felt leaked into my tone. "How dare you ignore what our parents would have wanted? How dare you strip our identities from us? How dare you keep us from our own family?"

"I raised you in a godly home."

"You controlled us."

"Spare the rod—"

"No, spare me your lame excuses for abuse."

"That's it! Get out!"

"Gladly. And also, fuck you."

Her eyes widened in shock, but I didn't wait for her reaction, I just turned and charged out the door.

Chapter 4

I nearly knocked Michael over as I burst through the door. As I'd suspected, he'd been listening.

I brushed past him, but he ran to keep up, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"Are you really leaving?" he asked me.

I nodded while I kept walking. He trotted alongside me.

"I can't believe you're leaving." He sounded a little upset.

"Do we really have a grandfather that we never knew about?"

"Yes," I said.

"Are you really gay?"

I stopped abruptly and looked squarely at Michael.

"Listen Michael, this has been a really shitty day so if you're just going to add more crap to the pile, I really don't need it. Okay?"

"I wasn't going to add to it," he said with a slight pout. "I don't care if you're gay. Is this what you wouldn't talk to me about last night?"

"Partly," I admitted.

He frowned suddenly. "It's not right that she threw you out," he said, sounding angry. "Whether she likes it or not, you're still family."

I gave him a small smile. "Thanks, Mikey. It's nice to know someone feels that way."

"I... I don't want you to go, Jacy."

His face suddenly crumpled, making him look uncharacteristically young. He was fighting hard to maintain his composure, but I could see he was upset.

I shrugged. "I don't have much choice. I can't stay here."

"Where are you going to go? Are you really going to live with Aunt Lily? Who was the other person you mentioned?"

"Fletcher is our grandfather. Fletcher Snyder. I don't know where I'm going."

"How come we never knew about him if he's our grandfather? Why didn't Aunt Daisy want us to know about him?"

I sighed. "You'll have to ask her."

The back door opened, and Daisy yelled out, "Michael, get inside now!"

The door slammed shut again.

"Why can't you tell me?" he asked petulantly.

"It's a long story, and we don't have time," I said.

"She'll never tell me. You know that."

"Then ask your cousin David. Or wait until you're old enough to drive and ask Aunt Lily. For that matter, just ask your grandfather himself. At least you know, which puts you ahead of me."

"I don't know if I can do this alone. Can't I go with you?"

I shook my head. "I wish. I hate leaving you here, but there's no way she'd let you go. She's still our legal guardian and you're still a minor."

"So are you."

"Yeah, but she just kicked me out."

"What if she changes her mind?"

"She won't. She hates me now. And I'm okay with that."

"But what if? You know how she is? She likes to control us, especially you and me."

I shrugged. "I'm sixteen. If I have to, I'll go to court, get her guardianship revoked."

His eyes widened even more. "You can do that?"

I wasn't really sure. "I think so. I can say I don't feel safe there anymore, which is true. I don't."

"What if things get worse now? What if she takes it out on me?"

"Then you let me know. You know how to find me. I'll come get you so fast her head will spin."

For a second, his eyes welled up and I thought he might cry, but then he gave me a crooked smile. "It's not like I'm never gonna see you again," he said. "I mean, we go to the same school, so it's not good-bye forever."

I smiled back at him. He'd be okay, I was sure of that. Michael was a fighter.

I ruffled his hair one more time and said, "No, it's not forever. If you can hang out with David, you can hang out with me. Now, you'd better get back inside before she flips and grounds you too."

I started backing away as he turned and started walking back toward the house, his head down, shoulders slumped. He looked like he was walking to his execution.

Despite his encouraging words, I knew he was upset.

I started to climb on my bike, but suddenly stopped and spun around.

“Michael!” I called.

He stopped and turned back. I glanced up at the house and motioned him closer. He loped across the ground between us until he was back at my side.

“Use condoms,” I told him.

His eyes flew open wide. “What?”

“If you’re going to keep screwing around with girls, use condoms or you’ll be a daddy by the time you’re sixteen, and I’m not ready to be an uncle.”

He gulped. “Where do I get condoms?”

“The school nurse can give them to you. Just don’t let Daisy find them or you’ll be living with me.” He nodded. “Now go, before she comes back out.”

He turned away again, but I couldn’t let him go just yet. “Mikey?” He stopped and turned around. “Take care of yourself, okay? And watch out for the others. You’ll be the big brother now.”

“Jeez, Jacy! It’s not like you’re dying. You’re just moving to a different house. You would’ve gone to college next year anyway.”

I nodded and grinned. He was right. I was being melodramatic.

“Yeah. Just...if you ever need anything, you come to me, okay?”

He nodded seriously. He was about to say something else when the back door opened again. “Michael, if you’re not inside in thirty seconds, you’re grounded for a month,” Daisy screamed.

“Told you,” I said with a forced smile.

“You’d better get going anyway,” he said sadly. “It looks like it could rain any second.”

I glanced up at the sky to see that it had indeed darkened forebodingly.

I gave him a small wave, which he returned before turning back toward the house I’d grown up in — the place that held my old

life. I started my bike and pulled away, heading toward something new, something exciting and terrifying all at once. I didn't look back. Whatever my future held, I knew one thing for certain: I wouldn't find it behind me.

Michael was right. I'd barely made it to the end of the dirt drive before it started to sprinkle. By the time I was a half-mile down the road, the skies unloaded a torrential downpour. I was soaked to the bone in no time.

Almost without thinking, I headed for Lily's house. I didn't know where else to go. By the time I arrived, I was so cold my teeth were chattering.

I knocked on the front door, but there was no answer, not even a baritone woof from Elmo. I decided to try the studio, so I walked back to the barn and tapped on the door.

A few moments later, it opened to a very surprised Lily.

"Jacy! What are you doing here?" Then she took in my drenched state and gasped. Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed me and pulled me in. "You're soaked! Get inside."

Elmo was prancing around us in an excited dance that would have been adorable if I wasn't shivering so hard.

Lily steered me toward the kiln, which was radiating heat.

"Stand next to this while you warm up. You could have just called if you wanted to talk, you know."

"Daisy kicked me out."

Lily froze. "Oh, Jacy. No. What happened? Never mind, it doesn't matter."

I appreciated that she was trying to be thoughtful, but I was ready to talk. Through chattering teeth, the story started spilling out.

"The pastor was preaching about gay people this morning and...I don't know. After everything that happened yesterday, I just couldn't sit there and listen to it. I had to get out, so I left. And then I ran into Skye, and we went to the zoo and kissed again."

Lily's eyebrow shot up at that, but she didn't interrupt and I kept going.

"But he didn't want to be boyfriends, so I just went home. And then Daisy started screaming at me about hanging out with gay people, and I just sort of lost it and told her I was gay too and that I knew all about my real grandfather and that she'd lied to me my

whole life. And then she kicked me out. And then it started raining, so I came here.” I suddenly ran out of words. Lily looked shell-shocked. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know where else to go. If it’s not okay, I’ll...”

I had no idea what I’d do. The idea scared me. I hadn’t even let myself think that far ahead.

“You’ll what? Live on the street? Don’t be daft. Of course, it’s okay. You’re family and I’m not going to just turn you away. I just hadn’t planned on having kids at this stage of my life.”

“I’m not a kid. And you’re not that old.”

She snorted. “Thank you for that back-handed compliment.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“So it’s okay?”

She rubbed her temples. “Of course, it’s okay. I just... That’s a lot to unpack. I hardly know where to start. I’m so sorry, Jacy. I didn’t mean for all this to happen.”

I shrugged. “It’s not your fault Daisy lied to me for my entire life.” I paused. “Or that she’s a homophobic bitch.”

Lily pressed a hand over her mouth to hide a smile. “Jacy...”

“What? You know it’s true.”

“Still...you probably shouldn’t say that. She is still your aunt, after all. Did you at least get clothes? We need to get you out of these wet things.”

“No, I didn’t have time.”

She sighed. “We’ll have to figure something out. Maybe she’ll let me come get your stuff.” I shook my head emphatically. “No? All right, well, maybe your grandmother then.”

Suddenly, I gasped as the world seemed to drop out from beneath me. For a moment, it was like everything had gone black, then I saw Fletcher, lying unmoving on his kitchen floor.

“Jacy?” Lily asked sharply. “Are you okay?”

“Fletcher,” I gasped.

“What?”

“We need to get to Fletcher. Right now. Something’s wrong.”

Without another word, Lily sprang into action, grabbing her jacket and keys.

“Come on,” she said as she headed for the door.

I was right on her heels, along with Elmo.

We squeezed into the cab of her truck, which was a tight fit with a dog the size of Elmo, but I was distracted with the rising sense of panic in my chest.

“Hurry!” I urged.

Lily threw the car into reverse and spun out of the drive, then headed toward Fletcher’s. She glanced over at me then cranked up the heat. “You okay?”

“Just drive,” I said through gritted teeth.

My sense of urgency was contagious, and soon Lily was pressing the truck much too fast, considering the wet roads. By the time Fletcher’s house came into view, I was straining against my seat belt. I hadn’t known what to expect, but the house looked shockingly serene.

Was I mistaken?

No, something was wrong. I was sure of it.

I was out of the truck before it even stopped rolling and was halfway to the house before Lily even opened her door.

I hit the front door and burst in.

Immediately, I saw Fletcher, just as he’d appeared in the brief vision at Lily’s. He was on the kitchen floor, eyes closed, face slack. His skin was a sickly gray, a far cry from the picture of health I’d met the day before.

Were we too late? Was he already dead? Had I just met my grandfather only to have him taken from me before I even got to know him?

I stood frozen in the door until Lily pushed past me.

“Call nine-one-one,” she growled as she dropped to his side and felt for a pulse.

Her order snapped me out of my daze, and I pulled my phone from my pocket. I tried to remain calm as I waited for the dispatcher to answer.

“He’s still alive but his pulse is weak,” Lily said. “I think he had a heart attack.”

Just then, the dispatcher answered. “I need an ambulance,” I told her, “I think my grandfather had a heart attack.”

“Is he conscious?”

“No.”

“He’s not responding at all?”

“No, please hurry. He needs help.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sending help right now. What’s the address?”

I asked Lily and relayed her answer. “How long will they take? Should we do anything?”

“They should only be a few minutes. Do you know CPR?”

“I don’t. Lily, do you know CPR?”

Lily looked up. “A little.”

“My aunt knows a little.”

“Tell your aunt to do chest compressions and keep it up until the EMTs arrive. They won’t be long. They’re already on their way.”

I conveyed her instructions to Lily, and she started performing the chest compressions.

“Come on, Fletcher. Stay with us now,” she was muttering under her breath. “I’m going to need your help with Jacy. He needs you.”

The day caught up to me and my eyes suddenly flooded with tears.

I stayed on the phone until the EMTs arrived. They quickly shoed Lily and I into the living room. We watched silently while they worked on him for a while. They finally loaded him onto a stretcher and started wheeling him out of the house.

“Is he going to be okay?” I asked.

One of the technicians, a young guy with a short, neat mustache, looked over at me.

“You family?” he asked. If his words seemed a bit gruff, his voice was kind.

“He’s my grandfather,” I said, unable to tear my eyes from his ashen face.

“He’s going to be all right. Why don’t you and your mom follow us to the hospital?” he said. “We’re going to take good care of your granddad. The doctors can tell you more there.”

I didn't bother to correct his assumption about my relationship to Lily. I simply nodded, my eyes never leaving Fletcher's face.

I watched from the doorway as they loaded Fletcher into the ambulance, then one of the technicians got into the back with him while the other jumped into the driver's seat. Behind me, Lily was turning off lights.

Once she was ready, we dashed back to her truck and jumped in. I had to push Elmo back to the middle just to squeeze in. He'd steamed up the windows while we were inside.

Neither of us talked much as we drove to the hospital. Once there, we entered through the emergency room. I'd never been in a hospital before, and it didn't take me long to decide I didn't like it at all. Just walking through the door made me feel dizzy. It was like walking into a solid wall of smell, sound, emotion, and pain — each of which was equally palpable.

Lily went directly to the nurses' station to ask about Fletcher. I tried to concentrate on what the nurse was telling her, but my head was spinning. I started to feel like I might get sick. I reached out for the counter but missed it and stumbled against the wall.

"Jacy, are you okay?" I heard Lily asked, but it sounded like she was at the far end of a tunnel.

I gasped for air, but everything was going black. The last thing I saw was the floor rushing toward me.

I was standing in a wide, sunlit meadow. The tall grass rippled like water in a gentle breeze, brushing against my legs and filling the air with a sweet earthy aroma. The sky above was an endless, impossible blue, and the sun radiated a warmth that sank into my bones. I didn't know where I was, but for once, that didn't matter. Peace settled over me like a soft blanket, and I let myself breathe it in.

"Hello, Jacy," a voice called from behind me.

I turned and found Fletcher seated cross-legged in the grass, looking perfectly at ease. He patted the ground beside him. I went to him and sat down, still half dazed by the strange beauty of the place.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"We are in the dream world," he said.

"So...this isn't real?"

"Oh, it's very real."

"I don't understand."

"You will with time. I'll teach you."

Something in his voice steadied me. "So you're not going to die?"

He laughed, a deep, rich sound that felt like it belonged here, in this meadow. "Oh no. You won't get rid of me that easily." Then he tilted his head, studying me as though I were a puzzle he was only beginning to solve. "Stronger than I thought," he murmured. "You found your way here on your own, without even knowing this place existed." His smile broadened. "Your first spirit journey."

Pride shone in his eyes, but it quickly gave way to a more somber expression. "But you need to learn to shield yourself."

"Shield myself? From what?"

"You're a strong empath. All true two-spirits are. Without shields, all the pain and sorrow in a place like that hospital will crush you."

I frowned. "How do I do that?"

"Keep one foot planted here, in the dream world," he said simply, smiling as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to. When the time comes, you'll just know."

I wasn't so sure, but I had no choice but to trust him.

"I've been searching for someone to carry this mantle," he said after a moment. "A successor. A healer to walk the old paths when I can't anymore. I thought I'd never find them."

He gave a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "Never once did I imagine it would be my own grandson...who I'd never even met until now."

"Me?" I squeaked.

"Yes, you, Jacy."

"But I don't know how—" I started, the words faltering under the weight of uncertainty.

Fletcher's eyes softened, steadying me in a way that made the nervous flutter in my chest settle. There was patience there, but also a quiet authority that made me want to listen.

"What do I do?" I asked instead.

"I'll teach you," he said simply.

Somehow, the simplicity of his words eased the tight knot of doubt in me. I could feel it — a spark of trust, instinctive and deep, as if I had known him long before I ever met him. It wasn't just confidence in him, it was recognition. Something in my soul was reaching toward something it had always been meant to find.

He nodded, as if reading my thoughts. "We'll start slowly. I'll show you how to sense, how to shield, how to listen. And one day, you'll know the way well enough to walk it on your own."

Then, without another word, the meadow around us seemed to shift and shimmer. The tall grass blurred into motion, sunlight bending in strange, beautiful arcs. I felt my feet lift from the earth, and suddenly I was standing alone in the center of the clearing, the air humming with quiet energy.

"Stand tall, Jacy," Fletcher's voice echoed, both from nearby and everywhere at once. "Your spirit guide waits."

A shadow passed over me. I looked up to see a magnificent gray owl swooping down, its wings wide and powerful. My heart pounded, not from fear, but from a deep recognition, as though some hidden part of me had been waiting for this moment all my life.

"Hold out your arm," Fletcher instructed.

I obeyed instinctively. The owl landed gently on my forearm, the wind from its wings blowing my hair back, its weight light, its presence immense. Its round, golden eyes locked onto mine, and for a moment, the world shrank down to the two of us.

I swallowed, awed, and asked, "What does it mean? The owl... What is a spirit guide?"

"Spirit guides take many forms," Fletcher's voice was filled with warmth. "They are teachers, protectors, messengers. Some appear as animals, some as people, sometimes as forces you can't name. The owl is wise, watchful, and connected to the unseen world. It will help you see what's hidden, guide you when you're lost, and remind you of the gifts you carry."

"The gifts I carry?" I echoed, still in awe of the owl perched on my arm.

“Yes,” he said. “I could feel them from the moment we met. You will be powerful, Grandson, perhaps the most powerful shaman in generations.”

The owl shifted slightly, and I felt a vibration run up my arm, a pulse that seemed to echo in my chest.

Suddenly, Fletcher stood in front of me. He watched with a mixture of pride and something I couldn’t name — perhaps relief.

“The spirits had a plan,” he continued. “And now, Jacy, it seems they have chosen you. This is only the beginning.”

Waking up in a hospital bed and not knowing how I got there was quite a disorienting experience. I remembered arriving at the hospital, and feeling overwhelmed, but I didn’t remember anything after that.

I gingerly sat up and looked around. I was in a sort of cubicle with walls on three sides and a curtain across the front. There was only one bed in the small room, and I was in it. I glanced down and was relieved to see I was still wearing my clothes at least.

The cacophony of stimuli had receded. It was still there, but the world seemed somehow muted. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and prepared to hop down, but at that moment the curtain was yanked aside. I jumped and let out a startled yelp.

An equally startled young Asian woman in blue scrubs stared in at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“I see you’re awake now, Mister...” She paused and consulted the device she held in her hand. “...Elliott.” She made it sound like I’d taken a little nap instead of passing out in the middle of the floor.

“Where’s my aunt?”

She glanced down at her device again, then back up at me. “I don’t know, but I’ll find out for you right after I do a few quick tests to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted. I didn’t want to do any tests, I just wanted to find Lily and see how Fletcher was doing.

“Maybe you can just answer a few quick questions,” she plowed on. “Have you ever fainted before?”

“No, but I’m fine. If I could just see my aunt—”

“When was the last time you ate?”

I stopped to think. Now that she mentioned it, I hadn't eaten since breakfast. "Early this morning," I said. "See, that's all it is, I haven't eaten today. I'll just go find my aunt and get something to eat."

She sighed, finally seeming to give in. "Okay, wait right here and I'll go see if I can find you aunt..." Another device consultation provided her name. "Ms. Lily Snyder."

I wondered what she'd do if she lost that thing.

"You stay put and I'll be right back." She pulled the curtain closed as she left, ever thoughtful of my privacy.

I waited exactly five seconds before I was off the bed and cautiously sticking my head out the curtain. The woman was nowhere in sight, so I slipped into the hallway.

A nurse was just coming out of another cubicle, so I asked her for directions to the waiting room. She pointed distractedly toward the end of the hall and a pair of swinging doors.

I walked swiftly in that direction, only to find that the doors were not your typical swinging doors. I pushed tentatively against one, but nothing happened.

"You have to use this button," another nurse said as she walked up briskly behind me and smacked a large flat stainless-steel button on the wall. The doors swung open, one inward and one outward. Of course, I was in front of the one that swung inward, causing me to jump back out of the way.

I quickly followed her through the doors and into the waiting room where I immediately spotted Lily sitting in a chair on the far side of the room staring blindly at the TV in the corner, her chin propped on her fist.

She glanced up as I approached and jumped to her feet, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "I hadn't heard anything since you fainted."

"I'm fine," I said, not mentioning my jailbreak. "How's Fletcher?"

"They're still doing tests," she said, sinking wearily back into her seat. I sat in the chair next to hers. "What happened to you? Do they know why you passed out?"

I shrugged. "I haven't eaten today," I told her.

I wasn't ready to talk about the inundation of pain and emotion I'd felt.

She frowned. "Maybe we should run to the cafeteria."

"Is it still open?" I asked.

I wasn't hungry, but I figured I should probably eat something before it really did become a problem.

She glanced at her watch. "I don't know. I'll go ask."

"Ms. Snyder? Lily Snyder?" Someone called before she could stand up.

Lily's head snapped around. "Right here," she said loudly.

I turned to find the nurse who'd questioned me back in the room.

"Ms. Snyder, your nephew is awake now..." she began before spotting me. She pursed her lips and gave me a disapproving look. "But I see you knew that already."

"We were just going to see about getting him something to eat," Lily said.

She nodded primly. "That's probably the best thing. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Is the cafeteria still open?"

"Yes," she said after checking her watch.

"Thank you," Lily said.

Lily checked at the nurse's station before we left, but there was still no news. We wandered down the sterile hallway to the small cafeteria, only to learn the kitchen was closed, but there was a selection of pre-made cold sandwiches in a grab-and-go cooler. They would do.

I managed to force down half a turkey and cheese sandwich while Lily picked at my bag of salt-and-vinegar chips, crunching them quietly. After a while, we both gave up the pretense of eating and silently tossed the rest into the nearest trash bin. The cafeteria was nearly empty, and the fluorescent lights hummed overhead, offering no comfort.

We returned to the waiting room, where we — what else? — waited. And waited. Time stretched like taffy, pulling every minute into an eternity. Lily called all her sisters, but none volunteered to come to the hospital. A few asked her to let them know if anything changed — which, I guess given the

circumstances, meant if Fletcher died. Daisy hung up on her before she could even speak.

We would not be winning any family of the year awards any time soon.

The TV flickered soundlessly in the corner, a pale distraction. I toyed with my phone for a while, scrolling through messages and posts, but even that couldn't hold my attention. Somehow, I'd managed to shield myself from the worst of the waves of emotion washing through the room. I could feel them slamming against my defenses, but my makeshift bulwark had held — so far. Relief mixed with exhaustion, and I sank back into the stiff chair, offering Lily little conversation, and accepting little in return.

Eventually, the boredom became heavier than the tension. My eyelids drooped, and I drifted in and out of restless sleep, the world around me a muted haze.

I woke with a start, drawn from a shallow doze by the subtle click of knitting needles. My gaze found a frail old woman sitting a few chairs away, her wrinkled face focused, intent on the soft yarn in her lap. Age-spotted hands, gnarled and trembling, worked diligently, weaving a scarf of delicate patterns.

There was something familiar about her, something I'd glimpsed before, though not in the waking world. In the lingering fog of sleep, I realized I'd seen her in a dream just moments before. And I knew more about her than I wanted to. She was dying. Her body was full of cancer. I wondered if she knew.

As if she sensed my stare, her pale blue eyes lifted and met mine. They were steady, calm, and clear. For a long moment, we simply looked at each other. Then, she gave me a small smile. She knew.

I returned the smile, my chest tightening with sorrow. Somehow, in that sterile, humming waiting room, a thread of connection passed between us — fragile, fleeting, yet undeniably real.

"Ms. Snyder?" someone called, pulling my attention from the older woman.

I turned to see a distinguished middle-aged man in a white coat. His black hair was touched with silver at the temples, and his warm brown complexion hinted at his Indian heritage — Indian from India, not Indigenous American.

Lily and I both stood, and he approached us.

"I'm Dr. Sahni," he introduced himself with a polite nod. "I'm a cardiologist, and I've been overseeing your father's tests."

His voice carried a soft lilt, a melodic rise and fall that lent his words a kind of gentle music. I found it unexpectedly beautiful, almost calming in the sterile tension of the hospital.

"How is he?" Lily asked.

"He's going to be fine. It seems he experienced a mild heart attack, but there doesn't appear to be any permanent damage."

"Oh, thank God."

I released a breath I hadn't even known I'd been holding.

"However, he will have to change some of his habits.

You're tired right now, though, and we can talk about this tomorrow. He's stable for the night. You can go in and see him briefly, but after that, why don't you go on home for tonight? You all need your rest."

"Is it all right if my nephew comes in with me?" she asked, gesturing towards me.

The doctor nodded. "Just keep it brief. When you get here in the morning, just ask the nurses at the station to let me know, and I'll come explain everything to both of you at the same time."

Lily thanked him. He told us what room they'd moved Fletcher into and pointed us in the direction of the elevators.

As we rode the elevator up to Fletcher's floor, I took a good look at Lily. Her relief was visible, but she suddenly looked very tired and worn, as if the adrenaline that had been keeping her going had suddenly run out.

"You were really worried," I said. I sounded more accusatory than I'd intended.

She gave me a tired smile. "He's old, Jacy. I forget that sometimes. He seems so strong. You haven't known him long enough to understand what I mean, but this was kind of a rude awakening for me. Seeing him like that..."

"You thought he was invincible?"

She gave me a surprised look as the doors slid open. She didn't answer, just stepped out and led the way down the hall.

A nurse intercepted us in the hallway with a practiced smile, her tone courteous but edged with quiet suspicion — the kind of gatekeeping that was really just making sure we belonged on this floor. Lily, steady as ever, gave her Fletcher's name and room

number without hesitation. The nurse nodded and pointed us down the corridor.

As we reached the door, I realized I was holding my breath. My chest felt tight, my pulse a little too quick. What would he look like? Frail and unrecognizable? Would he have a fortress of machines hooked up to him like they always did on the hospital dramas on TV? I trailed a step behind Lily, reluctant, as if the moment I crossed the threshold the reality of Fletcher's condition would become inescapable.

The room was quiet, the lights dimmed. Fletcher lay in the twin of the bed I'd woken up in earlier. The hospital had given him a private room, so he was alone.

A blanket was pulled neatly up to his chest, his arms resting at his sides. His face was unnervingly pale, expressionless, his long white hair fanned across the pillow as though someone had carefully arranged it there. For a moment, he reminded me of my parents, laid out in their silk-lined coffins at their shared funeral, a sight seared into my memory forever. If not for the slow, steady rise and fall of his chest, I might have thought we were too late. The thought made me shudder.

But there were other signs of life. A thin IV line fed into the back of his hand. Wires disappeared under his hospital gown, their ends trailing to the heart monitor beside him. A steady green zigzag scrolled across the screen, punctuated by soft beeps that reassured me with every pulse.

Lily crossed the room without hesitation, her presence soft but purposeful. She placed her hand gently on his. The moment they touched, Fletcher's eyes opened. Not sluggishly, not with the groggy disorientation I'd braced myself for — but with a startling clarity, as if he had been awake all along, simply waiting for us. He smiled up at her, then his gaze swept the room and, almost instantly, landed on me.

How did he even know I was there? I told myself he was only checking for others in the room.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Lily whispered, her voice softened by concern.

"You didn't," Fletcher replied. His voice was weaker than usual, but there was a quiet steadiness beneath it, something that carried weight. "I was waiting for you. Both of you. You and Jacy."

So he had known.

"Well, we're here now, but we can't stay long — doctor's orders. We'll be back tomorrow morning though. Dr. Sahni said he'd explain everything then. I'm just so glad..." Lily's voice caught, and she stopped in mid-sentence.

"The Old Man's here for a little longer, Lily," he said and squeezed her hand. "So stop worrying. I still have some things left to do. Right, Jacy?"

I blinked in surprise. Why was he asking me?

"Now you two get going and get some rest. It's late, and if I know my daughter at all, she'll want to be here as soon as visiting hours begin."

Lily grinned. "You know me too well." She leaned down and tenderly kissed his forehead. "See you in the morning."

"See you then," he said. He turned to me and winked. "You too, Gray Owl."

The name sparked something — not quite a memory, not quite a dream. More like the faint aftertaste of something I'd once known but couldn't quite place. I could almost see it: the blurred edges of a vision I'd had while unconscious. Or had I imagined it? A dream that wasn't entirely a dream.

Once we stepped into the elevator, Lily turned to me, her brow creased with curiosity. "What was that about?" she asked.

I stalled, playing dumb. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." Her gaze sharpened. "Gray Owl?"

I lifted a shoulder in a shrug, feigning ignorance. "I'm...not sure."

Her eyes searched mine, unblinking. It was clear she knew I was holding something back. But after a long moment, she let it drop.

That night, I stayed in one of Lily's spare bedrooms. I say "stayed" because sleep never really came — at least not in any restful way. The mattress was soft enough, the quilt heavy and warm, but my mind refused to shut down. It was strange being away from home and my familiar surroundings, knowing I wouldn't be going back. If that wasn't enough to keep me awake, I had more than enough to think about.

Images of Fletcher's pale face, Daisy's face twisted with rage, Michael's eyes filled with uncertainty and fear, Skye's cold expression combined with echoes of the preacher's venomous voice until I couldn't tell where memory ended and imagination began.

Elmo sprawled beside me, a living, breathing mountain of fur who hogged more than his fair share of the bed. His deep, steady breathing and occasional doggy snore should have been irritating, but instead they grounded me. I found myself grateful for the company. At least someone — even if it was just Lily's oversized dog — was keeping watch.

But even with his comforting presence, it was a long night.

The next morning, I was grateful to see Lily had made a giant pot of coffee. I didn't usually even touch the stuff, but I thought today would be an exception. Lily raised an eyebrow as I dumped cream and sugar into my second cup.

"Why bother?" she asked, taking another sip from her mug. She took hers black.

"I didn't sleep much," I told her.

She nodded. "That's understandable considering the circumstances. I didn't sleep well myself. Did Elmo snore?"

"A little," I said, looking down to where he lay on the floor, his recently emptied food dish between his paws. He looked up at us as if he knew we were talking about him. "But it was nice to have him there anyway."

"He likes you. Not to say the big lug doesn't like everybody, but I've never seen him take to anyone the way he has to you. I think last night was the first time he's ever not spent the night in my bed with me."

I smiled at him. "At least somebody wants to be with me, right, Elmo?" He jumped up at his name and shoved his giant fluffy head into my lap. "Take that, Skye."

"Okay, so I let it go yesterday, but what's all this about Skye?"

I shrugged. "Nothing. I just thought he liked me, but it turns out he just wanted to fool around."

Lily frowned. "I don't think Skye likes anybody but himself. I tried to warn you."

"I know. And I should have listened. But he's hot and he was paying attention to me."

Lily laughed. "And you're a sixteen-year-old boy. Say no more."

I blushed. "It's not like that. We just kissed a little."

"It's none of my business what you did. Just...be careful. And be safe."

I remembered my advice to Michael the day before and blushed even harder. I tried to hide behind my coffee mug.

"We'd better get going," Lily said after a few minutes.

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Visiting hours won't start for an hour. It takes less than half an hour to get there. What are we going to do for half an hour?"

She just gave me a look, and I gave in without further argument.

We stopped in the gift shop on our way up to his room and picked up a crossword book and a few magazines.

"If he has to stay here any length of time he's going to be bored out of his skull," Lily commented.

Once on his floor, the nurses at the station were nice enough to let us in a little early after checking to make sure he was ready to receive visitors. Lily sent word with one of the nurses to let Dr. Sahni know we were there.

Fletcher looked much better in the morning light. Much of his color was back, and he seemed to be in high spirits. We chatted while we waited for the doctor. Lily told him that I'd moved out of my aunt's and was staying with her. He didn't seem surprised in the least.

We didn't have to wait too long before the doctor joined us. He quickly explained what had happened to Fletcher, using layman's terms so we could easily understand. He'd had a mild heart attack brought on by high blood pressure.

"You're going to need to change some of your eating habits," he told Fletcher. "You need to watch your salt intake, and we're also going to put you on some medications that should help lower your blood pressure."

"Can we look into natural herbal treatments?" Fletcher asked.

Dr. Sahni's brows rose, but his expression was more curious than dismissive.

"I'm an herbalist," Fletcher explained.

The doctor nodded. "That makes sense. And yes, we can explore that if you're strongly opposed to pharmaceuticals. I'm not one of those physicians who dismisses alternative medicine outright. Still," he added, his voice firming, "as an herbalist you should understand better than most the importance of balance — eating the right foods, getting proper rest, keeping your body maintained." He glanced down at the chart. "According to your records, you haven't seen a doctor in almost five years."

"Haven't needed to up till now," Fletcher replied, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Dr. Sahni didn't return the smile. "If you had, we might have prevented this heart attack. It's not a laughing matter. Heart disease is the leading cause of death among Native Americans. Consider this episode your warning — your body is telling you it won't carry the load forever unless you start taking care of it."

The twinkle faded, replaced by a thoughtful nod. "You're right. I spend so much time looking after everyone else's well-being, I've neglected my own."

"Unfortunately, that's a common problem among healers," Dr. Sahni said. His tone wasn't condescending, but respectful — as if acknowledging a peer. I couldn't help but feel impressed.

"Another thing," the doctor continued, "you need to quit smoking."

My head snapped toward Fletcher. I hadn't even known he smoked.

His eyes narrowed just slightly. "Tobacco is sacred to my people."

"Yes," Dr. Sahni agreed, "but commercial cigarettes contain nearly six hundred other additives, most of them toxic — and none, to my knowledge, are considered sacred."

For a heartbeat, Fletcher held his gaze, then broke into a grin. "You've got me there. How about a compromise? I'll give up cigarettes, but I'll still use tobacco in ceremony."

Dr. Sahni's lips curved into a quick smile. "I'll take that deal — with one condition."

Fletcher cocked a brow. "What's that?"

"That you don't suddenly find yourself needing to hold 'ceremonies' three or four times a day."

Fletcher laughed, the sound booming in the quiet room. He extended his hand, and the doctor clasped it warmly. "I like you, Dr. Sahni."

"Likewise, Mr. Snyder," the cardiologist replied. Then his expression sobered, and he hesitated just long enough to make the pause deliberate. "But you may not like me as much after this next recommendation."

Fletcher arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I don't want you living alone anymore." Dr. Sahni's tone was gentle, though it carried unmistakable authority.

I think we were all braced for Fletcher to dig in his heels, maybe even explode at the suggestion. Instead, he surprised us with a wicked little wink at the doctor.

"Why, Dr. Sahni," he drawled, "we've only just met, and you already want to move in?"

For a moment, the room froze in stunned silence. Then the absurdity of it hit me, and I let out a snort that I couldn't hold back. That broke the dam — Lily chuckled, Dr. Sahni laughed outright, and finally even Fletcher threw his head back and joined in, his laughter rumbling through the room like distant thunder.

When the mirth ebbed away, Dr. Sahni's expression sobered. "In all seriousness, Mr. Snyder, you shouldn't be living alone. The next time, your daughter may not happen to drop by in time. You need someone close, someone who can respond if something goes wrong."

"I understand," Fletcher said, though his tone carried a stubborn undercurrent. "But I don't have anyone. I can't afford a live-in nurse, and frankly, I don't want one."

"You don't need round-the-clock care," the doctor reassured him. "But what about your children?"

"They all have their own families and careers," Fletcher said. His mouth quirked with something that wasn't quite bitterness. "They don't need to be burdened with an old man."

"You wouldn't be a burden," Lily broke in gently. "You could stay with me. I have that huge house all to myself."

Fletcher shook his head immediately. "I have my herbal business to run. My home is part of that. And you have your art studio, not to mention that enormous furball. You can't uproot everything just to babysit me."

Before I knew what I was doing, the words tumbled out of my mouth. “I could live with Fletcher.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Three pairs of eyes swung toward me at once, and heat rushed to my cheeks.

“What?” I muttered, trying to sound nonchalant, but my voice cracked on the word.

Lily blinked at me, startled. “Jacy...I don’t know. No offense, but I’m not sure a sixteen-year-old roommate is exactly what the doctor had in mind. You’d be in school most of the day. And—”

While she rattled off objections, Fletcher simply sat there watching me. His expression was unreadable, but the slight curve of his lips — that enigmatic, almost secretive smile — never wavered.

“And,” Fletcher cut in smoothly, his voice firm and decisive, “I think it’s the perfect solution.”

“I think I’ll leave you to work out the details in private,” Dr. Sahni said quickly, before Lily could respond. “It sounds like you have two great options, and I have some other patients to attend to. I’ll try to drop in later this morning to check on you, Mr. Snyder.”

We all said good-bye and thanked him for taking the time to talk to us.

Once Dr. Sahni left, Lily picked up where we’d left off. “Are you sure this is a good idea, Fletcher? It’s been a long time since you’ve had a kid in the house.”

I figured that was her polite way of pointing out the obvious — Fletcher hadn’t raised any of his daughters. He’d walked out on Grandma Allen when they were still young.

Fletcher, of course, knew exactly what she meant.

“Maybe I’ve never lived with a teenager,” he said lightly, “but I’ve been around enough of them to know what I’d be getting myself into. Besides”—his gaze flicked to me—“Jacy strikes me as an above-average example of the species. More importantly, I have a lot to teach him. We could manage if he lived somewhere else, but it’ll be a whole lot easier if we’re under the same roof.”

“You could both move in with me,” Lily countered. “I’ve got plenty of room.”

Fletcher arched an eyebrow. “Lily, you’re a beautiful young woman. Don’t you think having an old man and a teenage boy in the house might put a crimp in your love life?”

Lily flushed. “What love life? There’s nothing to crimp.”

“And there certainly wouldn’t be if we both moved in with you,” Fletcher said, chuckling. “I appreciate the offer, but Jacy’s idea makes the most sense.”

Lily shook her head in exasperation, but we all knew the decision had already been made. Both she and Fletcher were stubborn, but in a battle of wills, Fletcher was a force of nature.

She finally turned to me. “Are you sure you’re up for this, Jacy?”

I nodded. It felt right somehow, as if everything I’d been stumbling toward over the past few weeks — maybe my whole life — had been leading to this moment. I’d only just met Fletcher, and yet there was already a bond between us, something deep and instinctive. I trusted him in a way that didn’t make sense, as if my spirit had recognized his long before my mind could catch up.

“Then it’s settled,” Fletcher declared with a triumphant grin. “Jacy moves in with me the minute they spring me from this damn hospital.”

I couldn’t help grinning back at him. Across from us, Lily shook her head again, but I caught the twitch at the corner of her mouth. She was fighting a smile as she watched the two of us grinning at each other like a pair of fools.

“At least you won’t be alone,” she said softly.

Fletcher’s eyes stayed locked on mine, his smile widening. “No,” he said. “Never alone.”

And I felt the truth of his words echo inside me like a promise.

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.

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