

josh aterovis

Bleeding
HEARTS

a killian kendall mystery



Even the most idyllic small town has dangerous currents just under the surface -- like abuse, bigotry and hate.

And murder.

Killian Kendall is a small-town teen whose whole world is about to be turned upside down. The new kid in school is openly gay and, despite himself, Killian finds himself drawn to him. When the boy is killed in a brutal attack, and Killian is injured in the process, Killian begins to question everything around him.

The police seem eager to write the attack off as a random mugging, but Killian knows better. Unable to ignore the injustice, Killian launches his own investigation, and everyone is a suspect -- even his closest friends. His search turns up hatred in small town America. Before it's over, more people will die, and Killian's life will be on the line again.

Bleeding Hearts
A Killian Kendall Mystery

Josh Aterovis



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

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

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

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

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

respected me. That was enough.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The new boy scanned the room and caught me staring at him again. I quickly glanced away, but it was too late. The next thing I knew, he was sitting down at the desk next to me. There were empty desks all over the room, but he had to choose the one beside me. Mr. Tatum picked up where he’d left off. I could feel Seth’s eyes on me, but I refused to look over at him.

“Hi,” he said after a few seconds. He extended his hand. “I’m Seth.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Killian! Wait!” I heard Seth call.

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

“Hey.” He came alongside me.

“Hey.” What can I say? I’m a brilliant conversationalist. I started walking again.

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

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

He gave me his locker number, and I led the way, neither of us speaking a word. I felt Seth studying me as we went. I thought I should say something to break the silence, but my brain seemed to have stopped functioning. I couldn’t come up with anything that didn’t sound stupid in my head. The tension grew until finally he spoke up again.

“Killian. That’s a different name. I don’t think I’ve ever heard it before.”

“It’s Irish. My grandfather was from Ireland. He named me.”

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

“No. He died when I was four. I don’t really remember him.”

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

“Why’d you ask if we were close?”

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

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

He read the question in my eyes anyway. “I’m gay.”

I stopped dead in my tracks.

“My family is pretty religious. I guess you could say it didn’t go over well.”

I looked around to see if anyone had overheard him, but as usual, no one was paying any attention to me. For once, I was relieved. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

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

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

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

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

hanging out with the same guys.

“Get off me, Asher,” I snapped.

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

“Nothing. I gotta get home.”

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

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

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

“No thanks.”

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

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

“Hey, Zack,” Asher called out.

“Hey, Asher. Hey, Killian.” Zack watched me with narrowed eyes as I started to unlock my car. “Didn’t I see you with that new kid right after the bell?”

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

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

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

“What?” Asher asked.

“The first few were just stupid stuff — something about being from Baltimore and his parents being split up — but number five...” Zack paused dramatically. “...number five was the best. Guess what it was. Never mind. You’ll never guess. He said he’s a fag.”

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

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

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

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

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

I shrugged and started getting in my car.

“So who’s the fag then?” Jesse asked again.

“This new kid who just transferred here. His name’s Seth,” Zack told him.

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

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

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

As one, they all turned to stare at me.

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

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

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

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

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

After a few minutes, I realized I was heading toward Ocean City, a resort town only 15 minutes from my hometown, so I decided to take a walk on the beach. Since we were having unseasonably cool weather for September in Maryland, I didn’t expect too many people to be there. I was right. There were only a few cars in the lot, and those were bunched up close to the boardwalk. I parked by the beach, fed the meter, slipped off my shoes, and stepped out onto the sand.

I walked along the edge of the ocean, the waves lapping at my feet. I’d gone pretty far up the beach when I was surprised to hear someone call my name. I turned and caught my breath. Seth was jogging toward me. He had changed out of the jeans and polo shirt he’d worn to school and was now dressed in running shorts and a sweatshirt emblazoned with a cartoon cat I knew I should recognize but didn’t.

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

“Hi,” I said, looking at my feet.

“What are you doing here?”

“I just needed to get out so I thought I’d take a walk. The beach

always calms me.”

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

I still didn’t say anything.

He seemed to have a real need to fill in the silence so he went on. “I mean, I’m used to everybody hating me. My own mother hates me so why shouldn’t you —”

“I don’t hate you,” I interrupted.

He stared at me in surprise for a few seconds. “You don’t?”

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

“Because I’m gay.”

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

“Everyone else seems to think so.”

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

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

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

I thought for a few seconds, then shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

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

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

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

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

I made a face. “It sucks.”

“How come?”

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

“Nobody’s perfect.”

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

“Wimpy nerd?”

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

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

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

“What about your mom?” he asked.

“What about her?”

“What does she think?”

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

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

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

“Go ahead and ask,” he said.

“Ask what?”

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

“Um. Okay. Why does she hate you?”

“Because I’m gay. Duh.”

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

We made small talk while we ate. I filled him in on his teachers at school and what to avoid in the cafeteria — pretty much everything. After we finished, I took a deep breath and asked the question that had been plaguing me from the beginning. “So when did you know you were gay...and how did you know?”

He paused for a moment, looking me in the eyes so intently I had to drop my gaze. “It’s kind of hard to explain, but I guess I always knew on some level. It just took a while to admit it to myself. I figured it out for sure when I was 12, but for the next few years I tried really hard to be straight. See, my dad left about then, and I always thought it was because he realized I was gay. Then, a few months ago, one of my friends came out to me and said he wanted to date me. I liked him so I said yes, and we started going out. When my mom found out, she freaked. That’s when she told me that my dad is gay, too, and that’s the real reason he left my mom. So she threw me out. I didn’t have anywhere to go. Luckily, my dad took me in or I’d be homeless.”

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

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

“Oh, really?” I suddenly felt a little nervous. I wasn’t sure why. I mean, I wasn’t gay, so what did I have to worry about? Sure, I’d never

dated girls, never even been interested in them if I was honest with myself, but I'd never been interested in guys, either. Had I? Doesn't everybody take peeks in the locker room?

He was still smiling.

"Why are you smiling?" I asked testily.

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

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

"Me too. See ya, Killer!"

I started walking away but stopped in the doorway and smiled back at him. *Killer*...I liked it!

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dad continued, "He said there's a homosexual at your school now." He pronounced it carefully, overenunciating each syllable —

ho-mo-sex-you-al.

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

Of course, Dad wasn't about to let it go. "You know anything about it, son?"

"I met him, if that's what you're asking."

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

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

"I don't care what its name is. It's unnatural."

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

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

I managed to gag down the rest of my dinner somehow, although I was so angry it was almost more than I could manage to even sit at the same table with him. He continued to expound his theory that gays and lesbians were the downfall of every society from Greece and Rome on and how the queers would be the ruin of the United States of America if "we" didn't take "our" country back. I could only assume "we" were the narrow-minded bigots.

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

He answered on the third ring. "Hey. What's up, Kill?"

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

“Yeah, man, what was that about?”

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

“What crap?”

“About Seth being gay.”

“But he is gay.”

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

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

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

“You what?” Asher yelled.

“I said I spent all afternoon with him.”

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

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

“Whoa. You went on a date with him?”

“It wasn’t a date!” I screeched.

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

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

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

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

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

“I know, I know.”

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

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

“What do you mean?”

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

“Oh, yeah, that’s cool.”

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

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

“What do you mean?”

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

“Yeah, okay.”

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

I flopped back on the bed, more confused than ever. Everyone seemed to think I should avoid Seth. I knew how it felt to be the outsider, though, always getting left out, always being ignored. That was bad enough. How would it feel to be actively discriminated against? I made up my mind to be friendly toward Seth — but not too friendly. Asher’s vague warning was still ringing in my mind, and he was right. I’d never really been picked on too much because I was friends with Asher, Zack and Jesse, but that could change in a heartbeat. Everybody knows how high school politics work. One hint of weakness and the wolves circle. I should keep my distance,

at least in public, but I didn't want to let the bullies win. I'd have to figure it out as I went.

The rest of the week was pretty much an average first week back to school — assessing the new teachers to see how much we could get away with, figuring out homework loads, catching up with school friends you hadn't seen all summer. I'd decided to talk to Seth in class even though almost nobody else did. By then, the word was all over school that he was gay. People gave me funny looks, but for the most part no one mentioned it. In other words, things were pretty much normal for me. I didn't go out of my way to talk to Seth outside of class, but I didn't avoid him either.

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

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

It was raining hard when school let out on Tuesday. I stood by the door for a while until it became obvious the downpour wasn't going to let up, then made a mad dash across the parking lot, splashing through puddles and getting wet to my knees. I jumped into my car and turned on the defroster. While I waited for the condensation to evaporate, I dried off my glasses and looked around the almost empty lot. I'd had to stay after class to talk to one of my teachers about a project that was due Friday — the second week of the semester and I had projects due already — and most of the other students had left by the time I finished. Even the sports teams were gone since they'd canceled practice on account of the rain.

I was following another car out of the lot when it suddenly veered toward someone walking on the side of the road. I yelled — as if the other driver could hear me — but the car swerved away, splashing

the person in the process. That, I realized belatedly, was probably the goal all along. As I drove past the now thoroughly soaked person, I recognized Seth.

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

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

I quickly rolled down the window, and a cold spray of rain splattered my face and glasses. "Seth, are you okay?"

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

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

"My dad had an emergency and couldn't pick me up."

"Well, hop in. I'll drive you home."

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

"Why didn't you just take the bus?" I asked after he was in.

He looked away. "I don't really feel safe on the bus."

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

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

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

"Thanks. I can't wait to get home and change out of these wet clothes."

Home turned out to be an attractive two-story beach house with cedar-shingle siding. As we pulled into his driveway, a concerned expression crossed his face. “My dad still isn’t home. His car’s gone. You wanna come in for a few minutes?”

I hesitated. Was he coming on to me?

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

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

We made a dash for the house through the torrential rain, which was still coming down as though it would never stop. Seth held the door open while I ran inside. He jumped in behind me, slammed the door, and slumped against it. I looked back at him and couldn’t help but laugh. He was completely waterlogged from head to toe. Water dripped off him, forming a puddle around his feet. His hair was slicked down, and his clothing drooped, soggy with rain.

“What’s so funny?”

“You look like a drowned rat!”

He made a face, and I laughed again.

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

“Go look in the mirror.”

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

He went off down the hall, dialing his phone as he went and leaving a trail of water on the hardwood floor for me to follow, which I did. He went into the kitchen where he opened the refrigerator and stood in front of the open door while he talked to his dad. I stood around awkwardly until he hung up and turned to me.

“You hungry?”

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

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

“Uh, I don’t know.”

“If you don’t want to, I’ll understand.”

He was obviously lonely. It wouldn’t kill me to stay for a little while. “Okay,” I agreed and his face lit up. “But not for long. I don’t want to get in trouble with my dad.”

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

“I love it.”

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

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

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

“See anything you like?” Seth’s sudden voice made me jump and gasp, almost dropping the picture. He started laughing.

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

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

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

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

“My loss.” He gave me a shy grin.

I blinked in surprise, not sure what to say. He was definitely hitting on me. An awkward silence stretched between us.

“Killian, I’m kidding. Lighten up.”

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

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

“I dunno. I should probably get home.”

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

“Yeah, but my dad...”

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

I thought for a few seconds while Seth stood there looking miserable. “Okay,” I replied at last, “I’ll hang out for a while, but I have to call my parents so they won’t freak out.”

I called my mom’s phone and she accepted the fact that I would be home late without any questions, for which I was thankful. Sometimes, her general disinterest worked in my favor. The interrogation would come later from Dad, but I would think of something before then.

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

“Yes! Killer’s the man!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I think I have an idea.”

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

“I don't get it,” he said suddenly.

“Get what?”

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

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

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

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

“Cuz I do.”

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

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

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

“What's your middle name?”

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

“Maybe it’s symbolic.”

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

“No, of your inability to see yourself.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe.”

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

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

“Fine. You think you know me so well? Then why don’t you

introduce me? I'd like to meet myself."

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

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

"What the hell was that?" I yelled.

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

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

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

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

I sat across the kitchen from him and watched him cry. I felt as though I should do something, but I had no clue as to what. My brain had shut down. Everything just went blank and I felt completely numb. I couldn't even think clearly enough to leave, so I simply sat there. Occasionally, Seth would choke out another "I'm sorry" in between sobs.

Slowly, I began to come back to my senses. The first question that went through my mind was, am I gay? I wasn't so sure anymore. The kiss hadn't been that bad, really. I'd reacted more to the shock than to the kiss itself. Even in my addled state I knew that much. I thought about the way I'd been almost obsessed with Seth from day one. An image of Asher suddenly intruded into my thoughts. What was that supposed to mean? I needed to get out of there. I needed to think.

I struggled to my feet and started out of the kitchen. I paused at

the door long enough to mumble, “I don’t hate you. I...I just need to think.” And then I was gone, leaving him in a crumpled heap on the kitchen floor.

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

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

I sat up and stared at myself in the mirror. My face was pale and my eyes were red-rimmed, but I tried to look past that. What did Seth see in me? My wavy blonde hair was a little on the shaggy side. I had to admit my eyes were really blue, but they were hidden behind my glasses. I was blessed with fairly smooth skin, with the exception of the occasional zit. I supposed if I were being completely impartial, I wasn’t unattractive — but drop-dead gorgeous? No way. True, girls asked me out now and then, some quite persistently, but they were just after me because of my friends. At least that’s what I told myself. If I was completely honest, I had to admit I’d never been interested in any of them.

Why was that?

Asher flooded into my thoughts again. I’d choose spending time with him over a girl any day, even if we were just watching TV or wrestling around in his bedroom. Now that I thought about it, every time I wrestled with Asher, I got a hard-on.

That was normal, right? That happened to everybody.

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

The clues were pretty obvious all of a sudden.

I had been blind.

Chapter 3

I am gay.

The realization was almost overwhelming.

I am gay.

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

I am gay.

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

Oh my God!

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

I am gay.

Would the church kick me out? Just my mom and I attended. Dad said church was only for people who needed a crutch, which didn't stop him from spouting Bible verses when it suited him for political purposes. Mom ignored him and went nearly every Sunday. That was half the reason I continued to go week after week — it was one of the few things Mom did without Dad's approval. I wasn't particularly religious, but I liked the idea that Mom and I kept this one part of our lives separate from him. I wasn't sure I even believed in God or anything the pastor taught, but I tried to be a good person. Did God

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

I am—

The phone buzzed, startling me out of my thoughts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Great, just what I needed. Since when did Asher become a nurturer? I rubbed my cheeks, trying to get some color back. There wasn't much I could do about the red eyes. I flipped off the overhead lights and opened my laptop. Maybe if the light were dim he wouldn't notice. Plus, the computer would give me something to do so I wouldn't have to look him in the face.

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

“Come in.”

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

So much for my dim-lighting plan.

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

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

I looked away but not quickly enough.

“You’ve been crying,” he accused me.

“No, I haven’t,” I lied. “I think I have allergies.”

“I’ve known you forever, Kill. You don’t have any allergies.”

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

“Look, Asher, I’m fine.”

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

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

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

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

Did I mention I’m bad at lying?

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

back friend had in him. “If he hurt you, I’ll kill him.”

In that moment, I believed him.

I couldn’t stand any more confusion. I felt my chest constrict, squeezing all the air out of my lungs. I was having a panic attack. I took a deep breath, then another, slowly calming myself until I was ready to speak. I made my voice go steely to match his. “First of all, Seth did not hurt me. Second, why would it matter to you if he did? You’ve never paid any attention to me before. Why start now?”

Asher blinked in surprise, and the intensity drained away, leaving him looking like a hurt little boy. “Never paid attention to you? What are you talking about? You’re my best friend, Killian. You’ve always been there for me. Whenever I’ve needed to talk, I always knew I could come to you. I could never talk to Zack and Jesse like I do with you. I mean...maybe I haven’t been the best friend in the world. I guess I kinda took you for granted and I’m always busy with the team. But you were just always there. And now, all of a sudden, Seth comes along, and you’re hanging out with him. And he’s gay. I don’t get it. I...I guess I’m kinda jealous.”

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

“I don’t want to lose you as a friend. Especially not to a—”

“Don’t say it,” I cut him off, an unspoken warning clear in my voice.

“I was going to say a new guy.”

We stood there staring at each other for a minute. My cell phone suddenly buzzed.

I glanced down. It was a text from Seth.

“I’m so sorry...please talk to me.”

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

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

I quickly texted Seth back, "Hey."

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

I hesitated a second, then decided to go out on a limb. "You weren't stupid. You were right."

"WHAT?"

"I think maybe I am gay."

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

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

"I dunno"

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

"OK, I'll think about it."

"Good night Killer"

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

I am gay. I am a homosexual.

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

I like guys.

That sounded better.

I'm gay.

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

I couldn't tell anyone, though. I would just go on the same as ever. No one else had to know. True, Seth knew, but I was pretty

sure my secret was safe with him. He understood what it was like to be out, and I was confident he wouldn't do that to me. Besides, who would he tell? I was his only friend. Even if he did say something, no one would take his word over mine. He was new to town, while I'd lived there all my life. He was an outcast, I was a local, one of them... for better or worse. My secret was safe. I was starting to feel a little calmer about the whole thing.

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

I scrambled for my book bag and dumped the contents all over the bed. I grabbed a book at random (I think it was my history book) and opened it, pretending to read. I'd barely settled back on the pillow when there was a knock at my door. It swung open before I could even answer. It was Dad. The knock was simply a formality, and we both knew it.

"Doing your homework?"

"Yup," I answered, looking up from my book.

"Good. Get it finished before you go to sleep." He left, shutting the door behind him.

He hadn't noticed anything. He hadn't screamed at me and ordered me out of the house. I let out a shaky breath I didn't even realize I'd been holding. What was I going to do? I'd narrowly escaped this time, but what about next time? How long could I hide it from him? And what about my friends? What was I going to do about Seth? A feeling of despair and confusion suddenly overwhelmed me. I realized how emotionally drained I was. Pushing everything off the bed and onto the floor, I crawled under the covers without even taking my clothes off. I was asleep in minutes.

Surprisingly enough, I slept heavily. If I had any dreams, I didn't remember the next morning. The rest of my day was equally blurry. I couldn't tell you one thing that happened in school, except that I spent most of the day dodging Seth and Asher in the halls. I didn't

have any classes with Asher, so he wasn't too hard. I had drama with Seth, however, and we bumbled through the whole period trying our best not to look at each other. It was positively torturous.

I took off as soon as the last bell rang and drove straight to our church. I needed to talk to somebody, and didn't pastors have a rule about confidentiality? Or was that priests? Or maybe it was lawyers. At any rate, I figured it was worth a shot. I didn't know who else to turn to, and I felt distant enough from the church that I didn't really care if they knew. If they didn't like it, I'd just stop going. My mom would probably be disappointed, but Dad would actually be pleased.

There was one car in the parking lot. I pulled in next to it and climbed out, hoping it belonged to the person I wanted to see. I knocked on the office door and, much to my relief, Pastor Mike opened it. Mike, as he liked to be called, was the church's associate pastor, but more importantly, he was also the youth pastor. I'd been hoping he'd be the one there since he was pretty young — only in his late-20s — and I felt more comfortable talking to him. I didn't really know him that well since I wasn't active in the youth group at church, but I'd seen him around and he seemed approachable. He was short — shorter than me even — had curly brown hair, dark eyes, and always seemed to be smiling. He reminded me of an overgrown kid.

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

"Uh...hi. May I talk to you?" I asked him somewhat timidly. I don't think I had ever spoken to him before. I was surprised he even knew my name.

"Sure," he replied warmly. "Come on in."

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

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

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

“Well, look, Killian, it’s like this. If you trust me enough to tell me, then you have to trust me enough to do what’s best with that information. What I mean is, if you tell me you are really depressed and you’re going to kill yourself, then I’ll have to tell someone to protect you. But if you just need some advice or clarification on something, then I think we should be able to keep it confidential.”

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

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

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

I nodded. “Does God hate gay people?”

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

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

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

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

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

here?”

“I think so,” I replied. “So does that mean it’s okay to be gay? Doesn’t the Bible say it’s wrong?”

“Killian, that’s a question I don’t think I can answer for you. I’ve not studied it enough. Some people would say yes, the Bible lists it as a sin. Jesus himself never actually mentioned it, though Paul does a couple times. Then again, Paul also said women shouldn’t speak in church and should never cut their hair and never wear jewelry.” He shrugged. “We seem to have decided that those don’t count. Who gets to decide? Why do we pick and choose what matters? I don’t know. Like I said, I don’t have all the answers. I do know some people believe that the passages from the Bible often used to condemn gay people have been misinterpreted. I’m not speaking for the church officially at this point, but personally, I don’t think it really matters.”

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

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

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

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

I looked away. “No,” I answered softly. He sat in silence for a few minutes until I risked a glance in his direction. He was watching me, a small smile still on his lips. I didn’t see any condemnation or judgment in his eyes, though. I sighed. “Maybe...maybe I’m gay. I don’t know.” My eyes never left his face. I didn’t want to miss his reaction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I wasn't sure what that conversation had actually accomplished. I didn't really care what the church thought about me. It didn't solve the problem of my family or my friends. I still didn't know what to do. Yet, for some reason, as I sat in my car, I felt a little calmer. I'd told someone and they didn't freak out. He'd answered my most minor questions. Now I only had a million more to figure out. I knew who I need to talk to next.

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

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

"No. I just needed time to think."

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

"I don't know."

"I can come to you, if that helps."

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

"Sure. That works. See you there."

With that settled, I only had to make it till Friday. Which turned out to be easier said than done. The week seemed to drag by. I was constantly distracted, lost in my own thoughts. I knew my grades were probably suffering, but I wasn't too concerned. It was still only the second week. I would catch up.

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

Then all the teachers seemed to be in a bad mood, and I got yelled at several times for not paying attention. Were they just noticing? I hadn't been paying attention all week. Why was Friday so important? On top of that, I felt sick all day from nerves, so I couldn't eat lunch, which made me even crankier. I was hungry and felt like puking all at the same time.

When the final bell rang, I thought I'd escaped, but the day was far from over. Gilly Sheridan was waiting for at my locker. I almost just turned and left when I saw her standing there but I needed the books in locker for the weekend. I sighed as I approached. She'd briefly dated Asher last year. They only lasted about a month before Gilly ended it, but Asher would never talk about why they broke up. She'd been after me ever since. Needless to say, I wasn't interested, even if it wasn't for the whole bro code thing. I definitely wasn't in the mood to deal with her today. Still, she wasn't a bad person, just a little too persistent. I forced myself to be polite. "Hi, Gilly."

"Hey, Killian. I was looking for you all day." She gave me a huge smile. Gilly was really pretty — blonde hair, blue eyes, the works. I'm sure that smile usually got her whatever she wanted. It wasn't working on me.

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

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

I opened my locker and grabbed the books I needed, shoving

them into my backpack. “Hanging out.”

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

“Uh, no thanks.”

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

“Why not?”

“Uh...I’m...busy?”

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

Because I’m gay! I wanted to say it, but bit my tongue. “I don’t hate you, Gilly. Why would I hate you?”

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

I felt my eyes grow wide, and she laughed. “I’m kidding, Killian. Jeez. Lighten up. So...the movie? It’s a date?”

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

Just then, I heard one of the girls in her clique calling her name. Gilly dropped my arm and turned toward her friend. I saw my chance for escape and slammed my locker closed while spinning on my heel and dashing for the door.

That had been a narrow escape. I’d avoided her for now but I might not be able to give her the slip so easily next time. I needed a plan. Unfortunately, I didn’t have one.

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

I eyed them suspiciously as I approached. I was beginning to dread getting my car from the lot. Maybe I’d start riding the bus. “What’s with the welcome wagon?” I growled when I got close

enough. “Did you guys get elected to be the parking-lot hospitality committee?”

“Funny, Killian,” Zack snapped. “We need to talk to you.”

“About what?”

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

“What about Seth?”

“We think you are spending too much time with him.”

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

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

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

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

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

Asher’s head snapped up, his eyes meeting mine for the first time since I’d approached. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

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

Everyone looked shocked for a few seconds. I’d never blown up

like that before. Then Zack sneered. “Oh. I get it.”

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

“Nah, you were plenty clear. You’re a fag, too, aren’t you?”

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

“You’re gonna be sorry, Killian,” Zack warned as he, Jesse and Asher started backing away. “You and your faggy boyfriend.”

I stood there seething as they turned and walked away. Asher cast a baleful glance back at me over his shoulder, but I turned deliberately and climbed into my car. What right did he have to look like a kicked puppy? He was the one who’d betrayed me by telling Zack and Jesse I’d been hanging out with Seth. And he was the one who’d said they couldn’t find out. Some best friend he’d turned out to be. Screw all of them. I didn’t need them.

As my adrenaline rush drained away, Zack’s ominous threat echoed through my head. “*You’re gonna be sorry.*” What did it mean? How much did they suspect...or know? I sure hoped Seth would be a good friend, because I had a feeling I’d just burned my bridges with the only other friends I had. Not that they were exactly a big loss.

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

I drove home and did all my homework for the weekend, and it was still only 4:30 in the afternoon. I had over two hours to wait before I went to meet Seth at the park. Calling Asher was out of the question. I never called Zack or Jesse anyway. I didn’t have any other friends.

I looked around my room and spotted my shelf of old books that had belonged to my mother when she was my age. They were mostly Nancy Drew mysteries with a few others thrown in for good measure. I was a little embarrassed to have them sitting in plain view,

but no one ever really hung out in my room except Asher, so I kept the books around for sentimental reasons. I smiled as I remembered how much I'd loved them when I was younger. I used to imagine that I was in the stories with Nancy and the gang, helping them solve crimes by following the clues. In my fantasies, I was Killian Kendall, boy detective.

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

I checked my favorite blogs but quickly grew bored. It didn't take long until the subject that seemed to be perpetually on my mind lately resurfaced. I decided to look up some articles on being gay. I googled "gay" and quickly realized that the vast majority of hits were porno sites. Maybe I'd need to be more specific. But while I was there...I had to admit I was very curious. It wouldn't hurt to maybe click just one. I just had to remember to delete my browser history. I was pretty sure Dad checked fairly regularly.

I clicked on a link at random and almost fell off my chair. A video started playing on screen, two hard-bodied, naked men making out. Of course I'd seen naked guys before, in gym class, where I was too preoccupied trying not to stare to really notice anything, and the few others times I'd screwed up enough courage to look at porn. But I'd only looked at straight porn before and it hadn't really done anything for me. I hadn't allowed myself to look too closely at the men and the women, well, they didn't really catch my attention. Certainly, none of the guys at school were hard like the men on my screen, and they certainly weren't doing the things going on in the video. Their hands were all over each other, grabbing, kneading, stroking. My eyes were almost popping out of my head. One of the guys suddenly bent over and swallowed the other's dick in his mouth. My face felt like it was on fire.

I fumbled to click off the screen but somehow hit my volume button instead. The sounds of male moaning suddenly filled my room. I scrambled in a panic, slamming my laptop closed. I waited, red-faced and panting, for Mom to burst through my door asking

what those sounds were, but nothing happened.

After I caught my breath, opened my laptop and quickly turned the sound off, then closed the window. I sat in front of my computer, trying to decide if I should visit another site. I finally opted against it. I wasn't sure I was ready for that...and it made me feel a little dirty.

I closed my laptop again and stood up — and was immediately aware of the tent in my pants. I guess this settled the whole gay thing once and for all. That video was the hottest thing I'd ever seen. I could still see them in my head, kissing, touching, naked bodies pressed together.

Just then, Mom called me to dinner, breaking me out of my reverie. I realized I'd slipped my hand down my pants. I yanked it out and pushed all thoughts of being gay from my mind before leaving my room. I didn't want to give anything away with my expression or behavior. I hadn't forgotten the images I'd seen, however. I suspected I'd be seeing them again in my fantasies later that night.

When I got downstairs, I was surprised to find a vase of fresh flowers in the center of the table and an Etta James album playing on the old record player, one of Mom's most prized possessions. I'd grown up on a steady diet of the classics sung by vocal legends like James, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn and, of course, Billie Holiday. They were Mom's favorites, and I'd grown to love them too. The music itself wasn't unusual, but what was unexpected was that we never listened to music while we ate. Dad had a strange thing about it and didn't even like it when restaurants played background music.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I looked at her closely as if seeing her for the first time. My mom was very pretty in a muted kind of way. She’d had me when she was only 18, so that made her 34 now. She wore her ash blonde hair shoulder length, but rarely did anything with it. Her soft blue eyes were seldom enhanced by makeup, but they were pretty without any. In fact, she hardly ever wore makeup at all. Suddenly, I wondered why. Dad was always asking her to. Given the way she did everything else he wanted, the fact that she didn’t do this small thing suddenly seemed out of character. Then I thought about the whole church business. That was another place she stood up to my father. Maybe I had been underestimating her all this time.

“Why don’t you wear makeup?” I asked her.

She looked at me in surprise. “What an odd question!”

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

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

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

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

I shook my head silently, and she laughed. She blessed the food, and we made small talk while we ate, but my mind was busy trying to find other instances of my mother’s rebellion. They were there. I’d just never thought about them before. In fact, I realized I actually hadn’t paid much attention to her at all. As I thought about the various things she did to annoy my father — I think they call it passive-aggressive behavior — I suddenly had a new respect for my mother.

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

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

“No, Dad.”

“Oh.” She sat there for a few seconds, fork still suspended halfway between her plate and her mouth. When she spoke again, her voice was so soft I almost had to strain to hear her. “Your father is a very difficult man, Killian. So was his father. I’ve never told you this, but I think you are old enough to handle it. We weren’t married when I found out I was pregnant with you. I wouldn’t even consider an abortion, so his father, your grandfather, practically forced us to get married. Your Grandfather Kendall was a very religious man, very strict. Your father hated him back then. It’s funny, except for the religious part, he’s turned out exactly like his father.”

She let the fork slowly drop to her plate. “You’re right, though. I don’t like him very much. My mother told me I’d grow to love him... but it hasn’t happened yet.” She looked up at me, and I could see pain in her eyes. How had I never seen it before? “Please understand what I’m saying here, Killian. I don’t regret having you. You’re the only bright spot in all of this, the best thing in my life. I see the way he treats you, and it makes my heart ache. I’ve always tried to make sure you’ve had everything you needed, that you had some measure of freedom, some way to escape: the car, your phone, the laptop...” She shook her head as if to say it wasn’t enough.

“Those weren’t Dad’s ideas?”

She gave a short bark of humorless laughter. “No, but he certainly took credit for them, huh? The laptop was an easy sell; you needed it for school. And I managed to convince him the car was his idea, but I had to fight tooth and nail for the phone. I wanted you to have that independence.”

“I had no idea...”

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

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

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

I thought for a minute. “Asher?”

“What about him?”

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

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

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

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

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

She sighed and set her fork down again. “It doesn’t work that way, baby. Your father’s a very powerful man in this area. He’d take you away, and I’d never be able to get a decent job. It’s a good-old-boys’ network around here. Everybody knows everybody, and most of them are in your father’s debt. I never finished college because I was pregnant, and your father never let me go back, so I have no marketable skills. I’m stuck. And I’m afraid that means you are, too, at least for a few more years. Maybe once you’re in college, I’ll make a break for it. I just don’t want you to get caught in the crossfire. It would be ugly, trust me.”

“I do,” I told her sincerely. I knew how much Dad hated to be crossed. He was in a foul mood for days every time he lost a case. I shuddered to think how he’d react if Mom tried to leave him.

She nodded, and we went back to eating. The rest of the meal was somewhat solemn. I had a new image of my mother now, and my respect for her had risen considerably. All those years she’d stayed in an unhappy marriage because she didn’t want to lose me. The full impact of that her sacrifice me like a ton of bricks. When she stood up to clear the table, I jumped up, gave her a hug, and insisted she let me do it.

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

pond at night.

I told Mom I was going for a walk and left. I had plenty of time on the fifteen-minute stroll to think about things — and I had a lot to think about. So much had happened in the last two weeks. I'd realized I was gay and admitted it to myself. I'd come out to an authority figure and to a new friend...who was also gay. Then I'd alienated all my old friends, maybe for good. I'd been kissed for the first time...and it was by a guy. I wondered briefly if it counted if you hit them afterward but decided it did. Then to top it all off, I'd found out that my mother was a real person after all — and I liked her. Who would have thought?

I wondered what Seth would add to my list that night. Would he kiss me again? Did I want him to? I wasn't sure. Part of me did, but part of me was scared, too. I finally decided that if he did, I wouldn't stop him this time.

I was so lost in thought that I almost walked past the trail to the manmade fishpond sitting back in a dense patch of forest. The copse was small but thick, with lots of underbrush and high weeds on either side of the narrow trail circling the tiny body of water. The pond itself was a murky brownish-green, fed by drainage ditches and rainfall. We'd had plenty of the latter so the water level was quite high. Although the town had built cutesy little arched bridges over the ditches, everything still looked rather seedy, even in the middle of the day. At night, it was downright creepy.

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

As I began to cross the first bridge, I thought I saw something move on the far side of the pond. I paused and strained my eyes, but I couldn't tell if I'd really seen anything or if it was just a trick of the shadows. I picked up my pace as I got closer to the area where I thought I'd seen movement. When I neared the spot, I called out in a hushed voice, "Seth?"

If it is Seth, I thought, *he'll never recognize my voice*. I wasn't sure why I wasn't louder, but a sudden feeling of terror had crept over me. Goose bumps covered my arms, and the hair was standing up on the back of my neck. I almost turned and ran. Then I told myself I was being stupid and kept walking. "Seth?" I called again in my new raspy voice.

Still no one answered me, so I thought maybe I'd imagined the whole thing. Then I saw a shape lying on the ground. I froze in my tracks. It looked disturbingly like a person. Could someone have had a heart attack? I wanted get out of there, but that seemed wrong if somebody was in need of help, so I reluctantly kept walking forward. I pulled my phone out of my pocket in case I needed to call 911.

I still wasn't close enough to see what was going on when a sudden crashing sound came from the undergrowth. I spun around in time to see a figure explode out of the trees and toward me with a feral snarl. The figure slammed into me, cutting off my scream before it left my mouth. The impact sent the two of us rolling across the ground, my phone flying from my hand.

Fear gave me strength I didn't know I possessed as I tried desperately to get away, but my attacker seemed to have an equal source of inspiration. At first, I thought maybe it was Seth playing a sick joke. The ferocity of the grip quickly made that seem unlikely. I couldn't turn around to see, since my attacker now had me from behind in a tight hold.

One hand abruptly let go, and the weight on top of me shifted. Before I could take advantage of that, the person raised an arm and quickly brought it down. I saw a metallic flash in the moonlight. It was a knife! Everything seemed to go in slow motion. The impact of the knife as it slammed into my side knocked the air out of me with an audible "oof." Almost instantly, a searing, paralyzing pain spread through my entire body. The knife was yanked out, and I felt blood gush from the wound.

He stabbed me.

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

they called shock.

The fight had gone out of me, and my attacker knew it. He let go of me, and I collapsed to the ground as he sat up over me, roughly flipping me onto my back. Though I tried to get a look at my assailant, the pain must have blinded me. I couldn't make out any facial features. The arm rose again, then stopped. I lay there staring helplessly up at the faceless monster above me, waiting for the knife to fall once more and finish me off. I could do nothing but whimper.

"Please no," I whispered. Breathing was suddenly painfully difficult.

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

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

I didn't move for a few seconds.

I'm still alive.

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

I don't want to die.

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

I wanted to scream, yet I couldn't get enough air to cry, let alone call for help. I was also afraid my attacker would come back. Maybe he'd left me there to die, and he'd come back to check. I had no idea where my phone went in the attack. For all I knew, it was in the pond. I looked around but couldn't see it. Although I could glimpse the lights of nearby houses shining faintly among the trees, I knew my chances of getting through the underbrush in my condition were next to none.

The figure lying on the ground once again caught my attention. I could see that it was definitely a person. It looked like a man — at least he had short hair. He hadn't moved since I'd first noticed him. Maybe I'd interrupted a mugging and the victim was just unconscious. Maybe I could wake the person up to get help. If nothing else, maybe they had a phone I could use to call for help.

I began to crawl toward the still figure. My progress was excruciatingly slow. Every movement brought a wave of intense agony. Nausea rolled over me in palpable waves, and sweat ran down my face. My vision swam in and out. It was all I could do to stay conscious. Some detached part of my mind noted that my shirt was soaked with my own blood. I knew I was losing a lot, which probably explained why I was so lightheaded. I was leaving a glossy trail in the dirt.

After what felt like an eternity, I reached the figure. He was lying on his side facing away from me. I grabbed his shoulder and rolled him toward me. As soon as the body fell flat on its back, I knew I wouldn't be waking him up. His throat had been slashed open, the gash angry and raw. It's amazing the little things you notice in a moment like that. I saw leaves and small pebbles stuck in the congealed blood around the wound, and I wanted to brush them off. They looked unspeakably obscene, as if the gaping wound weren't obscene enough.

I felt the blackness swirling around me again and decided not to fight it this time. In the last second before I allowed it to overwhelm me, I looked up at the face.

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

Chapter 4

I was floating in complete darkness. Or at least that's what it felt like. I don't know how long I was there before I became aware. It could have been forever or no time at all. I was in no rush to leave. Slowly, I began to notice a bright white light visible even through my closed eyelids. The events leading up to my blackout flooded back into my consciousness with a sudden rush, and I crashed back into my body. I found myself wishing for the bliss of the darkness again. I remembered going to meet Seth. I remembered getting jumped. I remembered being stabbed. I remembered the pain. *The pain!*

That was when I realized I was no longer in pain. Had I died? Was that what the black nothingness was? I tried to open my eyes, but my eyelids felt so heavy. Through pure force of will I managed to open one eye only to quickly shut it again. The light was blinding. I was tempted just to slip back into oblivion, but as usual, my curiosity got the better of me. I blinked my eyes open once more, a little more cautiously this time.

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

A nurse wearing the typical uniform of brightly colored top over blue scrubs with white shoes walked into my field of vision. I guessed she was in her early sixties. She looked pleasant enough, with close-cropped gray hair and a competent air.

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

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

I cleared my throat and tried again. “I’m not...” My voice was scratchy and harsh. She quickly offered me a sip from a straw stuck in a cup of water. The cool liquid immediately soothed my throat, and I was ready to make another attempt. “I’m not sure. How long was I out? Was I in a coma?”

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

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

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

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

“You’re going to be fine. The doctor will be in shortly to tell you more. If you need anything from me, like more of the good stuff to knock you out or something to drink or you gotta pee, whatever, just push this little red button here.” She showed me a small remote control attached to the wall with a wire. Besides the red call-button, it had others to adjust my bed and control the TV. “This will page us at the nurses’ station. Someone will come and check on you, although it might not always be me. Just don’t try to get out of bed. Got it?”

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

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

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

entertainment value. Before long, the medicine started kicking in, and I found myself growing drowsy. I was just about to drop back off to sleep when a tall black man with a thin mustache walked into the room. Judging by the white coat and the stethoscope around his neck, I guessed he was the doctor.

“Hello there, Killian,” he said. He pulled up a chair (they were a lovely shade of orange — to go with the puke-green walls, I can only assume) and sat down so he was more or less at eye level with me. “My name is Dr. Murray. I performed your surgery. It’s good to see you awake. You’re looking a lot better than the first time I saw you. You’ve been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well, do you remember what happened?”

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

“Yes. The good news is you’re going to be just fine, though it’s going to take a while before you feel normal — several weeks at least. It’s never a good thing to get stabbed, but if you’re going to have a knife stuck in you, this was the best case scenario. The knife entered at a perfect angle. It missed most of the important stuff and only punctured your lung. We’ve stitched up what needed stitching, so now you just need rest to finish up the job. Like I said, that’s not going to happen fast, and it’s going to hurt quite a bit, but that’s why God invented drugs.” He smiled warmly and waited for me to laugh at his joke. When I failed to respond, he continued. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you, and I’m sure someone showed you how to contact the nurses if you need anything. Any questions?”

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

He looked startled for a second, then burst into laughter. He had a big, booming laugh that annoyed the hell out of me. “You’ve watched too many cop shows on TV. No, they aren’t going to need to ask you any questions. You were awake enough just before surgery to tell us that you didn’t see your assailant. Last I heard, the police are saying you interrupted a mugging, classic case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They haven’t caught the bad guy yet,

but they're looking."

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

Dr. Murray stood up as if to leave.

Through my fog I realized he'd left out some important information. I struggled to stay awake for a little longer. "Wait, what about Seth?" I asked. Maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe it had just been a bad dream and it wasn't really Seth, or, if it was, maybe they had been able to save him, too.

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

I nodded.

"Did you know him?" he asked.

Past tense. Definitely not good. I nodded again.

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

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

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

I wondered if he meant physically or emotionally. I suspected my physical wounds would heal faster. I didn't have long to think or react before drugs overtook me, and I slipped once more into darkness.

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

"Are you okay?" she asked me.

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

“Of course he’s okay,” Dad barked from his chair across the room. “The doctor said he’s going to be fine. Don’t baby him. He’s 16, for God’s sake.”

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

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

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

“Killian,” he went on when I didn’t answer, “if some dog-walker hadn’t seen someone run out of the woods wearing a stocking mask, then you’d be dead. I want some answers.”

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

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

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

“Did I ask you?” he said to her in his I’m-so-calm-it-hurts voice.

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

“Did someone need me?” asked a chipper voice. “Oh, I bet I know who it is!” *Oh, great, a perky nurse — just what I’ve always wanted.*

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

“Are you hurting again?” she asked me. *If you only knew how much*, I thought. Then she went on before I could even answer. “Well, we just gave you some pain medication not that long ago, so I can’t give you anymore right now. I think you just need some rest.” She turned toward my parents and smiled brightly at them. “He really needs his sleep. Maybe you could come back later and visit with him.”

I liked her better already.

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

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

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

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

I was alone with my thoughts at last, still a bit groggy from the pain medication, but I needed to think. Seth was dead. Someone had killed him and come very close to killing me as well. From what Dr. Murray had told me, the police had pretty much closed the case, saying I had interrupted a mugging. That didn’t make sense to me. At the very least, shouldn’t they have waited until I was more awake to ask me if I had seen my assailant clearly? I didn’t even remember talking to them. Didn’t they use witnesses’ descriptions to make those police sketches? Not that it would have helped even if they had asked. I hadn’t seen him clearly. In fact, I couldn’t remember his face at all. Hadn’t Dad said something about someone wearing a stocking mask? That would explain it.

One thing stood out, though. The killer froze when he saw me clearly for the first time and then ran away — almost as if he knew me. He’d even cursed. I wracked my brain trying to recognize the voice, but I’d been too scared, and the voice had just been barely more than a hiss.

My mind turned to the unthinkable. Why would someone want

to kill Seth? Maybe it really was just a random mugging gone wrong. That was easier to believe than to think he was targeted specifically. Somehow, though, I knew it wasn't as simple as a botched mugging. Why would anyone want to kill Seth? In my heart, I knew the answer. I could hear it in Seth's own words.

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

"Why would I hate you?"

"Because I'm gay."

His answer had been simple and honest. People hated him for no other reason than because he was gay. They didn't even know him, but they hated him. Now he was dead. What if he was killed because he was gay? That couldn't happen in my town, could it? I'd grown up here. I knew everyone. Sure, most of them were ignorant small-town hicks, but they wouldn't kill somebody just for being gay, would they?

I knew it happened all the time, though. The news was filled with gay bashings, murders and suicides. I was sure there were many others who never got national news exposure, cases swept under the rug. Was that what was happening with Seth?

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

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

Above all, however, I wept because I was afraid. I'd only just admitted to myself that I was gay. What if someone else found out?

Would I be next? Would the killer return to finish the job?

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

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

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

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

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

"Asher?"

"Yes, that's it. Asher."

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

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

But my rest wasn't any better at home. I had terrifying dreams nearly every night. They were almost always some variation on the same theme. I would be at the park again by the pond. The shadows under the trees were dark and writhing, almost like living things. Most of the time, Seth was there, sometimes still alive, sometimes already dead. The one thing that never changed was the horrifying presence of the killer. I could never see him clearly, but I could feel him watching, waiting. I would awake with a start, wet with cold sweat, my heart pounding in my chest, unable to fall back to sleep.

Thankfully, Dad hadn't come after me again. I knew it was just

a matter of time, though. He was prosecuting some big case and hadn't been home much, a situation that was too good to last. Asher hadn't come around anymore, either. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to or not.

Since I was pretty much bedridden, I had lots of time to think about what had happened. I had come to a few conclusions — fairly simple ones, at least to my mind. Number one, whoever had killed Seth couldn't be allowed to get away with it. If the police weren't going to find him — and it didn't seem to me they were trying all that hard — then I would.

Number two, it was pretty obvious — to me anyway — that Seth had been killed because he was gay. I didn't buy into the whole mysterious mugger theory. It was way too pat, too easy. My intuition told me it was more than a simple mugging. There was no doubt in my mind. For starters, I couldn't remember the last time there'd been a mugging in our sleepy little town.

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

Between my dark thoughts, the nightmares, and the accompanying lack of sleep, I found myself slipping deeper and deeper into depression. I had a lot of time to think about being gay, too. It was clear to me by then that I was, and I had accepted it. After what had happened to Seth, though, I was certain I could never come out. I felt trapped by circumstances over which I had no control. I wanted out, but I was too much of a coward to do anything about it but hate myself and the mess I was in.

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

She left to answer the door.

I set my book down and listened. I could hear the conversation

clearly from my position on the sofa. I could tell it was a man as they exchanged greetings, but I didn't recognize his voice. Then he introduced himself.

"I'm Adam Connelly, Seth's father."

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

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

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

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

He entered the room and gave me a sad, uneven smile. Obviously, Seth had taken after his father. The man looked like an older version of his son, except tired and worn out. "Hello, Killian." He extended his hand for me to shake.

"Hi, Mr. Connelly."

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

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

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

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

"I'm so sorry," I blurted, feeling horribly inadequate. "I'm sorry for what happened —"

He waved his hand to stop me, and I faded out. "You don't have anything to be sorry for. You may be the only person I know in this pathetic town who doesn't have anything to be sorry for." He shook his head as if to clear it. "I'm sorry. Don't pay any attention to

me. I'm still dealing with a lot of anger, but finger pointing doesn't accomplish anything. You're probably wondering why I'm here."

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

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

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

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

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

Hey Killer,

I'm really sorry about what happened today. I'm such a jerk.

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

I guess I should call or text you this but it somehow feels more real to write it down. Maybe I won't even send it to you. I just need to sort it all out first. I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe that's the whole problem. I wasn't thinking. I wanted so badly for you to be gay that I guess I imposed it on you. I get so lonely here and you were nice to me. And...well... you're really cute. I wanted to find someone like me, maybe someone I could love and who could love me. I guess I was expecting too much. I know I've probably

ruined everything by now, but if not, if you can forgive me, I'd still like to be your friend...if you don't hate me. I'm really sorry I kissed you. I know I crossed the line. I'm sorry I'm such a fuckup. Maybe I'll text you after all. Apologizing here isn't going to help anything.

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

Travers = from the crossroads

Is Killian at a crossroad?

My chest hurt reading his words. His pain was palpable even in his handwritten scrawl. I was very glad I'd texted with him, at least, so he didn't die thinking I hated him. But what did the last part even mean? I looked up to find Adam staring at me intently. I knew I had to say something.

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

"I know."

"You do?"

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

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

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

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

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

“Travers is my middle name.”

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

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

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

He started to leave, then stopped in the doorway. He stood there for a few moments then walked back over, leaned in close to me and once again spoke in a low voice. “He’s right, you know. Seth was sometimes a little overly dramatic with the name stuff, but you are at a crossroads. You know you’re gay, but you don’t know what to do about it. There are several paths you can take, but only you can decide which one is right for you. Whatever path you choose now will have an impact on the rest of your life, in ways you can’t even begin to fathom yet. Take it from someone who chose to stay in the closet for far, far too long — choose wisely.” He pulled his wallet from his pocket, fished out a business card and handed it to me. “And if you ever need anything, anything at all, just call me.” He rested his hand on my shoulder for a moment, then turned and left.

The front door had barely shut before Mom appeared in the doorway, a slight frown pulling down the corners of her mouth. I quickly slid the card into my pocket. She stood there for a while, then slowly crossed the room and sat down in the chair Adam had just vacated. She looked at the paper in my hand, and I reflexively crumpled it in my fist.

The silence stretched out. I could tell she wanted to ask something but didn’t know how. I was afraid I knew what her question would be, and I didn’t want to have to answer. She took a deep breath. “Killian, are you gay?”

It was exactly as I’d feared. I didn’t know how what to say, so I

turned my face into the back of the couch, refusing to meet her eyes. We stayed like that for what seemed like an eternity, until it started to feel like some sort of standoff. I was so tired. She was waiting me out and I didn't have the energy to lie. I finally nodded, just a single nod, still not looking at her.

She sat there for a few more minutes without saying a word. Just when I thought the silence would deafen me, she abruptly stood up and walked out of the room. I felt as if she had ripped out my heart and taken it with her. I'd always heard people talk about a broken heart but the sudden painful ache in my chest made me understand exactly what it meant.

Sobs racked my body. I don't know how long I cried, but I gradually became aware that a storm had come up. I could hear the rain beating against the house. Thunder rumbled in the distance, getting closer with each crash.

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

I was at a crossroads. Which path should I take?

Chapter 5

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

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

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

I fell to my knees in the middle of the yard. I had never felt so alone. In the course of the last two weeks I had lost everything and everyone important to me. I had alienated all my friends. Seth had been murdered. And now my mother knew I was gay — something I'd only figured out for myself a few days before — and she'd been so disappointed she couldn't even stand to be in the same room with me. She was going to tell my dad and the only sure thing about his reaction was that it would be very bad. There was no one I could

turn to, no one left to talk to. I found myself wishing that whoever had killed Seth had finished me off, too. I wanted to die.

I'd never had thoughts like that before. I'd never understood how people could even consider hurting themselves, let alone killing themselves. And there I was, trying figure out the best method.

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

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

I didn't think I could handle slitting my wrists.

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

I don't know how long I had been sitting there when a voice penetrated my dark reverie. "Killian!" I got the impression it wasn't the first time they had called my name. Before I could even raise my head, someone was at my side. I looked up through the rain pouring down my face thought for a moment that I was hallucinating. It was Asher.

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

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

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

"What? No way! It's freezing out here, and you're soaked." When I didn't move, he knelt down next to me, carefully wrapped his arms around, gently picked me up, and carried me into the house. I let him do it. I was past putting up a fight.

We entered through the sliding glass doors just as Mom came

into the room.

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

We must have looked pretty bad. I was soaked to the bone from the torrential downpour, and Asher had gotten pretty wet in just the few minutes he was out there.

He carefully lowered me to the couch before turning back to my mother. “He was in the backyard. I don’t know how long he was out there. I think he’s okay, at least physically, but...he’s really upset. He needs to get into some dry clothes, though.”

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

“Mrs. Kendall?”

She looked at him as if she’d noticed him for the first time. “Oh, Asher, I...could you leave us alone for just a minute? Don’t go far. I...I think we’ll want your help. I just need a few minutes alone...”

“Sure, no problem, Mrs. Kendall. I’ll go get some towels.” He cast me one last look as he left the room.

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

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

I turned my head away. “I wanted to die.”

A single choked sob caught in her throat. “Oh, God! Killian, I’m so sorry.”

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

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

outside didn't seem to have helped it much.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"For what?"

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

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

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

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

He stood staring at me, a frown on his face. I noticed he was almost as wet as I was. His long-sleeved T-shirt clung to his torso, emphasizing his muscular physique. I tore my eyes away from his chest and back up to his face. Finally, he spoke. "Your mom's wrong. I've not been a very good friend. You even said so yourself."

"You're friends with Zack and Jesse, and Zack's always been the leader." My voice was flat. I was simply stating the facts. "They've

always come first. I should be used to that by now. Like I said, I'm the backup plan. Or I used to be. I'm nothing anymore." I shook my head. "Why are you even here?"

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

"His getting killed really upset you, huh?" He still had his back to me as he continued his search.

I didn't have to ask who he meant. "Jeez, Asher, what do you think? I found him. And whoever killed him tried to kill me, too. No, I'm not upset. I'm just fucking fine and dandy here." Then, to my great embarrassment, I burst into tears — again. You'd think I'd have run out eventually, but I seemed to have a never-ending supply. How was I not completely dehydrated?

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

"We weren't that close. I just can't stop crying. It's all I do anymore." I was really getting tired of it, too. My eyes were aching from all the tears I'd shed. I probably looked as horrible as I felt. I was sure my face had to be red and puffy.

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

I felt like a little kid. "What are you doing here?" I asked again.

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

"You did? About what?" I was confused. "I thought you guys were like super tight."

He shrugged. "I wanted to come see you after...well, you know, but they didn't think I should."

"Shouldn't hang out with fags, huh?" I snarled bitterly. "It might rub off on you."

Asher froze. We stared at each other for a few seconds, neither of us speaking or moving. Then Asher tossed the towel aside, retrieved the shirt he'd dropped, and pulled out a pair of sweatpants. He brought them over and set them on the bed. He stood there for a moment, as if trying to decide what to do. Suddenly, he reached down and took off my glasses.

“What are you doing?”

Instead of answering, he began pulling up my shirt.

“Hey!” I yelled.

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

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

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

Sure, he’d seen me without a shirt when we were kids at the pool, but this felt different, more intimate. And I was certain he would think it was a big deal if he knew that I was gay. But he was right. I did need help. I gave him a dirty look but allowed him to help me untangle my arms from the damp material and pull it over my head. The maneuver still caused quite a bit of discomfort, and I could tell he noticed.

Once my shirt was off and all I was wearing were some wet bandages and soaked shorts, I suddenly became very self-conscious. Although I wasn’t exactly unattractive, next to Asher I felt scrawny and pale. “Help me get my shirt on,” I mumbled reaching for the dry one.

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

I sighed. He was right again, of course. “The stuff is in a basket by the couch downstairs.”

He was gone in a flash.

I decided to change my pants while he was out of the room, since that was much easier than pulling on a shirt. I remembered that

Adam had given me his number, and fished the soggy card from my pocket. It was a little worse for wear but still legible. I grabbed my phone and saved the number, then shucked off my wet shorts. I was standing there in my sodden boxer briefs when the door flew open again and Asher stopped in his tracks, his eyes darted down to take in my state of undress. It didn't seem that he'd had time to even get downstairs, yet there he was, holding the basket of medical supplies.

He frowned. "What are you doing up? You should have waited for me."

"I'm not an invalid."

"Actually, you kind of are. Now sit down and let me change your bandages."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to. I want to. Will you just stop fighting me and let me help you for a change?" He was starting to sound exasperated, so once again I gave in and sat back down on the bed.

He set the basket on the floor next to me, then knelt between my legs and began to gently unwind the wet wrappings, flinching as he uncovered my wound. It still looked raw and ugly. It wasn't healing quite as quickly as the doctors had hoped. They said my lungs were doing great, however. Small victories, I reminded myself.

Asher carefully applied the antibiotic salve to the gash before picking up the new roll of bandage. "Arms up," he murmured, beginning to wrap it around me. He had to put his arms around me with each pass. He seemed to be going much slower than was absolutely necessary, or maybe it just felt like he was moving in slow motion.

I tried not to enjoy the closeness of his body too much. After all, he was strictly off limits. I was also trying very hard to ignore the fact that I was still sitting there wearing nothing but wet underwear.

"You shouldn't be so nervous about your body, Kill."

His soft voice in my ear made me jump. Was he reading my mind? "Wh-wh-what?"

"You look great."

“No, you look great,” I argued. “I’m a skinny nerd. You’re so much more built than I am.”

“Who cares? You’re not a nerd. Well, okay, maybe you are a nerd but you look fine.” He grinned up at me and secured the end of the bandage with tape. “There, you’re all set.” He stepped back to admire his handiwork before grabbing my shirt and helping me into it. After returning my glasses, he picked up the dry boxers and stood there holding them for a moment, unsure of his next move. He looked so awkward it was all I could do not to start laughing.

“I think I can manage the rest on my own. But thanks for all the help, Ash.”

“You’re welcome, Killian.” He hesitated a second. “I should probably go now, but I want you to know I’m really sorry I haven’t been a very good friend. I promise I’m gonna do better from now on.” Then he totally shocked me by leaning in and kissing me on the cheek.

I was speechless, which Asher used to his advantage to slip quickly out of my room. He paused in the doorway and called over his shoulder, “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

I didn’t know what to think of Asher’s sudden about-face. He seemed to be making an honest effort to be my best friend again, but I couldn’t help being a little skeptical. He’d said he’d had a big fight with Zack and Jesse — over me no less — but what if they really just wanted to spy on me? I wouldn’t have put it past them — kind of a mission to see what the fag was up to. After all, Asher had reported to them before.

Except...Asher had seemed sincere, even sweet. And what was up with that kiss? He wouldn’t have thrown it in just to be convincing, would he? I was more confused than ever. Even if he were sincere, would he still be as sweet if I told him I really was gay?

Then again, Mom knew I was gay and she loved me anyway. That knowledge was indescribably comforting. My earlier thoughts of suicide seemed a million miles away. It was amazing how different things looked all of a sudden, simply because Mom knew and accepted me.

But what about Dad? He couldn't find out. I couldn't imagine Mom telling him, so I thought I was safe for a while.

Suddenly I was tired. All the conjecture, combined with my very emotional roller-coaster ride of a day, had worn me out. I didn't have enough energy to tackle the stairs again, so I simply crawled into bed.

I'll just take a short nap.

Chapter 6

I had a vague impression that someone looked in on me at one point, but the next time I awoke, the sun was streaming brightly through the windows in my room. It seemed the storm had passed while I slept through the night. I looked at the clock and gasped. It was almost noon. I must have been more worn out than I had thought.

I sat up and winced at the pain. I fought my way to my feet, then almost fell back onto my bed with a shriek of surprise. Asher was sitting on my floor reading one of my Nancy Drew mysteries. Usually, I would have been embarrassed that he'd found them, but I was so surprised to find him there that it didn't cross my mind. He was wearing jeans and a white hoodie that lay in sharp contrast against his dark skin. With his loosely curled, dark-brown hair catching the light just right, he seemed to glow in the sunlight that shone on him like a spotlight. He looked like an angel smiling up at me.

"Good morning, Rip Van Winkle," he greeted me. "I was starting to think you were never going to wake up. I've read like half this book while I waited. It's actually pretty good. I think I know who did it."

"How'd you get in here?"

"Your mom let me in. I've been here for about an hour. By the way, she had to leave to do some chores. She asked me to keep an eye on you, so I did." He grinned up at me. God, he was cute when he grinned. "You need some help getting into the bathroom?"

“I think I can handle it. I can walk, you know.”

He still hadn't stopped grinning. “Barely.”

I ignored him and headed for the bathroom, grabbing the bandage basket on my way. After taking care of first necessities, I decided a bath was in order. At the very least, it would make Asher have to wait that much longer. Maybe he'd go home before I got out. I stripped down and carefully took off the bandages while the water ran.

Usually, I preferred showers, but that was a little more than I could manage with my injury. I had to wash carefully around the wound. If any soap got in it, it stung like crazy. On the bright side, I thought it looked a little better than it had before, less red and irritated. Maybe I'd be able to get the stitches removed before much longer.

As I climbed out of the tub, I realized I hadn't brought any clothes with me. I'd have to go back to my room in just a towel, something I wasn't especially looking forward to. Then again, after Asher had seen me in wet boxer briefs the night before, a towel wasn't that bad.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised to find Asher waiting for me. However, I *was* surprised to find him propped up on my bed, still reading. “Make yourself at home, why don't you,” I said dryly.

“Thanks, I will.” He grinned again as he glancing up at me. I was gratified to see his eyes widen at my state of undress. He let out a wolf whistle. “Looking good.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and went over to get clothes from my dresser.

“Are you still being shy? You really shouldn't be worried about your body, Kill.” He got off the bed, came up behind me, and poked me in the ribs. “You have a natural definition. You don't even need to work out.”

I blushed. “I'm just skinny.”

He bent to examine my wound. “It looks a lot better this morning.” He lightly ran his fingers around it, sending chills coursing through my body. *He's off limits*, I reminded myself sharply. “Must be my magic touch. Sit down and I'll put the bandages back on it for you.”

“I, uh, left them in the bathroom.” His closeness was starting to get to me, and I was fighting to keep myself under control. I still didn’t know what to make of his sudden interest.

While Asher went to get the bandages, I quickly pulled on a clean pair of underwear.

“Okay,” he said when he returned. “Have a seat. The doctor will see you now.”

I chuckled as I perched on the edge of the bed. I had to admit, it was nice getting so much attention — weird, since it was coming from Asher, but nice. I hadn’t been that happy since before...

I felt my face fall with the thought of Seth. How could I be laughing and having fun when he had been murdered?

“You’re thinking about Seth again, aren’t you?” Asher asked, suddenly serious.

I nodded.

Asher pulled the tube of salve out of the basket and squeezed some around the stitches. “You can’t be sad forever, Kill. You’re hurting now because he’s gone, and it just happened so that’s to be expected, but you don’t have to be sad all the time. I mean, I hardly knew him, but I doubt he would have wanted that.”

“No, he wouldn’t.” I sighed. “It’s just...it isn’t right that he could be murdered in cold blood and no one even cares. No one seems to be trying to catch the killer. I could have been killed, too.”

Asher looked up at me from where he had knelt on the floor. “I know,” he murmured almost under his breath. Then he went on a little louder, “I’m sure the police are trying to catch him. They’re saying it was just a mugging. They’ll catch the guy eventually.”

“What if it wasn’t just a mugging?”

He stopped and looked at me intently. “What do you mean?”

“What if Seth was murdered on purpose?”

“Why would anyone want to kill Seth?”

“Because he was gay.”

Asher looked shocked. “But that’s not a reason —”

“We both know it is to some people.”

He was quiet for a few seconds, a troubled look on his face. “Then why stab you?”

I paused for a moment, then rushed on, hoping he wouldn’t catch my hesitation. “Maybe I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I walked up while the killer was still there, and he simply reacted.” I paused again. “And there’s more. I think...I think the killer recognized me.”

“What? How do you know?”

“He kind of stopped when he saw who I was. He was going to kill me, too, but then he got a good look at me and just froze. He said ‘Shit,’ jumped up, and ran.”

Asher sat back onto the floor, his eyes wide. “Are you sure? I mean, there was a lot going on. Maybe you’re just confused.”

I shook my head. “No. I remember what happened very clearly.”

“Did you get a look at him?”

“No, the police said he was wearing a mask.”

“That’s scary, Kill, but it doesn’t mean Seth was killed because he was gay. Maybe the mugger knew you.”

“How many muggings have there been around here? I can’t remember a single one ever. Besides, I’ve been thinking a lot about this. I was there. Call it intuition, call it a hunch — I don’t know what it is exactly, I just know that it wasn’t a random mugging.”

Asher sat in silence for a minute, then got back up on his knees and reached for the bandage. “If you’ve thought so much about it, who do you think it was?”

“I don’t know...I haven’t really gotten to that part of it yet.”

“Well, anyway, arms up.” As soon as I’d complied, he started winding the bandage around me.

While he wrapped, I considered his question. Who could it have been? That was the obvious first question, but it wasn’t something

I really wanted to think about. I didn't have much choice, though. I had to think about it whether I wanted to or not. The first person to pop into my mind was Zack. I remembered his threat earlier the same day. He'd said that I'd be sorry — and my boyfriend, too, and we all knew he meant Seth. Then I thought of Asher and his words that day last week in this same room: "If he hurt you, I'll kill him." My body stiffened involuntarily under Asher's touch.

He noticed right away. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, it's nothing." I paused. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure. You know you can ask me anything."

"Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden?"

He didn't answer at first. He just finished up the bandaging job, then sat back on his heels, leaving his hands still resting lightly on my sides. He kept his eyes turned down, not looking at me. "I told you before."

"Tell me again."

He took a deep breath. "When I thought I was losing you as a friend to Seth, I realized how much you mean to me. And then you started acting so different — I wasn't sure what was going on. You were always snapping at people and getting mad and yelling. It wasn't like you, so I got worried." He glanced up to see if I was listening, then quickly looked away again. "I didn't really like what Zack and Jesse were saying and all, but it was just easier to go along with them like always. I figured it was just a phase and things would be back to normal soon. When you got hurt, though, it really...it really scared me. I realized that I had almost lost you — I mean, lost the chance to tell you — I mean —"

"Tell me what?"

He sat there for a second, then looked back up at me. "Did you love Seth?"

"What?"

"Were you in love with Seth?"

I couldn't believe he'd asked me that. In essence, he was

questioning if I was gay. “No,” I answered truthfully. “I wasn’t in love with Seth.”

He heaved an enormous sigh, and relief flooded into his eyes.

What was going on? “Why would you ask me that?”

His eyes seemed to bore into mine. Suddenly, he leaned forward again and kissed me softly on the lips.

Time seemed to slow down. In the few seconds our lips were pressed together, I had a whole conversation in my head.

Does this mean Asher is gay? Well, duh! Straight guys generally don’t kiss their male friends on the lips like this. Not unless they are in the Mafia, and I’m pretty sure Asher isn’t. Why didn’t he ever tell me? Maybe for the same reason I didn’t tell him. Then again, I didn’t know until last week really. Although, on some level, I suppose I’ve always known in my heart. There’s no denying how great this feels. Nothing has ever felt more right than Asher kissing me. Wait a minute! Asher is kissing me!

With that last thought, I jerked back and stared wide-eyed at Asher. He slowly sat back on his heels, his eyes never leaving mine. In them, I could read both the fear of rejection and the depth of his feelings. For a long moment neither of us spoke.

Finally, I pulled myself together. “You kissed me.” My voice was shaky and a little hoarse, as if I’d just woken up.

“I...I...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. It’s just...I’ve been thinking about it ever since I read that letter...”

“Wait. What letter? Seth’s letter?”

“Yeah, I know I shouldn’t have read...”

I had completely forgotten about the letter. What if Dad had found it? “Where is it now?” I asked with a hint of panic.

“Huh?”

“The letter — where is it now?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter, a little the worse for wear, crumpled and folded, but safe from my father. He handed it to me. I was very glad Asher had been the one to find it,

especially considering what had just happened.

“I don’t understand. Why do you have it?”

“When I went downstairs yesterday it was on the couch. I...I read it. And then I kept it. I don’t know why. I’m sorry...” He stopped and seemed to be searching for what to say. He took a deep breath. “Killian, I’ve had a crush on you for years.”

“You’ve what?” I yelped.

“Just let me finish. I need to say this. I’ve always known I was gay, ever since I can remember. But who was I going to tell? Zack? Jesse? No way! I was even afraid to tell you, even though I kinda always thought you might be gay, too. Then, when you started hanging out with Seth, I started to think that either you definitely were gay and you liked him, or you weren’t gay but you didn’t care about him being gay, and either way maybe you wouldn’t care about me. And then when you were almost killed... Fuck. I was so scared, Kill. I made a promise that if you lived, I’d tell you the truth. I even went to the hospital, but they wouldn’t let me see you. After that, I lost my nerve for a while, I convinced myself it was a sign. But I couldn’t stop thinking about you.

“When I saw you out in the rain yesterday, all I could think about was getting to you. I knew you needed me. But it also kind of hurt ‘cuz I thought you must have really been in love with Seth to be so upset. I was jealous of him, Kill. I wanted to be with you and he comes in and steals you away, or at least that’s what it felt like.

“And then I found that letter and I was more confused than ever. Seth said he kissed you but you were angry, so maybe you weren’t gay after all. But...there was something about the way you looked at me yesterday. I don’t know. I just...felt something. And after I read that Seth kissed you, I couldn’t stop thinking about kissing you. And then you were there and we were so close and it felt right so I did it. I kissed you. But I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have. Please don’t hate me.”

He seemed to run out of words, so he just sat there staring at me hopefully. I wasn’t sure what he expected, however. I wasn’t sure what I felt. I needed time to think.

“Ash,” I began, speaking slowly and deliberately, “I need some time to figure stuff out. All I can tell you right now is, yes, I am gay. No, I didn’t love Seth. Not in that way at least. I didn’t even really know him, although I wanted to know him better.”

“But you don’t like me.”

“Ash, I didn’t say that. I just meant —”

“It’s okay, Killian,” he interrupted. “I understand. Why would you want me? I’m just a dumb jock who treated you like shit.” He stood up and started for the door.

“Asher, wait!” I pushed myself off of the bed, ignoring the pain, and grabbed his arm. He stopped but kept his gaze on the floor. I cupped my hand under his chin and lifted his head until he was looking me in the eye. I kissed him softly on the lips, just for a few seconds, before breaking away.

“Asher, right now I don’t know what I want. I do like you. I...I guess I have for a long time. It’s not that at all. It’s just...” I growled in frustration. “I don’t know how to explain it to you. I need more time. So much has happened so fast, and there’s a lot going on right now. Seth hasn’t even been buried yet.”

Asher nodded, pulling gently away from me. “I guess I understand. I’ll try to be patient.” He paused. “Maybe I shouldn’t even tell you this, but he was buried already, back up around Baltimore somewhere.”

“What? Why didn’t anyone let me know?”

“They probably didn’t want to upset you.”

“That’s not fair! He was my friend. I would have wanted to be there.”

“You weren’t exactly in the best shape.”

“That’s not the point. I should have been told.”

“Well, there’s some sort of memorial service this afternoon. I read online that his dad wanted to have a service down here, too.” He looked at his watch. “Actually, it’s in like one hour.”

I made a split-second decision. “I want to go. Will you take me?”

“I dunno, Killian. Maybe that’s not such a good idea. I mean,

everyone's talking already because you were with him in the park and all."

"Please? It would mean so much to me. I need to go. It would be kind of like a chance to say goodbye."

He stared at me for a minute, then nodded slowly. "Yeah, okay. I'll take you. And I'll stay with you, too, so I can bring you home afterward. We'll leave a note for your mom. You need to put something on, though. You can't go in just your underwear."

We spent the next forty-five minutes getting ready. First, we dressed me — it was a two-person job — then he ran next door to change. I sat on my front steps waiting for him, which gave me a few precious minutes to think — the first I'd had since Asher's big revelation.

I still wasn't sure how I felt about Asher. I knew I liked him, but did I trust him enough to give him what he seemed to want from me? My heart screamed yes, but my head was a little more cautious. Especially troubling was the nagging thought in the back of my mind that Asher might be the attacker. He'd admitted he was jealous of Seth and felt as if Seth was taking me away from him. And his words that day in my room kept echoing through my head over and over: "If he hurt you, I'll kill him." I honestly couldn't believe that about him, but there was still some lingering doubt holding me back. Maybe I just didn't want to admit that someone I'd known forever could be a killer.

I pushed the thought from my mind and remembered what else he'd said. Everyone was talking about me being at the park that night with Seth. I knew the high-school grapevine was vicious, but that seemed a bit much. Someone had almost killed me. I was barely out of the hospital and I was already the new juicy piece of gossip. Did they already suspect I was gay? I wasn't sure I was ready to deal with being out at school. I was still coming to terms with it myself.

Finally, Asher came back out dressed almost identically to me, all in black. He looked a whole lot sexier, however — at least in my opinion.

"What?" he asked me.

I tore my gaze away from him and tried to remember why we were dressed like that. I felt guilty for finding myself so attracted to one friend while on my way to the funeral of another. “Nothing,” I mumbled.

“No, tell me. Should I go change? Do I look stupid?”

“Definitely not. Let’s go, we’re gonna be late.”

The memorial service was being held at the park, of all places. I was scared about going back, but I tried to tell myself that it was broad daylight and Asher would be with me. I’d never even been to a memorial service or a funeral before. I wasn’t sure what to expect.

When we arrived at the park, there were hardly any other cars. As we approached the pavilion where the service was to take place, I could just about count on one hand the number of people who had showed up to remember Seth. I recognized Adam Connelly, Seth’s dad, standing next to a handsome man around his same age. Adam was talking to a man wearing a black suit and a clerical collar who I assumed must be the minister or priest or whatever. I didn’t know any of the other people there.

Adam noticed us as we approached. He broke away from the minister and walked toward us, the handsome man with him following a few steps behind.

“Killian, thank you for coming.” He embraced me gently, being careful of my injury. “You should be at home recuperating, but I appreciate your being here. I’m glad there will be at least one person present besides Steve and me who cared about Seth.” He turned to the man who had followed him over and motioned him forward.

“Killian, this is Steve Redden, my boyfriend. Steve, this is Killian Kendall. He was Seth’s friend.”

I shook Steve’s hand and exchanged pleasantries.

“This is my friend, Asher Davis,” I said, and another round of handshaking ensued.

“Did you know Seth, too?” Steve asked.

Asher flushed. “No, sir. I didn’t really get the chance. I brought Killian.”

“Thank you for coming anyway,” Adam said with a sad smile.

As hard as I tried to ignore it, the path to the pond drew my attention like a magnet. Memories of the last time I was there flickered through my mind as if I were watching an old filmstrip. I began to feel a little lightheaded.

“Come on.” Adam gently took my arm. “You’re looking a bit pale. You need to have a seat. Are you sure you should even be out here?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him, although I wasn’t at all certain I was.

With Adam on one side, Asher on the other, and Steve trailing behind, I felt a little like an invalid as we approached the pavilion. I scanned the gathering again and saw it had grown to maybe fifteen people while we talked. I suspected a few of them at least were plainclothes cops and reporters. It seemed so wrong that such a good person had been struck down so young, yet more people weren’t there to mourn his loss.

A sudden macabre thought occurred to me, causing a chill to run along my spine. What if his killer was one of those people present, pretending to mourn for the very life he had taken?

Asher noticed the shiver and leaned in to whisper into my ear, “Are you okay?”

I didn’t answer him. I’d just noticed a familiar face toward the back of the group of would-be mourners. I stopped cold. Steve almost ran into me from behind. What was my father doing there? Political posturing most likely — it was, after all, an election year and a kid had been stabbed in his county. I didn’t know if he had noticed me yet, but then he slowly turned and locked eyes with me. He glared with an intensity that frightened me. I knew the fight I had been avoiding since the hospital was imminent. I only hoped he’d have the decency not to start it during Seth’s memorial service.

I deliberately looked away, deciding I wouldn’t let him distract me from the reason I was there. I would have to deal with my father later, but for now, this was about Seth.

Adam insisted Asher and I sit in the front row with him and Steve.

I felt very conspicuous, and I could tell Asher was uncomfortable as well, but we couldn't exactly say no.

Once we had taken our seats, the minister stepped forward to the podium. For a second, a table set off to one side distracted me. Dozens of framed photographs, all of Seth, covered its surface. Many of them were the ones I had seen at his house, but there were some new ones, too.

"We are here today for a very somber purpose—" The minister's words brought my attention back to him. "—to remember a young man whose life was cut off before his time. Seth David Connelly was only sixteen when he was killed in a senseless and tragic act of violence. Perhaps we will never understand what provoked such a horrible event, but we may rest assured that Seth is no longer in a world filled with hate and prejudice. I am sorry to say I did not know Seth very well personally, so I am going to keep my comments brief today to allow you time to remember Seth in your own special ways." He read a brief passage from the Bible, something about God wiping away our tears and no more death or mourning.

I'd mostly stopped listening at that point, lost in my own memories of Seth. I snapped back to the present when Adam stood up and moved to take the minister's place. He stood there for a minute without saying a word, gripping the podium as if it were the only thing holding him up. I thought he was going to break down, but he fought for control.

"My son was taken from me last week by an act of violence so horrible that it sickens me every time I think about it. Most of you here didn't even know him. You only came because your editor or superior sent you. You're just doing your job. Well, let me introduce you to my son. Seth David Connelly was a beautiful, brilliant, clever, and compassionate sixteen-year-old. He enjoyed running on the beach. He liked writing poetry. Though he did well in all his classes, theater was his favorite. He loved acting. He wanted to be an actor, but now he'll never get that chance."

He choked up and dropped his head. When he raised it again, his eyes were bright with unshed tears, but he was once more in control. I admired his strength.

“There is so much I could tell you about my son. He was one of the greatest joys of my life. Due to circumstances beyond our control, we didn’t see each other for three years. I only recently got him back, and now he’s gone forever. Nothing will ever be able to fill the void his death has left in my world.”

He took a deep breath. “But I haven’t told you something very important about my son. It’s only important because it was important to him. He was gay. He wasn’t afraid or ashamed of it, either, even though he had suffered so much in his young life because of it. He was a hero to me. He should have been a hero to all of us. He had the courage to accept himself.

“He saw things with his poet’s heart. To him the world was always beautiful and exciting, he found deep meaning in even the most chance of encounters. He trusted people. We moved to this town in the hope of finding a safe place to live. Ironic, isn’t it? It’s even more ironic that this town, which prides itself on being welcoming, so totally rejected my son. In fact, there was only one person at his whole school who would even speak to him without calling him names and insulting him. To me, this person is also a hero.” Adam looked at me with a sad, teary-eyed smile. “Thank you.”

Adam looked around the small gathering, purposefully making eye contact with each person there. Most wouldn’t hold his gaze. Dad stared back unblinking and stone-faced. “I want to leave you with this thought. The police and our State Attorney have been quick to tell us that Seth’s death was a random mugging gone wrong. But I want you all to ask yourself this: Based on what evidence? All his money was still in his wallet, his cell phone in his pocket. There has never been another mugging at this park. So far they haven’t put forth a single suspect. Why?

“I believe this was a hate crime, pure and simple. Seth had been receiving threatening notes at school. When I told the police about it, they wrote the notes off as childish pranks. Well, I’m sorry, but I don’t think having your throat slit is childish.” Several people gasped, and Adam seemed to be struggling for control again. “Nothing can bring Seth back at this point, but we can ensure that he gets justice. And that’s my challenge to all of the reporters and police officers

here today. Make sure Seth gets the justice he deserves.” He turned to the memorial table, kissed his fingers and held them out toward the photographs. “Goodbye, Seth. I love you!”

Adam took his seat and began to weep softly. Steve pulled him against his chest and allowed Adam to cry on his shoulder. No one moved for what seemed like an eternity. Then the minister slowly walked back up to the podium. “Does anyone have anything they would like to say in memory of Seth?” He almost sounded as if he hoped not. Again, another eternity seemed to pass. No one dared even move. It was as though they were holding their collective breath.

Just as the minister cleared his throat to give some final words, I stood up. Every eye was fastened on me, including the furious glare of my father. I looked him straight in the eye before turning to Adam.

“I am truly sorry for your loss, Mr. Connelly...Adam. It’s not just your loss, though. It’s the loss of every person who never got the chance to know Seth. I didn’t know him very long, only two weeks really, but he was my friend. He was a truly good person, and that’s something we don’t have enough of in this world. He helped me realize a few things that I’d been blind to for a long time. I’ll miss him.”

I collapsed back into my seat and bit my lip. I had a feeling that speech would come back to bite me in the ass, but I knew it was the right thing to do. I felt Asher’s hand fumble discreetly with mine for a second. He slipped his into mine, holding it below the sight of the people sitting behind us. It was not, however, out of the minister’s sight. He looked at us in surprise before once again clearing his throat.

“Well, if there’s no one else, I’d like to thank you all on behalf of the family for coming out to show your respects. Donations may be made in Seth’s memory to the theater club at the high school.” He said a quick prayer, then hurried away. I imagined it was one of his more unusual services.

At the minister’s dismissal, the crowd quickly dispersed. My father shot me a lethal look as he left. Soon, it was just Adam, Steve,

Asher, and I.

“So you don’t think it was a mugger either?” I asked Adam quietly.

“Either?” He raised one eyebrow in an appraising look.

“I didn’t believe that from the beginning,” I told him, “but what can we do?”

“*We* can’t do anything,” Adam replied firmly. “There’s not much anyone can do at this point. I was thinking about hiring a private detective, but the few I’ve contacted so far turned me down cold. They said this isn’t some television show where private detectives run around with guns. They mostly just do insurance work and spy on cheating spouses. They told me to drop it and let the cops handle it.” Bitterness crept into his voice. “Who cares if they sweep it under a rug?”

We both sighed at the same time.

“Maybe I can ask some questions around school,” I suggested.

“Are you crazy?” Asher jumped in.

“Asher’s right,” Adam agreed. “That wouldn’t be safe, Killian. We’re talking about a murderer here. He killed Seth and he tried to kill you.”

“No, he didn’t try to kill me. If he’d wanted to kill me, I would be dead. He had the opportunity, and he didn’t take it.”

“Whoa. Hold on a second,” Steve interjected. “Two things there. One, you say ‘he.’ Do you know for sure your attacker was a man?”

“I don’t have any real proof, but I’m pretty sure it was a man. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and I’ve remembered some things that I think rule out a woman. The person felt solid, and I don’t remember feeling breasts. And they were strong. I guess it could have been a well-built teenage boy, too, but he seemed bigger than I am, but then I’m on the small side, so just about anyone could wrestle me to the ground, especially since he caught me by surprise. I was too busy fighting for my life to get a more precise idea of his size. I never really heard his voice because he just whispered. He...he was wearing a stocking on his head so I couldn’t see his face in the dark.” I almost choked up as the horrible memories came flooding back.

“I’m sorry to make you relive all this,” Steve apologized.

I took a deep breath and managed to pull myself together enough to continue. “It’s okay. It’s important that I remember.”

“Was there anything besides his size that made you think it was a man?”

I took another deep breath. “He just smelled like a man. You know what I mean?”

Steve nodded. “I think I do.”

“Jeez, Killian. You sound like a friggin’ detective.” There was a note of respect in Asher’s voice.

Steve smiled. “He’s right. You’re doing great. What did you mean he had the opportunity and didn’t take it?”

“After he stabbed me, he flipped me over and raised his arm to stab me again, but when he saw me, he said ‘shit’ and ran away.”

“And you told the police this?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked. “Were you questioned?”

“I don’t remember. I even asked the doctor at the hospital if I should give a report to the police, and he laughed at me. He said they didn’t need one and that I’d told them I didn’t see my attacker when they brought me in, but I don’t remember anything after I passed out at the park. I couldn’t have been very coherent if I was even awake.”

“What kind of investigation is this?” Steve shook his head in disgust.

“It’s not an investigation,” Adam snarled. “It’s a cover-up.”

“Come on, Adam,” Steve said gently. “Don’t go all conspiracy theorist on us. It’s just small-town-police ineptness.”

“This police force is anything but inept,” Adam retorted. “I looked into it before I decided to move us down here. For a small department, they have an excellent record. They aren’t Keystone Cops. They’re well-trained professionals.”

“They don’t have many murders here, though. It could just be a

case of being out of their depth.”

“Or it could be a case of no one caring about the dead gay boy.”

“You said something about threatening notes?” I interrupted, in an attempt to head off an argument that seemed to be heading down a well-worn path.

“Yes.” Adam rubbed his face. “There were three, each was printed from a computer, which makes them virtually untraceable. They wouldn’t have really led to anyone, but still, it would have been nice if the police had at least taken the notes somewhat seriously and not just dismissed them out of hand. They didn’t even take them as evidence. The notes were nasty, hateful. They said things like ‘God hates fags,’ and ‘Go away. We don’t want queers here.’”

“The police did say that if the notes had been death threats, they would have taken them into consideration,” Steve chipped in.

“How did Seth get them?” I asked.

“They were stuffed into his locker at school.”

“So it had to be someone our age!” I exclaimed. “See, you do need my help. Where else can you get inside information from school? I was Seth’s only friend. It’ll be natural for me to be asking questions.”

“It’s not safe, Killian.” Asher sounded a little worried. He’d been quiet for so long I had almost forgotten he was there.

“Well, actually,” Steve began as we all turned to look at him, “if you just stick to general questions, it can’t hurt anything. It’s not likely to be anything more than a mugging, but on the off chance it is, I doubt the killer will do anything to hurt Killian if they didn’t when they had their chance the first time. Meanwhile, if asking questions will help make you two feel better about the whole thing, then I say why not?”

We all sat in silence for a few minutes thinking about Steve’s suggestion.

Finally, Adam nodded. “Okay. If you promise to be careful and not do anything needlessly risky or obvious, you can ask some questions. We should stay in contact about this. You still have my number?”

I nodded. “I saved it in my phone.”

Adam turned to Asher. “Please keep an eye on him. If anything happened to either one of you, I don’t think I could live with myself.”

Asher didn’t look happy at the turn of events, but he assented grudgingly.

“Killian is looking a bit tired,” Steve observed. “Maybe you should get him home, Asher.”

“Yeah, I am feeling a little drained,” I admitted. “Although I can’t say I’m looking forward to dealing with my father when I get home. You should be able to hear the fireworks from the other side of town. I still can’t believe he came.”

“Your father was here?” Adam asked me. “I have to admit I didn’t expect that.”

“It’s an election year,” I joked halfheartedly.

“And I made those remarks about the State Attorney...”

“Don’t worry. What you said will be totally overshadowed by the fact that I was here at all.”

“You don’t think he’ll do anything...violent, do you?”

I shrugged. I really didn’t know what to expect.

“Killian,” Adam began, his voice deadly serious, “I know I said this before, but I mean it. If you need me for anything — and I do mean anything — I hope you’ll call me. I couldn’t be there for Seth when he needed me most. I hope you’ll let me be there for you.”

We all stood up and exchanged hugs. After a round of goodbyes, Asher and I started off for home.

We didn’t talk much during the drive. We both had a lot on our minds. When we arrived at my house, Dad’s car was parked next to Mom’s in the driveway. Asher pulled in behind hers and turned off the engine. We sat there in silence for a few minutes, neither of us wanting to face what was waiting for us inside.

“Do you ever wonder why you drive on a parkway and park on a driveway?” I asked no one in particular.

Asher, being the wise person he was, chose not to answer. He just got out of the car and came around to help me. We approached the front door with more than a little trepidation. Before he opened it, Asher wrapped his arms around me for a brief hug.

We barely closed the door when Dad entered the hallway, Mom a few steps behind him. I could tell by the look on her face that this wasn't going to be pretty. I braced myself for the barrage.

Chapter 7

“Asher,” Dad said in that horribly controlled voice of his, “I think it would be best if you went on home now. Your dad’s waiting for you. We just got off the phone.”

Asher shot me a look that was easier to read than a book. He was terrified. “Yes, sir,” he replied softly, then turned and let himself out.

I was left standing all alone facing my father. I still hadn’t moved beyond the entryway.

“What were you thinking?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t play games with me, boy. What were you doing at that faggot’s funeral?”

Suddenly, something shifted inside me. I was tired of being intimidated and bullied by my father. I knew I had done the right thing, and I wasn’t going to back down. I lifted my chin and stared him straight in the eye. “I felt I should go,” I said firmly.

“You felt you should go,” he mocked. “Well, isn’t that nice, Meg?” He addressed this to my mother. “You waited till your mother was gone, and then you and Asher couldn’t get out of here quick enough.”

“It wasn’t like that at all. We didn’t plan it. Mom was gone when I woke up. Asher mentioned that Seth’s memorial service was today, and I wanted to go.”

“Don’t talk back to me! I left you alone after the whole stabbing

incident at your mother's insistence—" He growled this as if the 'whole stabbing incident' were somehow my fault. "—but this is too much. I want answers and I want them now. How could you publicly humiliate me like that? There must have been reporters from three different newspapers in attendance and you sit in the front row. Then, if that isn't enough, you stand up and make your little tear-jerking speech. That's going to be all over the place in the morning."

His concern for the family of the deceased warmed me. He was making me angrier by the second, but I struggled to remain silent. There was no point adding fuel to his rage.

"Start explaining, and let's begin with the park. What were you doing there that night? You were meeting the faggot, weren't you? After I explicitly told you to stay away from him."

"I'm not a little kid. You can't tell me who I can and can't be friends with." I matched him in the control department. I had learned well.

"Yes...I...can." He was starting to lose his veneer of control, and I loved it. "That's why I'm the father and you are not. You were going to meet him that night, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was."

"Then you deserve what you got," he snarled, his control finally snapping. He took three large steps toward me, covering the entire length of the hallway in those few strides, and struck me across the face open-handed. I reeled backwards into the door. I vaguely heard Mom screaming for him to stop, but the ringing in my ears almost deafened me.

"It's bad enough you run around with that nigger boy. I won't have my son associating with faggots too!"

I'd never felt so much hate and contempt for anyone in my entire life. My hands were shaking with rage. I balled them into fists, and he actually took an involuntary step back. "I will associate with whoever I want," I spat out.

He moved so fast I didn't even have time to flinch. His fist shot out and connected squarely with my face. I felt my glasses snap as

my head bounced off the door, and the world exploded. I slid to the floor with the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. Mom shrieked again and tried to get to me, but Dad shoved her back roughly. She fell to the floor where she huddled against the wall and cried.

“You listen to me and you listen to me well, boy,” he rasped. “Stay away from that Connelly man. You stay away from Asher Davis from now on, too. I don’t know why he helped you, or what you did to get him to take you to the park, but you are not to see him anymore. If I find out you’ve been sneaking around again, this beating will look like fun. This is my house, and you will respect what I say.”

“Fuck you!” I screamed at him. “You think you can just hit me and I’ll respect you? You lost my respect a long time ago.”

He reached down and snatched me up by my shirt, suspending me in the air. Once again, time slowed down in the eerie way it has of doing at important moments, as if to underline their importance. The pain in my face and side was intense, but somehow it only served to sharpen my senses. I could hear Mom moaning softly behind him, a low keening sound that would have made the hair on my arms stand on end under other circumstances.

I struggled to focus on the face in front of me. Even without my glasses, I could see the fury in his eyes. My vision may have been blurry, but I was seeing my father with a clarity I’d never known before.

In the instant that I hung in midair, watching him draw back his fist to strike me again, I made a decision.

“Guess what?” I gasped. “I’m gay, too.”

Everything froze in place. Before, time had seemed to slow down. Now, it stopped completely. Mom fell silent, her eyes wide and fearful. Dad’s fist stopped in mid-swing. I stared at him defiantly as I dangled there. We all held our positions, a bizarre tableau of a dysfunctional family.

I broke the spell. “That’s right. Your son’s a faggot. How does that make you feel, Pop? Aren’t you proud?”

For a brief second, I could read utter hatred in his glare. Then

his eyes went dead, as if someone had flipped a switch. Suddenly, he released his grip on me, and I collapsed to the floor, gasping in pain. His fist dropped to his side, although it remained clenched. For a moment, all was silent.

“Get out of my house.” He couldn’t even bring himself to look at me. “Take your shit and get the hell out. I never want to see you again. You’re no longer my son.” He kicked me in the side so hard my vision exploded in white light and pure pain. Then the world went black. I heard his footsteps retreating, then the back door slammed shut.

I tried to sit up and focus, but the pain was excruciating. Everything was blurry. Suddenly, I felt someone over me and, in a flash, I was no longer in the hallway. I was lying on the ground by the pond once again with a murderer bending over me, knife raised, ready to plunge. I screamed and struck out at the figure.

“No! Please! Please don’t kill me! Oh, God, please, no!”

“Killian!” Mom’s frightened voice brought me back. “Stop! It’s me. It’s your mother.”

I managed to focus on Mom’s face. I wasn’t in the park. I was in the hallway of our house, and I was in a lot of pain.

“Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“Yes,” I managed to gasp.

She tried to lift me, but she was too small and I was in no condition to help.

“Should I call an ambulance?”

I didn’t know why I had to make all the decisions, but I was glad she asked me that time. “Call Adam Connelly.”

She gave me a blank look.

“Seth’s dad.”

“I don’t know his number.”

“In my phone. In my pocket.”

She fished out my phone and frantically searched through my

contacts. For once, I was glad that one of the conditions of Dad allowing me to have a cell phone was that I wasn't allowed to lock it — so that he could have access to it whenever he wanted. I heard her talking frantically to someone — Adam? — but the pain was coming in waves now, each one stronger than the last. I began to lose consciousness.

I faded in and out after that. I remember Adam arriving and cursing a great deal. “I shouldn't have let him come home alone. I could tell he was afraid.”

“You couldn't know,” Mom argued. “It's not your fault. It's Gary's.”

“We can play the blame game later,” another voice joined in. I think it was Steve's, but I was in too much pain to open my eyes to see.

At the point, someone lifted me like a doll, and I blacked out again.

When I came to, I was back in the hospital, and a doctor was talking to Mom. It wasn't the same doctor I'd seen before. This was a younger woman wearing green scrubs. “He's a lucky boy,” she was saying.

Funny, I didn't feel so lucky.

“Considering the beating he took, he's in pretty good shape. He didn't need any stitches and no ribs are broken. He's going to have some nasty bruises, though.”

“What about his stab wound?” Mom asked.

“Again, he was lucky. Somehow, it didn't reopen. He's probably going to experience quite a bit of pain in his ribs, though. There's a lot of bruising.”

“Can you give him anything for the pain?”

“We already have. He'll probably be very drowsy for a while.”

“Are you going to move him to a room?”

“We'd like to observe him for a few hours. We're a little concerned he may have a concussion. But if there are no signs of anything more

serious, he can probably go home tonight. Any other questions?”

“I...yes. When I went to help him, he started screaming ‘don’t kill me’ and he struck out at me. I think he believed I was the person who stabbed him.”

“That’s possible. He was probably having a psychosomatic episode.”

“What does that mean exactly?”

“They’re often called flashbacks. We see it most often with war veterans, but it can happen to anyone who’s been through a traumatic experience. In his mind, he probably reverted to the night of the stabbing and experienced it all over again, even to the point of believing he was there and you were his attacker.”

“Will he have them again?”

“It’s possible, maybe even probable.”

If she said anything more I missed it, because I faded out on that bright note.

The next time I came to, Mom was having a whispered argument with Adam. I didn’t have the energy to open my eyes so I just listened.

“Meg, you have to press charges,” Adam insisted.

“I can’t do that. You don’t understand.” Mom sounded defeated and weary, as if it wasn’t the first time they’d had the same conversation.

“You’re right, I don’t understand. How can you let him get away with this? He could have killed Killian.”

“Do you have any idea how powerful my husband is in this county? You aren’t in Baltimore anymore. Gary is the law. He has everyone in any position of power in his pocket. If I pressed charges, the only thing to come of it would be more trouble for Killian and me. And now that you’re involved, for you, too.”

“This is child abuse. He put Killian in the hospital. It’s not like he could just shrug that off.”

“You don’t know Gary. He could get away with murder.”

There was a long pause, then Mom murmured, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I know.” He sighed. “I just don’t understand how you can let him get away with this as if nothing had happened.”

“You think I want to? I just don’t have a choice. Please trust me on this. I want to make him pay, too, but I have to protect Killian first.”

“He can’t go back there.”

“No. Gary kicked him out.”

“That’s not what I meant. Even if your husband hadn’t kicked him out, Killian wouldn’t be safe there. He can stay with me.”

“I couldn’t ask—”

“You didn’t. I offered.”

“I don’t know..”

“Where else would he go? Look, I realize I’m practically a stranger to you, but I want to help. Killian meant a lot to Seth. The house is so empty now without him...it would be nice to have someone around again. And besides, I understand what he’s going through.”

“How can you?”

“Meg, I’m gay.”

There was another long pause, and I wondered what Mom was thinking. “Then maybe it would be good for him to be with you for now. This is all so new to me. God knows I’m completely ignorant when it comes to...homosexuality. But I don’t want to impose. Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I wouldn’t have offered if it wasn’t. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You’re welcome to stay with me, too.”

“Thank you, but I have to go back.”

“Is that safe?”

“He’s never hit me before.”

“Had he ever hit Killian before?”

“He didn’t tell me to leave. If I don’t go back, he’ll come looking for me. Killian will be safer this way.”

“I don’t like it, Meg.”

“I don’t like it either, but we don’t have a choice. We can’t press charges, and I have to go back.”

“Do I get a say in this?” I croaked.

“Killian!” Mom gasped. “You’re awake.”

I forced my eyes open and tried to focus but everything was blurry. I had a moment of panic before I remembered that my glasses had broken. Adam and Mom were standing over my bed with matching expressions of concern.

“How long have you been listening?”

“Long enough. I’m staying with Adam?”

“If you want to,” Adam qualified.

“I want to. But Mom, I don’t want you to go back there.”

Mom slipped her hand into mine. “Baby, you know I have to. For now. It’s just temporary until I figure something out.”

“You promise?”

“Promise. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I’ve been dealing with your father for a long time.” She leaned in and kissed my forehead.

“What about the police, Meg?” Adam asked.

Mom straightened up. “What do you mean? I already said we can’t press charges.”

“Killian has obviously been beaten and he’s a minor. The hospital will have to report that to the police.”

She visibly drooped. She’d been keeping up a brave face for me, but it was as if someone had let the air out of her. She looked utterly defeated. “I don’t know. I...I hadn’t thought of that.”

I was getting tired again. “Just tell them some guys jumped me.”

“But what guys?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know. Say I didn’t see them. I’m really tired.”

“Get some rest, sweetie. We’ll figure it out,” Mom assured me.

I nodded and allowed myself to drift off.

In the end, that’s the story they went with. I’m not sure anybody bought it, but I was in and out of sleep, and the cops didn’t ask too many questions.

The doctor decided I most likely didn’t have a concussion but they wanted to keep me overnight anyway. I’d had enough of hospitals, though, and argued strongly in favor of leaving. Eventually, they agreed to let me go. Somehow, I stayed awake while they wheeled me out to Adam’s car. An orderly helped Adam slide me gingerly into the back seat.

Mom knelt down beside me. “I’ll bring over your clothes, laptop and anything else you need tomorrow.” She sounded very tired. I knew how she felt. “We’ll sort everything out then.”

I nodded and struggled to hold my eyelids open.

She leaned in and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I managed to mumble. The painkillers were really strong. My last conscious thought was that I sincerely hoped Asher had made out better than I had.

Chapter 8

I woke up in a strange room. For a few disoriented moments, I couldn't remember where I was. Then the events from the night before came back to me. Dad had beaten me up and kicked me out. I was staying at Adam's, maybe indefinitely. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I hardly knew Adam. We'd only met a few times. I finally decided it couldn't be any worse than living at home. My anger toward my father throbbed like a dull ache in the back of mind. I hated him with every ounce of my being.

I sat up and gingerly felt around my ribs. Definitely sore, but I could live with that. I looked around the room to get my bearings since I'd been out of it when Adam had brought me in the night before. I caught my breath when I realized where I was. Adam had settled me into Seth's old room.

Seth's presence was everywhere. I almost felt as if he were standing beside me while I looked around at the physical memories he'd left behind. There were academic trophies on a shelf, framed playbills on the wall and a rainbow flag pinned over his desk.

Just then, someone knocked lightly on the door.

I jumped, wincing from the pain in my ribs. "Yes?" I called out through gritted teeth.

"I take it you're awake?" Adam called back through the door.

"Yes. You can come in."

He opened the door and stepped cautiously into the room, as if unsure of his reception. "How are you feeling?"

“Well, I’ve been better, but I could’ve been worse. On average, I’d say I’m surviving.”

He chuckled. “At least you still have your sense of humor. I brought you some medicine for the pain.” He gave me a glass of water, along with a pill that I swallowed without the water. “Your mom is on her way over with some stuff for you. I told her — and I’m telling you — you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need to.”

“Thanks, Adam. I can’t even begin to tell you how much this means to me.”

“There’s no need to thank me, Killian. I would have wanted someone to do the same thing for Seth when he found himself in the same situation. Luckily, I was able to take him in myself. I may not be able to do much, but I can offer you shelter and care when you need it most. My house is your house now. Seth would have wanted it that way. In fact, if he were alive he’d insist.”

I nodded, too overcome with emotion to speak.

The doorbell chime broke the moment, and Adam hurried off to answer it. He was back in a few minutes with Mom and, much to my surprise, Asher.

Mom noticed my eyes light up when I saw Asher, and she broke into a grin. “He insisted on coming along. I guess I made the right decision in letting him.”

After greetings and hugs were over, she asked me, “Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

“A little sore, but I’ll live,” I told her. “How are you?”

“Your father never came home last night, which is just as well. I’m not sure what to do. I’m going to see a lawyer this afternoon.”

“A lawyer? For what?”

“I didn’t sleep at all last night. Besides waiting for your father, I was also thinking about what happened.” She turned toward Adam. “You were right. I can’t stay with him. More importantly, I don’t want to stay with him.”

“You’re divorcing him?” I asked.

She turned back to me. “How do you feel about that?”

“I think it’s about damn time!”

“Killian!” she admonished, obviously trying to hide a smile. “Watch your language. Your mother is in the room.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think you should stay with him another minute.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay with me leaving him.”

“Okay? I’m thrilled.”

She laughed, but then quickly grew serious. “I can’t just walk out, though.”

“Why not?”

“You know your father. I want to have all my ducks in a row before I start packing my bags. That’s why I’m seeing a lawyer.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

I turned to Asher, who’d been sitting quietly on the edge of my bed. “What about you? Did you have any trouble with your parents?”

He broke into a grin. “You won’t believe what happened!”

“Hang on,” Mom interrupted before Asher could go on. “I’ve already heard this story on the way over, so while Asher fills you in, Adam, why don’t you and I get Killian’s stuff out of the car.”

After they left, Asher moved closer to me on the bed. “K, now tell me all about what I’m not gonna believe,” I insisted, snuggling up next to him.

“Wow, you really do seem to be feeling better,” he said with a smirk.

“That pain medicine is good stuff, although I’m sure I’ll be hurting again when it wears off. Now talk.”

“It’s about my parents. When I got home they were waiting for me and I thought I was in big trouble, but they were just concerned about you. They asked what was going on and I just couldn’t take it anymore. I told them I was gay”

“What? Oh wow. What did they say? How’d they react? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is great. They were fine with it. Well, maybe fine is a little strong, but they didn’t freak out. My dad’s best friend and roommate from college is gay. I never even knew it. We’ve always called him Uncle Billy, even though he’s not really our uncle, you know? But anyway, Dad and Uncle Billy are pretty close so it didn’t weird him out too much.” He said all of this without taking a breath.

I was stunned. Not only had Asher come out to his parents, but they were okay with it. Asher took advantage of my speechless state to sneak a quick kiss. I looked at him in surprise for a moment; I still wasn’t used to him kissing me. Suddenly, I decided to throw all caution to the wind. I reached up with one hand and pulled his face to mine while my other arm snaked around his waist. The kiss was much more passionate than our last attempt, slow and sensual. I felt his tongue against my lips and parted them.

The kiss lasted only seconds — or maybe it was years. Who could tell? When he finally pulled away, I fell back onto the bed and Asher laid his head on my chest.

“Wow,” he whispered after a moment.

“Yeah, wow,” I agreed.

Asher sat up quickly and scooted away as we heard footsteps coming down the hall. Adam entered with a box and gave us a funny look — we probably looked guilty as hell — but he didn’t say anything. Mom followed a few seconds later with another box.

“This is all your clothes,” she said. “When you’re feeling better, Adam will bring you to get your car. You’ll be staying here until I figure some stuff out. I’ve got to run now to keep my appointment with the lawyer. Asher, do you want to go with me or stay a while? Adam said he could take you home later if you want to stay.”

“I’ll stay!” Asher replied immediately, then added, “If you’re sure it’s okay, Mr. Connelly.”

“It’s fine,” Adam assured him. “And you can call me Adam.”

Mom came over to give me a hug and a few words about being a

good guest for Adam. Then Adam walked her out to her car, leaving Asher and me alone again.

“Um, Asher?”

“Yeah?” he answered cautiously.

“What do you think that kiss meant?”

“I dunno,” he whispered. “Maybe that you like me?”

“I told you I did, Ash.” I reached out and took his hand in mine. “I’m just confused about some stuff right now. I probably shouldn’t have kissed you like that.”

“Are you kidding?” he exclaimed. “I’m so glad you did. I want to do it again right now. And again. And again.” He giggled, then grew serious. “But what are you confused about?”

I didn’t know whether to tell him or not. How do you tell your oldest friend that you’re afraid they might have killed someone? I almost started laughing at the thought. The pain meds were definitely kicking in, making it harder to think clearly. Finally, I decided to be honest and let the chips fall where they would.

“Asher, I have to ask you a question. Please don’t be offended. This is really important to me, okay?”

“Sure,” he answered quickly, beginning to look a little nervous.

I took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.* “Where were you when Seth was killed and I was stabbed?”

For a long time, he didn’t say a word. I watched the light in his eyes slowly go out, as if someone were turning down a dimmer switch. The affection and warm humor were replaced by hurt and cold anger. He slowly stood and stared down at me. I pushed myself up, wondering if I had gone too far.

“So that’s it,” he said softly, almost to himself. Then his voice grew louder, anger punctuating every word. “That’s why you’re being so weird? You think I killed Seth? You think stabbed you? You think I’m a murderer?”

His face was white with rage. A single tear slipped out the corner of his eye, but he swiped it away angrily.

“I love you, Killian,” he snapped. “I’ve loved you for years. How can you think I would ever, ever hurt you? Do you really believe I’m the kind of person who could kill someone and then sit here with you like nothing happened? Is that what you think of me? If it is, then maybe you don’t know me at all.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could say a word he spun around and ran out of the room. By the time I finally found my voice, it was too late.

“Asher?” I heard Adam call out. His only answer was a slamming door.

Adam appeared in my doorway. “What happened?” he asked sharply.

“I was stupid and said something that hurt Asher,” I told him quickly. “Please, just go after him.”

Thankfully, Adam ran off after Asher without asking a bunch of questions first. I collapsed back against my pillow and let out a long, shaky sigh.

The wait for Adam to return was pure torture. When he finally reappeared in my door, the look on his face told me all I needed to know. It hadn’t gone well.

“He hates me now, doesn’t he?” I said sadly.

Adam shook his head as he came into the room and sat beside me on the bed. “He doesn’t hate you. His feelings were hurt. I tried to explain to him how everything that’s happened has affected you. We had a good talk.”

“But he didn’t come back with you.”

“He needs to cool off. Don’t worry, he’ll come around.”

“Or not,” I mumbled. “Where is he now?”

“He’s waiting outside. I’m going to give him a ride home now if you think you’ll be okay while I’m gone.”

I nodded, and he stood up and ruffled my hair. “Just give him a little time, Killian. Trust me.”

My thoughts were swirling, but the drugs were making it hard to

focus. I fought it for a few minutes, then gave in and sank into the blackness. If I was asleep, I didn't have to think about any of it.

The following week was spent in recovery. Adam would allow me to walk from the bedroom to the living room and that was about it. He waited on me hand and foot. Although I joked that he was going to spoil me, it was actually starting to drive me crazy. Since Adam worked from home, I felt like I never had a moment to myself.

I missed Asher. I hadn't seen him since our fight. He did bring my make-up work from school as far as the front door, where he handed it over to Adam. I figured it was a good sign that he was still looking out for me.

Meanwhile, I began to grow closer to Adam. We talked a lot about Seth, as well as about Adam and his life. I learned how Seth had come to live with Adam, and why his other son, Kane, still lived with Adam's ex-wife. Kane, it turned out, was the other boy who appeared in many of the pictures of Seth. Kane and Seth had been very close while they were growing up. Seth had missed his brother terribly after coming to live with Adam, but the boys' mother wouldn't allow Kane to see Adam or Seth at all. Adam choked up whenever he talked about his younger son. Kane's fifteenth birthday was coming up in a week, and Adam seemed pretty despondent about not being able to be with him.

I felt for Adam. I could tell just by the way he looked at the pictures how much he loved and missed Kane. I knew it had to be even harder as he dealt with his grief. I couldn't imagine anyone being cruel enough to keep a man's only living son away from him at a time like that. When I asked Adam about it, he simply said it was more hopeless than ever, since his ex-wife was blaming him for Seth's death.

I talked to Mom almost every day. She told me she and her lawyer were devising ways to get her out of the house as soon as possible, but she was still afraid of what Dad might do when she tried to leave him. On the bright side, she said he wasn't home much. When he was, he barely spoke to her and never mentioned me. It was as if I

had never existed. Despite her positive attitude, I was worried about her, fearing he'd become violent again and she'd have no one there to help her.

By the end of the week, I was feeling well enough that I thought I might try to go back to school Monday morning. On Saturday, after calling to make sure Dad wasn't home, Adam took me to pick up my car. I wanted to see Asher while we were in the neighborhood, but Adam thought I should wait for him to come to me.

As Kane's birthday drew nearer and nearer, Adam became more and more withdrawn and depressed. I desperately wanted to do something, but I had no idea what. Kane's birthday was on Wednesday, and it wasn't until Sunday afternoon when I had my brainstorm. As soon as Adam left that evening to visit Steve, who lived about an hour away, I went to work.

My idea was simple. First, I needed some information. Although I felt a little guilty about digging through Adam's desk, I decided the end would justify the means. After only a few minutes of searching, I was rewarded: an address book. I was glad Adam was old enough to still keep a physical one. Every number I had was stored in my phone.

I pulled out my phone and excitedly dialed the number. It rang once...twice...three times. I was getting tense.

"Hello?" a voice answered. I couldn't quite tell if it was a woman or a boy whose voice hadn't yet changed.

"Hello?" I said hesitantly. Now that I had someone on the line I was second guessing my plan.

"Hello?" they said again.

I almost said "hello" once more, but stopped just in time to cut off what could have become an endless spiral of salutations. "Um... is this Kane?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

I sighed with relief. Once I started speaking the words tumbled out in a rush. "You don't know me, but my name is Killian. I know your dad. Actually, I'm living with him right now 'cuz my dad kicked

me out of my house and your dad took me in. I was Seth's friend."

I paused to take a breath, and Kane jumped in. "You live with my dad?" His voice tightened with excitement. "Is he there now? Can I talk to him?"

"No, he isn't here now, and actually that's why I called."

"What do you mean?"

"Your birthday is this Wednesday, right?"

"Yeah?" He sounded even more confused. "How'd you know that?"

"It's all your dad has talked about for the last week. He's so sad because he can't be there with you. He wants to see you so much. Since he can't, I thought maybe if you called that day, it would be better than nothing. Maybe it will cheer him up."

"It's been years since I've even spoken with him," he said slowly. "When Seth started visiting him last year, we were always going to try and get me to his house. Then Seth moved out, and I never saw him again. He didn't even leave a note or anything. I just came home one day, and he was gone. When I never heard from either of them, I figured they didn't care about me anymore."

"It wasn't like that at all," I said gently. "Seth missed you terribly. Your dad has told me how much they both missed you. He has pictures of you everywhere. He would love to see you, or even just talk to you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Will you call him on Wednesday?"

"I don't even have his phone number. It would be great to talk to him. I miss him so much." Kane sounded a bit distant, as if he were thinking about something else.

"I'll give you his number. Are you okay?" I asked him.

"Yeah. Maybe. I don't know. I've always tried to understand my mom, but I really can't figure out why she kept me from Seth and Dad."

"Um," I stalled. I didn't know how much to tell him. "Do you

know why Seth moved in with your dad?”

“My guess would be because they’re both gay.”

I was shocked by his matter-of-fact tone. “And you were okay with that?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be? I’ve known for a long time. I knew Dad was gay when he moved out, although I didn’t really understand it at the time. As far as Seth goes, well, he took care of me after Dad left. It never mattered to me if he was gay or straight. He was a great brother —” He choked up. “I still miss him.”

“Me, too,” I said simply.

“Are you —?”

“Am I what?”

“Gay?”

I hesitated but only for a moment. “Yeah, I am.” It still felt strange to say that, but very right.

“Were you Seth’s boyfriend or something?”

“No, we were just friends.”

“Oh. Did he have a boyfriend?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Does my dad?”

“Um...maybe you should ask him that,” I said in an attempt to sidestep the question.

“So he does, then.”

“Like I said, you should talk to him about that. Are you going to call him?”

“You bet I will. I can’t wait. The hard part will be waiting for Wednesday!”

I gave him Adam’s phone number, and he asked for the address so he could send a card too. He wanted to chat longer, but I told him I didn’t want to risk ruining the surprise if Adam came home early.

“Thank you for calling, Killian,” he said just before we hung up.

“You seem like a pretty cool guy. I’m glad you were Seth’s friend. He didn’t have many.”

“I’m glad I was Seth’s friend, too,” I said sincerely.

We said our goodbyes and hung up. I felt very satisfied with what I had accomplished. I couldn’t wait for Wednesday, either.

Chapter 9

I woke up the next morning full of excitement, an emotion I hadn't felt in quite some time. I was excited for three reasons. First was my conversation the night before with Kane. I couldn't wait to see Adam's face when his son called on Wednesday.

Secondly, I was returning to school. After missing two weeks, I was anxious to get back. I wasn't sure how much longer I could stand being an invalid. At the same time, I was pretty nervous about it, since I knew I had been a main topic of conversation.

The third reason for my excitement was that I was getting new glasses. Mom was picking me up before school and taking me to the optometrist's to replace the ones Dad had shattered when he punched me. I'd been going without ever since, which had resulted in more than a few headaches while I tried to stay caught up with homework. I couldn't wait to see clearly again.

I was ready and sitting on the front porch when Mom arrived to pick me up for my appointment. After the optometrist checked my eyes to see if my prescription was still up-to-date, he asked me the same question he always did when I got new glasses: "So, Killian, have you thought any more about switching to contacts?"

I started to answer with my usual "no thanks," but for some reason I stopped and thought about it. *Why not?* I felt like I was starting a new phase of my life, and if other people could get used to sticking their finger in their eye, maybe I could too. It was time to make a fresh start, and that meant making some changes. I was determined to take control of my life. I would begin by getting contacts.

“Yeah, I think I’d like to try them,” I told him.

He looked up in amazement. “You would?”

“Yeah, I’m ready for something new.”

“Okay.” He still seemed a little surprised at the change in our routine. “Well then, let’s take another look at a few things.” He moved the machines back over my eyes and did a few more tests. After a while, he sat back and said, “You have great eyes for contacts. You shouldn’t have any problems. I think we even have your prescription in stock. You can take them home today.”

Before I could leave, I had to practice putting the contacts in over and over until I could do it relatively well. It wasn’t as bad as I’d feared, although it did take me about twenty minutes on each eye the first time. I was blinking a lot, but they were in. I decided to wear them to school.

On the way out to the car, I thought of another change that was way past due. It had been a while since my last trip to the barber, and my hair was looking decidedly shaggy. I asked Mom if I could get it cut after school. I was ready for a new style.

“We can go now, if you want,” she replied.

“What about school?”

“You’re already late. The contacts took longer than I expected. You might as well look your best for your first day back.”

In the face of such rock-solid reasoning, I happily agreed.

Mom took me to her usual salon and turned me over to her own hairdresser, a woman improbably named Bambi. She was wearing a stylish suit that would have been appropriate in a boardroom. Her hair, on the other hand, had more colors than a rainbow.

“So, do you know what kind of style you want?” Bambi asked, seating me in a barber’s chair.

Her hair held me in such thrall that the question went right over my head. “What?” I asked, my eyes never leaving her head.

She smiled. My reaction must have been one she’d grown used to. “What do you want me to do with your hair?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m just tired of this style. Do whatever you want.”

She raised an eyebrow, which I noticed was pierced. “Stylists live for clients like you!” She walked slowly around the chair, studying me from every angle. She ran her fingers through my hair, pushed it back from my forehead, fluffed it up, then slicked it down with a misting bottle. She walked behind me and gave me a serious look in the mirror. “I think we should do something similar to mine,” she suggested at last.

My eyes grew wide, and she burst into laughter. “Just kidding, cutie. Don’t worry. When I’m done you’ll have the girls falling all over you.”

I was tempted to inform her that I wasn’t particularly interested in having girls fall all over me. Then I decided my sexuality was one of those need-to-know type situations, and Bambi definitely did not need to know. And had she called me cutie?

She turned my chair so I couldn’t see the mirror and went at my locks with the scissors. About twenty minutes later, she spun me around to give me my first look at the finished product. My hair was quite a bit shorter than before, very different from the shapeless mop I’d come in with. It looked like the sort of haircut you saw on actors or models. With the contacts and the haircut, I barely recognized the guy staring back at me in the mirror.

“So, what do you think?” she asked me.

“I love it! But...will I be able to make it look like that at home?”

Bambi laughed. “It’s a super low maintenance style.” She handed me a container of hair goo. “Just rub a little of this between your palms and run it through your hair after you shower and let it air dry. It’ll do whatever it wants and look great, I promise.”

“Oh. Yeah. I think I can handle that.”

After Mom paid for my haircut and tipped Bambi (generously, at my insistence), we were off for school. The closer we got, the more nervous I became. I’d been out for two weeks and, in that time, I knew I had been the main topic in the rumor mills. Now, I had a new

look that, for all I knew, everyone would hate. What if it made me look gayer? Or like I was trying too hard? What if people made fun of me? I tried to summon up the courage I had found earlier, the courage belonging to the new Killian. Apparently, though, he had stepped out for the moment.

Mom noticed, of course. Mothers have a way of doing that. She glanced over at me. “Calm down. You’re gonna be fine, Killian. You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I feel like I’m about to pass out. What if everybody hates my new look?”

“They won’t. And if they do, who cares? I know I’m just your mom, and my opinion doesn’t really count, but I think the new look is super — very...sexy.”

“Mom!”

“What? I can’t say you’re sexy?”

“No! It just sounds gross coming from you.”

“Well, you are. You look so grown up. The girls will be all over you.” She paused for a moment and then added, “Too bad you won’t be interested.”

I stared at her in surprise for a second, my mouth hanging open in shock. When she couldn’t keep a straight face, I realized she was joking, and we both burst into laughter. It was a little weird for my mom to be cracking gay jokes already, but I figured it could have been worse.

“You should have seen your face,” she gasped as we pulled into the school drop-off point.

I grabbed my backpack, then impulsively leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks, Mom. Thanks for everything.”

She started looking a little misty, and I decided it was definitely time to make my exit. I jumped out of the car and waved as I started backing toward the building. “I love you,” she called as she pulled away. “Have a great day!”

I turned and faced the school, took a deep breath, then released

it slowly.

Here goes nothing.

Since I was late, I had to check in at the office. Everyone there was overly nice to me, telling me not to worry about being late and writing me passes. Essentially, I could have shown up five minutes before the final bell, and everything would still have been hunky-dory with them. I guess there were some benefits to being stabbed and having it splashed all over the news.

At my school, we have a four-period day, which means each period is much longer than with traditional seven-period days. I came in right at the end of my second period. The rest of the day went almost too well, with everyone going out of their way to be nice to me. So many people complimented me on my new look that it started to make me self-conscious. Was I that bad before? Prior to my makeover, no one had ever shown the slightest bit of interest in me. I quickly discovered I really didn't like being the center of attention. I preferred my usual anonymity.

After the final bell rang, I looked for Asher. My ego had received a hefty boost from all the compliments, and my newfound confidence was back. I was ready to make an attempt at patching things up. The situation with him had dragged on long enough, no matter what Adam said. I wanted to ask him to forgive me and see if we couldn't be friends again.

Unfortunately, I couldn't find him anywhere.

Since Mom had dropped me off, Adam was supposed to pick me up. I was leaning against the wall outside waiting for him, when Zack and Jesse approached me.

"Killian," Zack greeted me nonchalantly as he and Jesse took up positions against the wall on either side of me. They didn't fool me, though. I knew it was no casual social visit.

"Hi, Zack. Hi, Jesse," I replied nervously.

"I think we need to talk," Zack continued.

"Yeah? What about?"

"I think you know," he countered.

“I don’t think I do. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Stop playing games, Killian,” the ever-helpful Jesse chipped in.

“I’m not playing games. You guys are the ones who haven’t so much as spoken to me in weeks. I was in the hospital and then stuck at home, and you didn’t even bother to call and see how I was doing.”

“Well, you’re not at home anymore, are you,” Zack said.

“No, I’m not. What does that have to do with anything?”

“It has everything to do with everything,” Zack explained patiently. “Look, we’re not dumb. You start hanging out with Seth and you ditch us, then you’re in the park at night with him, you get stabbed, you get kicked out of your house, and next thing we know you’ve moved in with his dad. Now you’re back looking like this.” He waved a hand at my face. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure it out.”

“Well that’s good since neither of you is a genius. What exactly have you figured out, though?”

“You’re gay, aren’t you?”

I’d known I’d have to face the question eventually, but somehow it still caught me off guard. I wasn’t ready to come out to the whole school yet, and telling Zack and Jesse would be the equivalent of doing just that. But what could I say that they would believe? I thought frantically for a few seconds, then decided the truth was always the best way to go — or in this case, part of the truth.

“Look, Seth and I were just friends. He didn’t have any here, and I felt sorry for him. I was meeting him that night, but just to talk. It was a classic case of wrong place, wrong time. And my dad kicked me out because I went to Seth’s funeral. You know what a dick my dad is.”

They stared at me for at least a minute. The silence was so heavy I almost forgot to breathe. Suddenly, Zack pushed away from the wall. I couldn’t help flinching at his unexpected movement.

“Okay, Killian,” he said finally. “I’ll buy that for now, but we’ll be watching you. I just hope you can get back to normal now that the fag’s gone.”

I was suddenly so furious that my sight actually blurred. I've always heard the expression "seeing red," and in that moment I knew exactly what it meant. It took everything in me to remain outwardly calm and quiet as they walked away. *This isn't the time or place*, I repeated over and over to myself.

I was still trying to calm my pounding heart when Adam arrived. I climbed into the car, slammed the door and slumped down in the seat.

"What's wrong?" Adam asked.

"Nothing," I snapped.

"Bad first day back?"

"No. It's just...Arg! I hate stupid people."

"There's no shortage of those. Was it anything in particular or merely your everyday, average, run-of-the-mill stupidity?"

"Zack and Jesse just make me so mad. I don't really want to talk about it."

"No problem. If you change your mind, I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Adam," I said sincerely. "When I get back to your house, is it okay if I take my car and go see Asher? I think it's time we talked about what happened. I know you said to wait for him to come to me, but I'm tired of waiting."

"That's fine. He might be ready by now, but don't push it. If he still doesn't want to talk, let it go."

I nodded, but I had no intention of letting it go. I'd been doing that for too long already.

"By the way," he added. "I love the new look."

"Thanks," I mumbled.

I drove over to Asher's house and knocked on the door. His mom answered. She was a short, slightly plump woman who always seemed to be in a good mood, with a ready smile. She was prone to wearing bright colors and combinations such as the lime-green pants and fuzzy purple sweater she had on right then. I loved hanging out at Asher's house just so I could be around her. Her first name was

Deb. She kept telling me to call her that, but for some reason, she'd always been Mrs. Davis to me.

"Killian!" she exclaimed in surprise and gave me a huge hug. "I hardly recognized you! You look so handsome. Asher's been keeping us up to date on how you're doing. Are you feeling better?"

"Much better," I replied. "I went back to school today. Is Asher home?"

"No, he went out with Zack and Jesse." That was news. The last I'd heard, they were fighting.

"Oh. Okay. Well...would you tell him I came by to talk to him?" I paused for a moment, then added, "Tell him I said I'm sorry."

"I'll do that, Killian," she said. "And you take care of yourself, okay?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Davis. I'll try."

Tuesday and Wednesday were pretty much repeats of Monday, except I drove to and from school and parked in a different part of the lot than usual, so there were no more awkward conversations with Zack and Jesse. Asher had either dropped off the face of the earth or was still avoiding me. Since I hadn't heard any rumors of his sudden disappearance, I could only assume the latter. It hurt that he still wouldn't talk to me, but Adam kept saying he would come around eventually. If I heard "just give him time" once more, I thought I would scream. How much time would it take? I really missed him.

I was distracted the whole last period of school on Wednesday. I knew Kane was supposed to call that night, and I couldn't wait to see the look on Adam's face. As soon as the final bell rang, I shot out of the building like it was the first day of summer vacation. I drove straight to Adam's house and walked in to find Steve at the stove stirring something in a big pot. I smelled spaghetti sauce.

"Hey there, kiddo," he called out. Then he caught sight of me. "Whoa, new look! I like!"

"Hi, Steve. Thanks." I sniffed the pot. "Smells good. I didn't realize you were going to be here tonight."

“It was one of those last-minute things,” he told me. “I know today is Kane’s birthday. It’s always really hard on Adam, so I thought I’d come over and cook dinner for you guys. You know, offer a little moral support.”

“That was really nice of you.” I couldn’t hold back my grin any longer. I had to share my news or I’d burst. “I have a surprise that ought to cheer him up.”

“Oh, yeah? And what’s that?”

“If I told you then it wouldn’t be a surprise, now, would it?” I teased.

“What wouldn’t be a surprise?” Adam asked, walking into the kitchen.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Steve called over his shoulder as he dumped spaghetti noodles into boiling water. “If I can’t hear what it is then neither can you.”

Adam walked over and slipped his arms around Steve’s waist while kissing him on the back of the neck.

“Hey, don’t distract the cook,” Steve laughed. “And if you’re trying to get the secret out of me, it won’t work because I don’t know it.”

Adam pulled away from Steve, picked up a spaghetti strainer, and advanced on me. “Tell me the secret or I’ll strain it out of you,” he growled menacingly.

We all cracked up. The joking continued as I sat at the kitchen table under the warm yellow light from the overhead lamp and started my homework. Meanwhile, Steve and Adam pattered happily around me preparing dinner. The atmosphere in the Connelly kitchen was quite festive. At some point, someone put on some music and the grooves mixed with the pungent smell of garlic and oregano filling the house.

I stopped working to just bask in the moment. I wanted to commit it to memory. It was such a perfect domestic scene, unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. I realized I felt totally relaxed and happy for the first time in just about as long as I could remember.

I was home.

Smiling to myself, I went back to my work.

I had to move when Steve started setting the table. I was loathe to leave the warmth and security of the kitchen, however, so I stretched out on the floor and kept working until dinner was ready.

We had just sat down to eat when the doorbell rang.

“Who could that be?” Adam wondered.

“I’ll get it,” I offered.

I opened to the door and felt my eyes bug out of my head. I’d only seen the person standing at the door in photos but I recognized him immediately. “Kane?” I gasped. “Oh my God! I thought you were just going to call. What are you doing here? How’d you get here?”

“You must be Killian,” he said softly, ignoring my barrage of questions. With a shy smile, he offered his hand.

I nodded as I shook it. I couldn’t believe he was there. He was wearing jeans and an oversized gray sweatshirt with a red T-shirt peeking out around the collar. He looked like a lost little boy. I couldn’t help comparing him with Seth. Where Seth had the long gangly frame of a runner, Kane was stockier. That wasn’t the only difference. Kane was also quite a bit shorter, and his hair was a little darker, more auburn. His eyes, though, were the same intense green as Seth’s. If Seth had looked like an elf prince, Kane looked like an elfin warrior. He was just as beautiful, but in a different way than Seth had been — more solid and less delicate.

“Um...is my dad here?” he asked me after a few seconds.

I realized I was staring and quickly looked down. “Um, uh, yeah,” I stuttered. “He’s, uh, in the kitchen.”

I moved aside to allow him in. As he stepped by, I noticed he had a backpack slung over his shoulder and was carrying a skateboard by the front axle.

“Who is it, Killian?” Adam called from the kitchen.

Kane’s eyes lit up at the sound of his father’s voice.

“Just a sec,” I yelled before spinning back to face Kane. “How did you get here? Are you staying? Does your mom know you’re here?” I was trying to keep my voice down, but it kept rising.

“I caught a bus and then a taxi,” he explained, attempting to match my low tones. His eyes kept sliding down the hallway toward the kitchen doorway. “I don’t know what I’m doing. Mom has no idea where I am. She thinks I’m spending the night with a friend. She’s gonna flip when she finds out I’m not really at Connor’s house, but I don’t care. I just had to see Dad.”

“Oh, jeez,” I moaned. What had I done? “Okay.” I took a deep breath and started again. “Okay, well, you’re here now so...let’s make the best of it. Hold on a second. I’ll go in and set it up.” The more I thought about the situation, the better it got. “Oh, man, this is so much cooler than just a phone call!”

Kane giggled nervously, and I shushed him. With another deep breath, I walked back into the kitchen.

“Who was it?” Adam asked. He and Steve had started eating while I was gone.

“You remember that surprise I mentioned earlier?”

Steve and Adam both looked up, their expressions filled with curiosity.

“Yes?” Adam said.

“Well, it didn’t turn out quite how I expected, but I’m pretty sure you’ll like this even better.”

“Like what, Killian?” Adam asked me. “Whatever it is I’m sure I’ll love it.”

I took one more deep breath. I sure hoped so. “Come on in,” I called to Kane.

He stepped slowly into the kitchen, as if suddenly uncertain of his welcome.

For a few moments, you could have heard the proverbial pin drop. Then suddenly Adam leapt up from the table with a clatter of discarded silverware and ran toward Kane, lifting him off his feet in

a huge bear hug.

They spun around silently for a few moments before Adam set him down gently on his feet. When he pulled back, there were tears running down his cheeks.

He cupped Kane's face in his hands. "Kane! How did you get here? Does your mother know you're here?"

"I caught a bus, and no, she doesn't know yet," Kane answered. He sounded just as emotional as Adam.

"A bus? By yourself?" Adam pulled him in for another hug and turned to me. "Was this your doing?"

"Sort of," I admitted. "But I thought he was just gonna call."

"Well, thank you," he said, reaching out and drawing me into the hug as well. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Steve cleared his throat, and our little huddle broke up. "I think a phone call might be in order," he suggested gently. Steve always seemed to be the voice of reason.

"Yes," Adam agreed, although he didn't sound very enthusiastic. "We need to call your mother. But first let's eat, before the food gets cold. Oh, how could I forget? Let's sing 'Happy Birthday' to Kane!"

After a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday," we set another place at the table and sat down to eat. Although, there was a lot more conversation than eating going on. We started with explanations — how I'd found Kane, how he'd gotten there — then catching up. It felt like a real family. My glow of contentment from earlier had only deepened, filling me with an unfamiliar sense of affection and warmth.

When dinner was finished and we'd rinsed and stacked everything in the dishwasher, Adam sighed. "Well, I think we've put this off long enough. Let's call your mother."

Kane pulled out his phone and called home. After a few rings, he began to talk, explaining quickly where he was. We could only hear his side of the conversation, but things seemed to go downhill faster than an Olympic skier.

“But Mom—” he kept saying, as she apparently kept cutting him off. Finally, he just sighed and held the phone out to his father.

Adam winced, but reluctantly took the phone. “Hello, Eve,” he said guardedly. “It’s been a long time.” He closed his eyes and listened for a moment. “No, I had no idea he was coming.” Pause. “No, I didn’t secretly sneak him down here.” Pause. “No, Eve, it’s not a kidnapping. Don’t call the police. There’s no sense in blowing this out of proportion.” Long pause. “That’s fine, then, I’ll look forward to seeing you.”

He ended the call and added, “About as much as I look forward to having all my teeth ripped from my head while having all my body hair plucked out and ice picks shoved through my eyes and...and...”

I couldn’t help it, I started laughing. Adam looked over at me with a half-smile. After a few seconds, he too began to chuckle. The tension broke, and soon we were all howling. The easy, comfortable feeling from earlier returned.

“So what did she say?” Steve asked.

“A lot that I won’t repeat, thank you,” Adam said with a wry smile, “but the gist of it, once we’d established that I was a no-good, lying, kidnapping bastard that she never should have married, was that she’ll be down late tomorrow afternoon to pick you up, Kane.”

“You mean I get to spend the night?” he asked excitedly.

“Yep,” Adam confirmed. “And we’d better make the most of it, because it might be the last time for a while.”

We moved to the living room where we sat around talking and joking for the next hour. Kane turned out to be very funny and clever once he relaxed. Things bogged down a bit at one point, though, when everyone started reminiscing about Seth. We all got a little teary, until eventually Kane and Adam started telling anecdotes about Seth when he was younger. In no time, we were all laughing again, though now our mood held a bittersweet undercurrent.

The doorbell rang again, and everyone turned to look at me.

“What?” I said.

“Is this another surprise?” Steve asked.

“If so, it isn’t mine,” I told them. “But I’ll go get it anyway.”

I flipped on the porch light as I opened the front door — and froze.

“Hi, Killian.”

I stood staring at Asher, unsure of what to say. He was just about the last person I expected to see.

“Mom said you stopped by,” he broke the silence.

“Two days ago,” I answered.

“Look, can we talk? Either inside or out, it doesn’t matter, but I feel dumb standing at the door.”

I thought for a second, then called into the house, “It’s for me. I’ll be a few minutes.”

I stepped out onto the porch without waiting for an answer, shutting the door behind me. I stared at him expectantly. He’d looked as if made a special effort with his appearance. I even thought I caught a whiff of aftershave. He stood with his hands stuffed into his pockets, looking everywhere but at me.

I waited, and he waited until, finally, I couldn’t stand the silence any more. “So you said you wanted to talk? Why didn’t you just call?”

“Would you have answered?”

“Hey, I’m the one who came by your house. I’ve been looking for you every day at school and you’ve obviously been avoiding me. Don’t act like this is somehow my fault.”

“Look, I’m sorry, Killian. I’m sorry I got mad the other day, and you’re right, I have been avoiding you. I’m sorry for that, too. Adam explained to me how all...how everything that happened has messed with your head, how much it scared you, took away your sense of safety and made it harder for you to trust people.”

“He said all that?” I was surprised.

“Yeah. Maybe I should’ve understood it right away, but I wasn’t ready. I was upset that you could even believe for one second that I could hurt — let alone *kill* — someone. I’ve thought about it a lot, though, and I think I finally understand. I guess what I’m trying to

say is...I'm ready to try again...that is, if you want to."

"I...I do want to try, but..."

"But what?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Frustration filled his voice.

"What if every time we have a problem you run off the way you did? Plus, after you told me all those things Adam said, maybe I shouldn't even be in a relationship right now. And I'm not ready to come out to the school. I don't want to end up like Seth."

My voice cracked and struggled to maintain my composure.

Asher shifted uncertainly, as if he weren't sure what he should do. After a moment's hesitation, he moved closer and wrapped his arms around me. I bit my lip to keep from crying but lost the battle as a few tears squeezed out. He just held me for about a minute before he started talking.

"Look, about me running away... I don't know. I'll try my best not to, but I don't guess I can make any guarantees. It's my personality. I hate conflict, and I'll do whatever I can to avoid it."

"Like I enjoy it," I sniffled into his arm.

"I know you don't enjoy it, but you don't run from it either. Look at how you stood up to Zack and Jesse, and then to your dad. You're a lot braver than you give yourself credit for. I guess...I guess what I'm trying to say is I'd like for us to try dating, but only if you trust me and you're ready for a relationship. I'm willing to take the risk if you are."

"But..."

"Hang on. I'm not finished. As for school, I have no intentions of coming out, whether we're together or not. I don't want to deal with that either. At least not for a while." He paused awkwardly. "And if you don't want to date, I understand that, too, and I want us to stay friends. Whatever you decide, I'm here for you."

I pulled away so I could look into his eyes, trying to judge his sincerity, and found myself lost in their depths. I felt as if I were

falling into the night sky, tumbling toward the moon. How could I have missed noticing his eyes before? They were an odd color, kind of a silvery-gray. They were beautiful.

“What?” he asked.

“It’s...nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “I just need some time to think about it.”

Asher gave me a hurt look. “More time?”

“It’s a lot to process!”

“But if you weren’t ready, why’d you come looking for me?”

“Because I missed you, you big dummy. And I felt bad that I’d hurt your feelings. I’m not asking for a week or anything, just tonight. I’ll call you tomorrow after school. I promise.”

He nodded, stepped back, then quickly stepped in close again and kissed me softly on the lips. Without even giving me time to react, he spun around and leaped off the porch in a single jump. He stopped at his car and gave me an awkward wave, then jumped in and drove off.

I stood alone on the porch for several minutes before going back inside. Everyone was very respectful about my brief absence. In fact, they all studiously avoided asking me about it at all, which made me even more suspicious. I wondered if one of them had checked on me, but shook it off and soon the mood from earlier was recaptured for the most part. I was maybe just a little more distracted than before.

After a few more hours of conversation and laughter, Adam announced that it was time for bed. This caused some discussion about where Kane was going to sleep. Finally, we decided he would bunk with me. Steve, of course, was sleeping with Adam. We all took turns in the bathroom, then went to our respective rooms.

Seth’s bed was queen-size, so Kane and I decided to double up instead of one of us having to sleep on the floor. I was a little worried that he wouldn’t want to share a bed with a gay guy, but it didn’t seem to faze him in the least. We stripped down to our T-shirts and boxers, climbed under the covers, and I snapped out the light.

We settled in, squirming and wiggling until we were comfortable. We said our good nights, and silence fell as softly as a blanket.

I was so tired I started drifting off right away. I was almost asleep when Kane cleared his throat and whispered, “Hey, I’m really you called me last week. I don’t even know how to thank you.”

He sounded emotional, and for just the briefest second all I could think was, *Oh, no! Not more tears.* Then I got hold of myself and found my voice.

“You don’t have to thank me. The look on Adam’s face when you stepped into the kitchen was all the thanks I needed. And seeing you guys together, seeing how happy you both were. This is the closest I’ve ever felt to what a real family must be like.”

“You’re so awesome.” He still sounded a bit weepy. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

I hesitated. “Yeah, go ahead.”

“When you called me last week, you said you were living with my dad because your dad kicked you out. How come?”

I decided to give him the condensed version. “He didn’t react very well when he found out I was gay.”

“How did he find out?” Apparently he wasn’t satisfied with just an abridged tale.

“I went to Seth’s memorial service. Dad was there and saw me. When I got home, he was really angry and started yelling at me.” I shrugged in the dark. “So I just told him.”

“Why was your dad there? Did he know Seth?”

“No. I’m sure he was there for political reasons. He’s the State Attorney for the county. Seth’s murder was kind of a big deal. We don’t have many random killings here, especially not teenagers.”

“But if he was there why was he mad at you for being there?”

“I wasn’t supposed to hang out with Seth.”

“Because he was gay?”

“Yeah. He was furious that I was there. He said I embarrassed

him. He said a bunch of horrible stuff, and I got so angry I just blurted out that I was gay too.”

“And then he kicked you out?”

“After he beat the crap out of me.”

Kane sat up. “He hit you?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry.”

I shrugged. “At least it got me out of there. I’m already happier here than I ever was there.”

He laid back down and was quiet for a few minutes. I thought maybe we were done, but then he spoke again. “How did you know you were gay?”

I thought for a minute. “It’s funny, I asked Seth that same question the first time we hung out. I’ll tell you what he told me: you just know. I guess it’s the same way you know you’re straight, only I like boys instead of girls. Once, before everything happened, I was here hanging out with Seth, and he told me he thought I was gay. He kissed me and I freaked out, but afterward it made me think about a lot of things that I’d been avoiding. I realized he was right. I had just been blind, like he said.”

He was quiet for a minute, then: “I have to tell you something. Please don’t be mad at me.” I tensed up. “I went to check on you when you were gone for a while tonight, and I saw that guy kiss you on the front porch. I didn’t mean to, like, spy on you or anything. I hope you’re not mad.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said quietly and with more than a little relief.

“Is he your boyfriend?” The kid was just full of questions.

“No. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What’s his name?”

“His name is Asher. We’ve been friends since his family moved next door in the second grade. He just told me recently that he’s had a crush on me for years. We’re still working stuff out. I don’t know if we’ll end up together.”

Kane was quiet for so long I thought he must have gone to sleep, so I started relaxing again.

“I hope you find someone who makes you happy, Killian,” he said suddenly, making me jump. “You deserve it. You’re the nicest guy I’ve ever met. Will you be my big brother now that Seth is gone?” And then he was sobbing.

Without saying a word, I rolled over, wrapped my arms around him, and held him until he’d cried himself out.

“Thanks,” he sniffled. “I don’t usually act like this, really.”

“Kane, you don’t have to apologize to me. You’ve been through a lot. Believe me, I understand. I would be more than honored to be your big brother.”

He sighed. “I wish I lived here with you and Dad,” he said wistfully. “That way I could be with you guys all the time.”

I gave him a final squeeze, then let go and rolled onto my back. “We’d better get some sleep now. I have school in the morning.”

“Can’t you just skip school?”

I laughed. “I wish. But I already missed a lot when I was in the hospital and all. I should probably go. And besides, this won’t be the last time I see you.”

He sighed. “You don’t know my mom. But yeah, I get it. I guess it’s true that all good things do have to come to an end. G’night, Killian.”

“Sleep tight, Kane.”

Chapter 10

How I ever got any sleep that night I'll never know, but somehow, I did. I woke up to my alarm the next morning and wanted to chuck my phone out the window. Kane slept through the alarm, so I kept as quiet as I could as I got ready for school. I'd hoped to tell him goodbye in case his mom picked him up before I got home from school, but he didn't stir and I didn't want to disturb him.

I might as well have stayed home for all the attention I paid to my classes that day. I was equally distracted with thoughts about what I was going to tell Asher when I got home and thinking about Kane. Kane had won me over in much the same way Seth had, but different at the same time. I'd been attracted to Seth, even if I hadn't been able to admit it. I simply felt protective of Kane — for all the good that would do. He lived in Baltimore, and there was no way I could protect him from where I was. Hell, I couldn't even protect myself.

As soon as school was over, I directly to Adam's house, or what I was starting to think of as home. There was a strange car in the driveway when I got there. I assumed it belonged to Kane's mom and I was glad I'd at least get to say goodbye before he left.

I let myself in and listened for conversation. It was dead silent. Where was everybody? I went looking, but stopped in my tracks in the living room doorway. The queen of the fairies was posed imperiously in the exact center of the sofa. The woman was surprisingly tiny. She couldn't have been over five feet tall, nor weighed more than a hundred pounds soaking wet. She had short, spiky, fiery-red hair, and her skin was as white and translucent as alabaster, in sharp contrast

with her blood-red lipstick. She looked as if she'd be quite at home with wings sprouting from her shoulders. The last thing I noticed was her piercing green eyes, the same color that both Seth and Kane had shared. She could have only been their mother.

She stared at me, her gaze so cold I fully expected to see my breath. I realized that, while her eyes may have been the same color as Seth's and Kane's, they held none of the warmth and compassion that was so evident in her sons.

"Who are you?" Her voice was just as brittle and cold as her gaze.

"I'm Killian. Are you Mrs. Connelly?"

"Ms. Douglas. I stopped being Mrs. Connelly years ago."

"Oh, well. It's nice to meet you. I'll, um, go put this in my room," I said, backing away.

"If you mean the room at the end of the hall, you might as well have a seat. Kane has locked himself in and refuses to come out. Adam has been talking to him for twenty minutes now. I'm getting ready to go find an axe and hack the damned door down."

"Oh, um, maybe I can talk to him," I said weakly. I spun around and ran upstairs, eager to escape her domineering presence. Sure enough, there was Adam sitting on the floor with his forehead against the door. He looked up when I appeared.

"Killian," he said with considerable relief, "maybe you could..." He pointed helplessly at the door. "He won't open it."

I tapped lightly on the door.

"God, why can't you all just leave me alone?" Kane's anguished voice was muffled by the door. "I'm not coming out. You can't make me."

"Kane? It's Killian. May I come in?"

There was no response for a while so I called again, "Kane?"

"Okay," he said finally, "but if I open the door, only you can come in. Nobody else."

I looked at Adam, and he nodded.

“Deal.”

I heard the lock turn and watched as the door opened about an inch. I pushed it back far enough to slip through, then shut it again behind me. Kane threw himself dramatically across the bed face-down as soon as I was in the room. I went over and sat next to him, not saying anything at first. Eventually, after he made no move to speak or even acknowledge my presence, I began to gently rub his back.

“Kane?” I said softly. “What’s wrong? How come you’re locked in here like this?”

He mumbled something into the bed, but I couldn’t understand him. It sounded vaguely like “I ate one.”

“What?”

He rolled over and sighed heavily. “I hate Mom.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Thankfully, Kane didn’t need any prompting. “She’s such a bitch. She burst in here and started screaming at Dad like any of this was his fault. She was calling him names and saying dumb stuff. Then she told me to go get in the car. I said no, that I wanted to talk to her first. She said she didn’t care what I wanted, that I’d just better do what she said because I was in enough trouble already. That’s when I got mad. I told her I knew she’d been keeping me away from Dad all these years. I told her that Seth was dead because of her and I didn’t want to live with her anymore. I said I hated her and I do. I’m just so...UGH!” He punched the bed. “It’s just so unfair.”

I felt so helpless. Why were parents so awful to their kids? If my dad and his mother got together, we’d have the parents from hell.

“I don’t know what to say. You’re right. It’s not fair. But your mom is also kind of right, too.”

Kane gave me a sharp look.

“I just mean you don’t get much say in this. None of us do, not even your dad. She holds all the cards.”

“I just...” He took a shaky breath as his anger drained away,

leaving sadness in its place. “I want to see my dad.” He suddenly burst into tears, turning away from me quickly and burying his face in a pillow.

I lay down next to him and put an arm around him. After a minute, he rolled over and buried his face in my neck. I wrapped my arms around him and let him sob, just like the night before. He had so much pain bottled up inside him; he just needed to let it out.

After a while, his sobs turned to sniffles, and eventually even those died away. He sat up. “I have to go with her, don’t I?”

I sat up as well. “Yeah, you do.”

“I’ll be back, somehow,” he vowed. “Can I call you?”

“Of course you can. Give me your phone and I’ll put my number in.” I quickly saved my number in his phone and handed it back to him. “You can call or text me any time.”

He smiled weakly and slid the phone into his pocket. “Thanks.”

Then, taking a deep breath, he started for the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, turned, walked back to me and threw his arms around my neck for a big hug.

“Thank you.”

“Like I said last night, there’s nothing to thank me for.”

He pulled away and wiped his face, although there was no hiding the fact that he’d been crying. He threw his shoulders back, lifted his chin high, yanked open the door, and marched resolutely down the stairs. I followed much less impressively behind.

As soon as she saw Kane, Ms. Douglas stood up and swept past him to the front door. She stood on the porch and glared at Adam while he hugged Kane. She threw a calculating look at me, as if measuring up a potential enemy, before spinning on her heel and stalking off to her car. I had to give her credit — she certainly knew how to make a dramatic exit.

“I love you, Dad,” Kane whispered.

“I love you too, Kane.” Adam sounded on the verge of tears. There was entirely too much crying going on in that house.

Kane waved at me sadly and followed his mother to the car. Adam and I stood in the doorway until they were out of sight.

“Quite a piece of work, isn’t she?” Adam commented as he closed the door. There was a note of melancholy in his voice, but I sensed that he didn’t want to talk about it.

“I guess you could say that,” I replied. “Not how I would have described her?”

“What would you say?”

“That she’s a class-A bitch!”

He chuckled sadly. “I’ll have to give you that one.”

I followed him into the den, where I decided to do my homework while Adam used his computer. Although I usually did my work in my room, I felt he could use the company. He seemed to be okay, but I couldn’t help wondering if that was only an act. In effect, he’d just lost his son for the second time. If Ms. Douglas was as crazy and controlling as everyone said, who knew if he’d ever even see Kane again?

I tried to concentrate on my homework but kept looking up to find Adam staring blankly at his computer screen. I had no idea what to say to him, though, so I stayed quiet. I hoped my presence would be enough of a comfort.

About half an hour later, my phone vibrated. I pulled it out of my pocket and saw it was Asher calling. In all the excitement, I’d forgotten that I’d promised to call him and give him my decision as soon as I got home from school. I jumped up and excused myself from the room.

“Asher, hi. I’m sorry I forgot to call. There was a lot going on—”

“It’s all right, Killian,” he interrupted me. “Can we talk now?”

“Yeah, well, no...I mean—” I took a deep breath. “Can I come pick you up?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Great. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I went back into the den to grab my car keys. “I, uh, have to go

talk to Asher,” I told Adam.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” I told him honestly.

“Take a second and tell me what’s going on.” He stood up from the computer desk and sat on the couch, patting the cushion next to him.

I joined him and let out a sigh. “You know Asher likes me, right?”

“I’d have to be blind to not see that.”

I paused for a second at his ironic choice of words. “Well, remember how you talked him after he ran off?”

Adam nodded.

“When he came by last night, he said he’d been thinking a lot about what you told him. He apologized for running off and avoiding me all week. Then he asked me to, uh, be his boyfriend.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I...don’t know. I mean, I like Asher. I’ve liked him for years. And now I find out he likes me, too. I should be thrilled.”

“But you’re not?”

“I don’t know what I am. Scared I guess.”

“Scared of what? Do you still think he was involved in the attacks?”

“I dunno. Maybe? No...no, I don’t. In my gut I know Asher couldn’t have done it.”

“Do you think you’re afraid of losing him altogether if the couple thing doesn’t work out?”

“I hadn’t even thought about that. Thanks for adding something else for me to worry about.”

Adam laughed.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I’m afraid of. I just—” I floundered about, seeking the right words to explain myself but I couldn’t find them.

“What are you going to tell Asher?”

“I don’t know that, either.” I sighed. “I guess I’ll figure it out when the time comes. Maybe the words will come to me when I see him.”

Adam ruffled my hair and stood up. “Well, you’d better get going. Asher is waiting, and I’d wager he’s as nervous as you are you shouldn’t keep him waiting too long. I hope you figure out your heart on the way.”

As I drove to my old neighborhood, I brooded over what Adam had said about figuring out my heart. That was the problem. I couldn’t figure anything out. I didn’t trust my own heart. For that matter, I didn’t fully trust anybody, not even those closest to me — Adam, Asher, my mom. I thought about how the storm winds had battered the flowers. That was still how I felt — battered, raw, as if my heart were still bleeding.

I was so lost in thought that I drove right past Asher’s house and had to turn around. He was out the door and in the car almost before I’d come to a full stop in his driveway.

“What took you so long?”

“Sorry. I got hung up with Adam.” I backed out onto the street and asked, “Where do you want to go?”

“It doesn’t matter to me. This is your show. You asked me out, remember?”

“Oh, um. Right. How about the boardwalk?”

“That’s fine.”

We made small talk on the way there, both of us carefully avoiding the actual purpose of our “date.” We found a parking space at the inlet and I started toward the boardwalk. Asher caught my arm. “Let’s just walk in the sand,” he suggested softly. “It’ll be less crowded.”

I hadn’t been on the beach since the time I’d run into Seth, but I pushed that though from my mind and agreed. It wasn’t long before I started shivering. The wind off the water was more than a little chilly, and I wished I’d thought to put on something heavier than just

a T-shirt. I hadn't planned on being outside by the ocean.

Asher noticed. "Here." He took off his jacket and slipped it around my shoulders.

"No, that's okay. You need it."

"Just take it, Killian, please. Why do you always have to fight me about everything? Just let me do something for you." Exasperation filled his voice. "Besides, I'm wearing a sweatshirt and you only have a T-shirt."

I gave in and gratefully shrugged the jacket on. "Thanks," I said softly.

He nodded.

The beach was deserted except for the two of us and a few people off in the distance. The sun was quickly making its way toward the horizon. We walked toward the pier for a while, neither of us talking.

Finally, Asher spoke up. "Did you think over what we talked about last night?"

"A little," I replied quietly. "Okay, a lot."

Asher took a step closer to me so that he could hear above the sound of the waves. We were now walking almost shoulder to shoulder. I felt his hand brush against mine.

"And?" he prompted.

"I'm scared."

His hand slid gently into mine, our fingers interlocking as if we'd done this dozens of times before. "Of what?"

"I don't know how to explain it."

"Do you still think I killed Seth?"

"No. I honestly don't. I just don't know how to explain it to you."

I thought for a moment, and he didn't push.

Suddenly, I stopped walking and dropped Asher's hand. As if a dam had burst inside me, words began to tumble out of my mouth almost faster than I could speak them. "I was thinking on the way to your house about how I'm not sure I trust anybody anymore. When

I was a little kid, I used to worship the ground my father walked on. I thought the sun rose and set on him. He seemed so big and strong and wise. But then I grew up and realized he was just an abusive control freak. I never understood my mom. Until recently, I never thought she cared about me. I mean, I know now she was just trying to protect me, but she always seemed so passive. I've always been an outsider at school. Even with you guys, I always felt like second best.

“I guess I learned how to keep people at arm’s length. If nobody got close, nobody could really hurt me. I thought I was safe behind my defenses. Then along came Seth, and he saw right through me. That really shook me up. I was ready to trust him when all of a sudden he was murdered. And someone — probably someone I know — tried to kill me and my dad beat the hell out of me. I’m scared, Asher. I’m scared of getting hurt again.”

I walked away, my arms wrapped tightly around my body. Asher followed me closely. “Killian, wait.” I stopped under the pier. “You don’t think I’m scared too? I’ve never done anything like this. But I’ve already given you my heart.”

“But that’s just it. I’m not sure I want it. I don’t know what to do with it. What if I break it? What if I hurt you the same way I’ve been hurt?”

With one hand, Asher gripped my shoulder and turned me around to face him. He slid his other hand gently around my neck. “Maybe you will. Or maybe I’ll hurt you. Or maybe we’ll grow old together. I told you last night I’m willing to take the risk if you are.”

He pulled me close and kissed me hard on the lips. I slowly melted into his embrace. The kiss grew more and more passionate until the whole world disappeared and all my walls collapsed.

Asher lowered me to the sand, his body following, pressing his length against mine. We kissed for a while longer before I suddenly remembered where we were.

“Asher!” I gasped, my breath coming in short bursts.

“Mmm?” He had his face buried in my neck.

A tingling sensation flooded through my body, and I gasped

again. “Asher! We’re on the beach!”

He raised his head and looked at me. “So?”

I grinned and kissed him on the lips again, then pulled back. “So, let’s go home and finish this in private.”

“You mean it?” he asked excitedly, searching my eyes.

“Yes. Think you can spend the night?”

Chapter 11

Asher and I burst through the front door of the house, giggling and tripping over each other in our haste.

“Whoa,” Adam exclaimed as he came into the hall to see what was going on. “You two sound like a herd of elephants. I thought I was being invaded by Hannibal.” We giggled again. “Make that a herd of giddy elephants. I take it you had a good time?”

“The best,” I replied breathlessly. “Can Asher spend the night?”

Adam’s left eyebrow flew up so high it was almost lost in his hairline. “Well, I don’t know,” he said slowly.

“What?” I was shocked. I hadn’t expected any problems.

“I think I’d rather talk to your mother first.”

“What do you mean?”

“May I speak to you for a second in the other room?” He cast a meaningful look at Asher.

“Um, yeah, sure.”

“Asher, why don’t you wait in the den?” Adam suggested.

Asher nodded, and I followed Adam into the kitchen.

“Obviously your talk went well and you’ve made up your mind, but I’m not sure this is the best idea right now.” Adam said once we were alone.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Well, number one, that’s a hickey.” He tapped the side of my neck, and I gasped in horror, covering it with my hand, although it was too late to hide anything.

“I was a teenage boy once. I get it. But I know you two intend to do more than talk up there.” I blushed. “You’re so young, Killian. I know I’m not your father and therefore have no right to tell you what you can and cannot do with your life. Even so, I’ve grown to care for you very deeply in a short amount of time and I don’t want to see you get hurt. I’ll give you the same advice I’d give Seth if he were alive. Don’t rush into a sexual relationship. If what you have with Asher is real, then it will wait. Let your relationship grow first. You’re both just beginning to explore this new side of yourselves. Sex is great, don’t get me wrong, but you two weren’t even speaking two days ago.

“Number two, you just went through a very traumatic experience — actually two traumatic experiences, Seth’s murder and then your father’s abuse. I don’t think you’ve really dealt with either one. You don’t need to add the emotional stress of a serious relationship until you’ve worked through those things first.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted. “I don’t know what you mean about dealing with them. It seems like all I do is cry anymore. Isn’t that dealing with it?”

“No, you’re only releasing the pressure. That’s better than holding everything in, but it’s not dealing with the underlying issues. Until you address those issues, the pressure will always be building, threatening to overwhelm you.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I know, Kill. That makes two of us. I’m still dealing with my own set of issues. We’ll work through it all together, huh?” He pulled me in for a quick hug. “I’ll talk to your mom tomorrow and see what we can do about maybe finding a good counselor for both of us.”

I nodded, though still not convinced I needed to see a counselor. I thought I was doing pretty well, considering.

“But what about Asher?” I asked.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for him to stay over. How about if we watch a movie together, and then you can drive him home? I have a great one that I know you guys will love. I guarantee you’ve never seen it before.”

“What is it?” I asked suspiciously.

“Just wait. It’ll be a surprise. I’m pretty sure you’ll love it, though. You might say it’s a classic.”

I frowned. “It’s in black and white and all the actors are dead, right?”

Adam laughed. “No, the actors are still very much alive and it’s in color. It’s not *that* classic. Just from the ‘90s.”

“You do know Asher and I weren’t even born yet, right?”

Adam groaned. “Don’t remind me! I’m so old.”

“You said it, I didn’t.” Adam threw a dish towel at me but I dodged and ran from the room laughing.

I went back to Asher and filled him in on the developments. He was disappointed, but agreed to the movie idea. It was better than nothing.

Asher and I settled in on the couch with a blanket while Adam made some popcorn. We kissed a little, but jumped apart guiltily when Adam came in with the munchies. He pretended not to notice. After Adam had dimmed the lights and everyone was ready, he pushed play on the remote control to start the movie.

The film lived up to his glowing recommendation. Called *Beautiful Thing*, it was a British movie about two working-class teenage boys who fall in love. I related so much to the characters. One of the guys was a seventeen-year-old named Ste whose father abused him. Those scenes poked at open wounds, but Asher held me tightly and I made it through them without breaking down.

The dialogue was a little hard to understand at first, because they used a lot of British slang terms I wasn’t familiar with. Fortunately, Adam was able to keep us up to speed. The soundtrack was fun, almost all Mama Cass songs.

Even more than the story playing out on the screen, however, I enjoyed snuggling with Asher. It felt so good to have his warm body curved around mine, his breath on my cheek, his arms around me. His hands rubbed slowly up and down my arms while we watched, giving me shivers. I wished like crazy Adam hadn't imposed the no-sleepover rule. At one point, when the boys in the movie were making out in a beautifully romantic scene, Asher gently kissed my neck. I wondered if he was as turned on as I was.

After the last notes of Mama Cass died away, Adam turned to us expectantly. "Did you like it?"

"Yes!" we answered in unison.

Adam just chuckled a bit. He turned his attention to the TV, and changed the channel to the news. We all got a bit engrossed in the top story. It wasn't long, though, before I realized that Asher's breathing had become very regular and his body had relaxed. He had dozed off.

"Asher fell asleep," I whispered to Adam.

He looked over and smiled at us.

"What?" I asked.

"You two look so peaceful. I hate to disturb him."

"Then don't. Let us sleep here. We won't do anything. I promise."

He thought for a moment, then seemed to make up his mind. "I'm going to trust you on this, Killian. Don't disappoint me."

I broke into a wide grin. "I won't."

"In that case, I need to call his mother and let her know where he is," he said, getting up.

I gave him Asher's phone number, and he made the call. After speaking for a brief time, he hung up and snapped off the last lamp.

"I guess that means it was okay," I whispered.

"You guessed correctly. His mom sounds like a very nice lady."

"She really is."

"Good night, Killian."

“Good night, Adam.”

He started from the room. “Adam?” I called out softly.

“Yes?” He turned back toward me.

“Thank you...for everything. I’m glad you’ve been here for me. You’re like the dad mine never was.”

He stood silhouetted in the hall light for a few moments. I couldn’t see his face so I couldn’t judge his reaction. Just as I was wondering if he was going to respond, he slowly walked back to me, bent over, and gently kissed my forehead. Before I could say anything else, though, he quickly left the room and turned off the hall light. I heard him go up the stairs and his door close. The sudden silence was almost deafening, but it was a peaceful silence. It wasn’t long before I joined Asher in sleep.

Chapter 12

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I was standing in the park by the pond. I could feel more than see the other presence lurking in the shadows, which seemed to writhe and dance around me, slowly closing in. I was turning, trying to watch all sides at once, but it was hopeless.

All at once, the shadows began to take form, become more solid, and from them stepped a figure dressed in black from head to toe. Where his face should have been, there was nothing — no features at all, only a horrible blankness. He was my attacker, Seth's murderer, and he'd returned to finish what he'd started.

I tried to run, desperate to escape, but shadows wrapped around my ankles, holding me in place where I stood as he slowly drew closer.

Suddenly, he was behind me. His arm snaked around my neck and I felt the cold steel of a knife blade cutting into my throat. A trickle of blood ran down my collarbone. Whatever spell was holding me broke in that instant, and I was fighting with all my strength — kicking, screaming, thrashing.

I didn't want to die.

"Killian! Killian!" A voice was calling me.

My eyes flew open, and I sat bolt upright. I was clammy with sweat, and my heart was pounding so loudly I was sure it could be heard in the next county. Everything was dark. I looked around frantically for the attacker. I couldn't see. Where was he?

I felt an arm slide across my shoulders. I cried out, flailing blindly, and hit flesh. I heard a startled “oof” from the darkness.

“Killian, it’s okay! It’s me, Asher.”

“Asher?” I whispered.

“Yes, I’m right here.”

“It was a dream?” I asked shakily. It had seemed so real, but already the sense of blind panic was fading, leaving only a residue of fear in its wake.

Asher’s arms slid around me again, and this time I didn’t fight. “Yeah, it was just a dream,” he murmured comfortingly. “You’re okay now. I’ve got you.”

“It was just a dream,” I repeated, as if by saying it enough times I might convince my pounding heart to slow to its normal pace.

“It must have been a bad one. You woke me up throwing your arms around and kicking and crying.”

“I’m sorry.” I buried my face in his chest.

“Don’t be sorry. You can’t help it. It’s not like you can control what you dream. Do you remember what it was about?”

“Yeah.” I wished I could forget. The images were still sharp in my memory. “It was Seth’s killer. He was after me and I was fighting... Oh, God, it was so horrible.” I squeezed Asher harder.

“I’m here. It’s okay, Killian,” he murmured into my hair. “It was just a dream. Go back to sleep, baby. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

Usually, I had trouble falling back to sleep after the nightmares, but I did feel safe wrapped in Asher’s arms. Much to my surprise, I was soon asleep once more.

I awoke the next morning on the couch with Asher’s arms still wrapped around me. The feelings of safety and warmth from the night before had not left me, even though the vestiges of the dream lingered on like the last shreds of mist in the morning sun.

I could get used to waking up like this. Asher’s arms felt so good, so

right. I wanted to stay like that forever, but nature's call was coming in loud and clear. If I didn't get up soon I'd have an embarrassing problem on my hands.

I tried to slip out of his embrace without waking him, but he just tightened his grip. I tried again with the same results, so I gave up on not bothering him.

"Asher." I said softly. When he didn't respond, I got a little louder. "Asher!"

"Huh? Wha?" His eyes fluttered open, and he tried to focus on my face.

"I gotta pee. You hafta let me up."

"Mm-kay. Sorry," he mumbled, letting go and immediately dozing back off. I stared down at him for a minute, filing that bit of information away for future reference: Don't worry about disturbing Asher's sleep.

After relieving myself, I was wide awake, so I decided to take a shower. When I came out of the bathroom, I smelled bacon cooking — a sure sign that Adam was up. No breakfast was complete in the Connelly household without a helping of crispy bacon. I padded down the stairs in my stocking feet and made my way into the kitchen.

"Good morning," Adam greeted me as I sat down at the table. He was quite chipper. I hate morning people.

"Morning." I may not be a morning person but I did make some effort to be civil.

"How'd you two make out on the couch?"

"With our lips," I shot back. Adam gave me a warning glance, and I gave in. "We made out fine. Except, I had a nightmare, and Asher had to wake me up."

Adam looked at me again, this time with concern. "Bad?"

"You could say that. Asher will probably wake up with some bruises — that is, if he ever wakes up."

"What was it about?"

I sighed. "The same thing all my nightmares have been about the

last few weeks: the killer. He was trying to finish me off.”

Adam left the stove and came over to sit across from me.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were having nightmares?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think it was a big deal. After everything that’s happened, I figured anyone would have nightmares.”

“I guess that’s true. When you dream about the killer, what does he look like? Can you see him clearly? Maybe your subconscious noticed things you’ve forgotten from all the shock.”

“I couldn’t see his face. It’s as if he didn’t have one.”

He rubbed his face and sighed. “I guess that would be too easy. I’m going to call today to find out about counseling.”

I nodded and noticed smoke coming from the frying pan. “I think the bacon is burning.”

Adam jumped up and dashed over to the stove. “Not burnt,” he reported, “but it’ll be extra crispy. Go wake Asher. By the time he gets out of the shower, breakfast should be ready.”

I went into the living room where Asher was still asleep. I leaned over the back of the couch and gently shook his shoulder while calling his name. He didn’t so much as open one eye. A rather mean idea began to form in my head and, of course, I loved it. I started tickling him.

As soon as my fingers dug into his sides, he sat up with a jolt and his head smacked into mine. He tumbled off the couch and I fell backwards with a thud, both of us yelling “Ow!” in chorus.

“Everything okay in there?” Adam called.

“Dammit, Killian!” Asher whined as he pulled himself to his feet. “Why’d you have to go and do that?”

“I thought it would be funny.”

“I think it lost something in the translation, ‘cause it sure wasn’t funny.”

My hands were pressed to my nose. “Is it bleeding?”

He pulled my hands away and examined my nose. “No, it’s not

bleeding, but if you ever do that again, it will be...because I'll punch you."

I started giggling, and soon we were both rolling on the floor laughing. I got control of myself first, and told him that he needed to hurry up and take his shower.

When he finished, he had to borrow some of my clothes. His overnight stay wasn't planned, so he hadn't brought any of his own. This proved to be a challenge, since Asher was considerably taller than I was. A pair of shorts solved the problem to everyone's satisfaction.

After breakfast, I drove us to school.

"We probably shouldn't be seen together," Asher said in the car.

"What do you mean?" I asked sharply. Was he regretting last night already? Or was he so serious about keeping our relationship a secret that he was going to start avoiding me?

"I mean more than usual. We don't want anyone to be suspicious."

"You think they'll suspect something if they see us together?"

"Well...maybe. I mean, people are still talking about you and Seth."

"So, what you're saying is you don't want to be seen with me at school."

"No! I don't mean that, Killian. Just...maybe we should keep a low profile, you know? I'm not going to ignore you or anything. I just don't think we should be seen together more than normal."

"Whatever."

We didn't talk much for the rest of the drive. I was too busy brooding over what Asher had said. He just stared moodily out the window.

We arrived at school and went our separate ways. School was pretty uneventful, but I was preoccupied with thoughts of Asher. Things had seemed so perfect the night before. Could they be falling apart already? The only saving grace was that my school routine was finally getting back to the same old patterns, for which I was very

relieved. I was tired of the whole special-treatment scene.

I didn't see Asher once the entire day. Of course, he had said he didn't want to see me more than usual, and lately not at all was exactly how often I saw him. By the time the last bell rang, I was ready to give him a piece of my mind. I understood we had to keep a low profile, but avoiding me altogether wasn't going to work.

I was walking toward his locker when suddenly Zack and Jesse appeared out of nowhere. Taking places on either side of me, they grabbed my arms and lifted me off my feet. I put up a token struggle, but I was at their mercy and we all knew it. They swept me down a side hall and into an empty classroom, where they dropped me unceremoniously.

I spun around to face them. "What the hell was that about?" I was scared, but decided to take the offensive. Maybe if I could keep them off-balance I would get a chance to escape.

"We need to have a little talk," Zack said threateningly.

"I'm sick of our 'little talks.' I'm leaving," I tried to push past them, but they shoved me back roughly. Now I was really scared. They were so much bigger than I that I didn't stand a chance in any sort of fight.

"We know what you and Asher were doing on the beach last night," Jesse growled.

"What?" I gasped. *Deny it!* my brain screamed. "We weren't doing anything on the beach."

"We saw you, dumbass," Zack taunted, jabbing me in the ribs for effect. "So now we know for sure that you're a faggot, and we know Asher is, too."

"Yeah, and you're both going down," Jesse piped up. "We don't want fags at our school."

"How very enlightened of you, Jesse," I snapped, my anger quickly overtaking my fear. "But I don't know what you're talking about. I wasn't even at the beach last night. You must have seen somebody else."

Jesse looked confused, but Zack wasn't buying it. "I know what I

saw. I saw you swapping spit with Asher under the pier. You're queer, a cocksucker, a butt fu—"

"Okay!" I cut him off. Obviously, there would be no denying it. Maybe if I just admitted it they would get off my back. "So what if I am gay? I'm not ashamed. And you know what? It's none of your damn business. You can't intimidate me or scare me."

"Maybe not, but we can sure beat the shit outta you." Jesse took a menacing step toward me.

I backed away and glanced over my shoulder. There was only the one door to this room, and Zack and Jesse were between it and me. My mind was racing almost as fast as my heart. Zack and Jesse began closing in on me. My foot shot out, catching Jesse by surprise, nailing him in the balls and causing him to release a wheezing, high-pitched howl of anguish. He collapsed to the floor just as Zack launched himself at me. I tried to jump out of the way, but he caught my shoulder, and I spun as I fell. Zack dropped on top of me as if we were in a football game and I had the ball. I was at a distinct disadvantage. I'd never been in a fight in my life, unless Dad's beating the crap out of me counted. I braced myself for the first punch, but it never came. Instead, the lights went on.

"What's going on in here?" a voice demanded. It was Mr. Tatum, the drama teacher.

I sat up, disentangled myself from Zack, and put as much distance between us as possible.

"Nothing, we were just messing around," Zack replied quickly, shooting me a warning glance.

Mr. Tatum looked to me for confirmation. I didn't know what Zack and Jesse would do with their newfound knowledge, but Mr. Tatum had a reputation as a gossip around school. I was sure I didn't want the entire faculty to know I was gay. I reluctantly nodded my corroboration of Zack's lie.

"Well, mess around somewhere else. Get going before I escort you to the office." I could tell he didn't believe me. He cast a suspicious look at Jesse, who was struggling to get up, obviously still in pain and looking a little ill.

“Are you feeling all right, Mr. O’Donnell?” Mr. Tatum asked him.

“Not really,” he answered truthfully.

I grabbed my backpack, which I’d dropped when Zack tackled me, and started out of the room.

“We’ll talk later,” Zack called after me meaningfully.

“Not if I can help it,” I mumbled under my breath.

I searched all over for Asher but couldn’t find him anywhere. No one I talked to had seen him and he wasn’t answering my texts, so I decided to drive to his house.

Mrs. Davis answered my knock. Her cheery smile was absent, making me feel as if I were seeing her naked. “Killian, I’m glad you’re here. Asher is in his room. Go right on in.”

I tapped on his door and heard his muffled voice tell me to come in. I opened the door and gasped. Asher was lying on his bed with the worst black eye I’d ever seen. His lip was cut and swollen. When he saw me, he made an attempt to sit up, but he winced in pain and pressed a hand to his side.

“Oh, my God! What happened?”

“Zack and Jesse happened.” He spoke carefully because of his lip, but his bitterness came through loud and clear.

I rushed to his side and helped him sit up. “Holy shit,” I whimpered. Up close, he looked even worse.

I sat down next to him, being careful not to bounce the bed too much. I reached out to touch his face, but he jerked away from my hand.

I sighed. “They tried to jump me after school, but I fought back. Luckily, Mr. Tatum showed up before things got any uglier. I didn’t squeal.”

“Neither did I. I just called my mom to come take me home.”

“Did you fight back?”

“I didn’t have a chance. It was two against one, and they took me

by surprise. Besides, I'm not much of a fighter. They just threw a couple of sucker punches and called me some names."

I laid my head on his shoulder, but as I did, he immediately tensed up beneath me.

"Maybe we should've told someone," he mumbled. "They aren't gonna give up that easy, you know?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting up.

"They'll be back — and probably with backup. And you can be sure they'll spread it all over school. Our lives as we knew them are over."

I sighed. "We messed up last night, didn't we?"

"Yeah, we did."

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I could tell Asher wanted to say something but was holding back.

I decided to speak up first. "Okay, so maybe things will change for us at school. You know what? I'm not sorry. Last night was awesome. We were careless, but what's done is done. Now we have to live with the consequences. There's no sense in beating ourselves up over it. Zack and Jesse will take care of that for us."

I attempted to smile, but Asher didn't even try to return it. I continued seriously, "At least we have each other to talk to and lean on as we go through this. Seth didn't have anyone."

"That's just it, Killian! I don't know if I *want* to go through this. I don't know if I can. Maybe it's too late, but maybe not."

"Whoa! Slow down. Too late for what?"

"To save my reputation. If I can convince Zack and Jesse that it was just a one-time thing, or at least not to tell anyone what they saw —"

I stood up. "Wait a minute. Are you saying that your reputation is more important than we are?"

He shrugged, looking thoroughly miserable. "Come on, Killian. Don't try to pretend this isn't a big deal. Zack and Jesse will make life a living hell for us."

“So you’re breaking up with me?”

“I didn’t even know we were dating,” he said evasively. I glared at him until he had to look away. “I just don’t want to end up like Seth, a social reject — or worse, dead.”

My blood ran cold as my breath rushed out of me. “What are you saying? Do you think Zack and Jesse killed Seth?”

He wouldn’t look at me. “I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“If you know something, then you have to tell someone,” I insisted, urgency creeping into my voice.

“I don’t know anything,” he snapped. He rolled over, putting his back toward me. “Maybe you should go, Killian. I’m not feeling so great.”

“Asher, if you know something please tell me. It could help catch Seth’s killer.”

“I told you, I don’t know anything!” he shouted. “Please, just go.”

I stood there for a second then turned and left. I was so confused. What was wrong with Asher? Did he know something he wasn’t saying? Or was he just having the same kinds of doubts and fears I was? He definitely wasn’t ready to be outed.

Chapter 13

I drove home and went in to find a note from Adam saying that he'd be back with Steve soon, and they would bring dinner with them. I went up to what had become my room and started on homework.

I was interrupted a while later by a buzz from my phone. I looked down to see it was a text from a number I didn't recognize. Curious, I opened the text.

"Hey, it's Kane."

I quickly replied. "Hey! What's up?"

"Ugh...things are so bad."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"All mom and I do is fight anymore. I called her a liar tonight. I haven't left my room since."

"That sucks."

"For real. She's such a bitch. No wonder dad went gay. lol"

"lol I don't think that's how it works."

"Duh. I know. It was a joke. But I've been thinking...do you believe that being gay is genetic?"

"Uh...I don't know. What do you mean?"

"Like...do you think you get it from your parents? Dad is gay. Seth was gay. Maybe I'm gay too?"

"My parents aren't gay. Why would you think you're gay?"

“I dunno. It was kind of nice when you held me when i was crying.”

“I don’t think that means you’re gay.”

“Yeah, I dunno. Can I call you later?”

“Sure.”

“Cool. Later.”

I took a deep breath. That was unexpected. Could Kane really be gay? Was it genetic? I hadn’t thought much about it. I definitely didn’t consider myself qualified to counsel someone else on this topic. I was confused enough on my own.

It occurred to me that I didn’t really know very much about why people are gay. I’d accepted the fact that I was and never wondered why. I didn’t have any clue what to tell Kane when he called later. It was time for some research. I opened my browser and googled “What makes people gay?”

After reading several articles, I found that each one seemed to contradict the one before. One suggested that it was genetic, another that it was environmental, nature vs. nurture, on and on. They all seemed biased and stated their case as if they were absolutely right and everyone else was wrong. It was all very bewildering, and after half an hour, I didn’t know any more than I did when I started.

Then I found a website that seemed to offer unbiased views of both sides. What I read made more sense to me than anything I had found before. I was still reading it when Adam called me to dinner. I hadn’t even heard him and Steve come in.

After dinner, Adam, Steve, and I were sitting around the table chatting about our days. I told them what had happened with Zack and Jesse at school — how they’d beaten up Asher and how he’d reacted.

“Asher’s reaction is normal,” Steve said when I’d finished, “especially if he’s still uncertain about what he wants. I admit it does sound as if he may know more than he’s saying. However, there’s no way of knowing what that might be, and it’s useless to speculate. I’m more concerned about this situation with Zack and Jesse. Something

is going to have to be done about those boys. Their behavior is clearly harassment, and we can't allow it to continue. There are antidiscrimination laws now. The school needs to be informed."

"Wouldn't I have to tell them I'm gay?" I asked.

"Not necessarily. The laws also protect perceived orientation, so even if someone is harassing you because they *think* you might be gay, the school can punish them. It doesn't matter if you really are gay or not."

"But everyone will assume I am, and I'm not ready to come out at school."

"You may not have a choice if Zack and Jesse tell everyone. You can't just let them get away with this. Someone could get hurt worse than a black eye."

"Maybe they already have," Adam said softly.

"You think they might have been involved in Seth's murder?" Steve asked him sharply.

"Maybe — and if not, it's possible they know something about what happened."

"I can't very well walk up to them and ask," I objected, "especially not after today. In fact, I'll be doing everything I can to avoid them."

"Maybe we should go to the police," Steve suggested.

"And tell them what? That two kids at my school are picking on me and we think they know something about the murder? They'd probably laugh in our faces. The police don't seem all that interested in Seth, remember?"

"What about the school? Maybe they'd be willing to step in and question the boys."

"That's assuming the school would do more than the police. And I'd still have to come out. I don't think I'm ready to come out."

"If the school were aware of the harassment, they could help protect you—" Steve began but I cut him off.

"The same way they protected Seth? Besides, if Zack and Jesse are determined enough, the school really can't do anything to stop

them. It's bad enough that Zack and Jesse found out about Asher and me, but maybe Asher can convince them not to tell anyone. We don't even know if they have any more information about Seth's murder than we do. They're bullies, and bullies pick on people. I think we should just wait and see what happens."

Steve looked unconvinced but gracefully changed the subject. "Have you had a chance to start asking questions at school yet?"

"Not yet. I'm not quite sure where to start. I was kind of waiting until things returned to normal."

He nodded. "Smart thinking. As for what to say, you'll have to play it by ear. Just be very careful. Zack and Jesse sound as if they could be dangerous. Now that they know you're gay, they'll probably be targeting you."

We were back to that. It was time to steer the conversation in a new direction. "Speaking of being gay, I've been wondering, what makes someone gay? I mean, why am I gay? Was I born this way or did something make me gay? I've read some articles, but what do you think?"

Adam looked up, seeming to come out of whatever deep thoughts he'd lost himself in. "No one is one-hundred-percent sure," he said. "I believe we're born gay, that it's genetic. I mean, just look at me and Seth."

And possibly Kane, I thought.

"Most respectable scientists agree that it's probably a very complicated series of genetic influences that happen while we're still developing in the womb," Steve interjected. "It's not just one single gay gene."

Adam picked up again. "If you've been reading articles then I'm sure you've seen the other side too. I think we can discard the choice theory. I've never met anyone who chose to be gay."

"I sure didn't," I agreed. "That's pretty much what the last article I was reading said, though, about it being a combination of things. That makes sense to me."

We talked about it a bit more while we finished dinner, then I

went back upstairs to finish my homework.

I stayed up late waiting for Kane's call, but it never came. When I gave up at last and went to bed, all I could do was toss and turn. I knew he'd probably just forgotten to call, but that didn't stop me from worrying. I hoped nothing was wrong.

I finally managed to doze off after what seemed like hours. I don't know how long I was asleep before the attacker was there. I don't even know how long he was there before I noticed him, but suddenly he appeared on the edge of my consciousness, as if taunting me. As I became more aware of him, he grew in clarity, although he still didn't have a face.

He didn't attack me, just stood there and stared at me. Since he had no eyes, I couldn't explain how I knew he was staring — I just did. Somehow, that was even worse than an actual attack, as if he were telling me he could have me whenever he wanted.

As he began to fade back into the shadows, I woke with a start, feeling quite unsettled, my heart pounding. There was no Asher to help me get back to sleep that time. I never did drop off again, for fear the killer would be there waiting for me like some real-life Freddy Krueger. As a result, I was tired and cranky at breakfast.

My bad mood continued throughout the rest of the weekend. Since Asher was still avoiding me, I stayed in my room a lot. I wasn't very good company anyway. I didn't hear any more from Kane, so I continued to worry about him as well. At least it helped distract me from the situation with Asher.

Finally, Monday rolled around, and it was back to school. I was still thinking about Kane and Asher and found it hard to concentrate in class.

I was getting some stuff out my locker between first and second periods when Gilly Sheridan appeared at my side and leaned against the locker next to mine.

"Hi, Killian," she greeted me cheerily. She was in my first-period class that semester, but I hadn't talked to her much since she'd cornered me in the hall. I hoped we weren't about to have a repeat of that awkward encounter.

“Hi, Gilly,” I responded with my head as far in the locker as I could get it without stepping inside.

“Uh, can I talk to you?”

“Sure.”

“I mean without your head stuck in the locker.”

I reluctantly withdrew my head, shut the door, and looked at her.

She appeared worried or maybe just concerned. “Are you okay, Killian?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

“You seemed distracted in class this morning — actually, you’ve seemed distracted a lot lately — and...well...I’ve heard some stuff.”

She had my full attention. “Like what?”

“Just...stuff,” she finished lamely. The bell rang, and she pushed away from the locker. “Maybe we can talk later. Which lunch shift are you on?”

We were on different schedules but we agreed to meet during my lunch and went our separate ways.

Just what I need, I thought gloomily, more complications.

I suspected I already knew what people were saying, but I needed to hear it for sure. I zoned out through my entire next class worrying about what Gilly had to tell me.

When my lunch period finally came around, I waited impatiently for her in the cafeteria. Once she arrived, we settled at a table away from the main crowds.

“I told Old Mother Hubbard I had to use the bathroom,” she began as we sat down. Mrs. Hubbard had taught English at our school since our parents were students. She was well past retirement age but loved teaching. “We’ll have to keep this quick.”

That suited me fine. I got right to the point. “So what’s this stuff you’ve been hearing about me?”

“Well, you know I don’t believe any of it—” She looked away, refusing to meet my eyes. “— but, um, Zack and Jesse are saying that

you're...uh...gay." She was looking anywhere but at me.

It was just as I'd expected. At least I finally knew what Zack and Jesse were going to do with their information. That still left me with the decision of how much to tell Gilly.

I looked over at the girl sitting next to me and thought about what I knew of her. She had a reputation for being something of a crusader for the underdog. I'd never heard anyone so much as suggest that she was bigoted or mean-spirited. I made an impulsive decision to be completely honest. If Zack and Jesse were going to tell everyone anyway, what did I have to lose? It might be good to have Gilly Sheridan on my side.

I took a deep breath. "They're telling the truth for once." I stared down at my sandwich, which I had yet to touch. It suddenly didn't seem all that appetizing. My stomach was knotted, and if I'd put anything in it, I probably would have thrown up.

She kept silent for so long I finally had to look up. She was watching me with a curious expression. Curiosity was better than hatred or revulsion, but for some reason it had me almost as worried.

"Is that why you'd never go out with me?"

I nodded. "I guess so."

"Well, at least I don't feel like a total loser now." She started to giggle.

I smiled at her a little, although I was still nervous.

"Killian, you look like you're gonna puke. Don't worry, I won't tell anybody."

"Thanks, but you won't have to with Zack and Jesse running around telling the whole damn school." I grimaced. "I wasn't ready for people to know, but I guess I don't have much choice now."

"How'd they find out, anyway?"

I blushed. "They...uh...saw me kissing...someone."

Her eyes flew open wide. "Who?" She sounded so excited you'd have thought we were discussing her favorite show.

I blushed even deeper if that was possible. "I can't really say." I

hoped she'd drop it.

She nodded. "That's cool. I guess I can understand why." I breathed a sigh of relief. "Hey, if you really don't want people to know, we could always pretend to date. Nobody would believe Zack and Jesse if you were dating me." She giggled again. "And besides, it's apparently the closest I'll ever get to the real thing."

"I don't know—" I started, then stopped. It occurred to me that it might be beneficial to have an in with the popular crowd when I started asking questions. Besides, as she'd said, a girlfriend might help me counter the rumors Zack and Jesse were spreading. I liked Gilly well enough. Maybe I should take her up on her offer. "I need to think about it. Is that okay?"

"Of course. Here, give me your phone and I'll put in my number. Call me later and we can talk it over." I handed her my phone and she quickly saved her number in my contacts. "Now text me so I'll have your number."

After I texted her, we sat awkwardly for a few minutes while Gilly played with her phone. "You know," she said eventually, "I've had a crush on you for years."

What does one say to that? "Oh," was my witty response.

"I always wondered what was wrong with me that you'd practically run away screaming whenever I asked you out. In all that time, it never occurred to me that you might be gay. I guess we only see what we want to see, huh? I was actually kind of relieved when I overheard Zack telling somebody you're gay. I had to find you right away to see if it was true."

"Well, now you know."

She nodded. "Now I know. To be honest, it's of a relief to find out it's not me, but it's still kind of sad. I've liked you for so long I feel like I'm losing something, even though I never really had it."

Once again, I didn't know what to say. I wondered if girls were always like that, leaving you at a loss for words. "I'm...sorry?"

She laughed. "Don't be sorry, silly. I'm not trying to make you feel bad." She stood up and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Maybe we can

be friends at least.” I nodded dumbly. “Call me tonight.”

“I will.”

She smiled brightly, then ran off to get back to class.

I sat and nibbled on my sandwich while I thought about her offer. She didn’t appear at all bothered by the fact that I was gay. I remembered Asher telling me that her family was extremely religious and her dad was really strict and a little weird, but Gilly seemed nice. As far as I knew, she’d only gone out with a few guys for very short periods of time. While she was popular, she was also considered something of a good girl. She and Asher had only lasted about a month before she broke things off with no warning. I wished I could ask Asher about it, but he was still avoiding me. I decided to talk to Adam when I got home and see what he thought about the idea of “dating” her.

The rest of the day passed quickly, and even though I was looking, I found no opportunities to question anyone about Seth. I wanted it to be natural when I did, so they wouldn’t think enough of it to mention it to the wrong person. I saw Zack and Jesse once and ducked into a classroom to avoid them. I got some funny stares, but I didn’t care as long as I didn’t have to deal with the dynamic duo.

I waited until after dinner to bring up the subject of Gilly with Adam. When I finished telling him about our conversation and her offer, he thought for a minute.

“If you’re sure she understands what she’s suggesting, then maybe it would be a good idea, at least until you are ready to come out to everyone. Just make sure you’re very upfront with her. Sometimes, girls think they can change you. Gilly sounds like a nice girl, though. She could be a good friend if nothing else. Every gay guy needs a fag hag.”

“A what?” I asked, startled.

He laughed. “That’s what we used to call straight girls who are best friends with gay guys.”

I frowned. “I don’t like the word fag.”

“I don’t either. I guess I’m showing my age again, huh? I wonder

what they call them these days.”

“Maybe just friend?”

Adam laughed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

After I helped load the dishwasher, I went up to my room to finish my homework. Much to my relief, I got a text from Kane a short while later.

“Sorry I never called last week. Nothing much has changed. I’ll try to call you soon.”

I felt so sorry for him. He seemed much younger than fifteen. I wanted to protect him, but I wasn’t sure how or from what. I had enough problems of my own, and he was too far away for me to do much.

I decided to call Gilly to see if we were on the same wavelength. Gilly answered but before I’d even finished saying hi, I heard a man in the background grilling Gilly about who was calling. I guessed him to be her father. I couldn’t hear her response, she must have covered the phone, but finally she came back on the line.

“Sorry about that. I’m in my room now so we can talk.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m so glad you called.” She sounded as if she meant it. “I really didn’t expect you to.”

“Well, I was thinking about what you said today. You know, about us pretending to date? Are you sure you want to do that? I mean, it doesn’t seem very fair to you.”

“Hey, don’t worry about me. I offered, didn’t I? Look, at first it was kind of an impulsive sort of thing, but the more I think about it, the more I want to do it. I’m not really into any of the guys at school right now, so it’s not like I’ll be missing out on the boy of my dreams. If someone does come along, we can just officially break up. No big deal. I want to be your friend, and this is something I can do to help you out.”

“That means a lot to me, Gilly. I don’t know why you are being so nice to me. I’ve never done anything for you. It really doesn’t bother

you that I'm gay?"

"I'm only asking for your friendship. I'm not one of those Kleenex people."

"Kleenex people?" She'd lost me.

"Yeah, you know — the ones who use you and then throw you away like you're a tissue." She lowered her voice. "As far as your being gay, no, it doesn't bother me at all. Why would it? Besides, I had an uncle who was gay."

"What's up with everybody having a gay uncle?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind." I was afraid to mention Asher for fear she'd connect him to the guy I was caught kissing.

"Okay, so...I guess this means we're dating?"

Coming from Gilly Sheridan that sounded so weird I almost laughed out loud, but I managed to restrain myself. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Great! Hey, why don't you come over for dinner tomorrow after school so you can meet my family? If you're gonna be my pretend boyfriend, then you need to know them. Besides, my dad won't let me date anyone he hasn't met. We're having this big family dinner because my Aunt Judy is in town from California. Everyone will be here, and you can get it all over with at once."

I gulped. "Who is everyone?" I knew she had two brothers, an older brother named Todd who was a senior, and a twin brother named Jake, but besides her strict father that was pretty much the only information I had about her family.

"Oh, well, it's not that many people, just my family. Wait till you meet Aunt Judy. She's a little...um...eccentric. She thinks she's some sort of psychic or something. She says it runs in our family. Maybe I'll tell your fortune?" She started giggling again.

"Who're you talking to?" asked a male voice in the background. It wasn't the same person who'd answered the phone. "Who are you inviting to dinner?"

“Who’s that?” I asked.

She sighed. “Todd. He thinks he has to watch out for me.”

“I do,” I heard Todd say. “That’s what big brothers do.”

“Eavesdrop? You’re so rude. I’ve told you a million times that you can’t just barge into my room whenever you want. Get out.” There was a pause, then Gilly continued. “Okay, he’s gone now. I swear, sometimes he’s worse than my father.”

“I wish I had a brother to watch out for me. I’m an only child.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you had a brother. They’re a pain in the ass. So now that you know all about my crazy family, how about dinner?”

“Well...”

“Please?”

“Okay,” I gave in. “I’ll check with Adam, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Who’s Adam?”

“Oh, uh...Adam is Seth’s dad. I kind of live with him now. My dad kicked me out when he found out I was gay.”

“Oh, Killian. That’s horrible. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not as big a deal as it sounds. I hated my dad anyway. I like living with Adam. He’s cool. He’s more like my dad than my real father. I miss my mom, though.”

“She stayed?”

“Yeah, she’s afraid of him.”

“Well, he is pretty influential around here.”

“Yeah.”

“Can you do me a favor at dinner tomorrow and not mention who you live with now?”

“Um, okay...but why?”

“My dad is kind of weird about things like that.”

“What about your gay uncle?”

“He died in a car accident last year.”

“Oh, gosh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I always thought he was great, but my dad couldn’t stand him. He wasn’t even allowed to come to our house, so we only got to see him when we visited him with Mom.”

Great, I thought irritably. What am I getting into?

I heard Todd’s voice in the background again.

“Hang on.” I could hear Gilly talking to Todd, but her voice was again muffled. Then she came back. “Hey, I have to go. You’ll be here for dinner tomorrow?”

“I mean I have to ask...”

“Cool. Just text me later to let me know for sure. Buh-bye.”

“Bye.”

I hung up and flopped back on the bed. I mulled over the events of the day and how a brief phone conversation had changed everything. I had gone from dating Asher — however short-lived that had been — and having it spread around school that I was gay, to dating his ex...who was a girl. Of course, Gilly was only a cover.

I had a cover. I felt like a spy. Just call me Kendall, Killian Kendall.

I was still lying on my bed when the phone buzzed in my hand. “Hello. This is Kendall, Killian Kendall.” I put on my best English accent as I answered.

“Killian?” a shaky voice said uncertainly.

“Kane! Hey. Are you okay?” I dropped the accent, along with all traces of silliness.

“No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got to get out of here. It’s horrible.”

“What’s going on? What’s horrible?”

“Mom. She watches every move I make now. She won’t let me do anything with any of my friends. I go to school and have to come

right home. She took my phone away. She never speaks to me except to scream. She's going through my stuff. Yesterday she slapped me. I mean, I said some pretty mean stuff to her, but she's never hit me before. I hate her. She lied to me about Dad, she sent Seth away, and then she dragged me back here even though she doesn't really want me. I can't stand it anymore."

"Kane, slow down. How did you call me if she took your phone?"

"She's not home right now. She locked my phone in a desk drawer but I know where the key is. Don't worry. I'll put it back before she gets home...unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless I just run away. I've been thinking about it a lot. I want to be with you guys."

"Look, if you run away, your mom will just take you back again and your dad would get in a lot of trouble. It would only make things worse. You're going to have to do this the right way."

"What right way?"

"I don't know, but I know running away isn't it. There's got to be a legal way—"

"That takes too long. I want out now."

"I don't know. Hang on, I'm getting your dad. Maybe he'll know what to do." I didn't wait for Kane to answer; I just took off for the living room, where Adam was reading a book.

"Adam, Kane is on the phone, and he's really upset. I think you'd better talk to him. He wants to run away."

Adam snatched the phone from my hand.

"Kane?" His voice was filled with tension.

He listened for a while, making comforting noises occasionally. Finally, he said, "Kane, listen to me, son. Hang in there for a few more days. I'll call my lawyer in the morning and see what's involved here. We'll get you out of there, I promise. If your mom hits you again, though, call me immediately and I'll come get you, damn her lawyers."

They talked for a few more minutes, then said goodbye.

Adam rubbed his face tiredly, the stress plain on his face. "Thank you, Killian."

"For what?"

"For being there for Kane. He told me he's been talking to you and what you told him. You're a good friend and a good person. You've proven over and over that I can trust you. I was too emotional to talk the other night when you said I was like a father to you but I want you to know that I have come to think of you as a son as well."

I took the few steps between us in one leap and gave him a huge hug.

I backed up and gave him a lopsided smile. "So do you think we can get Kane?"

"I'm not going to stop until we do," Adam said with resolve. "I'm sick of Eve using him as a weapon against me. He's not a pawn in some petty game of revenge."

"I wish there were some way we could get him without a fight."

"Me, too, kiddo, trust me. Unfortunately, when it comes to me, Eve won't do anything without a fight. She hates me with a passion. But enough about that. Have you talked to Gilly?"

I quickly filled him in on our conversation and asked if it was okay for me to go to dinner at her house. He agreed without hesitation. We talked for a while longer, then watched TV until it was time for bed.

The nightmare came back with a vengeance that night. I was in my bedroom, Seth's old room, and Seth was there, and, for the first time in my dreams, he wasn't dead. He had a book in his hands, which he kept holding toward me, but I couldn't move to take it. He seemed to be urging me to do something, but I couldn't understand what. The faceless man stood malevolently in the background, not saying a word but making his presence clearly felt.

I awoke in a cold sweat, crying and shaking. Seth's urgent if incoherent demands had made the dream even more upsetting than usual. I knew I wouldn't be falling back asleep any time soon

so I decided to go down to the kitchen and have a snack. I was rummaging through the fridge when I heard footsteps behind me. I spun around with a gasp, but it was just Adam.

“I thought I heard someone down here,” he said. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“You didn’t. I couldn’t sleep. You?”

“Nightmare.”

He sighed. “I can’t keep putting off this counseling,” he said so softly I wasn’t sure he was talking to me at first.

“Will counseling make the nightmares stop?”

“I don’t know, Kill,” he replied, his voice weary. “I hope so. I’ve really neglected this. I should have done it a long time ago. You’ve been through so much.”

“I think I’m doing pretty well, considering. It’s just these stupid nightmares...”

“You are doing amazingly well, but remember what I said before. I suspect the nightmares are just a symptom. There’s a lot of stuff you haven’t really dealt with. You’ve just shoved it all down and ignored it in an effort to live your life as normally as possible. It’s like a defense mechanism, but you can’t go on that way indefinitely.”

“What about you? You’ve been through a lot, too. You seem all right.”

“Appearances can be deceiving.” He sighed.

“What do you mean?”

“Killian, losing Seth has been incredibly hard for me. Especially since a part of me feels I should have done more to protect him, taken the notes more seriously...something. I blame myself for so much. I haven’t been sleeping much.”

I felt horrible. I’d never really considered that Adam might be having a hard time, too. In my mind, he was the strong one, the one who’d been holding everything together while I fell apart. “You couldn’t know...” I started.

“Oh I know. At least I know that intellectually. And Steve keeps reminding me. I don’t know what I’d do without him. He’s been a huge support for me through this, and having you here has been a godsend. Maybe we should both stop suffering silently and be here for each other. What do you think?”

I crossed the kitchen and gave him a hug, which he returned. “Sounds good to me.”

“Good. Then tomorrow I’ll get some references for the best counselor I can find. No more putting it off.”

I nodded.

Adam pulled away and gave me a sad smile. “Now, how about I make us some warm milk so we can get back to bed.”

I made a face. “People really drink that?”

“Hey, don’t knock it until you try it. Sometimes, those old wives tales really work.”

I shrugged. “Well, it can’t hurt.”

Adam made us a couple of mugs of warm milk and sent me to bed. I don’t know if it was the milk or just exhaustion, but, thankfully, I was able to fall asleep pretty soon after getting back in bed, and neither Seth nor the killer haunted my dreams any more that night.

I overslept a little and was late getting to class, so I didn’t get to talk to Gilly until after first period. We met by the door, and she gave me a big hug. I noticed our classmates grinning at us as they filed out.

“Does everyone know already?” It never ceased to amaze me how fast news travels in a high school.

“Sure seems that way,” she said with an impish grin. “All I did was tell a few key people, and it spread like wildfire.” She shrugged. “I guess after the rumors that Zack and Jesse were spreading this is hot stuff. Who would have thought?” She giggled.

I laughed. “You’re a mastermind.”

“Nah, I just know how this stuff works. So, can you come

tonight?”

“Yeah, Adam said it was fine.”

She squealed with delight, then gave me another hug and a peck on the cheek before running off to her next class.

I was eating lunch later that day when someone sat down next to me. I looked up to find Asher slouching there with a hurt, confused look on his face. I hadn't spoken to him since the day Zack and Jesse tried to beat me up.

Before I could open my mouth he said, “You're dating Gilly?” His voice was filled with equal parts of pain and anger.

“Well, yeah, kinda,” I said meekly.

“You're dating my ex-*girl*/friend?” He hissed the last part, his eyes narrowing.

“Wait a minute! It's not how it looks—”

“Then how is it?” he interrupted angrily. “Huh? Tell me, Killian. You couldn't have me so you went for my ex? What kind of shit is that? I thought you were gay, or was that just a phase? Was I just a little experiment? You need to make up your mind.”

“Make up *my* mind?” I was getting angry now as well, and my volume was climbing. A few people nearby glanced over at us curiously, so I made an effort to lower my voice. “Who was it that said they didn't want to ruin their precious reputation? Who was it that backed off with us? Who was it that said they couldn't handle all this? Here's a clue — it wasn't me!”

“Yeah, well, I didn't run off and start dating your ex — *who's a girl* — less than a week later.”

“I don't have an ex. Besides, it's none of your business who I date.” I lowered my voice even more and leaned in until our noses were almost touching. He refused to back off or look away. “You lost that right when you chose your reputation over us. You had your chance, and you blew it. Sorry, babe.”

I stood up, grabbed my backpack, and walked away without looking back. I should have felt great, but I didn't. I felt like throwing

up. I detoured into the first bathroom I came to and splashed cold water on my face.

I just told Asher off. The first time we've talked since he got beaten up over us and I told him off. It was almost as if someone else had taken over my body and spoken through my mouth. I'd been just as shocked as he was at what I was saying. Why hadn't I told him the truth? Was I really so angry that he'd pulled away from me?

I stared at my dripping face in the mirror and almost didn't recognize myself. I'd changed so much over the last few weeks, in a lot more ways than just a physical makeover. What was I becoming? Was I choosing the right path? I had a desperate feeling that I was stumbling down the wrong one. Was it too late? More than anything, though, I wished could talk to Seth.

Gilly caught me in the hall between classes later that day. "Well, if the whole school wasn't already talking about us dating, they are after your fight with Asher at lunch."

"What?"

"Everybody's talking about how you guys had a fight over me in the middle of the cafeteria."

"Oh no!"

"No, it's great. I wish I'd thought of it."

"No, it's not great. Poor Asher. He's...he's my friend and now he thinks I'm dating his ex. This must be so embarrassing for him."

Gilly laid a hand on my chest. "You're so sweet. Don't worry about Asher. He's a big boy. If you want, I can talk to him."

"No, I should talk to him." She didn't even know why Asher was really mad. What could she say that would make it better? She'd probably just make it worse. This was my mess, and I'd have to deal with it...eventually.

She smiled. "You're such a good friend. See you tonight." She kissed my cheek again and disappeared into the crowd, leaving me standing there feeling like shit.

I wasn't a good friend. A good friend wouldn't be pretending to

date his best friend's ex without telling him what was really going on. I made up my mind to talk to him as soon as possible.

Chapter 14

By the end of the day, the whole school had heard about Gilly and me. Guys I hardly knew were slapping me on the back and giving me thumbs up. Girls who'd never had the time of day for me before were waving, smiling at me and calling me by name from across the hall. It was truly bizarre. Like popularity in a box, just add beautiful girlfriend.

I didn't run into Asher any more that day, although I was half hoping I would so I could apologize. I even waited around by the door closest to his locker, but he must have used another exit because I never saw him. I drove home still feeling guilty for the way I'd treated him but unsure of what to do about it. It seemed like the sort of thing to address in person, but I sent him a text saying we needed to talk. He didn't answer.

Gilly had said to be at her house for dinner by 5:30. I didn't intend to arrive a minute early, so I had a couple of hours to kill. When I got home, Adam was gone. I found a note on the refrigerator saying he was seeing his lawyer and probably wouldn't be back before I went to Gilly's, but he'd talk to me later that night.

I made myself a light snack. I was just sitting down to eat it while doing my homework when the doorbell rang. I got up to answer it. The glass in the front door was frosted, which I hated. I could never see who was on the other side, only shadows and movements. For a split second, panic swept over me as the shapes reminded me of my dream, and I almost didn't answer the door. The moment passed, though, and I did open it. I immediately wished I hadn't.

There stood Zack and Jesse.

I was so surprised that at first I didn't know what to do. Then I reacted and tried to slam the door, but my brief hesitation was all Zack needed. He was already in motion and managed to shove the door back.

"That's not very friendly, Killian," he said as I stumbled back. "We're just here to pay you a quick visit. I promise it won't take long."

I wasn't about to allow them into the house. I stood where I was, feet apart and arms crossed to try and hide their shaking.

"What do you want?" I demanded. I refused to let them see how scared I was.

"What kind of game are you playing, Killian?" Zack leaned casually against the doorjamb.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play games, fag." Jesse entered the conversation for the first time with his usual wit and charm.

"I don't know what you two are talking about? What games?"

"What's going on with Gilly? We know you're a fag; you told us so yourself. Plus, we saw you with Asher." Zack spoke with exaggerated patience, as if he were talking to a mentally challenged child. "So what's with the sudden switch?"

"I'm going out with Gilly."

"We got that much, what we want to know is why. Why date Gilly if you're gay?"

"Maybe I changed my mind." I was so nervous I could feel the sweat trickling down my back, but I tried to keep my tone flippant.

"You can do that?" Jesse asked in surprise.

Zack shot him a disgusted look.

I rolled my eyes. "You do know there is such a thing as bisexual, right?"

"But you said you were gay."

"I'm just trying to figure stuff out."

Zack poked a finger in my chest. “Look, Killian, I don’t know what you’re up to, but don’t forget we’re watching you. If you hurt Gilly, we’ll hurt you. Got that?”

“Yeah, I got it, Zack, but since when are you guys the protectors of Gilly’s virtue? I think she can take care of herself. Besides, you’re pretty pathetic if you don’t have anything better to do than follow me around all the time and keep tabs on my love life.”

Zack straightened up and squared his shoulders as Jesse moved into position behind him. Why hadn’t I kept my big mouth shut? It was about to get me in trouble again. I was gearing up to try fast-talking my way out of whatever was coming when Adam pulled into the driveway.

Zack glanced over his shoulder and clenched his jaw as Adam started climbing out of his car, a slight frown on his face as he took in the scene on the porch. Zack reluctantly started backing away from me. “We’ll talk more later,” he said loudly enough for Adam to hear.

“Are we leaving?” Jesse asked. I swear he would be out of his depth in a puddle.

“Yeah, we’re done here for now,” Zack told him.

“Who was that?” Adam wanted to know as they drove off.

“Zack and Jesse, otherwise known as Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dumber.”

“The guys who have been harassing you? What did they want?”

“They were trying to figure out what I’m doing with Gilly. I think it really confuses them. It’s more than their tiny brains can handle.”

Adam put his arm around me and steered me into the house. “That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble one of these days.”

“It almost did just then. Your timing is impeccable.” I went on to recount the whole scene with Zack and Jesse.

“I don’t want you coming home alone anymore,” he said when I was finished. “We’ll have to figure something out for when I can’t be

here. It's not safe. That could have gone so many ways."

"But it didn't. I'm okay. I just won't be stupid enough to open the door anymore before I know who's there. So...what happened with the lawyer? I didn't think you were supposed to be back this early."

"Please note that I'm aware you're changing the subject and I'm allowing it to happen. The meeting went well. Ilana thinks we have a good chance. She's very confident."

"Is Ilana the lawyer?"

"Yes, Ilana Constantino. She's a family lawyer. I met her a few months ago at a PFLAG meeting."

"PFLAG?"

"It stands for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Ilana and her husband have a gay daughter. Ilana has agreed to take my case and get the wheels turning on this custody thing. She's going to start by contacting Eve's lawyer. I told her to expect all hell to break loose when Eve finds out."

"What happens if Eve gets ugly?"

"Oh, it's not a matter of if, only when and how ugly. I guess I'll just have to get ugly back. This is my son we're talking about. I'm not playing around anymore. I'm tired of being the nice guy while my kids get hurt."

We'd settled in the living room by then, talking about the prospect of Kane's coming to live with us. We decided we'd move the queen-size bed out and buy twin beds so he could share my bedroom. I was excited about the idea of having a brother and really wanted someone else in the room. Maybe it would help me stop having the nightmares.

That thought reminded me of the night before. "Did you find anything out about a counselor today?"

"I got some names from Ilana. I'm going to contact them soon, maybe tomorrow. I want to talk to your mom first, though. I'm sure she'd like to have some input on the situation, and she'll have to give me your insurance information. She may even have to sign some paperwork since you're a minor and I'm not your legal guardian."

I went quiet for a few minutes, lost in my thoughts, until Adam finally asked, “What’s on your mind, kiddo?”

“I’m a little nervous about telling a complete stranger everything that’s happened, but I know I need to see someone. I think it’s all really starting to get to me.” I recounted my altercation with Asher at lunch.

He frowned when I finished. “You need to explain to him what’s going on, Killian. You shouldn’t leave things like that hanging for very long.”

I nodded miserably. “I know. I tried to find him this afternoon, but he’s probably avoiding me again. Not that I blame him.”

Adam looked at his watch. “As much as I’d like to keep talking about this, aren’t you supposed to be getting ready for your dinner with Gilly’s family?”

“Getting ready?”

“Meeting the girlfriend’s family is a big deal, you know.” He was grinning now.

“She’s not my girlfriend!”

“As far as her family is concerned, she is. You should at least make an effort to look nice.”

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing now?”

“Nothing...if you’re going to school. Why don’t you go change? It doesn’t have to be anything too dressy, just a little less...beachy.”

I looked down at my T-shirt and jeans and realized he had a point. I ran upstairs and changed into a pair of khakis and a button-up shirt over a white T-shirt. I checked myself out in the mirror and thought I didn’t look half bad. My hair had grown out since my haircut and was even curlier than usual. I decided not to brush it out since I kind of liked it that way.

I went back down and presented myself to Adam. Once he’d given me his approval, it was time to head over to the Sheridans’. I didn’t want to be late and make a bad first impression.

I entered the address Gilly had given me into my phone and

followed the GPS directions out into the rural roads of our county. When I pulled into the drive, I was sure I'd entered the address wrong. The house was an old plantation manor so huge it could almost have been described as a mansion. Although it had seen better days, it was aging with typical Southern grace. After double-checking the address, I parked the car and walked up to the broad porch. The door opened before I could even knock.

Gilly stood there looking a little anxious. "Are you sure you're ready for this?" she asked before I could even say hi.

"What do you mean?"

"Think you're prepared to meet my crazy family?"

I grimaced. "Do I have a choice?"

She laughed tensely. "Not really." She stood back and allowed me to step inside.

The moment I walked through the door, I felt a change in the air. The hair stood up on the back of my neck. A chill ran over me, and with it came a strange sense of foreboding. I hesitated, unwilling to go any farther.

Gilly gave me a funny look. "Are you okay? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

I smiled weakly and shook off the strange feeling. "I'm all right, just a little nervous."

"You'll be fine. Don't let my nerves get to you. Come on. I'll give you a quick tour and introduce you to everyone."

She led me through the entrance hall and into what had probably once been called the front parlor. It now served as a formal living room, lavishly furnished with worn antique furniture that I was sure had to be family pieces. What looked like original oil paintings in heavy gilt frames hung on the walls.

Two men sat on the sofa. One was Todd, Gilly's older brother, and I assumed the other was her father. They were in the middle of a conversation when we entered the room, but they stopped and politely shook my hand as Gilly made the introductions.

“Killian, this is my father, Tom Sheridan, and you know Todd. Dad, this is Killian Kendall.”

Tom Sheridan was a rather unimposing man — average height, graying hair and a little pudgy around the middle. His outfit of light-blue oxford shirt and tan dress pants revealed little. He could have been anything from a CEO to an accountant. The only feature that stood out about him was his pale blue eyes, which seemed to hold a startling intensity, especially when compared with the rest of his ordinariness.

Todd Sheridan, on the other hand, was anything but ordinary. Everybody knew who Todd Sheridan was. I’d only seen him from a distance and didn’t really know him at all, but he was one of the hottest guys in our school. He was tall and lightly muscled, with eyes the color of a summer sky and straight white-blond hair that just brushed his shoulders — the prototypical California surfer boy, but right here in Maryland. He was a masculine version of Gilly, every bit as beautiful as she was, and about as physically perfect as anyone I’d ever met in person. I almost melted as I shook his hand.

“After you get the tour, why don’t you join us back in here,” Mr. Sheridan offered, snapping my attention away from his attractive son. At least, it was posed as an offer, but it sounded more like a command. “The men can get to know each other while the women prepare dinner.”

I managed a polite smile.

Gilly propelled me from the living room and into what appeared to be a formal dining room, empty except for an enormous table that was set and waiting. “Don’t mind him,” she murmured. “He can be a little old-fashioned sometimes.”

A better word might be chauvinistic, I thought, but decided that wasn’t the time to quibble about semantics.

From there we entered the kitchen, which was bustling with activity. Two blonde women were busy preparing enough food to feed a small army. They were playfully arguing over who was going to remove the turkey from the oven but stopped when we appeared.

“This must be Killian,” the smaller woman gushed. “We’ve heard

so much about you. I'm Janice Sheridan, Gilly's mom." She held out a manicured hand for me to shake. She looked fragile enough to break, but it was obvious where Gilly and Todd had gotten their looks. She was a stunning woman. She wore her blonde hair swept up in a sophisticated chignon, and her eyes were the same shade as Gilly's and Todd's. Still, as nice as she seemed, I couldn't help but feel there was something slightly fake about her.

While Mrs. Sheridan was busy with her introduction, the other woman had quickly slipped the turkey from the oven. When Mrs. Sheridan noticed, she tried to take it away from her, and the two of them began playing tug-of-war with the roasting pan. I fully expected to see the bird hit the floor at any minute.

"Will you guys grow up?" Gilly teased affectionately.

The other woman, who I assumed to be Aunt Judy, released the turkey to Mrs. Sheridan and turned to face us with a smile. She bore an amazing resemblance to Gilly and her mother. They all shared the same fine bone structure, blonde hair, and intensely blue eyes. Judy must have been younger than Mrs. Sheridan, though, because she looked more like Gilly's older sister. Her hair hung to just above her shoulders. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that proclaimed, "I only do what the voices in my head tell me to do."

"Afraid not," she said with twinkling eye. "We'll still bicker the way we did when we were kids when we're eighty years old and in a nursing home." She held out a hand and gave me a warm smile. "I'm Judy Cassara, the other sister."

"Nice to meet you," I responded, sliding my hand into hers.

Her eyes widened slightly when we touched. She stared deeply into my eyes as if trying to see inside me. Another chill ran down my spine. She released my hand with a thoughtful look.

"Almost done," Gilly said, breaking the moment and dragging me away. I glanced over my shoulder once more at Judy. She was still watching me as Gilly pulled me through the door.

Gilly ushered me into a small room that from the looks of things had once been a playroom. Over the years, however, as the kids had grown, it had evolved into more of a game room. The border at the

ceiling was still a childish pattern of crayons, letters of the alphabet, and numbers, but a slightly battered sofa sat against one wall facing an entertainment center filled with all the latest electronic equipment. I noted several gaming systems, from old school Nintendo to the latest consoles.

Gilly's twin brother Jake was so busy playing a game that he didn't even turn to acknowledge us when we entered. I'd seen Jake around the halls quite a bit and knew who he was, but we traveled in different circles. We didn't have any classes together since I was in mostly advanced classes, and, well, he wasn't. He hung out with the surfers, skaters and potheads. I didn't know if he smoked, but most of his friends did.

Like his older brother, Jake was working the surfer-boy look, but where Todd was thoroughly masculine, Jake was somewhat more delicate. His shaggy hair was darker than Todd's and Gilly's, more like a dark honey with lighter highlights. His face was thinner than Todd's, his cheekbones more pronounced with a natural blush. His eyes were so huge you almost felt you could get lost in their depths. There, at least, he had something in common with Todd and Gilly. His eyes were the same impossibly sparkling shade of blue.

"You could at least say hello," Gilly complained with a playful swat at the back of his head.

Jake paused his game and turned around to greet me. For the second time that night, I found my breath catching in my throat over one of the Sheridan boys. He smiled, and I felt my knees buckle at the sight of his dimples. "Hey," he said in a softly husky voice.

"Hi," I managed to squeak.

"You're friends with Asher Davis, right?"

"Yeah." At least, I hoped we were still friends. I wasn't so sure anymore.

"He's a nice guy. Want to play?"

"Uh, no, that's okay." I sucked at video games unless they were the shoot-em-up type, at which I was pretty good. Jake was playing a fighting game, however, and those made me nervous. "I think your

dad wanted me to go talk to him after I got the tour.”

“Oh, please.” He rolled his eyes. “We won’t torture you like that. This is your first time here. Come on, play with me.”

“You’re in the middle of a game,” I tried.

“I can start over.”

“Gilly —”

“I don’t mind,” she chimed in.

“I don’t know how to play.” It was my last gambit, and I realized it was doomed before the words were out of my mouth.

Sure enough, Jake smiled and said those famous last words uttered by everyone who plays video games: “It’s easy. I’ll teach you.” Translation: I know how to play, and I can kick your ass.

I sighed and admitted defeat. Jake scooted over on the couch so I could sit down. Gilly perched on the arm to watch my slaughter. Jake handed me a controller and launched into an explanation that might as well have been in Greek for all I understood. Not aiding my comprehension was the fact that I kept forgetting to listen to what he was saying because I was so caught up in just watching his lips move.

Eventually, we started playing and, as I’d predicted, he beat me soundly. We played a few more rounds with similar results until Mrs. Sheridan called us to dinner.

If I’d thought the introductions were awkward, dinner brought a whole new meaning to the word. Tension hung thick in the air, yet I couldn’t figure out its source. I tried to pass it off as just a case of nerves. Maybe I was telegraphing my own stress. Deep down, though, I knew that what I was sensing was not coming from within.

I didn’t have a lot of time to figure it out. Mr. Sheridan kept up a steady bombardment of questions lobbed directly at me — easy questions such as where was I going to college and what did I intend to do with my life. I tried to answer them and still sound somewhat intelligent, but when the majority of your responses include the phrase “I don’t really know yet,” that’s a pretty tall order.

There was very little other conversation. Everyone was intent on their food, which was delicious and seemed to keep multiplying like a miracle of Biblical proportions. The biggest challenge of the meal was trying to avoid staring at Todd and Jake, both of whom were conveniently seated right across the table from me. I was so stressed I had heartburn even before I finished eating. I'd never been so relieved to see dessert served.

Afterward, the women cleared away the dishes while Mr. Sheridan herded the men into the living room. To say I felt acutely uncomfortable in that environment would be an enormous understatement. I watched the women start clearing the table and wished I could stay with them in the kitchen. I envied their escape.

Within minutes, the conversation had completely lost me. Todd and Mr. Sheridan were talking about sports, and I'd never even heard of the team they were discussing. At least Jake seemed as disinterested as I was. I managed to dodge direct questions by asking Mr. Sheridan his opinion and staying quiet the rest of the time. My strategy seemed to be working, and I thought Mr. Sheridan was even starting to like me.

Then Gilly appeared at the door. Her father glared at her with annoyance. "Mom said I was excused from washing dishes," she said meekly. This wasn't at all the forward, confident girl I knew from school. "Would it be all right if Killian and I took a walk? I want to show him the yard."

Mr. Sheridan reluctantly agreed, and I gratefully slipped from the room under his watchful eye. We didn't talk much as we walked around the backyard, which was huge and well landscaped. The property abutted a small inlet that fed in turn into the Chesapeake Bay. An old boathouse sat by the water, making a beautiful scene.

After my tour of the property, we settled onto a swing hanging from the ceiling on the back porch. It would have been the perfect place to watch the sun set over the bay had it not been for a small stand of trees that hid the water from the house. I was just thinking how I would cut down the trees if I lived there, when out the blue Gilly asked, "Have you talked to Asher yet?"

I jumped guiltily. I'd almost forgotten she was even there. "No. I couldn't find him and he's not answering my texts."

"Oh. I think he's really mad about us. He sent me a pretty nasty text tonight."

"What did he say?"

"Just something about how he guesses I'll date anybody these days. But I don't get it. I mean, I broke up with him a long time ago but we stayed friends, so I don't know why he would care. I've gone out with other guys since then, and it didn't seem to bother him. So I figured the problem isn't my dating, but my dating you. Is that what you guys were fighting about today?"

"Sort of," I ventured, hoping she wouldn't pursue it further.

Fate stepped in at that moment to distract her when the back door opened and her father stuck his head out. "Gilly, your mother could use your help after all. Killian will be fine for a few minutes."

She quickly stood up. "I'll be back as soon as possible," she apologized.

"No problem," I assured her. I was actually looking forward to a few minutes alone to collect myself, but it wasn't to be. As Gilly disappeared into the house, her father came out onto the porch. He leaned against a post and gave me a measuring look. I shifted uncomfortably while I waited for him to speak.

"So," he began slowly, "you're my daughter's new boyfriend."

"Yes, sir." I was mortified to hear my voice fly up an octave on the second word.

"We're a religious family," he informed me. "Do you go to church?"

"Yes, sir. My mother and I attend a church in town." Sure, I hadn't been in weeks, but he didn't have to know that.

He nodded. "Good. Glad to hear it. Then I hope you will treat her with the respect she deserves, if you know what I mean." His tone left little doubt that the consequences, should I fail to do so, would be dire indeed.

I gulped. “Sir, I intend to treat Gilly with the highest respect.”

He nodded once. “Good. See that you do. You seem like a nice young man. I’d hate to see things end badly.” With that vague threat hanging in the air, he turned and walked back inside.

The door hadn’t even shut behind him before Judy stepped out of the shrubbery and sat down beside me on the swing. I wondered how long she’d been lurking there.

“You’re not really Gilly’s boyfriend, are you?”

“Huh?” I managed. No one could accuse this bunch of beating around the bush.

“You and Gilly, you aren’t really boyfriend and girlfriend.” She gave me the same searching look she’d given me in the kitchen. “When we touched...I saw things.”

This was definitely creeping me out. “Saw what things?”

She closed her eyes for a second, apparently choosing her words carefully. When she opened them again, they seemed sad somehow. “I know you’re not Gilly’s boyfriend because you’re only attracted to boys.”

“What? How do you know that? How do you know I’m gay?” I was getting panicky.

“Don’t be scared. I don’t judge, and I won’t tell. I simply see. I see many things most people don’t. It’s not that they can’t; they just choose not to.”

The hair on my arms stood up. I’d definitely entered Weirdsville, and Gilly’s whole family lived there. “What else do you see?” I asked hesitantly. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but I couldn’t resist asking.

Her eyes locked onto mine for a moment, then she closed them once more and began to speak. “I see you’re afraid — and with good reason. You’ve been hurt very much, and you’ve not yet healed. You’re in danger. Someone wishes you harm, someone closer than you think. You must find them before they carry out their plan. Your paths are intertwining, they converge repeatedly. You’re at a crossroads. From this point there are many paths you can chose, but there is only one you will survive. Watch your step carefully.”

My heart was racing at her words. They were so similar to what Seth had written. Her eyes popped open, and she studied me for a few more seconds. Then she abruptly stood up and began to walk away.

“Wait!” I called after her. “Do you know who it is? Who’s after me?”

She paused and turned back to me, her face lost in the shadows so her voice seemed to come from nowhere. “No. I can’t see that. You must discover that for yourself. It’s your path.” She turned and melted into the darkness.

It took all my strength to keep from running for my car and hightailing it out of there. I tried to convince myself I didn’t believe a word she’d said, but the chills running up and down my spine belied that assertion. She’d hit too close to home for comfort.

I was actually relieved when the door opened and Gilly stepped out. Before she was halfway to the swing, though, she stopped. “Oh, I’ll go get us some iced tea. Be right back.” I almost called out to her, asking her to stay, but I bit my tongue and let her go.

She’d barely gone inside before the door opened again. My mind was still swirling with Judy’s words, so it took me a moment to realize that it was Todd, not Gilly. He didn’t notice me on the swing as he walked to the porch rail and leaned against it. I was debating whether to make my presence known when he turned around and saw me. He started a little, then threw me an unreadable look.

“I didn’t see you there.” His voice was flat, still not giving me an indication as to how he felt about me.

I shrugged and said, “Sorry,” although for what I wasn’t sure.

“You’re awfully quiet.” He came over and sat down beside me.

I couldn’t help thinking that this was all like a carefully choreographed play or TV sitcom, with everyone coming and going in such a seemingly synchronized way. I felt as if I were running the gauntlet. Maybe the Sheridan clan had arranged it. I could picture Mr. Sheridan gathering the whole family around a whiteboard and laying out the game plan with X’s and O’s.

“So Gilly’s finally got you.” Todd’s voice snapped me back from my weird daydream.

“Huh?”

“Aren’t you the guy she’s been after for so long?”

“Oh, I guess.” I laughed nervously. Something about his manner was making me a little edgy. It wasn’t anything he’d said, but more his demeanor. Plus, it didn’t help that he’d sat a bit closer to me than was comfortable. I was feeling a little flustered from his nearness. Physically, he was very attractive. I tried shifting away from him, but since I was already sitting against the arm of the swing, I didn’t really have anywhere to go.

“You guys don’t seem to be all that enthusiastic about it.” He looked at me closely, and I felt even more uncomfortable, as though he were seeing through me.

“What do you mean?”

“Just that you don’t have the body language you usually expect to find in two people who are first going out.”

“Get lost, Todd,” Gilly said, suddenly coming up behind us. We both jumped. I hadn’t even heard the door open. “Since when are you an expert on body language?”

“Chill out, Gilly. I’m just looking out for you, that’s all.” He stood up and moved away from the swing.

“Thanks, Todd. I appreciate it, but you have to remember that I’m a big girl now. I’m only eighteen months younger than you. I can take care of myself.”

Todd gave her another one of his indecipherable looks, then turned to me again. I could tell there was more he wanted to say, but he just shrugged and walked back into the house.

“Sorry about that,” Gilly said as she filled the once-more-vacant spot next to me and handed me a glass of tea. “I warned you I had a weird family.”

“It’s okay,” I told her as I set the glass on the floor, “but I really think I need to be getting back home. I didn’t finish my homework.”

Gilly smiled, though it never quite reached her eyes. “Okay. Will you come in and say goodbye to everyone first?”

“Yeah, of course.” I was already dreading it.

“It’s been really nice having you here tonight.”

“It’s, uh, been nice being here.” I was stretching the truth a little, but it seemed the polite thing to do.

“So many times I’ve imagined what it would be like if you were here with me...what I would do...what you would do.” She was slowly moving closer and closer to me. Once again, I found myself pressed into the arm of the swing.

“Uh, Gilly, I really need to go —”

“Just one thing first,” she whispered. Then, before I could react, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine. *I’m kissing a girl*, my shocked brain informed me. I placed my hands on her shoulders and pushed her gently but firmly away. I could clearly see the hurt in her eyes.

“Gilly, we can’t do this,” I said softly. “I can’t do this. I’m gay, remember? We’re not really boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“I know, but I thought maybe if we...that you...” She faded out and stared at me with a horrified expression. A single tear slipped out of her eye and slid down her cheek.

“Oh, jeez, Gilly.” I patted her clumsily on the arm. “I’m sorry...I just can’t...”

She gave me a weak smile and wiped the tear away. “No, I’m sorry, Killian. I guess I thought that if we kissed you might actually like me.”

“I do like you, Gilly,” I said, feeling exquisitely awkward, “but not that way. It’s not that you aren’t a great girl. You are. If I weren’t gay, I’m sure I’d like you a lot. I mean, I like you now as a friend, but if I were straight I’m sure I’d like you as more than a friend—”

Gilly reached out and placed a finger on my lips to shut me up. “You don’t have to apologize or explain anything, Killian. I was out of line and I’m sorry. We agreed that this was only for show. I

just got carried away. I know that sounds stupid, but I've thought about you for so long. I wanted to know what it felt like...just once. I promise I won't do it again."

I nodded thoughtfully as her words sank in. She was doing a lot for me, pretending to be my girlfriend, and she was getting nothing in return. Maybe one kiss would be all right.

I leaned in and pressed my lips against hers before I could change my mind. The kiss was nothing like the ones I'd shared with Asher. There was none of the spark or excitement. I felt absolutely nothing. I sat back and stared at Gilly expectantly. She kept her eyes closed for few seconds, then opened them slowly and gave me a bittersweet smile.

"Thank you, Killian," she whispered.

"You're welcome" seemed rather egotistical, so I just nodded and stood up. "I guess I should get going."

She stood up as well. We hugged briefly before going back inside. After saying a quick but polite goodbye to everyone, I made my escape from what was surely one of the strangest nights of my entire life.

Chapter 15

As tired as I was, the moment my head hit the pillow all I could think about was what Judy had said on the porch. Someone was after me, though she couldn't tell me who. She'd also said he was closer than I thought. That news was made even more unsettling by my dreams, which now seemed an eerie confirmation. How did Judy know all this? Was she really a psychic? She'd grown up with a gay brother, so maybe she knew what signs to look for. That might explain how she knew I was gay, but not the rest. My mind just kept going around in circles.

It took me forever to fall asleep. When I woke up the next morning, Judy's prophecy — if that's what it was — immediately popped into my head. It totally distracted me all morning at school as well. At one point, I paid enough attention to realize that I had no idea what we were talking about, which would be a bad thing come test time. Then I just spaced out again.

I was still in my own little world at lunch when I realized someone had sat down next to me. Somehow, I wasn't surprised to see the only member of Gilly's family besides her mother who hadn't cornered me the night before.

I sighed in resignation. "Hello, Jake."

"Hi, Killian. Can I talk to you for a few minutes?" His dark blonde hair was tucked behind his ears.

"Sure, why not?"

"You were friends with Seth, right?"

That was about the last thing I expected him to say. I debated how to answer him, but I figured there was no use denying it. The whole school knew I had been friends with Seth. “Uh, yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“I heard you’re even living with his dad now?”

“Um...” I wondered what he was leading up to and how he knew where I lived. I figured Zack and Jesse had spread that around, too. They’d been to the house so they certainly knew. Did I admit it to Jake, though? Gilly had told me not to mention around her father that I was living with Adam, but what about Jake? I finally decided that if she hadn’t wanted me to tell him, she should have warned me. “Yeah, I am.”

He looked around the tables near us, then leaned in closer to me. “Wasn’t Seth gay?”

“Um...” Seth had been so open about his sexuality, I wasn’t about to force him into the closet now that he was dead. “Yes.”

“Is it true that his dad is, too?”

That was a little different. However, I was curious to see where these questions were leading. “Yes.”

“Then, um...are you?”

I mentally slapped myself. Why hadn’t I see that coming? These were dangerous waters. What was I supposed to say? “I’m, uh, dating your sister, Jake.” I decided to go with a non-answer.

“I know, but that’s not what I asked.”

I bit my lip. Obviously, I had underestimated him. He was sharper than he first appeared.

“Look, Jake, do you think we could talk about this later?” I threw a meaningful glance at the tables full of people nearby.

“Yeah, sure. Can I ask you one more question, though?”

I was hesitant, but agreed.

He leaned in again and lowered his voice even more. “Do you really think Seth was killed in a mugging? I mean, you were there, but that just doesn’t feel right to me.”

I was so shocked I couldn't make my vocal chords work. After several seconds of slack-jawed silence, I recovered the ability to speak. "What do you mean?"

"Doesn't it seem strange that the only openly gay student at our high school gets mugged and killed two weeks after school starts? Call me suspicious, but that sounds awfully fishy to me, especially since he was treated so badly here."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I wondered for a second if he was setting me up. Red flags were going up everywhere. I remembered Judy's words: "Watch your step carefully." I decided it was very good advice for that situation.

"Why does it matter to you?"

He looked around again. Why did he seem so paranoid? "We'll talk about it later, okay? When do you want to meet?"

"How about after school? You can meet me at my car. You know what I drive, right?"

"Yeah, I've seen you around."

"Cool."

"I think Todd parked next to you this morning. I'll meet you there, but wait for me. I have to talk to Mr. Johnson after school for a few minutes about an assignment that's late. I'll see you then."

"Okay," I said, wondering what strange new twist my life was about to take. "See you then."

Gilly found me after school, and we walked out to the parking lot together. We leaned against my car and talked while we waited — Gilly for Todd and I for Jake. Neither of us mentioned the kiss from the night before. We seemed to be studiously avoiding that topic by mutual consent. Other kids were straggling out of the building, and many of them stopped to say hi to us. I still wasn't sure how I felt about being part of the school's newest "It" couple.

"So how for-real is your Aunt Judy?" I asked after an awkward lull in the conversation.

“Who knows? Why? Did she get to you last night while I was gone?” Gilly tucked a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear. I nodded, and she went on, “We don’t really take her all that seriously, but there have been some spooky coincidences.”

“Like what?”

“Well, by far the freakiest thing that ever happened was last Christmas. Aunt Judy had flown in a few days early, and she brought all her presents with her. We were supposed to exchange gifts with Uncle Rick on Christmas Eve, but that morning, Aunt Judy came downstairs looking very sad and said we didn’t need to go. Mom asked her why but she wouldn’t say. A few minutes later, the phone rang. It was Uncle Rick’s boyfriend calling to let us know Uncle Rick had been killed by a drunk driver on their way home from a party the night before.”

I felt the hairs on my arms stand up again. “Wow. So she really is a psychic?”

Gilly shrugged. “That sounds so silly. It’s not like she has a crystal ball. She says she just sees stuff that other people miss, that she’s more sensitive.” She gave me an appraising look. “Why? What did she say to you?”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“When did she talk to you?”

“While you were inside.”

“She and Todd both?”

“And your dad.”

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry. Is my family stalking you?”

We both laughed.

A moment later, Jake came running toward us.

“Speaking of stalkers, here’s another one,” I quipped.

“What? Why am I a stalker?” Jake asked, confused.

Todd walked up just then. “Because you’re a sick little pervert.” He grinned as he grabbed Jake in a headlock, making him struggle

for a minute before releasing him.

Jake rubbed his neck as if it hurt. “Knock it off, Todd, or I’ll tell everyone about the magazines under your bed.”

Todd shot him a strange look, as if unsure whether Jake was serious. Apparently satisfied he wasn’t, Todd asked, “Are you two brats ready?”

“I’m going to Killian’s. He’ll drive me home later,” Jake said, shifting his backpack from one shoulder to the other.

Gilly turned to me with surprise. I’m sure my expression mirrored hers. I’d thought Jake and I were just talking. He hadn’t mentioned anything about going home with me.

Todd regarded me searchingly for a moment, then shrugged. “Suit yourself. Gilly, you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.” Then she leaned over and kissed me hard on the lips. “Have to keep up appearances,” she whispered in my ear and, with a lingering look at me, got into her brother’s car.

After they had driven off, Jake and I climbed into my car.

“So, when did the plans change?” I asked as I buckled my seatbelt.

“Sorry. I just wanted to go someplace where we can talk in private. I figured your house would be best.”

“What’s all this cloak-and-dagger business about, Jake?” I started the car and pulled out.

“I just need to talk to you about some stuff, and I don’t want to be overheard. Somebody’s always listening in my house.”

“So I’ve noticed. What stuff do you want to talk about? Seth?”

“Partly.”

“Jake, we’re in a moving car, and as far as I know there’s no one in the back seat. I think it’s safe to talk.”

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “It’s just that this isn’t easy for me. I’ve never told anybody this before.”

“Told anybody what?” I shouted in exasperation.

“I’m gay!” he shouted back.

I almost drove off the road. Once I had the car back under control, I looked over at him.

He sat slumped in the seat, staring at his hands in his lap. He looked as if he might start bawling at any second. That was the last thing I wanted. I knew how much courage it had taken him to come out to me.

"It's okay, Jake," I said softly. "I'm not going to hate you or anything."

He looked up hopefully. "Really?"

"Yeah, really. You know why?"

"Why?"

"I'm gay, too."

"I knew it!" he crowed. "I figured when you started hanging out with Seth, but then I was confused when you started dating Gilly..."

"Gilly and I are just friends."

"But that kiss she just laid on you..."

"It's kind of like a cover, so no one knows I'm gay for right now. Not that I'm ashamed of it or anything. Well, I was at first, I guess. It was something I wanted to hide, but Adam has taught me that it's just a part of who I am, like being left- or right-handed."

"Adam?"

"Adam is Seth's dad."

"So were you and Seth...?"

"We were just friends. He helped me realize that I'm gay. I'm not ready to come out at school, which is the main reason I'm dating Gilly. She offered, by the way. Plus, I think more people will talk to me about Seth if they don't know I'm gay."

"Talk to you about what? Do you think it was more than just a mugging, too? I mean, why else would you want to ask people about Seth without them finding out you're gay?"

"You know, you're a lot smarter than you let on," I commented dryly.

"I'm not sure if I should take that as a compliment or not." He gave me an adorable grin.

At the sight of his dimples, I almost ran off the road again. "Take it as a compliment." I could feel my cheeks heating up. Even without looking at him, I knew he was still grinning.

"Okay, but only on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You keep your eyes on the road while you're driving."

We burst out laughing. The drive passed quickly and before I knew it, I was pulling into the driveway. "Well, this is where I live now."

"This is a really cool place." He flashed me another one of those killer smiles.

I felt as if I were melting. "It's not quite your house."

"Our house is too big. It's like living in a museum. It's been in my dad's family for years. All our money is family money. This is so much cooler. I'd love to live on the beach. I could just walk out my back door and go surfing."

"I wish I surfed," I said as we climbed out of the car.

"I could teach you," Jake offered eagerly.

"Like you taught me how to play that video game?"

We laughed and went inside. After I made introductions, Adam went back to work on his computer, while Jake and I wandered up to my room to talk.

As we settled at opposite ends of the bed, I returned to our earlier conversation. "So you think Seth was murdered?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's the only thing that makes sense to me. I really don't understand why the police aren't doing more."

"We believe it was more than just a mugging, too. Adam thinks maybe the police are purposefully ignoring important information."

"Like what?"

"There were letters in Seth's locker. The police dismissed them as

harmless pranks, but they could mean the killer goes to our school — or at least has a contact there who knows something. Did you have any classes with Seth?”

“No, but I saw him a lot in the halls and stuff. I guess I kind of watched for him. He was the only gay guy I knew. And then you started talking to him at school and stuff, so I started wondering..”

“Did you ever see him with anyone else?”

“Mostly just you.”

“But was there anybody else?”

He thought for a minute, then spoke slowly, as if carefully considering each word. “This is hard. Not just hard to remember who I saw him with, but also because I feel like I’m casting suspicion on anyone I name.” He sighed. “But I guess if there’s even the smallest chance any of them did it... Anyway, I saw him talking to Zack Phillips, Jesse O’Donnell and Asher Davis once — or they were talking to him, to be exact, kind of surrounding him. Seth didn’t look too happy, but you know how Zack and Jesse are. Another time I saw him with just Asher. I saw him with Becky Rosinski. And I think I saw him with Marcus Davis once.” He hesitated for a moment before continuing quickly. “I saw him with a few other people, but I don’t really know them. Besides, they all seemed to be just talking to him after class, you know? Not like a real conversation.”

I started to ask him about the hesitation, then I decided it would wait. I was more distracted by the news that Asher had talked to Seth twice. He’d never mentioned it to me. Could it be what he was hiding from me or was there more? I pushed that line of thought from my mind and forced my attention back to our conversation.

“Did Seth look angry or scared or uncomfortable with any of them?”

Once again, Jake thought for a moment before answering. “It’s hard to say — maybe with Zack, Jesse, and Asher. I guess he also looked uncomfortable when it was just Asher. Not really with Becky. I couldn’t tell with Marcus because I only saw them from behind.”

“What about the others?”

“I’m not sure.” His eyes flickered away.

Once again, I had the distinct impression he wasn’t telling me everything. This time I decided to not ignore it. “You have to tell me everything, Jake.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean whatever it is you’re not telling me. It’s obvious you’re trying to protect someone or something, but this is really important. I need to talk to everyone who had anything to do with Seth. Even if they didn’t kill him, they might know something, maybe something they don’t even realize they know.”

He sat there for a few minutes before finally making up his mind. “Look, Killian...there is another person I saw him talking to, but I can’t say who it is yet.”

“Why are you protecting this person? What if they’re the one that killed Seth?”

“I just can’t believe that. Please, let it go for now and give me a chance to ask them about it first.”

“Okay,” I gave in with a sigh.

His whole face lit up with a smile as he impulsively jumped across the bed and tackled me. We wrestled on the bed for a few minutes before he finally got the advantage. He had my body pinned with his and was holding my arms above my head. His face was just inches from mine when our eyes locked and we both froze. We stared at one another for what seemed like an eternity before he suddenly jumped back.

“Sorry.” He was slightly out of breath, even though I knew we hadn’t wrestled that hard.

“For what?”

He seemed at a loss for words, so I took pity on him. “Never mind,” I said over my shoulder as I got off the bed and checked my phone.

There was a strange tension in the room for a few minutes. We avoided looking at each other, and neither of us spoke. Finally, he

broke the silence. “Hey, Killian, can I ask you a question? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

That certainly piqued my curiosity. “Sure, you can ask me anything.”

“Do you...like anybody?”

“Like how?” I knew what he was asking; I just wanted to hear him say it.

“Like as in...are you, like, attracted to anyone?” He blushed a furious red.

I couldn’t help smiling. I stared at my phone so he wouldn’t think I was laughing at him. “Yes.”

“Can I ask who?”

“Sure you can ask. It doesn’t mean I’ll tell you, though.” I was enjoying teasing him way too much.

“Why not? Don’t you trust me?”

I realized it was a serious question for him, and I wasn’t being very sensitive. I slipped my phone back into my pocket and walked back over to the bed. I sat down next to him and looked directly into his eyes. “I don’t know who I trust anymore. You seem to be a very honest person, though, and I really like hanging out with you. I hope we can be friends. I’m just not quite ready to talk about my crushes. Do you understand?”

He looked away. “Yeah, I guess so.” He sounded dejected. “I should be getting home. Do you think you can take me now?”

I felt awful. I could tell I’d disappointed him, but what could I do? Tell him I was attracted to both him and Asher?

“Yeah, sure.”

We made small talk as I drove him home, comparing classes and teachers, discussing our favorite movies, and arguing about our musical tastes. I liked pop and older stuff, while Jake preferred R&B and hip hop. In between, he must have thanked me a dozen times for being so honest and accepting with him.

I dropped Jake off and was pulling out of their driveway when

Judy stepped out from behind one of the two enormous bushes on either side of its entrance. She stopped in front of my car as I slammed on the brakes and managed to stop just short of hitting her. I was very glad I hadn't been going any faster. My heart was pounding as I started to open my door.

Judy motioned for me to stay where I was. She walked around and climbed into the passenger seat. She looked older than she had the day before. She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail and wasn't wearing any makeup. There were dark circles under her eyes.

"What is it with you jumping out of the shrubbery? I could have hit you!" I accused her angrily.

"But you didn't. I needed to speak to you privately."

"So you jump in front of my car?" I was exasperated.

"We're talking, aren't we?"

I shook my head in wonder. Obviously, there was no winning with this strange woman. "So what was so important that you had to risk your life to tell me?"

"I'm leaving to go back to California tomorrow."

"Well, thank you for the information. I'll miss you terribly." I was still rather miffed about the near accident.

"Killian, please take this seriously. I needed to tell you before I left that you're in danger."

"You told me that last night."

"Things have changed since then. You're in even more danger now. I had a dream last night."

Now she had my attention. "What about?"

"There was a faceless man watching you from the shadows, but you didn't see him. He didn't come after you, but he will soon. He fears you."

At first I was speechless. When I finally found my voice, it came out a bit shaky. "I have that dream all the time."

She gave me a measuring look. "When we first shook hands, I felt

something in you. I thought you might be Gifted.” She said the word as if it had a capital G.

I stared at her in dumbfounded shock.

“If you’re having dreams like that, I might be right.”

I found my tongue. “What do you mean Gifted?”

She hesitated. “Do you believe in supernatural powers, Killian?”

“Like...seeing the future and stuff?”

She tipped her head slightly to one side. “Among other things.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“I believe that some people are born with certain...talents. The same way some people have a natural ability to draw or a knack for music, others are born with a special sensitivity to things — for lack of a better explanation — on another plane. I call these talents Gifts.”

My head hurt as I tried to process what she was saying. “So you think I have these...Gifts?”

“Possibly.”

Panic gripped my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. “The dreams I’m having might be visions of the future?”

She shook her head. “Not necessarily. They could just be warnings. Of course, there’s always the possibility they’re merely bad dreams.”

“But you said you felt something when we shook hands...”

“Yes. I did.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed my throbbing temples. Suddenly, her earlier words sank in, and my eyes popped open. “Wait a minute. You said the killer fears me? I fear him!”

“You fear him because he’s a threat to you. He fears you for the same reason.”

“How am I a threat to him?”

“You’re the only one who can stop him.”

We sat staring at each other for a few more seconds. I was in

shock, and she seemed to be in thoughtful contemplation. Then she opened the door and climbed out. Leaning back in, she said, “You are a remarkable young man with a promising future, Killian. Just be careful. You’ve lost a lot and been hurt so much already — and you’ll most likely be hurt more before this is over. Eventually, if a soul is hurt enough it will become calloused. You must not allow that to happen. You’d stop feeling — and then *you’d* be dangerous.”

She slammed the door and started toward the house. I sat there for another minute pulling myself together before driving off. I wasn’t sure I bought her ideas about Giftedness, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to Judy than met the eye. I decided I’d be smart to heed her warning.

My sleep was troubled once again that night. At one point, I woke up from a nightmare and sat up in bed to find Seth standing at the foot of my bed. I almost screamed before I realized it was a dream within a dream, like some kind of nightmare inception. I blinked and he was gone.

I crawled out of bed the next morning feeling as if I hadn’t rested at all. That was becoming a pattern with me. I dragged myself down to breakfast and then on to school. The day pretty much went by in a blur. My grades for the semester were going to be mediocre at best if things didn’t change.

After school, I saw Marcus Davis, Asher’s older brother, walking across the parking lot. He was a senior on the student council and, by all accounts, a pretty nice guy. He’d always treated me well. He looked nothing like his younger brother. He was built like a football player, much beefier than Asher.

I remembered Jake saying he’d seen Marcus talking to Seth, so I ran to catch up with him before he could reach his car, a beat-up old Honda that he treated like a Corvette.

It was time to start my investigation. “Marcus, could I talk to you for a second?”

“Hey, Killian. We can talk if you’re fast. I’ve got to get to work. If I’m late one more time, I’m dead meat.”

“This is going to sound weird, but humor me. Did you ever talk to Seth Connelly?”

“Talk to him? Yeah, I guess so. He was in my Spanish III class. Man, that kid could speak some *español*. He was really advanced.”

“No, I mean did you ever have a real conversation, not just class stuff?”

He gave me a funny look. “I don’t know, maybe once or twice.”

“Do you remember what you said?”

He gave me the same funny look again. “Not really. Nothing important, I’m sure.”

“Well, if you think of anything, will you let me know?”

“Yeah, sure Killian, whatever. I gotta go.”

He turned to walk away, but I had one more question. “Did you ever see him with anyone else?”

“What difference does it make? Why do you care?”

“Oh...um...I was pretty much Seth’s only friend. I’m just trying to find out what was going on with him before he died. I need...you know...um...closure.”

“You’re one weird dude, Killian. I don’t know who he talked to. I didn’t keep tabs on him.” He started away, then turned around and kept walking backwards. “If you need closure, maybe you should talk to Asher. He’s the one still moping around ‘cause you guys broke up.”

“*What?*” I screeched, but he was already gone, loping off toward his car.

I wanted to chase after him but decided against it. People in the parking lot were watching me curiously. I’d already attracted more than enough attention for one day, so I got in my car and left.

All the way home, I thought about what Marcus had said. Asher was moping about us? Did he really feel as if we’d broken up? He was the one who’d said we’d never really even been dating. Everything had happened so fast. Did that mean there was still a chance for us to work things out? I couldn’t believe Asher had told Marcus about

us or, more importantly, that Marcus would just blurt it out in the middle of the school parking lot.

What about Jake? another part of my brain piped up. I couldn't deny I was attracted to him, and I was pretty sure he was attracted to me, too. Where did Judy's warning play into all this? There were too many questions. I didn't know what to think.

I walked in the house and dropped my backpack by the door on my way to the kitchen to grab a snack. My phone buzzed. It was Mom. "Hi, Mom. What's up?" I answered.

"Killian," she sounded tired — or maybe weary was a better word, "I need to talk to you about something important. Is now a good time for me to come over?"

Chapter 16

I was waiting nervously in the living room for Mom to arrive, pacing back and forth like one of the big cats at the zoo. I was too tense to sit still. Mom wouldn't tell me on the phone why she wanted to see me. All she would say was that it was the kind of thing we needed to talk about in person. I just knew something was wrong.

Finally, I heard her pull up outside. I was at the door before she was even out of the car. Her appearance confirmed my fears. Something was definitely wrong. Her clothes were rumpled and wrinkled, as if she'd slept in them. When she straightened up, the wind caught her hair and blew it back from her face. I felt my knees buckle under me, and I had to grab the doorjamb to keep from falling. One whole side of her face was an angry purple bruise, and her left eye was swollen shut. As she came toward me, I noticed she was walking with a slight limp.

I tried to swallow around the lump that had formed in my throat, tried to say something — anything — but I couldn't find my voice. I wanted to run to her and take her in my arms, but I seemed rooted to the spot.

She stopped midway across the yard and attempted to give me a smile. "I make a pretty sight, huh, kiddo?"

Her voice released me from my state of shock. I leapt from the porch and ran to her, catching her in an embrace and trying not to cry.

"Oh!" she gasped as I squeezed her. "Be careful, honey. I have a

few cracked ribs.”

I backed away quickly and looked at her again. She was in even worse shape up close.

“He did this to you, didn’t he?” I finally managed to whisper hoarsely.

She looked at me for a minute, then linked her arm through mine and started toward the door. “Come on, let’s go on inside.”

We made our way to the living room — I wasn’t sure who was leading whom — and settled on the couch. I suddenly felt like a little boy again, frightened and confused and just wanting my mommy to comfort me. I laid my head gently against her shoulder. She heaved a long heavy sigh and began to stroke my hair.

“What happened?” I finally asked.

“We fought.”

“Obviously. But what about?”

“That hardly matters.”

“It was about me, wasn’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What will you do now?”

“I’m going to live with Aunt Kathy in Pennsylvania.”

I sat up and turned so I could look into her eyes. “What?”

“I can’t stay here, Killian. That became very clear last night. I’m going to move in with Kathy and help take care of the kids for a while.”

Aunt Kathy was my mom’s sister. Her husband had died about a year before, leaving her with a bunch of kids to raise alone. I didn’t know any of my cousins. I couldn’t ever remember meeting them. Kathy and my dad didn’t get along.

“You can’t just run off and let him get away with this again, Mom.”

“I know, baby. Trust me, I’m not running off, and I’m not letting him get away with it. I’m through being a doormat. After I drove

myself to the hospital last night, I told the doctor everything that happened. He reported it to the police, who came and took a formal statement. I pressed charges. Adam was right. We should have pressed charges after he beat you. I was just afraid of the repercussions.”

“What’s going to happen now?”

“That’s a good question. I don’t have any idea.” She stood up and limped slowly to the window looking out over the beach and the ocean. “I haven’t been home. I spent the night in a shelter for battered women. I haven’t seen or spoken to your father since I left last night. I’m not supposed to go to the house without a police escort. Knowing your father, he’ll squirm out of this somehow. No matter what happens, though, he’s going to be very angry. He knows a lot of people around here. I don’t think it’s safe for me to stay in town.”

I nodded with a frown. “You’ll definitely be safer at Aunt Kathy’s, but that’s so far away. I won’t get to see you very often.”

Mom turned to look at me in surprise. “I thought you would go with me.”

“What?”

“I want you to go with me.”

“I don’t even know Aunt Kathy.”

“You’ll love her. I talked to her last night. She can’t wait for us to get there.”

“You made these plans without even asking me?”

“I just assumed you’d want to be with me. Come on, Killian. You’ll like it at Kathy’s. She lives in a nice town, good schools. You’ll have all your cousins around to keep you company.”

“I’ve never even met them!”

“So you’ll get to know them.”

I stood up and started pacing. “But...but...”

“But what, Killian?” Exasperation filled her voice.

“I don’t want to go.”

“You...don’t want to go?” I could tell she was hurt.

“I don’t want to leave. I like living with Adam. I’m happy here. I don’t want to move away right now. I —” I almost said that I couldn’t leave until I’d found out who killed Seth, but I stopped myself just in time. Somehow, I doubted Mom would think that was an acceptable reason for staying.

“I don’t understand.”

“I just can’t...drop everything and go. I’m happy now. Maybe you can move in with me and Adam.”

“No.” She was starting to get angry now. “That’s not far enough. I need to leave. I have to get as far away from him as possible. You of all people should understand that. Do you see what he did to me?” She pointed to her face. “And I want you away from him, too.”

I bit my lip. “He’s left me alone since I moved in here.”

“So far. What happens if he decides his gay son is becoming too much of an embarrassment? What if he decides you’re a handicap to his campaign? You’re no safer here than I am. I wouldn’t put it past him to try and use you against me.”

“I’m willing to take that risk.”

“Well, I’m not, damn it! You’re all I’ve got now. This is your life we’re talking about. Do you want to end up dead like your friend Seth?”

My breath caught in my throat, and I stared at her in horror. She glared back at me, her eyes flashing with anger — but beyond that, I realized, fear.

Then suddenly her eyes changed. All the anger drained out as if someone had pulled a plug, leaving only the fear. She swayed in the center of the room, and for a moment, I thought she was going to collapse. I rushed to her side, but she waved me off. She walked to the nearest chair and lowered herself gingerly into it.

“I’m sorry, Killian. That was uncalled for. You’re right. There’s no sense in dragging you out of school and away from your friends. You’re as safe here with Adam as you’d be anywhere. If your father wants to find us, Kathy’s is the first place he’ll look. She never liked

him, and she's the only family I have. We'll talk to Adam. If it's okay with him, you can stay here." She rubbed at her good eye and sagged back farther into the chair.

"It's fine with me," Adam said from the doorway, making us both jump. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. Or eavesdrop either, for that matter. I came in, and I guess you didn't hear me, but I couldn't help hearing you."

Mom looked at him silently, then turned and looked at me. I nodded. She sighed again and stood up.

"Then it's settled. Killian, you'll stay with Adam — at least until school is out. Maybe after that you can come up and spend the summer with me."

"Mom, I'm sorry—" I started.

"Killian, it's okay. Really. Now that I think about it, it makes a lot more sense this way. Kathy has enough kids in the house without adding yet another. You'd be in a new place with no friends. Adam's proven he's responsible, and he's been good to you, better than your own father."

"Meg, I said it was okay with me and it is. I've grown to think of Killian as another one of my sons. I just want to make certain you're sure about this."

"I don't have time to be sure," she said wearily. "I need to go. I have to call the police and go pick up my things from the house, then drive to my sister's tonight. I'm already emotionally and physically drained. I just want to leave now before I get any more tired."

"Can I do anything to help?" Adam's voice was filled with concern.

Mom shook her head. "You've already done more than anyone could ever have expected."

She turned toward me, holding out her arms, and I took her gently into mine. She seemed so frail. We stood quietly like that for a few minutes before she pulled away.

I looked into her tear-streaked face and realized how much I loved her. I knew I would miss her, but I also knew I had made

the right decision. I had unfinished business I needed to deal with. There was peace inside of me, and I could see it reflected in her eyes.

“I love you, Mom,” I whispered.

“I love you, too. This isn’t forever. I’ll be back and forth. I have doctors’ appointments I’ll need to keep, and Adam and I will have to work out all the details of his becoming your legal guardian. And I can’t be away from my baby on Thanksgiving, so I’ll definitely be back in a month.”

We hugged again, and then she turned to Adam. “Take care of my boy, Mr. Connelly. If anything happens to him, you’ll see what I’m capable of.” She said the last part with a smile, but I had the feeling she was deadly serious.

“I will,” Adam promised solemnly. “I’ll take care of him as if he were my own. As for Thanksgiving, we’ll expect you to stay here and have dinner with us.”

Mom nodded and looked at me one more time before she started to leave. I walked her out to the car. Adam followed as far as the front door, where he stood watching us.

She opened the car door, then paused and gave me a shaky smile. “Are you sure you won’t come with me?”

“I can’t.”

She reached out a hand and rested it on my cheek for just the briefest second, then turned to get into the car.

“Mom—”

She stopped and faced me again. I leaned in for one last hug, kissing her on the cheek before stepping back. She reached up to the spot where my lips had brushed her, and I saw a tear slip out of the corner of her eye. Then she quickly ducked into the car, backed out onto the street, and sat there looking at me for a moment. Finally, she waved one last time before pulling away.

I watched until she made the turn at the end of the street and drove out of sight. Even then, I stood staring at nothing until I felt Adam’s arm settle around my shoulders. He pulled me back toward the house and into the living room.

“It’s not forever, Killian.” He said as we sat on the couch. “She’ll be back in a few weeks.”

“I know. It won’t even be that much different from the way it’s been since I moved in with you. It’s just weird to know your whole family is out of reach in one way or another. You’re the only family I have now.”

“As I told your mom, I consider you one of my sons.”

“Well, then I guess I have a brother now, too...Kane. Any news on him?”

“Ilana called today. She said things are going well. Eve’s lawyer has been very cooperative so far, although they have in no way even suggested that I’ll get so much as visitation rights, let alone custody.”

“When will you know more?”

“I’m not sure. These things are complicated. Without Eve’s cooperation, this could be a long, drawn-out process. With Seth, it was easy — she didn’t want him. He was too much like me, in all the wrong ways.”

My eyes widened, and I had trouble controlling the smile that was fighting to spread across my face. If I’d been a cartoon character, a light bulb would have just popped on above my head. Nothing distracts me from a bad mood like a good project, and I’d just thought of a great one.

Adam could tell something was up. “What?” he asked me suspiciously. “I’m not sure I like that look you just got on your face. You’re up to something.”

“It’s nothing. I just remembered I have homework.”

“I’ve never seen you get so excited about homework before.” If his tone were any drier, it might have spontaneously combusted.

“First time for everything.” I jumped up and headed for my room.

“You’d better not be up to something, Killian,” he called after me.

“Who, me?” I gave him my best innocent look, grabbed my backpack, and bounded up the stairs.

I shut the door and whipped out my phone to text Kane. It only

took a few minutes to explain my brilliant plan. Kane loved it and thought it just might work. With that out of the way, I turned to my homework, just so my little fib to Adam wouldn't be a total lie. I gave a groan as I remembered I actually did have quite a bit. It was God's way of punishing me for lying, I just knew it.

Jake called later that night. I'd finished the dinner dishes and all my homework and was just sitting in my room reading.

"Hey, Killian. I've decided to tell you about the other person that I saw talking to Seth. I haven't said anything to them yet, but I will before tomorrow afternoon. How about if you come over to my house around three? I mean as long as you don't already have plans. I know it's a Saturday and all—"

"I'll be there at three," I cut him off.

"Great, I'll see you then."

Now my mind was going a hundred miles an hour trying to figure out who Jake was protecting. It had to be someone he liked or he wouldn't care. I didn't really know Jake all that well, but I knew who he hung out with in general — the surfers and skaters. Could the person in question be part of that group? I couldn't picture a homophobic killer among them since they tended to be more tolerant than the general student body.

Then again, just because someone was having a conversation with Seth didn't mean they were the killer. In fact, the killer might never have had any direct contact with Seth before the night of the murder. That was a depressing thought. How would I ever find the killer? Suddenly this seemed like a bigger project than I could handle.

The more I turned everything over in my mind, the more muddled it all became. In movies and books, they always make lists when they are trying to figure stuff out, so I decided to give it a try. I pulled a notebook out of my backpack and wrote a heading at the top of the page: *People Who Talked to Seth*. Under that, I listed Asher, Zack, Jesse, Becky, and Marcus. That was all I had so far. I looked at the list and sighed. It wasn't very much. I added a check next to Marcus's name since I'd already spoken to him, for all the good it did me. Then I

added a big question mark to represent Jake's mystery person.

I stared at the page for a few more minutes, but for the life of me, I couldn't see anything useful. It sure didn't make the killer pop off the page the way it always did in the movies. Frustrated, I threw the notebook across the room.

What was I doing? I wasn't a detective. I could barely do my calculus homework. How was I supposed to find a killer? By making a list? I laughed at myself. I was too tired to think about it anymore. I swept everything off my bed, got undressed and crawled under the covers. I'd worry about it in the morning.

I was watching a group of people from a slight distance away. I could see them clearly, but none of them seemed to notice me. It was almost as if there was a pane of one-way glass between us. I looked closely and realized I knew almost everyone in the group: Zack, Jesse, Asher, Marcus, Jake, Kane, Becky Rosinski, and someone else I couldn't quite make out. Seth stood off to one side, not included in their little huddle. They were talking casually among themselves when suddenly the shadows around them began to undulate and swirl as if coming to life. Several wisps of darkness separated themselves and formed into a familiar person, the faceless man.

No one else seemed to notice him as he drew closer to the group. I wanted to scream and warn them, but I couldn't make a sound. He paused a few feet away from Seth and turned his head in my direction. Even though I couldn't see his face, I knew he was looking right at me. I felt as if he was smiling cruelly at my futile attempt to cry out to Seth.

Without warning, he reached out and grabbed Seth. There was a knife in his other hand, and with one smooth, effortless motion, he drew it across Seth's throat. Seth crumpled to the ground, where he lay motionless in a growing pool of crimson. I tried to scream once more, but still nothing came out. The faceless man's cold laughter rang in my ears. Why could no one else hear it? The others hadn't even noticed that Seth was dead. The killer closed in on them. I tried to throw myself forward to stop him, but I couldn't move. I was

helpless to do anything but watch in horror as he deliberately reached for Asher. He turned to look at me again, mocking my inability to stop him, then raised his knife in preparation to kill once more.

“Killian!” someone screamed my name, but I didn’t answer. I had to stop the faceless man. “Killian!” the voice screamed again, louder this time. I turned to see who it was.

I found myself looking up at Adam leaning over my bed, one hand on my shoulder. I was still shaking from the dream. Residual images skated around the edges of my consciousness.

“Are you okay? Were you having another nightmare?”

“It was awful,” I told him groggily.

“It sounded like it.” He sat down on the edge of my bed, a concerned look on his face. “I talked to a counselor yesterday, but I still didn’t have your medical and insurance information. Besides, since I’m not your legal guardian yet, he needs to speak to your mother. With everything going on earlier, I’m afraid I forgot to ask her. I’ll call her tomorrow — or today rather.”

I nodded absently. I was only half listening, my mind still on the dream.

“Do you think you can go back to sleep?” he asked me.

I nodded again, and he leaned over to kiss me lightly on the forehead. Even with the nightmare fresh in my mind, I was asleep again in minutes. My body was just too exhausted to fight it anymore. If I had another dream that night, I mercifully didn’t remember it in the morning.

The next day was busy. I got up, showered, and ate breakfast while watching a few Saturday-morning cartoons. Then I decided to clean my room, which had become amazingly messy in the short time I’d lived there. I was half under the bed trying to reach a stray sock when something caught my eye. Someone had shoved a small book into the lining of the box spring, and knowing whose room this had been before mine, my first guess would be Seth. I reverently slid the book out and pulled myself from beneath the bed. It looked

like a journal of some sort. Part of me wanted to open it and start reading right away, but another part wanted to respect Seth's privacy. If I kept a journal, I wouldn't want anyone else to read it, even if I were gone. I sat on the floor staring at the dark green cover. What should I do? I finally decided not to make a decision — at least not right then. I'd put it back where I found it and think about what I should do.

Not long after I'd returned the journal to its hiding place, I came across the notebook I had thrown down the night before. Any distraction from cleaning was welcome, so I sat on my bed and looked at the list again. I still didn't know what I was doing, but maybe if I talked to everyone on it, I might find out something more. I'd already questioned Marcus and all I'd gotten from him was that crack about Asher, which I'd almost convinced myself was just Marcus being a jerk. At any rate, I still wasn't quite ready to talk to Asher.

I moved to the following names, Zack and Jesse. I didn't have to think long about that one. I did not want to ask them about Seth. I'd have to find someone else to do it for me, maybe Gilly.

Next on the list was Becky. I didn't know her number but thought Gilly might, so I texted her. Sure enough, she had Becky's number and gave it to me once I explained why I needed it. She also agreed to try and talk to Zack and Jesse without raising too much suspicion.

I took a deep breath and sent Becky a text.

“Hi Becky. This is Killian.”

“Killian who?”

“Killian Kendall. We go to school together. Gilly gave me your number.”

“Oh right. You're Gilly's new boyfriend. Cool. Why are you texting me?”

What an ego boost. I had officially been relegated to accessory status. Just what I'd always wanted. Oh, well, if it meant I had an in with the people I needed to interview, I could deal.

“I have a somewhat weird question. Can I call you?”

“Um...I guess. This better not be some weird sex thing. I’m not having a threesome.”

“WHAT? NO! It’s not like that, I swear. Hang on. I’ll just call.”

Becky answered on the first ring. “What’s this about?”

“I just have some questions about someone at school.”

“Okay.” Becky somehow managed to stretch those two syllables as if she were pulling taffy. She had an annoying way of speaking so slowly that you sometimes felt you needed to put a chain on her words and drag them from her mouth. I wished I’d just kept texting her.

“Did you ever talk to Seth?”

“Seth was, like, that guy who was gay, right?”

“Right.” I held my breath.

“Yeah, I used to talk to him all the time. He was in my art class. He was really cool. That was so sad what happened to him.”

“Did you ever speak to him outside of class?”

“Maybe. I dunno.”

“Do you remember what you talked about?”

“Um, probably just about art stuff, you know? He was helping me with a project. I got an A on it. It was really awesome. It was this painting of—”

“That’s great, Becky,” I interrupted. If I let her go off on a tangent we’d be there all day. I tried to gently steer her back to the conversation at hand. “Did you ever see him talking to anyone else?”

She thought for a minute, or at least I assumed she was thinking. She got quiet, but maybe she was just filing her nails or something. I was about to ask if she was still there when she spoke again. “You know, I did see him talking to some guy a couple times, but I can’t remember his name.”

I immediately thought of Asher. “What did he look like?”

I heard someone talking to her in the background, and then her voice answering, kind of muffled.

“I don’t know. I have to go,” she finally replied.

“Wait! What did the guy look like? You have to have some idea.”

“Why is it so important? Were you hot for him or something? He’s like a surfer or something, maybe a skater. Who gives a damn? I have to go, my boyfriend is waiting.” And with that, she ended the call.

I snarled with frustration. Everything I tried was turning out to be a dead end. The only information I’d managed to glean from Becky was that Seth might or might not have spoken to someone who might or might not have been a surfer dude...or maybe a skater. We lived in a beach town. That described half the guys in my school. Could she have been any more ambiguous? Then again, it tied back to my suspicions about the person Jake was protecting. His crowd was the surfers and skaters.

I glanced at my watch. It was only a little after 2, and I wasn’t supposed to be at Jake’s until 3 o’clock. What the hell. I was tired of sitting around my half-cleaned bedroom. I decided to leave a little early.

By the time I arrived at the Sheridans’ it was already 2:30, only half an hour before he was expecting me. I knocked on the door, and Todd answered.

“Are you here for Gilly or Jake?” he asked, then before I could answer, “Because Gilly’s gone shopping and Jake went surfing, although he might be back by now. He took the boat. You can check out back.” He walked away, leaving the door open.

I shrugged and pulled the door shut, then walked around to the backyard. Gilly had shown me the old boathouse and dock the night I’d had dinner there, so I knew it was on the other side of a small stand of trees, shielded from view of the house.

I followed the path through the woods and, just as I was about to step into the open, I saw Jake coming out of the boathouse. For some reason, I stopped. He hadn’t seen me yet. His hair was damp and tousled, and he was wearing a full wetsuit.

He paused outside the boathouse and rummaged through a

backpack sitting on the ground. He pulled out a big towel and hung it over the door handle. He then proceeded to unzip his wetsuit and peel it down. I caught my breath at the sight of him naked to the waist. I watched in mesmerized silence as he grabbed the towel and began to dry off his upper torso. He wasn't overly buff, but like most surfers, he had a well-defined swimmer's body that was tan all over — at least what I could see. He reached back into the bag and pulled out a T-shirt, which he slipped over his head.

Then he unzipped the wetsuit the rest of the way and pulled it off. I almost passed out. I had a completely unobstructed view of his perfect butt. I took an involuntary step backwards and bumped into something warm and solid. I let out a yelp as I spun around to find Todd watching me with narrowed eyes.

"Like what you see?" he said in a low, dangerous-sounding voice.

"Todd," I gasped. I would have been gasping even if he hadn't just scared two years off my life. I was still catching my breath after seeing Jake naked. "No! I mean, I just didn't want to interrupt..."

"Killian? Is that you?" Jake was still down by the boathouse.

"Yeah," I called back, without taking my eyes off Todd.

"Come on down, I'm just getting everything put away. I went surfing this afternoon. The waves were awesome, but it was a little chilly."

"Coming," I yelled.

"Go," Todd said, still in a low voice, "but talk to me before you leave. Oh, and one more thing. If you hurt my sister, I'll come after you."

I turned and walked down to the boathouse without looking back, my heart racing.

Jake, now fully clothed, was locking the boathouse door. "Hey, Killer," he greeted me.

I froze in my tracks. "What did you say?" My voice came out sharper than I'd intended — so much for the subtle approach.

He looked up at me with a confused expression. "I just said hey."

“No, what did you call me?”

“Killer? I’m sorry. You don’t like that?” He straightened up, leaving the lock hanging open in the hasp.

“No...I mean, it’s okay. It just surprised me. Seth called me that. No one else ever has.”

“Really? You’d think it would be a natural nickname for Killian, especially with that killer smile of yours.” He added the last part with that incredible grin of his. Those dimples got me every time.

I laughed, breaking the tension.

He turned around and bent to pick up his backpack. I couldn’t help picturing his bare butt once again. I must have had a funny expression on my face when he faced me again, because he gave me an odd look. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I managed to say.

His eyes sparkled, and his little smirk said he didn’t believe me. I could tell he had something up his sleeve, but what?

“So...” His smirk grew into a full-fledged grin. “How long were you in the trees?”

Chapter 17

My mouth was moving, but nothing was coming out. How was I going to explain this? Todd would tell Jake I'd watched him change, and he'd be mad at me. As my panic mounted, Jake laughed.

"Killian, I'm kidding. I knew you were there the whole time. Did you enjoy the show?"

"You jerk!" It had been a setup.

He cracked up. "I saw your reflection in the window. Do you think I always change out in the middle of the yard? I wanted to see how far I could go before you said something."

I blushed, and he laughed even harder. Suddenly, he stepped in close to me and kissed me softly on the lips, then stepped quickly around me and walked away up the path toward the house. I stood where I was until I'd calmed down enough to follow him.

"By the way," he said when I caught up to him by the backdoor, "don't expect a repeat performance anytime soon."

"I...I...I don't," I stuttered, and he giggled again.

"Oh, and one more thing," he said with his hand on the doorknob, "don't worry about Todd." I opened my mouth to reply, but he gave me a look that effectively said, "Shut up."

I followed him inside, wondering the whole time where the nervous, self-conscious kid from the other day had gone. This confident tease was another whole side of Jake that I hadn't even known existed. Obviously, I still had a lot to learn about my new

friend.

“Come on up,” he said.

I followed him upstairs to his room. A double bed sat against one wall and a dresser flanked the door. A small desk was positioned under the window with an office-style chair in front of it. Surfing posters covered almost every square inch of the walls.

He sat on the bed and looked at me expectantly. I decided it might be wise to keep some distance, at least until I'd figured him out a little more, so I took the desk chair.

We stared at each other for a few seconds in awkward silence. Jake was no longer looking so confident. The seconds stretched into minutes with neither of us saying a word. Jake began to squirm and even had the grace to look a little guilty. He was probably wondering what was going through my mind.

I was enjoying the sudden shift in power until I realized how sleazy that was. Then I just felt bad. I decided to break the silence at the exact same moment Jake spoke up.

“So, you wanted to talk about—” I started as he blurted out, “Killian, I'm sorry—”

“Sorry?” I repeated stupidly.

“For that whole thing down by the boathouse.” He looked quite sheepish. “Don't be mad. It was just one of those spontaneous things. I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry if it made you uncomfortable.”

“It's...okay. Trust me, I'm not mad. Let's just forget about it.” As if I could forget what I had seen, forget how beautiful his body was.

He looked up at me through his incredibly thick lashes. Our eyes locked for several seconds before I started blushing again and glanced away. Was he still playing with me? I couldn't tell with him. I felt as if I had to constantly be on my guard.

“Why are you blushing?” A slight smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

“Why don't we talk about something else?” Subtle as ever.

“Why are you always avoiding my questions?”

“Why are you always asking such personal questions?” I countered.

We stared at each other for a few seconds before my resolve cracked and I smiled. He quickly followed suit, and we both relaxed.

“So,” I decided to try again, “you said you wanted to talk to me about the other person you saw with Seth.”

“Well...yeah...about that...”

“Come on! Don’t tell me you’re backing out on me now.”

“Not backing out so much as offering a rain check.” He gave me an apologetic, lopsided smile. He was the undisputed king of lopsided smiles.

I found I couldn’t stay angry at him. I sighed. Might as well give in with dignity, I thought. “So what is it now?”

“Well, the person in question asked me to hold off until they can talk to you themselves.”

“They? How many people are we talking about here?”

“Just one. I’m trying to keep things gender neutral.”

“You weren’t trying to keep things gender neutral outside,” I teased. I was surprised when he flushed a fetching shade of red.

“I thought we were gonna forget about that.”

“Sorry.” I didn’t even sound convincing to myself.

Jake shot me a dirty look.

“Hey, if you saw me naked, would you be able to just forget about it?” I asked.

His eyes immediately lit up with the same impish look he’d had outside, and I knew I’d goofed. “Hmm...I don’t know...there’s only one way to find out.”

In one smooth motion, he leapt from the bed and pounced on me like a cat. The swivel chair spun around and dumped us both onto the floor, where Jake began to tickle me.

“Hehehehe...stop!” I gasped out. I tried to push him off, and we ended up wrestling for several minutes before I managed to pin him

to the floor. I suspected he'd allowed me to get the upper hand, but I didn't care. I was too busy savoring our contact. My body pressed against the length of his, and our faces were only inches apart. A feeling of *déjà vu* swept over me. The last time we'd been in this position, he'd pulled away and the moment had been lost. I decided to not let that happen again. I moved slowly closer. Our gaze never wavered until the last second, when he closed his eyes and lifted his head to meet my lips.

We were kissing for the second time that day, but this time I kissed back. It started off gentle — we were both a little uncertain — until I let go of his wrists. Then his arms wrapped around my back and things quickly grew more heated. His tongue brushed against my lips, which I parted instinctively.

As the kiss went on, I felt myself getting hard. Apparently, Jake felt it, too — not all that surprising considering my erection was pressing into his crotch. He responded by grinding up into me, revealing his own excitement. My breath rushed out, leaving me limp in his arms.

Jake rolled me over, maneuvering so he was on top. He started kissing down my neck, and I found it harder and harder to breathe. When he resumed the grinding, I thought I might die right there. He rose, straddled me, and slid his hands along my sides, pushing my shirt up as he went. Then he bent down and pressed his lips against my chest.

“I can feel your heart beating,” he whispered.

I reached up and stroked his cheek, then slipped my hand behind his head to pull him in for another kiss. He broke away again and trailed kisses down my chest and stomach. He hesitated when he reached my pants.

Just then I heard footsteps coming. Obviously, Jake heard them as well, because he leapt to his feet in panic. He stood there a moment with a “what-do-I-do-now?” look on his face before grabbing my hand and yanking me up, too.

We had just gotten our clothing straightened out and our erections hidden as best we could when the door swung open. I

almost jumped out of my skin. It was Todd. He looked at me and then at Jake, taking in our flushed faces, and his eyebrows drew together in a frown.

“You can’t just barge in here, Todd,” Jake yelled. “And don’t look at me like that. We weren’t doing anything. We were only wrestling.”

“Oh, yeah, right, Jake,” Todd snapped. “Do you think I’m stupid? You should be glad it was me and not Dad.”

Jake’s eyes grew wide. “You’re not going to tell him, are you?”

Todd’s frown deepened. “I probably should.” He pointed at me. “What kind of an asshole are you? Gilly could be home at any minute, and you’re up here screwing around with her brother.

“And you!” He wheeled toward Jake. “I saw what happened down by the boathouse. You’re going after him. You’re both pathetic. You deserve each other, a couple of little queers. If it weren’t for Gilly, I’d kick both of your asses. Get out, Killian. I’ll deal with you later. Right now, Jake and I are gonna have a little chat.”

“Todd—” I tried, but he quickly cut me off.

“Out!”

I cast one last look at Jake. He was red-faced and clench-jawed and refused to meet my eyes. I dropped my head and walked out of the room.

Gilly was coming through the front door as I reached the foot of the stairs. “Killian, I thought that was your car. What are you doing here? Have you been waiting long? Never mind, I just got home. This is perfect. I was going to call you later tonight. You know how we throw a Halloween dance here every year, right?”

I nodded. Everyone knew about the Sheridans’ Halloween party. It was practically legendary. I’d never been, but I’d heard all about it. It was the social event of the year for the high-school crowd.

“Well, it’s next weekend. You’re coming, right? I mean, of course you’re coming. You’re my date. Have you thought about what you’re going to wear?”

She was talking so fast I could barely keep up. I didn’t want to

go, especially after my run-in with Todd, but I couldn't see any way out of it.

Gilly must have read my expression because her face fell. "Please say you're coming, Killian. I know I kind of messed up with that kiss, but I really don't want to be alone that night."

I sighed unenthusiastically. "Yeah, of course I'll be here."

She frowned. "You could at least sound a little excited."

I heard a noise at the top of the stairs. It was Jake. Our eyes locked and, for a moment, everything else faded away.

Then Gilly's voice broke through and brought me down to earth. "Killian? Are you okay?"

I forced my eyes back to Gilly. "Oh, yeah, sorry. I'm fine, and of course I'll be your date, but I hafta go right now."

Gilly looked from me up to Jake and back at me. Her eyes narrowed, and for a moment I thought she was going to make the connection. Then her face cleared, and she linked her arm possessively through mine as she walked me to the door. "Okay, Killian. I'll call you later to discuss our costumes."

"Great." I backed out the door, looking up at Jake one more time before spinning on my heel and jogging off to the car. Todd had been standing behind him, glaring at me with eyes full of disgust. I wondered how much he'd overheard.

I had a lot to think about as I drove home. How did I feel about Jake? Obviously, we were attracted to each other, but was it more than just physical? I'd seen him around at school for years, but we'd never actually been friends. How well did I really know him? We definitely would have gone further if Todd hadn't come in when he did. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Although part of me wanted to so badly, another part warned me that this could be dangerous territory.

Then there was Gilly. Would she be hurt if I ended up with her twin brother? She'd known I was gay from the beginning, but that didn't mean she wouldn't be upset. I couldn't even pretend to

understand how a girl's mind works. There was that kiss on the back porch the night I met her family. Then she was all excited that I was going to be her date for the costume party.

I couldn't forget about Todd, either. Where did he fit into the equation? He'd seemed to have it in for me from that first night. Why? Was he just the typical protective older brother? That was probably all it was, but it still made me uneasy. Now that he'd figured out Jake and I were gay, what would he do?

To top it all off, Jake had backed out on telling me who he'd seen with Seth again. I still wasn't any closer to learning who killed Seth. I had to come up with a plan soon.

When I arrived home, an extremely happy Adam greeted me as I walked in.

"Guess what?" he shouted before I even had the door closed.

"What?"

"Ilana called. Eve's lawyer contacted her today — on a Saturday no less! He told her that Eve has decided not to contest my request for custody. All we have to do is sign the paperwork and Kane will be moving in with us!" He grabbed me in a huge bear hug and swung me around the hallway, stumbling over the rug and almost dropping me before setting me back down.

"Steve's on his way over, and we're gonna celebrate! Oh! I almost forgot. Kane called soon after Ilana and said to tell you the plan worked, but he wouldn't explain what that meant." He stopped and gave me a speculative look. "Does this have anything to do with your sudden interest in homework last night?"

"Maybe, maybe not," I said with a grin.

"Are you going to fill me in?"

"No."

"Fine, then, I won't tell you my last piece of good news."

"What? You have to tell me!"

"Not until you tell me about this secret plan of yours and Kane's."

“I’ll do it when Kane gets here, I promise. Now please tell me the other good news. Ple-e-e-ease?”

Adam gave a huge mock sigh, then broke into another grin. He was too thrilled with the way things were working out to even pretend to be upset. “Okay, well, Asher called in the middle of all this excitement and wanted to talk to you, so I invited him to the celebration dinner. He should be here in about half an hour.”

I felt my smile freeze and then slowly melt away.

“What’s wrong?” Adam asked. “Did I screw up? I thought you’d be happy. You guys have hardly talked in weeks.”

“Asher...hasn’t been very...happy about Gilly and me.”

“You didn’t tell him it’s just a cover?”

“I tried, but he won’t talk to me.”

“How hard did you try?”

“I mean, I texted him... He never answered.”

“And it was easier to just avoid dealing with it. You shouldn’t have let it drag on this long. You should apologize tonight. Just clarify the situation and patch things up.”

“Well, there’s one other problem...” I was thinking about Jake.

“What’s that?”

“It’s...kind of hard to explain.” I felt myself start to blush.

“Does this have anything to do with that boy you brought home the other day? Gilly’s brother?”

It never ceased to amaze me how easily Adam could read me.

“Yeah, his name’s Jake.”

“And you like this Jake?”

I blushed again.

Adam gave me a sharp look. “What exactly is going on with you two?”

“Nothing! Um...well...it’s kinda hard to explain.”

“You just said that. Let’s give it a try, huh? Let sit down.”

I followed Adam into the living room and perched nervously on the edge of a chair. I haltingly began to tell him all about Jake and me, from our first conversation in the lunchroom, to the flirtation, to our interrupted make-out session.

When I finished, Adam sat thinking for a moment. Finally, he said, “Killian, you’d better be very thankful that Todd came in when he did. He stopped you from making what could have been a very big mistake.”

“What do you mean?”

“How well do you even know Jake?”

“I...I mean...I guess not that well.”

“Do you trust him?”

“I like him.”

“That’s not what I asked. Do you trust him?”

“I don’t distrust him...”

“Look, Killian, you’re young. I get it. And you’re exploring your sexuality for the first time. And you’re meeting other guys like you. You’re going to be experimenting, and that’s inevitable.”

I was blushing furiously. Why did I feel like I was about to get the birds and the bees talk?

“What you were experiencing today was lust. It’s easy to be carried away by lust no matter how old you are, but especially at your age. I just want you to be careful. Jake seems like a nice boy, but you don’t really know him. Just a few weeks ago, you were head over heels for Asher. Now it’s Jake.”

“I still like Asher.”

“Which means you need to be even more careful. I know I can’t stop you from fooling around, but I hope you’ll at least take some advice from me. Wait until you love and trust the other guy for your first time. It’ll be so much more special.”

I nodded. What he said made sense. “Okay. But how will I know if I love him or I’m just attracted to him?”

“You’ll know. And trust me on this: it’s worth the wait. Maybe it’ll be with Jake, or maybe not. Maybe it’ll be with Asher, maybe not. Maybe it’ll be with someone you haven’t even met yet. But when the time comes, I want you to promise me one thing. If and when you do have sex, you’ll use protection. I’ll even buy you condoms if you want.”

My face flushed hot again. “I’m not doing that!” Adam raised an eyebrow. “I’m not! I’m not ready for all that. Sheesh.”

“Maybe I’ll still get you some, just in case.”

“Can we please stop talking about this now?”

Adam laughed. “I just don’t want you to get hurt, Killian. I got a later start on this but I still have a lot more experience. And I’m lucky to have found that right guy.”

As if on cue, we heard the front door open, quickly followed by Steve’s voice. “Adam?”

I watched Adam’s face light up. You could see the love he’d just been talking about reflected in his eyes.

“We’ll finish this later,” Adam said, practically flying from the room.

I followed as he met Steve just inside the door. Adam leapt into his lover’s arms, and they just seemed to melt against each other.

“I’m so happy for you, babe!” Steve mumbled into Adam’s shoulder.

They hugged for a few more seconds and then stepped apart.

“Let’s get dinner started. The other guests will be here soon.” Adam grabbed Steve’s hand and pulled him toward the kitchen.

“Who else is coming besides Asher?” I asked, trailing behind them.

“Ilana and her husband and my long-time friend Bryant and his current beau. Ilana said something about bringing some guests that were in town, so I guess we’ll see.”

The next twenty minutes were spent cooking pasta and making the garlic and clam sauce that would go over it. When the doorbell

rang, Adam went to get it.

Once he was gone, I asked Steve a question that had been bubbling in the back of my mind since he'd arrived. "Why don't you live here with Adam?"

Steve carefully set down the pan he was holding and turned to face me. He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. "You picked a good time to bring up a very complicated question. The short answer is that, when we first discussed it, we didn't think it would be a good idea. Seth was moving in and my job was hours away. Plus, things were still up in the air with whether or not Adam would have visitation rights with Kane. Of course, he didn't get them, but we didn't know that when we were making those decisions."

"Why didn't you move in once Seth came and you knew he was gay and Adam wasn't going to get to see Kane?"

"Well, all that didn't happen overnight. The whole court case with Kane took months. By the time everything was decided, we had settled into a comfortable routine. It didn't come up again until Adam and Seth moved down here. We were talking about it then, but when Seth was murdered, it didn't seem like the best time to press the issue."

I nodded, I had more questions but we could hear voices coming toward the kitchen. Steve turned back to the stove just as the whole party came bursting through the doorway. Apparently, everyone had arrived at the same time.

Adam introduced me to the group. First, there was Ilana, a tall, elegant woman with bronze skin, golden brown eyes, and straight glossy brown hair that she wore cut just below her shoulders. She looked to be somewhere in her early forties. Her husband Lysander appeared to be perhaps a little older. He was a very handsome and distinguished black man with close-cropped hair graying at the temples and a pencil mustache. They had different last names, although I missed his, so I assumed she had kept hers for professional reasons.

Ilana's guests turned out to be Lysander's daughter from a

previous marriage, Nila, and her partner, Heather. Over dinner, I learned they'd been together for four years, having met as freshmen in college when they were both eighteen. Heather looked like the quintessential college student — long curly brown hair pulled up into a ponytail, a sweatshirt bearing the university's initials, jeans, and glasses. Nila, on the other hand, had the exotic beauty of an actress or a model. She wore her long, straight black hair parted in the middle and hanging on either side of her face like a curtain. This only served to accentuate her high cheekbones, straight nose, and pouty lips. Her dark skin seemed to glow in the kitchen lighting. She was quite stunning. I was not at all surprised to learn she was majoring in musical theater.

Then there was Bryant and his boyfriend, Calvin. Bryant had wavy brown hair that he didn't seem to wear in any particular style. He looked pretty buff under his sweater and khaki slacks. Calvin had bleached blonde hair and several earrings in each ear. He was very thin and wore oversized, baggy clothes.

A few steps behind everyone else came Asher, looking as innocent and hurt as ever. I gave him a small smile to let him know I didn't mind his being there, and he offered a halfhearted version in return.

After all the introductions had been made, most of the group headed for the living room. Steve and I stayed behind to finish up the food preparation and set the table. Asher stayed, too, standing around awkwardly for a few minutes before sitting down at the table. We all made small talk, but it seemed forced and more than a little uncomfortable — at least for Asher and me.

Dinner was a festive event. Everyone was very excited about Kane moving in, with the possible exception of Asher. Since he didn't know Kane, it was hard for him to show much enthusiasm, especially since it was obvious he had something on his mind. Once dinner was finished and we all had settled back in the living room, Asher asked me if we could talk. We excused ourselves and walked upstairs to the room I would soon be sharing with Kane.

“Killian,” he said as soon as I closed the bedroom door, “we need to talk.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I need to explain some things to you.”

“I need to explain some things to you, too.”

“I’ll start,” I offered, and quickly rushed on before he could say anything. “I’m not really going out with Gilly. It’s just a cover so I won’t get harassed at school. I need to find out who killed Seth, and I can’t do that if everyone knows I’m gay. Or maybe I could. Not as many people seem to care as I thought. It’s just that those who do care have been very vocal about it. Anyway, I’m still just as gay as I was before. I wanted to tell you all this right away, but well, you pissed me off...I guess I have a bad temper.”

“Yeah, me, too.” He sat on the bed and stared down at his hands. “I was an ass that day in the lunchroom. I was jealous and hurt, and I just said a bunch of shit I shouldn’t have. I want to ask you to forgive me for all the stuff I said...and see if maybe we can start over...or something...maybe?” He glanced up at me hopefully.

“I’ll forgive you if you’ll forgive me, but what do you mean by start over?”

“I don’t mean as boyfriends or anything — at least not yet — but I’d hate to lose the best friend I’ve ever had over something like this.” He gave me his best puppy-dog eyes.

Who could resist that? I closed the distance between us as he stood up to meet me, and we wrapped our arms around each other in a tight embrace.

My phone interrupted our moment.

“I should probably get that.” I reluctantly disengaged myself from our hug. “Not many people call me.”

“Killian!” Kane started screaming before I even had the phone to my ear. “Did you hear?”

“Yeah, Kane, I heard,” I laughed. “And it’s a good thing I heard before you called. I think I’m deaf in that ear now.”

Kane laughed, too. “Your plan worked. I told Mom I wanted to live with Dad, and when she asked why I told her it’s because I relate more to him since I’m gay, too.”

“What did she say?”

“Well, she just sat there for a minute, then she walked out of the room. A little later she came to my bedroom and said she’d called the lawyers and it was being taken care of.” Kane’s voice changed at this point from supercharged excitement to uncertainty. “She seemed really sad, Killian. Like I had let her down.”

“I’m sorry, Kane. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea after all. I mean, it was kinda lying.”

“No, even if I’m not sure, it was right ‘cuz it means I get to come live with you guys now! Hey, I’d better go. I don’t want Mom freaking out at this point. I just had to call you. Thanks, big bro!”

“You’re welcome, Kane.”

I hung up and turned to find Asher had slipped out of the room while I was on the phone. I started to go look for him when the phone rang again. It was Gilly calling as she’d promised about our costumes.

I was eager to get off the phone to look for Asher, so I agreed with whatever she suggested without really hearing a word she said. I told her we had company and I couldn’t talk for long. After I hung up, I realized I had no idea what I had agreed to wear. I shrugged it off, figuring I’d find out sooner or later.

It turned out to be sooner. I didn’t make it out of the room before the phone rang yet again. I answered, expecting Gilly, but this time it was Jake.

“Hey, Killian. I’m really sorry about what happened today. I mean about everything, the boathouse, in my room, with Todd. I don’t know what’s going on with me. I’d blame it on the moon or something, but I don’t know whether it’s full or what. Anyway, I’m just really sorry about everything.”

“Jake, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“Just forget about it, huh? Like before?” I could hear the smile in his voice and I could just picture the lopsided grin that I was growing so fond of.

“Are things okay with Todd?”

“Don’t worry about him. I can handle my brother. You know, Killer, I really like you a lot.”

I winced a little when he called me Killer, but I quickly recovered. “I like you, too, Jake.”

“No, I like you a lot, Killian. I want to spend more time with you, but I don’t know how with Gilly and Todd and all.”

“Hey, we’re friends right? Friends spend time with each other.”

“Do you think maybe we could be more than friends?”

“Maybe, but let’s take things one step at a time for now. I think we were moving a bit too fast today. It’s probably a good thing Todd walked in when he did.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Well, I probably won’t see you really before the costume ball, but I know what you’re wearing so I’ll look for you.”

“At least one of us knows what I’m wearing. What is it?”

“You don’t know? You just got off the phone with my sister.”

“I, uh, wasn’t paying that much attention.”

He laughed. “Gilly wants you to dress up in some costume she found in a thrift store. I’ve seen it. I guess it’s pretty cool. It’s like this long black hooded cloak that goes over this tunic thing and tights, with a fake sword and all. It looks kinda creepy, but cool. Gilly bought a cloak of her own, so I guess you guys are going as a medieval couple or somebody from Middle Earth...I dunno.”

“Did you say tights?”

“I haven’t decided what I’m wearing, so I guess you’ll be surprised.”

“Tights?”

“Hey, Killian, I have to go. I just wanted to apologize and all. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“I have to wear tights?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “And I, for one, am looking forward to seeing it! Bye, Killer.”

His calling me Killer snapped me out of my horror at the thought of wearing tights. “Bye, Jake.”

I hung up and turned around to find Asher sitting on the edge of my bed staring at me accusingly. “Jake?” he asked quietly.

Chapter 18

My mind raced as I tried to decide how much to tell Asher. What had he heard? If he'd been there for more than a few minutes he'd heard me tell Jake I liked him. "Jake Sheridan."

Asher closed his eyes for a second, then opened them again. Pain flashed out of them like the beam from a lighthouse. "So...you're not dating Gilly...but you are dating her twin brother?"

"I'm not dating Jake."

"But you like him."

"Asher—" I wasn't sure where I was going with it but felt I had to say something.

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Killian," he interrupted quietly. "You don't owe me anything. You said you wanted us to be friends and that's all we are."

"It's not like that," I tried again.

"Look, I heard you tell Jake you like him. You also told him you wanted to take things slow, which must mean you're planning to pursue *something* with him. I didn't even know he was gay — or bi or whatever he is — but it's obvious where that leaves me."

I opened my mouth again, but he stood up and held out a hand to silence me. "Don't say anything, please. It'll only make things worse. I'll be okay, if that's what you're worried about. I've lived without you just fine so far, and I'll survive again. Yes, I care about you a lot — maybe I'm even in love with you. How would I know? I've never

been in love with anyone before. I don't have anything to compare it to. I do want to at least be friends with you. Just...I think I'll need some time. I'll let you know when I'm ready. I'd better go now before I do something that would embarrass us both."

He turned and walked toward the door.

"Asher, wait!" I yelled, louder than I'd intended, but it had the desired effect. He stopped in his tracks, although he kept his back to me. "Will you let me get a word in somewhere? Yes, I like Jake. Yes, he is gay, and yes, I'm attracted to him. And yes, maybe it could develop into something more, but for now, we're just friends — same as you and I. I never stopped liking you, but I don't think I'm in love with anyone — you or Jake. I do know I need time to figure all this out, the same as you do. In the meantime, I hope you don't think I'm being too selfish because I want to stay friends with you."

Asher slowly turned and faced me again. "I don't think you're selfish, and I don't want to be, either. If being with Jake is what makes you happy, then I want you to be with Jake. But I don't want to lose our friendship. It's the best thing in my life."

We both moved toward each other at the same time and hugged tightly. "No matter what, we'll always be friends," I whispered into his hair.

He pulled back a little, keeping his arms around my neck, then leaned in for a quick peck on the lips. "I really should go, Kill."

"Okay," I said, dropping my arms.

He turned and left, pausing in the doorway for a moment before continuing on down the stairs.

The next week passed quickly with preparations for Kane's arrival and the Halloween party. Adam bought another dresser and a set of twin beds to replace the queen-size bed I'd been using. I spent a lot of time moving my things from place to place, trying to make the room perfect for my new brother. I was careful to slip Seth's journal from its hiding place inside the old box spring and stash it away under the mattress of my new bed. I still hadn't read a single page of

it, though not for lack of interest. It had occurred to me that it might contain clues to his murder, but I still couldn't bring myself to open it. The very idea felt like such an invasion of his privacy.

Gilly roped me into helping set up for the party. I was over at the Sheridans' house several times that week to give them a hand with the decorations, but Jake and I kept our distances under the watchful eye of Todd. I made a point of never being alone in the same room with Todd. Their mom was always around somewhere, but I never saw their dad. I tried on my costume, which I had to admit looked better than I had expected — even with the tights.

I talked to Asher a few times although we didn't really hang out or anything. We mainly just ran into each other between classes.

Before I knew it, Friday had come, which meant Kane should have arrived by the time school let out. I was so excited that I drove home at what was probably an unsafe speed. I was officially gaining a brother and, having grown up as an only child, I was really looking forward to it. I pulled up beside Eve's car and ran inside.

Kane was just coming down the stairs. He leapt the last few steps and threw himself at me with a feral howl, flinging his arms around my neck in a huge bear hug that I thought would break my spine. For a little guy, he had surprising strength.

When he finally let me go and I had caught my breath enough to speak, I gasped, "Kane! I can't believe you're actually moving in!"

"I know! It all happened so fast. One day I'm wishing I could live here and the next here I am. And I owe it all to you, big bro!" With that, he launched himself at me again. If this kept up, I'd need a neck brace before long.

"Well, isn't this touching?" a caustic voice said from above. I looked up to see Eve standing at the top of the stairs in all her fairy splendor. She was wearing a long white airy dress with a scarf that created an eerie effect of wings. As she walked down the stairs, the dress and scarf swirled around her in a mesmerizing ethereal display that made it seem as if she were floating. When she reached the bottom, she broke the spell by speaking once again. "Is this your boyfriend, Kane?"

“Mom, this is Killian, remember? He lives here with Dad. He’s like my brother.”

“Of course.” She shot a withering glance in my direction, then fixed Kane with a piercing glare. “You only had one brother; his name was Seth. In case you’ve forgotten already, he was murdered because he was gay.”

My mouth dropped open at the coldness in her voice. I winced when I saw the raw pain in Kane’s eyes.

“Well, Kane, you know how to get in touch with me if you change your mind about all this. I’ve got to go. Tell your father I said goodbye.”

With that, she swept past us, her scarf actually dragging across my face as she blew by. When she reached the door, she stopped. At first, I thought it was for dramatic effect, but suddenly she spun around, ran quickly to Kane, and enveloped him in a tight hug.

I was surprised by the sudden display of emotion. I hadn’t thought she possessed any. It was over as quickly as it had begun, however. She was out the door before Kane could react, leaving him stunned and more than a little confused.

He stood still for a moment, too overwhelmed to even know what to do. He looked over at me, his eyes wide with surprise and confusion. “I never knew she loved me,” he said. “I never knew, and now she’s gone.”

“She isn’t gone forever,” I assured him with as much conviction as I could muster.

“Yes, she is. She walked out, and I’ll never see her again.”

“Kane, you need to calm down. Where’s your dad?”

“He and Mom were fighting, so I finally told him to just go for a walk or something.”

It looked like I’d have to handle this one on my own. “Okay, well, listen to me. Of course your mom loves you. She isn’t gone forever. She’ll want to see you again.”

“You don’t know my mom. When she discovered Seth was gay,

she kicked him out and never saw him again. She didn't even mention him. It was like he was dead before he actually died. And now he really is dead, and I never got to say goodbye to him."

A single tear rolled down Kane's cheek, I realized that he was grieving for Seth as much as for his mother. This had to be an incredibly emotional time for him. His desire to live with his father essentially meant he had given up his mother. He was working himself into a full-blown breakdown. I led him over to the couch and gently pulled him down next to me.

Kane's grief was almost palpable. It suddenly occurred to me that I had never really grieved Seth's death myself. I'd gone from stunned numbness right into trying to find out who killed him. Of course, I'd only known him for two weeks. Still, we were already friends, and we would have been even better friends if we'd had the chance.

It all seemed so surreal. I hadn't really known Seth that well, and there I was living in his house, with his dad, sleeping in his room, and now his brother was there too. I was living the life that was meant for him. It was an unsettling thought. I felt as if I were in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

I heard the front door open, followed by footsteps.

"Adam?" I called.

"Yeah?"

"We're in the living room."

He stopped short when he saw Kane's face. "What happened?" His voice was suddenly tight with fear.

Without waiting for an answer, he rushed to Kane's side. Kane threw himself into his arms and burst into tears.

"What happened?" Adam asked again. "What did Eve do now?"

"Um, she didn't really do anything. He's afraid he'll never see his mom again," I explained.

"She loves me, Dad, and now I'll never see her again," Kane said in a tear-filled voice.

"Of course she loves you, Kane." Adam's voice filled up as well.

“It’s just, well, your mother hasn’t had an easy life. She’s been hurt by a lot of people, including me. That’s made her very wary about showing her emotions. It’s not that she doesn’t have any; she just has a hard time showing them. I’m absolutely sure you’ll see her again.”

I felt I was intruding on a private moment, so I left them to talk and went up to my room — our room now. Kane had already moved his stuff in but hadn’t had a chance to put anything away yet. I decided to give him a hand.

That turned out to be harder than I’d anticipated. I didn’t know where Kane kept things or how he liked them arranged. I hadn’t made much progress half an hour later when Adam and Kane joined me. Kane’s eyes were red and he was still sniffing a little, though he seemed much better. We worked together for a few hours until we had his clothes and stuff put away. By then it was past time for dinner, so we went out to a nice restaurant to celebrate.

While we were eating, the subject of the Halloween party came up. We decided Kane should go too so he could meet people before being thrown into the complex social environment that was high school. I said I would call Gilly to be certain it was okay, but I was sure she’d agree. It was a big affair. No one would notice one more person.

The only thing left was to find a costume for Kane, so after dinner we headed to the closest store. Nearly everything was gone by then, but we managed to come up with a fairly decent vampire costume. Not entirely original, but pretty good for the last minute.

After shopping, we went home and spent the rest of the evening simply talking and relaxing. It felt natural and right, as if Kane had always lived there. Before we knew it, the time had come to say goodnight. We still had some running around to do the next day before Kane and I went to the party.

After all the bedtime rituals were finished, Kane and I settled into our respective beds. Adam came in to say goodnight, then turned the lights off on his way out. A heavy silence descended with the darkness. It wasn’t long, though, before I heard sniffing sounds from Kane’s side of the room.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly, barely more than a whisper.

“Yeah. I guess so. It’s just...there’s so much going on right now and I’m so confused...and it’s kinda weird being here for the first night. Do you think I could sleep with you like I did last time?”

“Well, the bed’s not as big as before, but come on over.”

The words had barely left my mouth before he was sliding under the covers next to me. He wiggled around for a few seconds, then rolled over and settled with his back to me. I lay there for a while just watching him breathe. Then I slipped my arm over him and started to drift off.

Just before I crossed the threshold between wakefulness and sleep, I heard Kane’s barely audible voice. “Tell me again how you knew you were gay.”

I thought for a moment before I answered. I’d already told him once, but I knew he was trying to figure things out for himself. I decided to go into more detail than last time.

“Well, like I said before, Seth told me he thought I was and then kissed me. He really freaked me out! Later, though, I started thinking about it and realized he was right. I wasn’t interested in girls — at all. And not only that, I *was* interested in guys. I enjoyed Seth’s kiss. It...did something to me I’d never felt before, almost as if it had awakened a part of me that I had ignored until that moment.

“At first, I didn’t want to believe it, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized he was right. I was definitely gay. I felt really scared and guilty, but I went to see a guy at my church who helped me feel better about myself. Later, I talked a lot to your dad. He’s pretty smart, you know. He helped me understand that there’s nothing wrong with me and I have nothing to be ashamed of. It’s just the way I am. When I’m ready, I’ll come out. There’s no big rush. I’ll do it when the time seems right.”

“Killian,” he asked when I stopped to take a breath, “do you think I’m gay?”

“I don’t know, Kane. That’s kinda something you have to figure out for yourself. I can’t decide for you.”

“Would you be mad at me if I wasn’t?”

I sat up, and he rolled onto his back so he could look up at me. The faint moonlight shining through the window was enough to see him clearly. I could tell he was worried about my response.

“Why would you think I’d be mad at you?”

“I just don’t want to disappoint you. Right now, you’re not just my brother, you’re my only friend here. I want you to like me.”

I ruffled his hair. “Don’t be silly, Kane. Of course I like you. There’s nothing you could possibly do to make me not like you. I’m really glad you’re my brother. I don’t care if you’re gay, straight, bi or anything else. I just want you to be who you are and that’s it. Just be Kane. Don’t let anybody make you something you’re not.”

He sat up and threw his arms around my neck, squeezing so hard I could barely breathe. “Thank you, Killian,” he whispered fiercely into my ear.

We lay back down with my arm around him. Just as I was about to doze off once more, Kane spoke again. “I don’t think I’m gay. I like girls.”

I stifled a chuckle and squeezed him gently, pulling him tighter against my chest. “Okay.”

“And I like you holding me, but it’s not like it gives me a boner or anything.”

This time I laughed out loud.

“So you’re not mad?”

“No.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Good.”

“Now go to sleep.”

He giggled but finally quieted down and let me fall asleep.

I dreamt again that night, but the dream was different from the others I'd been having. I was in my bedroom again, but the killer was nowhere to be seen. Seth was there, however, sitting on the edge of my bed. The dream seemed so real, I felt as if I could reach out and touch Seth. I glanced over at Kane, but he slept on.

Seth held a finger to his lips. "Shh. Don't wake him. I'm here to see you."

My breath caught in my throat. The feelings of terror and frustration my other dreams had brought were completely absent. Instead, my heart ached at the sight of Seth sitting so close, looking exactly as he had the last time I'd seen him alive. I felt tears spill down my cheeks.

He smiled. "It's all right. I'm okay."

"But what—"

He shook his head. "No questions. We don't have much time. You have to read this." He held up a book I recognized as his journal. "I know you thought it was too personal, but I want you to read it. There are things in here that you need to know."

"What kind of things?"

"I can't tell you. You have to figure that out for yourself. Promise me you'll read it."

"Why can't you just tell me what you want me to know?"

"Because I can't. Please, just promise me."

"Okay, I promise."

His face lit up with a grin. "Thanks."

Kane stirred in his sleep. I glanced down at him, and when I looked up again, Seth was gone.

I felt a sense of loss even as I tried to tell myself it was just a dream. It had felt so real, though, that I couldn't resist checking to see if the journal was lying where Seth had been sitting. It wasn't there, of course, but by then I had an overwhelming need to make sure it was still under the mattress. I knew I wouldn't be able to fall back asleep until I'd actually touched it.

I slithered out of bed as carefully as possible so as not to wake Kane, then slid my hand between the mattress and the box spring. I sighed with relief when I felt the book. I pulled it out just to make sure.

“What’re you doin’?” Kane asked sleepily, making me fall backwards with surprise.

I looked up at him peering blearily at me over the edge of the bed and willed my heart to stop pounding. “I, uh, couldn’t sleep so I thought I’d read for a while. Just go back to sleep.”

Kane nodded, then rolled over and burrowed under the blanket.

I climbed into Kane’s bed and turned on his bedside lamp. It wasn’t very bright, not enough to disturb Kane, but enough to read by. I opened the cover. The inside page was inscribed “Seth David Connelly.”

I ran a finger across the words and thought about the vision I’d just had. While I knew it had only been a dream, it still gave me a sense of peace about reading Seth’s most private thoughts that I hadn’t felt before.

At the bottom of the page, he’d written, “This journal was given to me by my father on the day I moved in with him.”

I turned the page to his first entry. I quickly realized it was a more complete version of the account he’d given me about how he’d come to live with Adam. He’d written it as if it were a fictional tale or short story. It was fairly long, but I couldn’t stop reading. Tears coursed down my cheeks as I turned the pages. He’d ended his narrative on his first day at school. I couldn’t believe it when I saw he’d actually mentioned me.

After that, he’d written the entries in a more typical journal style, interspersed with an occasional poem. They were fairly regular at first. They had a positive vibe, even though it was quickly evident he wasn’t going to find the easy acceptance he’d hoped for at his new school.

Then the entries became more sporadic, recording only unusual or memorable events. They also became increasingly cynical and

negative. It seemed his only bright spots were the few times I'd spoken to him. I felt a twinge of guilt for not having gone out of my way to talk to him more.

He'd recorded the day I came over and he'd kissed me. A page had been torn out, obviously the letter Adam had found and given to me. The entry in the journal was made after we'd texted and was filled with relief.

I turned the page and started reading the next entry. My heart began to beat faster as I went.

After two weeks of either being ignored or picked on by everyone in school (except Killian, of course), something weird happened today. This totally hot guy came up to me in the hall and asked if he could talk to me in private. I was a little scared that he was just trying to get me alone to gay-bash me, but I agreed. He was so hot I probably would have agreed to let him beat me up if he'd asked nicely. We went into an empty classroom, and he asked me if it was true that I was gay. I said yeah and waited for him to hit me. He just stood there for a while, kind of staring into nowhere and biting his lip. It was kind of creepy. Finally, I was just like, Is that it? Then he grabbed me and tried to kiss me. I shoved him away and was like, What the hell? He got all freaky and weird, talking all this crazy shit about how gay people were going to hell. I was just like, So why did you just try to kiss me? Then he **SLAPPED ME!** I couldn't believe it. This guy is seriously fucked up. I just started walking away, and he grabbed my arm really hard. I tried to pull away but he was stronger than he looked. I told him to let go or I'd report him, but he just said I didn't understand. I told him I didn't want to understand, I just wanted him to let go and stay the hell away from me. He suddenly looked like he was going to cry or something. Then he let go and I got out of there as quickly as possible. I hope he just leaves me alone. That's all I need, some psycho closet-case stalking me.

A chill ran down my spine when I read his final words. I glanced back up at the date. He'd written it the day he died. I flipped through

the next several pages. There were no more entries.

I let the book fall to the bed while I thought about what I'd just read. Someone had come on to Seth, someone who was obviously very conflicted about his sexuality. Could that same person have followed him to the park and murdered him?

Who might it have been? Seth had thought the guy was hot. I tried to form a mental picture of everyone I had connected to Seth. Of those, I only considered Asher hot, and I really didn't believe he was involved. His brother Marcus was attractive enough, but again, I couldn't see him involved. Plus, he didn't have any religious hang-ups with homosexuality.

I didn't think either Zack or Jesse was hot at all. Of course, my opinion of them probably colored my perception. I supposed someone else might find them attractive.

Then there was the other guy Jake had seen talking to Seth. What if the person Jake was protecting and Seth's mystery man were one and the same? I was going to have to pressure Jake to tell me. He could be unwittingly shielding the killer.

I looked over at the clock and saw it was almost 3:30 in the morning. I wasn't going to solve the mystery that night. I sighed and turned off the light, then slid deeper under Kane's blankets.

I stared at the ceiling for a while before finally drifting off.

Chapter 19

The next day passed quickly and fairly uneventfully, although my mind kept drifting back to Seth's journal and the identity of his mystery man. I distracted myself by making a concerted effort to get to know Kane better. We had a great time running errands and just hanging out.

Before we knew it, the time had come to get ready for the Halloween party at the Sheridans'. As I had known she would be, Gilly was thrilled that Kane was coming along.

Adam helped Kane and me with our costumes. We decided not to use too much makeup on Kane since no one knew him yet and we wanted everyone to see what he really looked like. He wore his usually messy hair slicked back and had his vampire teeth in.

My costume didn't require any special makeup. Besides, my face was pretty much hidden when my hood was up. I was still very self-conscious about the tights, but Adam and Kane assured me they looked great with the tunic, which was thankfully long enough to hide my bulge and my butt, though just barely. The cloak was surprisingly heavy once I had it on. I figured I would be hot for the rest of the night unless Gilly let me take it off. I didn't think she would, though, since it kind of made the costume.

When we were dressed, I had to admit we looked pretty good. Adam took a ton of pictures. Then he made sure we had our phones — I didn't have anywhere to keep mine, but Kane had pockets and was holding it for me — and said to call if we needed anything. After some final reminders about our curfew and the usual parental

warnings, we were off to the party.

I thought we were arriving early, but when we pulled up, the yard was already full of cars. I had to park on the road.

“Wow, there are a lot of people here,” Kane commented. He tried to sound casual, but his nerves showed through.

“You’ll be fine,” I told him. “Remember, just be Kane. Everyone will love you.”

He took a deep breath and nodded.

We got out of the car and started walking toward the house. Before we reached the front door, the welcoming committee — namely Zack and Jesse — intercepted us. Jesse was dressed as a zombie and Zack was a vampire. Zack’s eyes narrowed when he saw Kane’s costume.

“Well, well, well,” Zack started in right away in his smarmy voice. “What do we have here? Who’s your friend? Don’t tell me this is your boyfriend? What will Gilly think?”

“Hello, Zack,” I said evenly, keeping a tight reign on my temper. I suddenly felt extremely protective of my new little brother. “This is Kane. He just moved here. He’s like a brother to me, so back off. If I see you anywhere near him for the rest of the night, I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Jesse took a menacing step in my direction, but Zack reached out a hand and stopped him. “Is that a threat?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t start something you can’t finish, fag.”

“Who said he can’t finish it?” a new voice cut in.

I spun around to find Asher and Marcus coming up behind us. Kane looked somewhat scared, but Asher and Marcus just looked pissed.

Zack eyed the brothers warily as they squared off next to Kane and me. “What’s going on, Marcus? You a fag lover now?”

“Quit being such an infected asshole, Phillips,” Marcus growled. “And while you’re at it, you can quit using the word ‘fag.’ I’ve lived

next door to Killian for years and he's a good guy — as you should know since you used to be his friend.”

“Used to be is right. I don't hang out with f —” Zack bit off the epithet at a warning glance from Marcus. “I don't hang out with queers.”

“No, you prefer to surround yourself with imbeciles and half-wits who think you're hot shit, when in fact you're just plain shit.”

Jesse, looking confused as he swiveled his attention back and forth between Marcus and Zack, seemed a little unsure of what role he was supposed to be playing. He totally missed the fact that he'd just been seriously insulted.

Marcus continued, “Stay away from my brother and his friends. If you mess with one of them, you mess with me — and trust me, you don't want to do that.”

Zack threw me a dirty look, then sniffed and turned. “Come on, Jesse, they aren't worth it.” He walked away, still trying to maintain his tough-guy act. Jesse tagged along behind him.

I turned back to Marcus and Asher. “Thanks, guys.”

“My pleasure.” Marcus glared at Zack's retreating back. “Zack Phillips is and always has been nothing more than a bully. I've wanted to tell him off for years now. I never could figure out how Asher put up with him.” He turned to me. “Hey, Killian, I'm sorry I was kind of rude the other day when you were asking me about Seth. I was having a bad day, but that's no excuse for being a jerk.”

“It's okay,” I assured him. “You weren't a jerk. And even if you were, you more than made up for it just now.”

He laughed. “So who's your friend here?” He dropped a hand onto Kane's shoulder.

“Marcus and Asher, this is Kane, Seth's little brother. He moved in with us today. Kane, this is my best friend Asher and his brother Marcus.”

Asher's face lit up when I called him my best friend. Everyone shook hands, and together we set off toward the house once more.

When we walked inside even I was impressed with what we saw — and I'd helped set it up. Everything looked different at night. The enormous entry hall was decorated to look like a haunted house. Cobwebs were draped everywhere and candles burned eerily in silver candlesticks and sconces. Dance music thumped from speakers in every room, and people in costume were milling about all around.

Suddenly someone was at my elbow, propelling me forward. I flinched away, thinking it was Zack or Jesse, but it turned out to be Gilly.

“Hey,” I exclaimed.

“Killian, can I talk to you for a second?” She may have phrased it as a question, but her tone left no doubt that I really didn't have a say in the matter.

“Yeah, but hold on. This is Kane, Seth's brother. Kane, this is—”

“Yeah, great, hi,” she mumbled, pulling me away again.

I shrugged toward Kane, Asher, and Marcus, then allowed her to drag me off toward the kitchen.

As soon as the door swung shut, Gilly dropped my arm and faced me. “What's going on with you and Jake?”

“What?”

“Todd said he walked in on you and Jake messing around. I wouldn't have believed him, but I saw the way you looked at him the other day.”

“Gilly—” I started, but she cut me off, which was just as well since I hadn't decided what to say or how to handle this yet.

“Killian, you know I like you. I can't believe you would go after my own brother — while we're still dating no less!”

“Uh, Gilly, it's not like you and I are really dating. It's just a cover... and it was *your* idea. You know I'm gay. And besides, I'm not going after your brother.”

“Did you kiss him?”

That caught me by surprise. I didn't have an answer ready.

My hesitation was all the answer she needed. “You did. You son of a bitch!”

“Gilly, I didn’t go after Jake.” I was starting to get annoyed.

“Oh, yeah, I guess he’s going after you, then? Is that it?”

“Yeah, that is it, actually,” said Jake, walking into the room. “You guys might want to keep it down. I could hear you as I was coming down the hall.”

We both stared at him for a moment, Gilly with fury and I with surprise. Then we both reacted at once.

“Jake, you don’t have to—” I started.

“You can both go to hell!” Gilly shouted.

Jake and I stared at Gilly in shock.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she seethed. “You, Jake! You knew how much I liked Killian, yet you stand there and calmly tell me you went after him? And you, Killian Kendall! You think you can just play with my emotions, then throw me away when you find someone else?”

“Gilly, it’s not like that, and you damn well know it.” I was pissed. “You said from the beginning that you understood I didn’t and couldn’t have any feelings for you beyond friendship. You said that pretending to date me would be okay with you. You said that you just wanted to be friends, and this was something you could do for me as a friend. If that’s not how you really felt, then you should have said so upfront and I never would have played this stupid game.”

I watched her deflate right in front of me and immediately regretted my angry words. Once again, I’d hurt someone I cared about because of my temper.

“Oh, I didn’t realize this was all just a game. I’m sorry, Killian. You’re right. I was stupid to think you could love me. Why would anybody ever love me?” She burst into tears.

“Gilly, I didn’t say that,” I said awkwardly.

“You didn’t have to.”

Jake shifted from foot to foot, obviously uncomfortable.

“Look,” I said, “there’s a party going on out there, and you guys are supposed to be hosting it. Why don’t you go get your costumes on and let’s all try to have fun. Okay?”

“Fuck you!” Gilly screamed, storming off out the back door of the kitchen.

I stared after her for a moment, then turned to Jake. “Damn. That went well.”

“Sorry about that,” Jake said darkly. “Welcome to our dysfunctional family. We may look like the Waltons from the outside, but trust me, we’re more like the Mansons. I should have known Todd would say something, even after he said he wouldn’t. He’s such an ass. And I just made it worse. Maybe I should have stayed out of it.”

I shrugged. “Probably, but you did what you thought was best at the time. At least you were honest. Will she be all right?”

He shrugged as he turned to walk away. “I guess we’ll see. I should probably go get my costume on. I’ll meet you in the backyard.”

“What did you decide to be?” I asked before he could get away.

He glanced over his shoulder with a pale imitation of his usual grin. “It’s a surprise. You’ll find out soon enough. See you outside.”

I went back to the front hallway to look for Kane, Asher, and Marcus, only to discover that an obnoxious bunch of giggling girls had replaced them. I headed out to the backyard to see if I could find the boys there.

The music gradually got louder as I walked through the house. By the time I reached the back door, it was almost deafening. When I stepped outside it was as if I had walked into a wall. An almost physical wave of vibration and sound washed over me. I stood in the doorway and gaped. What looked like the entire student population had turned out, not only from our school but maybe from some of the neighboring schools as well. Strands of fairy lights had been strung through the trees, and bright lights illuminated a makeshift DJ stage at the far end of the yard toward the water. Dance music pumped out of huge speakers set up in strategic locations. Bodies were writhing, wiggling, bumping, and grinding everywhere.

Someone pushed me from behind, reminding me that I was blocking the door, so I stepped out into the mass of bodies to start my futile search for someone I knew. I hadn't really paid attention to what Asher and Marcus were wearing, but vampires were everywhere. There was also the usual assortment of goblins, ghosts, ghouls, cartoon characters, and current movie villains. I spotted a few efforts that were a little more creative: a line of girls wearing parkas and strapped into folding lawn chairs to make a ski lift, a quartet of cheerleaders who I could have sworn were actually on the football team, and my favorite, a scantily clad guy in a hula hoop shower.

I felt as if I were looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. There were so many people, all of them in costume. I was getting a little worried that I wouldn't be able to find my friends. After searching for what felt like forever, I was about to give up when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I whirled to find Zorro giving me a dashing smile. On closer inspection, he turned out to be Asher.

"Great costume!" I yelled over the music.

He was dressed all in black, with leather boots, mask, and a long flowing cape. He wore tight leather pants and a blousy silk shirt open halfway down his chest. I wondered how I had missed it earlier. I decided he couldn't have been wearing the whole ensemble when I first saw him.

"Yours, too," he screamed back.

"Gilly found it."

"I know. I heard you discussing it on the phone with Jake."

Time to change the subject. "Where's Kane?"

Asher pointed behind me, and I turned around to search the crowd. It took me a minute, but finally I spotted him and Marcus talking to a group of three girls dressed as fairies in skimpy outfits identical except for color. Judging by the way Kane was ogling the shortest fairy's generous cleavage, I thought it safe to say he was definitely straight. Marcus wasn't in costume.

"What's Marcus supposed to be?" I asked.

Asher rolled his eyes. “Nothing. He refused dress up, said it was for kids. I pointed out that we *are* kids, and besides, it’s a Halloween party. That’s kind of the whole point. He told me to shut up, so I did.” He shrugged expressively. “Do you want a Coke?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“Cool. Be right back.”

Asher was barely gone before I felt another hand on my back. I spun around but didn’t recognize the guy in the Batman costume standing there. Whoever was under the mask and skin-tight costume, he was in very good shape.

He motioned to me to follow him. I looked back after Asher, but he wasn’t paying attention.

I remembered Jake had said he would meet me in the backyard. I wasn’t sure if this was Jake or not, but I decided to follow the caped crusader and see what happened. There were hundreds of people around, so I figured I was safe.

He led me away from the lights and crowds and into the shadows of some nearby trees, where he turned to face me with a strangely unnerving smile. I suddenly felt uncomfortable and questioned the wisdom of following him. I started to back away, but he moved quickly and grabbed my wrist.

“Leaving so soon?” he rasped in what obviously wasn’t his real voice.

Something about his voice caused a chill to run down my spine. I tried to yank my hand away but he held on tightly.

“What’s going on? Who are you?”

“You don’t know?”

“No, and you’re freaking me out.”

“I am the night, I am Batman,” he said, and laughed coarsely.

“Killian?” someone called. It sounded like Asher.

“I’m over here,” I called back quickly.

I turned to see Asher walking toward us. He took in the scene

before him and frowned. “Is everything okay?”

Batman quickly let go of my wrist and stepped back.

“No. I mean—” I was suddenly unsure. Was I just being paranoid? I was freaked out so maybe I was simply overreacting. Surely, no one in their right mind would try anything in a place this public. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself if it turned out to be nothing.

Just then, the music stopped abruptly in the middle of a song. I glanced toward the stage. Standing in the spotlight, microphone in hand, was Gilly. She looked amazing. Her long, shimmering gown fell to her feet. She’d piled her hair artfully on top of her head with just a few tendrils falling softly around her face. Her cheeks were bright red, although I couldn’t tell if it was from anger or makeup.

I turned back to Batman, but there was no sign of him. I almost wondered if I’d imagined the whole thing. I looked around for him, but I was soon distracted by Gilly.

“Hello, everyone,” she said into the microphone. “I hope y’all are having a good time so far.” An enormous roar greeted her. “Please remember that no drugs or alcohol are allowed at my parties. If you are caught with either, you will be asked to leave.”

Scattered boos met this statement.

Gilly ignored them and plowed on. “Before we turn the music back on I have an important announcement to make.”

I noticed someone moving quickly toward the stage, though I couldn’t quite tell who it was.

“It’s time you found out the truth about someone you all know,” Gilly went on.

“She wouldn’t,” I muttered under my breath. Batman was all but forgotten. A new crisis had taken center stage, literally and figuratively.

“He’s lied to everyone, and I was a part of that lie — something I now deeply regret.”

I felt as if someone had dumped cold water all over me. I felt myself take a few steps forward as if I could somehow stop her. Out

of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the person shoving through the crowd was going even faster toward the stage.

“I’m talking about—”

Before she could finish, the person — a guy — who had been pushing toward her dove onto the stage with a spectacular belly flop, grabbed the cord, and yanked the microphone out of her hand. When he scrambled to his feet, it became obvious he was supposed to be a pirate, although I still couldn’t see who it was or if I even knew him.

The pirate and Gilly launched into a heated argument, some of which the fallen microphone picked up.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Gilly snarled.

“What do you think *you’re* doing? You can’t do that. Not here,” the pirate shot back. I recognized Jake’s voice.

They both seemed to realize at the same time that they were broadcasting their conversation and quickly moved away from center stage. Jake motioned for the music to start up again. Soon everyone had gone back to dancing, forgetting the little drama that had just transpired before them. It wasn’t so easy for me. I was convinced she had been about to out me when Jake interceded on my behalf.

“Killian, are you okay?” Asher asked, reminding me he was there.

I turned toward him with a shaky smile. “I think Gilly almost outed me in front of the whole school. She’s mad at me because—”

“No, not that. I mean the guy in the Batman costume. Who was he?”

“Oh.” I’d almost forgotten about him. “I don’t know who he was.”

“You just ran off after a complete stranger? After all that’s happened?”

“I thought it might be Jake. Then I realized Jake was up on the stage with Gilly, so he couldn’t have been Batman.”

“Well, what did he want?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know that, either.” I frowned. “He gave me

the creeps, though. I'm glad you showed up when you did."

Asher shook his head. "Kill, you have to be more careful. There's still a murderer running around out here. Remember?"

"Of course, I remember. Do you really think I could forget that? I was almost killed."

"So I'd think you'd be a little more cautious."

"We're in the middle of how many people? I figured I was safe."

"He led you right into the shadows. He could have done whatever he wanted to you over here and no one would have known. They certainly wouldn't have heard anything over this music."

"So it wasn't the best idea to just follow him. I made a mistake. I'm sorry. We don't even know what he wanted, though. It didn't have to be something bad."

Asher gave me a look. "No, I'm sure he just wanted to ask you to dance."

"Hey, we're here to have fun so let's not argue about this. Okay?"

"Fine. Just don't go running off into the shadows with strange guys anymore."

I grinned at him. "Why, Asher, are you jealous?"

Asher rolled his eyes, but I noticed he didn't exactly deny it.

I walked over to him and ran a finger across his exposed chest. "You *are* jealous, aren't you?"

He smiled a little. "Maybe just a smidge."

I raised an eyebrow. "Just a smidge?"

He moved in closer, and I could feel his breath against my skin. "Okay. A lot."

"Um, Asher, don't look now, but I'm in the shadows with a strange guy. What should I do?"

He leaned in a little more. "I'm not strange."

I tipped my head in to kiss him just as I heard, "There you are!"

We jumped apart guiltily. It was Kane, grinning ear to ear.

Marcus stood behind him with a suggestive leer. “What were you two doing over here in the bushes?”

“Not what you’re thinking, perv,” Asher grouched.

“Not yet, anyway,” I added under my breath.

“Uh huh. So, Killian, what was that little stage show all about? Did it have anything to do with you?”

“I suspect it might have. I also think it’s safe to say that Gilly and I are no longer a couple.”

Marcus shook his head. “That’s pretty fucked up. What did you do to her?”

I blushed and glanced over at Asher, who was watching me carefully, waiting for my answer.

“It was mostly a misunderstanding,” I mumbled. Time to change the subject. “Have you seen anyone dressed in a Batman costume?”

“Batman? I don’t think so. Why?”

“A guy dressed as Batman asked me to come over here, but I don’t know who he was or what he wanted.”

Marcus looked at me in confusion. “So, uh, what happened? Where’d he go?”

“Beats me. He was here one minute, then when Gilly started making her little announcement, he disappeared.”

“Weird. And you have no idea who it was?”

“None. I thought at first it was Jake.”

“You thought what was me?” Jake asked as he appeared at my side. Up close, his pirate costume was really pretty impressive. He’d obviously put a lot of work into it. I didn’t know how much he and Asher had spent on their outfits, but they’d spared no expense. Jake even had a *papier-mâché* parrot stitched to his shoulder and, if I wasn’t mistaken, a real sword strapped around his waist.

“Nice dive earlier,” I said.

Jake grimaced. “Thanks. I think I got a splinter in my nipple.”

“That was you who jumped on stage earlier?” Kane asked,

entering the conversation for the first time.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I realized I hadn’t made any introductions. “Jake, this is my new little brother, Kane. Kane, this is my friend Jake. He’s Gilly’s brother.”

Kane smiled and extended his hand. Jake answered Kane’s smile with one of his patented lopsided grins.

Kane turned to me. “So Gilly was the girl who dragged you off earlier and then was just on stage?”

“Right.”

“And she was your...?”

“Girlfriend,” I supplied.

Kane screwed up his face. “I don’t get it.”

I sighed. “It’s a long story.”

“Which you can get later,” Jake interjected. “Right now we’re supposed to be having the time of our lives, so let’s dance!”

“You guys go ahead,” I said quickly. “I need to talk to Jake for a minute.”

Asher gave me an intense look but turned and followed Marcus and Kane without putting up an argument.

“What’s up?” Jake asked.

“Like you don’t know. What the hell was she thinking?”

He sighed. “She was angry and hurt, so she decided to lash out. Just be glad I was near the stage and figured out what she was doing in time to stop her.”

“She probably said enough. When we’re not a couple anymore on Monday, people will put two and two together and figure out what she was going to say.”

Jake shrugged. “I did what I could. It’s not like people haven’t been talking anyway.”

“Even since I started dating Gilly?”

“Not as much as before, but some. Becky told a few people you

called her up and asked about Seth and...well..."

I groaned. "So I'm pretty much out at school."

He shrugged. "It's still just rumors. You can always deny it."

"What's the point? I was never popular anyway, unless you count my fifteen minutes of fame while I dated your sister. Still, I can't believe she was going to out me here at her party."

"She really liked you a lot."

"And that's an excuse?"

"No. It's just...she's been through a lot, Killian. There's a lot of stuff you don't know about my family."

That certainly piqued my curiosity. "Like what?"

He shook his head. "I really don't feel like talking about it, especially now. Can't we just go have fun? It's a party, for God's sake!"

"Yeah. Okay. Just one more thing. Do you know anyone here dressed up as Batman?"

He rolled his eyes. "Have you seen how many people are here, Killian? I haven't even been outside that long, and between my stage dive and hanging around with you in the bushes, I haven't exactly had time to mingle."

I grinned. "I guess that's a no."

"It's a no. Why did you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Just curious."

We found the others and rejoined the group. Asher, Kane, Jake, and I hung out dancing, joking, and just generally having fun for the next several hours. Marcus came and went with a few of his friends. Everyone seemed to get along, although there was definitely some tension from Asher toward Jake. If Jake noticed, however, he didn't let on.

Fortunately, there was no more drama with Gilly. In fact, I didn't even see her anymore that night. I never saw Batman again, either. I caught a glimpse of Zack and Jesse a few times, but they kept their

distance.

The party started winding down around 12:30 a.m. Adam wanted us home by 1:00 anyway, so Kane and I decided to leave. We said our goodbyes and started toward my car. The closer we got to the road, the darker it became. It seemed the security light at the end of the driveway had burned out. By the time we reached the car, the only light came from the sliver of moon that hung low in the sky. However, it was enough to see that all my windows had been smashed.

Chapter 20

“Oh, shit!” I gasped. I could still hear the sound of the party coming from the backyard, but the distance muffled it, making it seem farther away than it was. I suddenly felt very vulnerable standing out in the street in the dark.

“Killian?” Kane sounded scared. I knew how he felt.

“Come on.” I grabbed his wrist and practically dragged him back toward the house.

“What are we going to do?” Kane whispered.

“We’re gonna go back to the house and call the police.”

Jake spotted us as we returned to the house. “I thought you guys were leaving.”

“So did we.” My voice shook a little.

“Someone smashed out all the windows in Killian’s car,” Kane told him.

“*What?*” Jake gasped.

“We need to call the police and Adam, but we didn’t want to wait out there. The security light is out so we didn’t feel safe.”

“Holy crap! I’m so sorry, guys. I feel responsible since it happened while you were at our house.”

“It’s not your fault,” I replied, “and it’s probably just a Halloween prank, but after everything that’s happened...”

I pulled out my phone and called the police first, then Adam.

Adam sounded panicked, which didn't help calm my jangled nerves. He said he'd be right there and hung up. He actually beat the police. He grabbed us both in a bear hug and didn't let go until I told him I had to breathe.

By then, word had spread and many people made their escape before the cops could show up. When the police finally did arrive about half an hour after I'd called, they kept everyone who was still there in the backyard until they knew more. Soon the whole area out by the road was lit up brighter than the dance floor. I suspected they were treating the whole thing more seriously because of my stabbing back in September. They worked while Adam, Kane, Jake, and I watched from a distance. Asher and Marcus joined us after a while.

Eventually, one of them disengaged himself and came over to us. "Mr. Kendall?" he asked Adam.

"No, I'm Adam Connelly. Killian is staying with me while his mother is out of town."

"Connelly?" the cop asked with raised eyebrows. "Any relation to the Connelly kid..."

"He was my son."

"I'm sorry," the cop said quickly. "That was insensitive. I'm Sergeant Hoetz."

"It's okay, Sergeant. You couldn't know."

He nodded. "Well, here's what we've concluded so far. In light of what happened last month and how it involved Killian here, we took this more seriously than we normally would have. I mean, windows smashed at a party might be upsetting, but it isn't an earth-shattering event. But under the circumstances...well, as you can see, we took precautions. We searched the car and the surrounding area and kept everyone on the premises who hadn't left already. We found a scrap of material caught on a piece of glass. We may be able to match it up with one of the people still here. We're trying to do that now. We are also taking names and releasing people as we can. We don't want to keep everyone here all night, but things took a nasty turn when we found this in the front seat of the car." He held up a plastic zip-lock bag with a folded piece of paper inside. "Someone threw it in after

the windows were smashed. It was on top of the broken glass.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s a note.”

“What does it say?” Adam asked.

Sergeant Hoetz thought a moment, then nodded and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a pair of rubber gloves and slipped them on. Opening the bag, he drew out the note and opened it. It read: “Killian, you’d think after last time you’d learn. This is just a warning. Next time you won’t be so lucky.”

We all stood stunned as Hoetz refolded the note and sealed it back in the bag.

Adam snapped out of it first. “That proves that Seth’s death was murder, and now the killer is after Killian.”

“Mr. Connelly, calm down,” Hoetz said soothingly. “It doesn’t prove anything, necessarily. It just means that someone is unhappy with Killian and is trying to scare him. Maybe he stole someone’s girlfriend or something.”

Adam snorted. “Here we go again, huh? My son was murdered, and no one wants to do anything about it.”

“Mr. Connelly, I understand your grief, but there was no proof—”

“No. You *do not* understand my grief. And there’s plenty of proof, but no one will even look at it. How was that note written?”

“It was computer generated. Red ink on white paper.”

“That’s exactly like the threatening notes Seth was getting before he was murdered.”

Hoetz pulled out a notebook and jotted something on it, flipped it closed, and stuck it back in his pocket. “We’ll look into it, Mr. Connelly.”

“I hope so,” Adam said angrily. “But excuse me if I don’t have much faith in the police.”

“There’s something else,” I said, speaking up for the first time.

Everyone turned to face me.

“Go ahead, son,” Sergeant Hoetz encouraged.

“Someone approached me during the party and tried to get me off by myself. My friend Asher followed and interrupted. If he hadn’t, I don’t know what might have happened. There was something about the guy that made me uncomfortable.”

“Did you know who it was?”

“No, but he was wearing a Batman costume.”

The sergeant spoke in his radio, telling everyone to look out for a Batman costume. “Is there anything else?”

I shook my head “no” just as another officer approached Hoetz and asked to speak with him for a minute. Hoetz excused himself, and they walked off to one side where they conversed quietly with their heads together for a few minutes before he returned. “Folks, I’d like to ask you to hang around a while longer if you can. There’s a chance the person who did this is still here. We’ve got the remaining kids rounded up and we’re going to attempt to match the fabric. There’s a chance we could wrap this up tonight.”

“This is a nightmare,” Adam mumbled, rubbing his forehead.

“Do you really think it was Seth’s murderer?” Kane asked, his voice tense. “You think he was here?”

“I don’t know,” Adam sighed. “I probably shouldn’t have even let you come here tonight, with a killer still on the loose.”

Kane’s eyes were wide. “Dad, I’m scared.”

“Me too, kiddo. Me too.”

Me too, I thought. I felt a pair of arms slide around me from behind, and I jumped, twisting awkwardly to see who it was.

“It’s just me,” Asher assured me quickly.

I turned rest of the way into him and returned the hug. I needed one right then.

We waited for over an hour. Asher and Marcus stayed with us the entire time. Finally, Hoetz reappeared, but judging from his deep frown, I guessed he didn’t have good news for us. I was right. “We weren’t able match the fabric sample at first glance, but that

was pretty much wishful thinking anyway since so many people left before we got here. Not that there's any lack of suspects — a couple hundred of them, to be exact. We've collected a list of names, which I'm sure is woefully incomplete. We'll start calling tomorrow. Maybe someone saw something. For now, I appreciate you waiting around, but you can head on home. I'll let you know if we turn up anything."

I sighed. Several hundred suspects didn't sound very promising. Of course, I had my own list, with Zack and Jesse at the top.

Once we got home, Adam sent us straight to bed, but I stayed up the rest of the night thinking. I was too unnerved and had too much on my mind to get any sleep. I had more trains of thought than I had tracks, but by morning I'd come to some conclusions.

For one, I decided I was ready to come out at school. It was obvious that Gilly and I were through. Besides, as Jake had said, everyone already suspected I was gay anyway, and I was tired of hiding and lying. It just kept hurting people I cared about. As a bonus, maybe my coming out would goad the killer into making a move. I was essentially offering myself as bait, but if it meant the killer might be caught, it would be worth any danger to me. At least that's what I reasoned at 4 a.m.

I also decided to confront Zack once and for all. I was feeling very reckless and angry by that point, ready for action.

And finally, I decided to give Asher another chance. I wasn't ruling Jake out completely, but it seemed Asher was always there for me, no matter what. He was definitely proving himself to be a true friend, and isn't that one of the things you should look for in a boyfriend?

With that last thought playing through my mind, I fell asleep just as the first rays of light broke over the horizon.

Adam let me sleep in that morning, for which I was truly grateful. I didn't get up until well after noon. I was still tired, but there were things I needed to do that day and I didn't want to put them off.

Adam and Kane were waiting for me when I went downstairs.

“Hey. You didn’t sleep much last night, did you?” Kane commented.

I ruffled his hair. “No, but you didn’t seem to have any trouble.” He’d fallen asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

“I was really worn out, I guess.”

“No kidding.”

“How are you feeling this morning?” Adam asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Really drained, but I did a lot of thinking last night. I made some decisions.”

“Come tell me about them while I make you breakfast,” he suggested.

I followed him into the kitchen with Kane trailing along behind. Adam opened the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of eggs and a pound of bacon.

My stomach lurched at the thought of all that greasy food. “Actually, I think I’d rather just have some cereal.”

He looked down at the eggs in his hand with a doubtful expression. “Cereal isn’t exactly comfort food.”

“I don’t think my stomach is up for that kind of comfort.”

He nodded and put the food away, pulling out a gallon of milk instead. He set it on the table and got me a bowl and a box of my favorite cereal.

“So what decisions did you make?” Kane asked as I poured the cereal.

I finished adding milk and took a bite before answering. “I think it’s time I faced some things instead of pretending they don’t exist.”

“What kinds of things?” Adam sat down across from me.

“I’ve decided to come out at school.”

They both stared at me in shock.

Kane recovered first. “What?”

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

I shrugged. “I don’t really have much choice. Everyone already suspected anyway, even when I was dating Gilly. Add to that the fact that she practically outed me at the party last night—”

“Kane told me about that,” Adam interrupted. “I’m sorry, Killian.”

I shrugged it off. “I just think I’d rather be honest than keep pretending to be something I’m not.” I decided not to mention my bait-and-trap strategy. I didn’t think Adam would go for it.

“I’ve never been one to encourage others to stay in the closet,” Adam said after a moment, “especially after my own experiences. I don’t know if this is the best decision, though.”

“Why not?” I challenged.

He hesitated.

“Is it because of what happened to Seth?”

Adam clenched his jaw and nodded tersely.

“I’ll be careful, Adam. Seth was all alone. I have people looking out for me. Besides, it’s not like I’m going to get on stage at an assembly and announce it. I’m just going to stop pretending.”

“Still...”

“This is what I want to do.”

He stood up and walked to the counter, keeping his back to me.

Kane shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “So, uh, you said you made several decisions, right? What else did you decide?”

“I’m also going to confront Zack. I want to do that today, before I lose my nerve.”

Adam whirled around. “Absolutely not!”

I sighed. “Adam, I’m tired of being a doormat. Last night, I stood up to him for the first time and he backed right down. He’s a bully, a coward.”

“Is Zack the jerk from last night?” Kane asked. “The one in the vampire costume?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Well, keep in mind you had backup last night, too.”

“What do you mean by confront him?” Adam asked.

“Just tell him to leave me alone once and for all — and all my friends. Plus, I’d really like to find out why he hates me so much. We used to be friends...kinda. I can’t believe this is all just because he thinks I’m gay.”

“That could be all it is, though, Killian.” Adam leaned back against the counter. He looked tired and old. “Bigots don’t need any other reason to hate someone.”

“It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I wish you’d rethink this. It’s really not wise to provoke him right now. What if he’s the one who smashed your car windows?”

“You think he’s the killer?”

“I don’t know who the killer is. That’s what scares me. It could be anyone, even someone you trust. I don’t want you taking any unnecessary chances.”

“So you don’t think I should try to talk to Zack right now?”

“I really don’t.”

I turned to Kane for his opinion.

He shrugged. “Don’t drag me into this. I don’t even know him.”

“Fine. I won’t talk to him now.”

Adam nodded.

“Is that all?” Kane asked.

“Well, no. This one isn’t up for negotiation, though.” I shot a stern glance in Adam’s direction, causing him to look a little worried. “I’m going to give Asher another chance.”

Adam and Kane broke into twin grins. “That’s a decision I think I can get behind,” Adam enthused.

“What took you so long?” Kane teased. “It’s obvious he’s crazy about you.”

I laughed. “I guess I don’t make up my mind very quickly. Besides,

it was complicated.”

“Speaking of complications, what are you going to do about Jake?” Adam asked.

My smile faded away. “I don’t know. I like him, but...it’s different with Asher and me. We have a history, you know? I just met Jake.”

Kane blinked. “Wait. Jake is gay, too?”

“Oops,” I said sheepishly. “Yeah, but don’t say anything. He may not want people to know.”

Kane shook his head. “I never would have guessed he was gay.”

“You should know better than to stereotype people,” Adam admonished gently.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” He paused, then turned to me. “So is everyone at your school gay?”

I laughed again. “No. There are a thousand students at my school and I only know three gay people, counting myself. Statistically, that’s not even close to the ten percent there should be.”

He nodded with satisfaction. “Hey, it’s not like I care. The more of you guys that are gay, the more chicks that leaves for me.”

We all cracked up, then I grew serious again. “So you guys think Asher and I make a good couple?”

Kane patted my hand. “Follow your heart, Killian. You’ll know what’s right.”

I tried not to smile at his serious tone. “Thanks, oh wise one. How’d you get so smart?”

“I dunno. Good genes, I guess.”

Adam snorted as I rolled my eyes.

“What?” Kane asked with mock innocence.

“On that note, I’ll be going,” Adam said.

“Where to?” Kane asked.

“Well, now that everyone is awake and I’m reasonably sure no one will do anything risky—” He gave me a meaningful look. “—I’m

going to go check on your car. The police impounded it last night and I need to see what we have to do to get it released and repaired. While I'm there, maybe I can also see if they've learned anything more overnight."

"You want me to go with you?" I offered.

"No, stay and finish your breakfast. I shouldn't be long."

I stared down at my now soggy cereal and made a face.

Adam left while I dumped out that bowl and started again from scratch. After I'd finished, I rinsed out the bowl and got a handful of cookies to dunk in my glass of milk.

Kane grabbed one of my cookies and dipped it in my glass.

"Hey, get your own!"

He bared his teeth, which were covered with chewed chocolate cookie.

"Lovely. Did you have fun last night?"

"You mean up until the whole car thing? Yeah, I really did."

"You and Jake seemed to hit it off."

He shot me a funny look, and I quickly added, "I meant as friends."

"Oh. Yeah." He smiled. "He seems really cool. I also liked Asher, by the way."

"I think he liked you, too."

"Well, I mean, who can blame him? I'm pretty awesome."

I laughed. "And so humble, too."

"Careful or I'll steal all your boys."

"Jake is all yours. Stay away from Asher though."

Just then my phone started vibrating. I glanced down. "Speak of the devil, it's Jake. You want me to tell him you want to go on a date?"

Kane stuck his tongue out at me. I was still laughing as I answered.

"Hey," Jake said. "I was calling to see how you are but I guess

you're okay."

"Yeah, I'm okay. I was a little shaken up last night, but I'm fine. What's going on there?"

"The police are still here. They came back this morning to search the grounds, even the house, because people could come and go as they pleased. My parents are not happy, let me tell you."

"It's not exactly your fault."

"Oh, I know. That doesn't mean they aren't mad, though. This place is a total wreck. I'm sure Gilly, Todd, and I will have to clean it all up, too. It'll have to wait until the cops leave though."

"All this just because somebody broke my windows?"

"Well, that and now apparently Zack is missing, too."

"Missing?"

"He never went home last night and he's not with Jesse. His mom called here earlier. She told me Jesse said he left Zack at the party. They split when the cops arrived. I think she called the cops so now they're looking for him, too."

"I'm sure he'll turn up. You can't get rid of cockroaches that easily."

Jake laughed. "True. Anyway, sorry the party ended on such a rotten note for you."

"Again, not your fault. We had a great time except for that."

"And the whole mess with Gilly."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"No problem. Hey, the police are yelling something outside. I'd better go see what's going on."

"Okay. I'll talk to you later, Jake. And if you need any help cleaning up, call me and I'll give you hand."

"Thanks, but, uh, you're probably not the most popular person around our house right now, so that might not be such a good idea. Later, Killer."

"Bye."

“Who’ll turn up?” Kane asked as soon as I hung up.

“Huh?”

“You said, ‘He’ll turn up.’”

“Oh. Zack. Apparently he didn’t go home last night. Probably found a new bridge to sleep under like the troll he is.”

Kane snickered.

“I should probably call Asher. I’d really like to see him today.” I waited but Kane didn’t move. “Don’t you have something to do?” I asked.

He raised one eyebrow, a gesture I’d seen Adam make many times. “Why? You want to be left alone so you can call your boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” I felt my face flush.

“Not yet anyway. You know, you could just go to our room instead of kicking me out of the kitchen.”

Once again, he had a point. I was about to run upstairs when my phone started ringing again. It was Adam.

“Killian?” Adam sounded tense. “Listen carefully and don’t argue, okay?”

“Um, okay.”

“Good. After we hang up, lock all the doors and check the windows and don’t go anywhere until I get home.”

“What? Why? What’s going on?”

“Just do as I said.”

“I will, but, Adam, what’s going on? You can’t just say that and not explain. You’re really scaring me.”

“I’m sorry, Killian. I’m at the police station, and it’s total chaos here. They just found Zachary Phillips’ body floating in the creek behind the Sheridan’s house.”

The phone suddenly became heavy, and my arm slowly dropped to my side. I could still hear Adam’s voice squawking, but I no longer understood what he was saying.

As if from a distance, I heard Kane asking me what was wrong. I felt him come up behind me and gently take the phone from my hand. I heard him talking to Adam, asking him what was going on, when he'd be home.

The next thing I knew, he was standing in front of me. "Killian, snap out of it. I need your help."

I forced myself to focus on him.

"Why are you acting like this? You weren't close to that guy, were you? Wasn't he the jerk? You were planning to tell him off just a little while ago."

I shook my head to clear it. "I've known him since we were little kids. We grew up together. I was saying such terrible things about him, and now he's gone. The killer got him, too. And he's not going to stop till he gets me." I was getting more and more hysterical with every passing second.

Kane grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "Killian, listen to me. All Dad said was that they found Zack dead in the creek. That doesn't mean he was murdered. Maybe he got drunk and fell in. Don't jump to conclusions yet. Why would anyone want to kill Zack?"

"I don't know. It's too much to be a coincidence. I just know that this is bad — very bad."

"Well, of course it's bad. It's always bad when someone dies. But you need to calm down right now. Dad wants us to lock all the doors and windows. Help me do that."

We went around the house locking and checking all the doors and windows on the first floor — and, after some thought, the windows on the second floor as well. We'd watched too many horror movies, though, and by the time we were finished we'd thoroughly spooked ourselves. Kane dug his baseball bat out of the closet, and I armed myself with a large kitchen knife. Then we barricaded ourselves in the living room to wait for Adam to get home.

As we were sitting there, it suddenly occurred to me that we were acting like little kids. We were hiding in our living room and jumping at the slightest sound. The more I thought about it, the

more ridiculous it became, until I was laughing out loud.

“What’s so funny?” Kane sounded a little insulted.

“Just that here we are, you’re fifteen and I’m sixteen, and we’re acting like a couple of babies scared of our own shadows. It’s broad daylight. I’m not going to live my life in fear.”

Kane grinned sheepishly. “Yeah, it is a little silly. Let’s put this stuff away before Dad gets home.”

I returned the knife to the kitchen while Kane ran the bat upstairs. By the time he returned, I’d gone back to thinking about Zack.

“What’s wrong?” Kane asked after one look at my face.

“I feel really bad that I was saying all those mean things about Zack and he was dead the whole time.”

“Was he any less of a jerk just because he died?”

“No, but still...I was always taught that you don’t speak ill of the dead.”

Kane rolled his eyes. “Please. If you didn’t like him when he was alive, why pretend he was some great person now that he’s dead? Besides, you didn’t know he was dead when you were saying that stuff.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. Now let’s see what’s on TV.”

“Actually, I think I’ll go take a shower before Adam gets home.”

Kane nodded approvingly. “Good. You stink.”

I tossed a pillow at his head and ran upstairs before he could retaliate.

Adam was home by the time I’d finished and gotten dressed. He and Kane were talking quietly in the living room. They both looked up and fell silent when I entered.

“What?” I demanded.

“What do you mean?” Adam asked carefully.

“You stopped talking when I walked in the room. You must have

been discussing me.”

Adam and Kane exchanged glances, then looked back at me.

“Sit down, Killian,” Adam said.

This wasn’t going to be good. No conversation that started with the words “sit down” was ever good. I crossed the room and sat on the couch next to Kane.

“Does this have to do with Zack?” I asked.

“Yes. I didn’t want to go into it over the phone. I wanted to tell you in person.”

“Tell me what? What’s going on?”

Adam swallowed and took a deep breath. “Killian, Zack was murdered. His throat was cut.”

I sat stunned for several moments. “I don’t understand,” I said finally.

“Zack’s throat was cut, just like Seth’s. Obviously, there’s a lot we don’t know yet, and won’t know until they do an autopsy, but it’s a little much to be a coincidence. It’s hard to believe that we have two killers running around this little town slashing the throats of teenage boys. The police don’t understand yet what the connection could be, but they’re taking it very seriously this time. They do think it was Zack that either broke your windows or left the note or maybe both. The fabric fragment that the police found matched a tear in Zack’s costume.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. If Zack was the killer, who killed him? And if he wasn’t, why would he leave the note?”

“As I said, the police are working on it. Now that they’re taking the case seriously, it’s not up to us to figure it out anymore. As of right now, I want you out of this, completely and totally. I want to know where you are at all times, and I don’t want you going anywhere alone. You’re to come directly home after school and go nowhere after dark until this killer is caught.”

“But I—”

“But nothing, Killian. I want you out of this. I don’t want you

involved.”

“I’m already involved.”

“And I was an idiot to allow it. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking. This is a cold-blooded murderer we’re talking about. He’s already killed two boys, one of whom was my son. Killian, I have come to love you as if you were my own. You and Kane are all I have left. I don’t think I could bear to lose either of you at this point. I couldn’t bear it! Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I sat stunned for a second as the impact of what Adam had just said sank in. Then I was off the couch and throwing my arms around Adam in a tight hug. After a few beats, I felt Kane slide in next to me to complete the group hug.

After a bit, I pulled away. “I should probably call Asher before he sees this on the news.”

Adam nodded. “Good idea.”

I quickly dialed Asher’s number. He picked up right away.

“Hey! I was just thinking about you. I almost called earlier but didn’t want to wake you if you were still asleep. Are you okay?”

“Um, well, I’m okay, but something else has happened.”

“What?”

“Ash, Zack is dead.”

The line was dead quiet.

“Asher?”

“How?”

“He was murdered. Last night at the party. His throat was cut, like Seth. The police found him this morning in the creek.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Are you okay?”

“We’ve been friends since elementary school. Sure, he was a jerk sometimes, but he was still my friend.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Are you by yourself?”

“No, Kane and Adam are here.”

“Can you come over?”

“Hang on. I’ll ask.”

I checked with Adam, but he told me flatly he didn’t want me to leave the house. He couldn’t take me anyway, and my car was still being held as evidence.

I reported back to Asher. “Can I come over there, then?”

Adam was fine with that, so Asher said he was on his way. It didn’t take him long to arrive. Kane was playing video games in the den so Asher and I went up to our room for privacy.

Once alone, Asher enveloped me in a tight hug.

“I can’t believe Zack is gone,” he said.

“I know. I hated his guts lately, but I didn’t want him to die.”

“It could have been any of us.”

“You don’t know that, Ash. Maybe Zack was targeted for some reason. We don’t know.”

“It could have been you.”

That I couldn’t argue with. I just squeezed him tighter. “But it wasn’t me. I’m right here.”

Asher pulled back but kept his hands on my sides, as if he was afraid I’d vanish if he let go completely. “But what about next time? What if it is you next time?”

“Who says there’ll be a next time?”

“This isn’t over, Killian. Not until they catch this guy. The broken windows, that guy at the party who grabbed you, now Zack. You’re in danger. Maybe you always were and I was just ignoring it, but it seems more real now.”

“Asher, you’re scaring me.”

“Good. You should be scared. I’m scared, too. Scared shitless. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that. If you had died last night, I would never have been able to tell you that I’m crazy about you. I would have never have gotten to tell you how I feel about you.”

“You’ve told me before.”

“No, not really.”

I stroked his cheek. “Well, I’m here now.”

“I love you, Killian. And I want to be your boyfriend. I don’t care who knows.”

A grin spread across my face. “I thought you’d never ask.”

For the first time since he’d arrived, a small smile tugged at the corners of Asher’s mouth. “Is that a yes?”

I pulled him close and kissed him hard. “Yes.”

He kissed me again, softer this time. “So it’s official then? You’re not dating Gilly? Or Jake?”

“Just you. It’s official.”

I kissed my boyfriend again.

Chapter 21

Since my car was still in impound, Adam let me take his car to school Monday morning. The situation at school was infuriating. Very few details had been given about Zack's death on the news, but that didn't stop the story from taking on a life of its own. Word of the murder had quickly made the rounds of the gossip grapevine. Jesse didn't show up to school, which sparked a rumor that he was missing too.

In life, Zack had never enjoyed true popularity. He'd been well-known because he was good at sports, but hadn't been admired or especially liked. He was too mean-spirited for that. In death, however, the student body practically beatified him — in the religious sense. Suddenly, Zack was a saint. Girls walked through the halls crying. Guys looked sad and shaken. Everyone went on about how great he had been. I couldn't help wondering if they were talking about the same Zack Phillips I'd known.

On Tuesday, the school brought in grief counselors to speak to the students about Zack's death. Anyone could get out of class to go see the counselors. I couldn't believe it. Where had they been when Seth was murdered?

My car was released on Wednesday, and Adam paid to have the windows replaced, which would take a few more days. In the meantime, I was still using Adam's car. At school, the atmosphere of public mourning continued unabated. Jesse came back, but everyone gave him a wide berth. I saw him a few times in the hall, looking lost, and I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. Then I remembered how

he'd threatened me and beat up Asher.

I reached my breaking point on Thursday in homeroom during morning announcements. We had just been notified about a special assembly to be held the next day when something in me snapped. "That's it!" I stood up so abruptly my chair flew backward into the desk behind me, causing a surprisingly loud clatter.

Every eye in the room turned toward me. The teacher, Mrs. Chalk, looked shocked to see it was me causing the disturbance. I couldn't remember the last time I'd spoken up in class without being called on.

"This is so ridiculous," I snarled. "You're all a bunch of hypocrites."

"Mr. Kendall!" Mrs. Chalk stood up, eyeing me warily, as if I were a wild animal on the attack. "I think you should sit back down."

I ignored her. "How many of you could even stand Zack when he was alive? Now everyone's acting like he was their best friend. He was a jerk and you all know it."

"That's enough," Mrs. Chalk said sharply.

"No, it's not enough. A few weeks ago, another student was murdered and nobody gave a damn. Where was his assembly? Oh, that's right. He didn't matter because he was gay."

Mrs. Chalk visibly softened. "Mr. Kendall...Killian, this isn't the time or place. I understand you've been through a lot—"

"No, you don't understand. Seth was my friend. I was the one who found him with his throat sliced open. I was almost killed, and all anyone could talk about was whether or not I was gay. Well guess what, everybody? *I am gay.*"

The other students stared at me in shock. No one knew quite how to react.

"That's right. I'm gay. I'm queer. I'm a *fag.*" I spat out the last word, and several people flinched. "So go ahead, make fun of me. Pretend I don't exist. It doesn't matter to me. You know why? Because I'm proud of who I am. I'm not going to lie about it anymore. If you don't like it, then that's your problem."

I stood glaring around the room, daring someone to say something. Most eyes looked away as my gaze swept over them. No one said a word, not even Mrs. Chalk. As my anger and adrenaline slowly drained away, I was left wondering how to gracefully end my diatribe. Did I sit down and pretend nothing out of the ordinary had happened, or did I make a dramatic exit by storming out?

I was saved the decision by the bell signaling first period. Everyone burst into motion as they leapt from their desks and tried to crowd through the door at the same time. The room had never emptied so quickly. In a matter of seconds, I was alone with Mrs. Chalk.

She made a feeble attempt at a smile. "If you need someone to talk to..." she began uncertainly.

I grabbed my bag and fled the room without responding.

I wasn't exactly in the mood to go to my next class, so I decided to skip. I drove home before I remembered that Adam would be there, which meant I'd have to explain why I'd left school before first period. I took a deep breath and walked inside.

Adam appeared in the hallway. "What are you doing home? Are you okay?"

I leaned back against the door, giving him my best puppy-dog look. "Remember how I said I wouldn't get up in an assembly and come out at school?"

"Ye-es," he said slowly.

"Well, it wasn't an assembly..."

"Oh, God, Killian! What did you do?"

I sighed. "I kind of lost it in class."

"Maybe we should sit down while you tell me this." He headed back into the den, and I followed.

Once we had settled on the couch, I explained all about what had happened at school since Zack had been killed. I ended by describing how I'd reacted that morning when they announced the assembly.

After I'd finished, Adam whistled through his teeth. "Well, you

certainly know how to make a scene.”

I shrugged miserably. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize, kiddo. I probably would have done the same thing if I’d been there.” He considered a minute, then added, “Maybe minus the coming out.”

“You think that was a bad move?”

“You know my thoughts on the subject. I just don’t want to see you go through the same hell Seth did. Who knows, though? It could be different for you. He was an outsider. You’ve grown up with these kids.”

“I just got so mad at the way they’re acting like Zack was such a wonderful guy. He was a jerk! And that damn assembly! Nobody even cared when Seth was murdered.”

“Again, while I don’t think it’s right, I can understand. Zack attended school there all his life. His family is well-known. Seth went there for two weeks.”

“You don’t think it had anything to do with the fact that Seth was gay?”

“I don’t know, Kill. Maybe it did or maybe it didn’t. Either way, does it really change what happened?”

“I guess not,” I admitted grudgingly.

“There’s something else you need to think about. Now that you’ve outed yourself, you have to face your classmates eventually. Are you going to be okay with that?”

My eyes widened in horror. That hadn’t even occurred to me. “Fuck!” I groaned.

“Killian!”

“What am I going to do?”

“You’re going to march in there and act like you meant what you said. You’re going to be proud of who you are, regardless of what anyone says or does.”

I nodded weakly. It was easy for him to say. I was the one that

would have to face the looks and jeers.

“You’ve been through enough today, though.” He ruffled my hair. “Why don’t you stay home? Tomorrow will be soon enough to face them.”

“Too soon,” I mumbled. Even so, I was grateful for the reprieve.

“Want some good news?”

I nodded vigorously.

“I finally got something concrete from the police this morning.”

I sat up with sudden interest. “What?” Adam had been calling the police twice a day to check on the case’s progress, which was minimal to say the least. All they would tell him was that they were pretty sure it was someone at the party — well, duh! I was pretty sure of that too, so give me a detective badge and put me on the force! — but they were still going over the evidence.

“The medical examiner has placed Zack’s estimated time of death at or around midnight.”

I slowly leaned back into the cushions as that bit of information sank in. I was a little lightheaded from relief. As much as I knew in my gut that Asher had nothing to do with the murders, somewhere in the back of my mind I had never been able to completely shake that last little bit of doubt. Adam’s news finally made it possible to put that nagging fear to rest. I had been with Asher, Kane, and Jake all night.

I realized I needed to warn Asher about my coming out. We hadn’t had any time alone since we’d become boyfriends on Sunday night. We’d seen each other in school a few times, but we’d decided not to act any differently than usual because we were afraid people would figure out we were a couple. Now I’d outed myself to my whole class. The whole school probably knew by now. I checked my phone but there were no texts. Maybe word hadn’t gotten out yet. I wanted to tell him before he found out from someone else. It was almost enough to send me back to school, but not quite.

Instead, I watched the clock impatiently until school let out. The wait was interminable. I’m not sure who suffered more while

waiting, me or Adam. As soon as the clock ticked over, I started begging Adam to let me drive over to Asher's house. I wanted to tell him in person. Adam still didn't want me to go anywhere by myself, but it didn't take too much whining before he agreed to let me drive directly there, as long as I called the moment I arrived. I was out the door and on my way before he could change his mind.

Marcus answered the door. "Killian, hey! Come on in. Dude, did you hear about Zack? Well, I mean, sure you did. Wasn't that awful? He died while we were at the party! I mean, we were right there! It could have been any of us!"

"Not really," I said without thinking. I called Adam to assure him I was safe and sound at the Davises'.

"What do you mean?" Marcus asked as soon as I'd hung up.

"Well, just that...if the murderer killed Zack, he must have had a reason. I don't think it was just a random murder any more than I think Seth was killed in a random mugging."

"Whoa! You think Zack's death is connected to Seth's?"

I'd forgotten the police hadn't released the details of Zack's murder, only that he'd been found dead in the creek and that foul play was suspected. The rumors at school had ranged from a version of the truth to a drug-related shooting. I had already said way too much and wasn't sure where to go from there. "Yeah. I mean, I guess. It just makes sense, you know? I mean, I just assumed—" Smooth, real smooth, Killian.

"You know more than you're saying, don't you?"

"Hey, is Asher here?" I was trying to change the subject but it had also just occurred to me that I hadn't called first so it was possible Asher wasn't home yet.

"He's upstairs in his room. Have you talked to the police?"

"Something like that," I called over my shoulder as I loped up the stairs. Marcus followed me to the base of the staircase, and for a moment I thought he was going to chase me all the way up. Instead, he simply shrugged and wandered off.

I heaved a sigh of relief and walked down the hall to Asher's

room. I stood in front of his door for a few seconds before taking a deep breath and knocking. I watched in amusement mixed with apprehension as Asher answered and his eyes widened in surprise. What if he wasn't happy to see me?

"Hi," I said, suddenly shy.

Asher quickly calmed me by breaking into a huge smile. He stepped back and opened the door wider. "Hi, come on in." His voice was soft, making him sound as shy as I felt.

I entered the room, and he shut the door behind me. Without saying a word, we moved toward each other and melted into an embrace. For a few seconds, we simply enjoyed being in one another's arms. I didn't want to let go, but eventually Asher pulled back with a concerned expression.

"Are you okay? What happened in school today?"

I groaned. "So you already heard, huh?"

He shrugged. "It was all anyone was talking about by the end of the day. Are you okay?"

"Just peachy."

Asher grabbed my wrist and pulled me over to his bed. He flopped down, yanking me with him. "Tell me what happened."

I explained my mounting frustration with how the school was handling Zack's death, and how I'd finally snapped in class that morning.

He nodded when I'd finished. "That's about what I heard."

"What's everybody saying?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know, but I had to ask.

He shrugged. "Some people were making jokes, about what you'd expect, but others seemed kind of impressed."

"Impressed?"

"Yeah. You stood up for yourself. More importantly, though, you created quite a scene." He chuckled.

"You're not mad?"

He gave me a confused look. “Why would I be mad?”

“Well, I mean, I outed myself.”

“So?”

“Um, last time we almost got outed by Zack and Jesse, you freaked out.”

He looked down. “Yeah. I know. I was a jerk. I’m really sorry. A lot has changed since then.”

“You’re not afraid that people will assume you’re gay because we’re friends?”

“We’re more than friends, Kill.”

“Yeah, but nobody else knows that.”

“Yet.”

The mischievous twinkle in his eye made me a little nervous. “What do you mean yet?”

“I told you the other day. I don’t care who knows about us.”

My eyes narrowed. “You’re planning something, aren’t you?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“No, tell me now or I’ll...tickle you!” I launched myself at him and began to dig my fingers into his sides.

He laughed and squirmed under me until he managed to slip away because I was laughing just as hard as he was. He leapt to his feet and stood panting and giggling. I watched him from where I lay sprawled on the bed. Our eyes locked, and we gradually stopped laughing. I slowly got up and approached him. Our arms slid around each other, our gazes never wavering for a moment. Time seemed to stop. Nothing else existed as I looked into his beautiful silver eyes. It was just Asher and I.

Our faces drew steadily closer until our lips met in the softest, most romantic kiss I had ever experienced. In that moment, in that utterly perfect moment that would be burned into my memory for the rest of my life, I knew I loved Asher.

We stood there with our arms around each other, my head on

his shoulder, moving to the silent sounds of music that can only be heard with the heart. The notes of an old song that Mom had listened to over and over when I was little began to float through my mind. Soon, the words followed, and I softly began to sing.

“Someday, when I’m awfully low, and the world is cold, I will feel a glow just thinking of you and the way you look tonight.”

I was very self-conscious about my voice. It wasn’t that I couldn’t sing. I’d often been told I had a very good voice. In fact, I had been in chorus all the way through middle school, often getting solos. However, I’d lost my confidence and stopped singing when my voice changed. It had become low and husky, perfectly suited to the old ballad.

Asher cut off my serenade with another one of those wonderful, tender kisses. This one quickly escalated to a deeper level of passion. He walked me backwards until the backs of my knees hit the edge of the bed and we tumbled onto the mattress. There, things heated up even more. We rolled around, first with me on top, then him. Our hands seemed to be everywhere at once — running through his hair, under my shirt, squeezing his ass. Somehow, our shirts seemed to come off without our lips ever breaking contact. It was as if I were in some sort of trance, completely caught up in the moment.

I crashed back to reality when I felt him fumbling at my zipper. I sat up so suddenly I almost threw him off the bed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I...I’m not sure we should do this.”

He stared at me incredulously “What?”

“I’m just...I’m not sure...”

“Not sure of what? Do you like me?”

“Yes!”

“Then what’s the problem?”

I sat there for a long time. Too long I guess, because before I could say anything I saw fear and uncertainty flicker through his eyes.

“Killian?” he prompted.

“Asher, I want to. I want to so bad.”

“Then what’s stopping you?” he asked, pulling me closer and running his hands up my back. His touch on my bare skin sent a tingling shock directly to my crotch. I pulled away more roughly than I’d intended.

“I can’t.” I could see the hurt in his expression and rushed on. “Asher, I want to do this right. More than anything, I want this to work. I don’t want to do anything that would ruin what we have.”

He sat up and glared at me. I couldn’t tell if he was more angry or hurt — maybe it was equally both. “So...let me see if I’ve got this right. You’re saying that sleeping with me would ruin our relationship?”

“That’s not what I meant...well...yeah, maybe in a way it is, but not in the way you mean.”

“Please explain it to me, then.”

“I...I don’t know if I’m ready to...do that.” I stopped and took a deep breath while I tried to gather my thoughts. “I don’t want to mess up what we have. You mean so much to me. When we finally do have...sex, I want it to be perfect and amazing. I want to make sure I’m ready.”

Asher seemed to be considering what I’d said. After a minute, he nodded. “I guess I can understand that.” He gave me a small smile. “I suppose you’re worth waiting for. Just...you really do like me?”

“Yes, Asher, I really do like you. No, wait. I don’t just like you — I...I love you!”

His eyes grew wide. “Really?” he whispered.

I nodded. “I love you, Asher.”

A huge grin spread across his face, but then it quickly faded.

“Ash? What’s wrong?”

“As long as we’re getting things off our chests, I have some things I need to say.”

“Okay,” I said nervously. “Go ahead.”

He took a deep breath. “I’ve loved you for years. I don’t think I ever realized how much until I saw you with Seth. God! I was so jealous. I wanted so badly to let you know how I felt, but I was scared. Then when you got hurt, I was terrified I might lose you.

“That’s when I finally found the nerve to tell you how I felt. I thought everything would be perfect — but nothing went right. First, I was still scared, then there was Gilly. When you told me she was just a cover, I thought maybe I still had a chance, but *then* I heard you talking to Jake, and it was like I had lost you again.

“And now after all that, here you are, telling me you love me. I want so much to believe it — to believe that you really do love me — but I’m scared of losing you again. Maybe tomorrow it’ll be someone else, maybe Jake or someone new. Maybe I’m not enough for you. Killian, I love you with all my heart. When I’m with you, it’s the happiest I ever feel, and when I’m not with you it’s like a part of me is missing. You’re all I ever think about. As much as I love you, though, I don’t think I can stand being on this rollercoaster forever.”

“I’m sorry I put you through all that — or I guess we put each other through it. I was just as scared and confused as you were. In some ways, I still am. Before, I couldn’t see what was right in front of my eyes...but I do now. I hope the rollercoaster stops here, but I can’t promise anything. Who knows what’s going to happen tomorrow or the next day? All I can tell you is that I love you and I want this to work. I want us to work. I’m willing to risk it if you are.”

A small smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. “Using my own words against me, huh? That’s fighting dirty.”

I shrugged and smiled back. “I use whatever I have at my disposal.”

He sighed. “So you really love me?”

“Yes. I really do.”

He grabbed me by the shoulders and yanked me closer to plant a firm kiss on my lips.

“Does this mean you’re willing to take the risk?” I asked with a

smirk when he released me.

“I probably need to have my head examined, but yeah. I love you too damned much not to.”

I grinned triumphantly.

“You don’t have to look so damn smug,” he growled. He was pretending to be annoyed, but the look in his eyes belied his tone.

I stuck my tongue out at him, and he pounced on me. We fell back onto the bed. “Don’t stick that thing out unless you plan to use it.”

“Who said I wasn’t?”

He made a face. “You said no fooling around.”

“No, I said no...”

“Sex, Killian. The word is sex. Say it with me now—”

I laughed and gave him a playful shove. “Okay. I said no sex. That doesn’t mean we can’t do other stuff.”

Asher raised one eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Oh, like making out...among other things.”

“What other things?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” I teased, echoing his words from earlier.

“Oh, you really do fight dirty.” He gave me a wicked grin before leaning in and pressing his lips against mine.

Sometime later, I lay watching Asher as he slept. Our bodies were intertwined, his arms wrapped tightly around me. It was a nice feeling, one I could definitely get used to. However, as much as I wanted that moment to last forever, I knew I had to get back before Adam started to worry. I slipped out from under him and, with a soft kiss on the lips, left him for the night.

I had a lot to think about on the drive home.

I was not at all looking forward to facing my classmates the next

day. I dragged my way through my morning shower and breakfast even more than usual. I toyed with the idea of playing sick, but I knew Adam would never fall for it. I had to face them eventually, so I decided it was better to just get it over.

I parked in the student lot and trudged toward school. As I walked, I noticed everyone seemed to be watching me out of the corner of their eye. Although no one said anything to me directly, I suspected they were all talking about me behind my back. I felt my shoulders begin to hunch. Suddenly, I remembered what Adam had said about marching in proudly. I immediately stood up straighter and lifted my chin.

After a brief trip to my locker, I headed toward homeroom. It seemed much further away than it ever had before. At the last minute, I realized I needed to take a detour to the bathroom. I was extremely nervous, a condition made manifest through my bladder. After I'd relieved myself, I splashed some cool water on my face, then stood staring at my reflection in the mirror. Would I look any different to my classmates now that they all knew I was gay? Would they see me or just another faggot?

I heard the morning announcements start and glanced down at my watch. I was late to homeroom. I couldn't put it off any longer.

I opened the door as quietly as possible, but Mrs. Chalk noticed me anyway. "Killian," she said nervously and everyone in the room turned to look at me. "Why, uh, don't you take your seat?"

It was a struggle to keep my chin up as I crossed the room and slid behind my desk, but somehow I managed.

Once I was settled, Mrs. Chalk began speaking. "Yes, well, er, as you all know, the, uh, assembly is this morning." She paused and cast an anxious glance in my direction, as if she expected a repeat of my previous day's performance. I studied the top of my desk. "You're to go to the auditorium after the bell instead of to your usual first-period class."

I held my breath. Was she actually going to let the episode slide without comment?

"Now, about what happened yesterday..."

I sighed. Of course, that was too much to hope for.

Mrs. Chalk gave me an uneasy smile. “We understand you’ve been through a lot, so we’re going to make allowances this time. Just don’t let it happen again.”

I blinked. Don’t let it happen again? That was it?

The bell rang, and everyone leapt up and rushed from the room.

“Killian, could I speak to you for a moment?” Mrs. Chalk called.

I’d known it was too good to be true. I approached her apprehensively. I was sure she was about to tell me I had detention or was suspended.

“Killian, I spoke to Principal Martinez about yesterday’s, er, incident.”

I felt my stomach sinking. “I’m sorry about that. I don’t know what came over me.”

She smiled nervously. “Under the circumstances, it’s understandable. It’s been stressful for all of us, but even more so for you since you were friends with...the, uh, murdered boy.”

“His name was Seth,” I told her sadly.

“Yes, Seth.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, while we do understand, your outburst was still inappropriate. You’ve never been in trouble before so, as I said, we’re going to let it go this time. However, you do need to deal with your grief and anger. The school has special grief counselors available right now, and of course there are always our own guidance counselors here for you if you need to talk to someone.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Chalk, but I’m going to be seeing a counselor soon. My, uh, dad is trying to work it out.”

“Oh. Well, good. I hope it helps.”

“Thanks.”

“Okay. Well. You’d better get going. You don’t want to miss the, uh...” She petered off awkwardly.

I just nodded, then turned and walked away.

Much to my surprise, Asher was waiting for me in the hall. “Did you get in trouble?” he asked, falling into step beside me.

“Not exactly. She just told me I needed counseling.”

Asher snorted. “I could have told you that.”

I punched him lightly in the arm.

“So are you sure you’re up for this assembly?”

I shrugged. “Do I have a choice?”

“Not really.”

“Then I guess I’m ready.”

“I doubt it’ll be as bad as you think. I heard it’s not really so much about Zack as it is because of Zack.”

“Huh?”

“They’re holding it because he was killed, but it’s not like in his honor or anything.”

We walked into the auditorium, which was rapidly filling up with students.

“Come on.” Asher started toward the stage, where Principal Martinez stood talking to a young man in a police uniform. Behind them sat the school’s three guidance counselors and the vice principal.

“Uh, can’t we just sit in the back?”

“You want to look like you’re trying to hide? Let’s sit right down in the front row. Show them you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Although I wasn’t quite convinced, I followed him.

Halfway to the front, someone shoved me roughly. “Fag,” he spat. It was one of the football players. I didn’t know his name.

Before I could respond, Asher spun around and glared at him. “Back off, asshole.”

“Or what?” he sneered.

“Or I’ll report you for harassment. Did you know that it’s illegal here in Maryland? I could get you suspended.”

I blinked. I remembered Adam and Steve mentioning that

harassment was illegal, but it had completely slipped my mind. How had Asher known about it?

“Students, please take your seats,” Principal Martinez announced from stage.

The football jock glared at Asher for another moment, then turned and walked away. Asher started for the front of the room once again.

“Where’d you learn that?” I had to hurry to keep up with him.

He shrugged. “I’ve been doing some research online. I found this website called GLSEN that tells you all about your rights as a gay student and how to start a GSA in your school.”

“A what?”

“GSA. It stands for gay/straight alliance.”

I mulled that over while we found seats in the front row. We sat down just as Martinez started the assembly.

“As everyone is well aware, we’ve suffered several tragedies already this year. The school has made grief counselors available. They’ll be here for at least another week, longer if we think they are still needed. However, we felt that wasn’t enough. We decided to hold this assembly as a way to allow you all to vent your feelings and emotions. We’ll talk about ways to deal with grief and depression. We also have a representative from the police department here to speak to you about safety. And finally, after our presenters have finished, we’ll take questions. Mrs. Berdan?”

The school’s ancient guidance counselor stepped up to the podium and started droning about the stages of grief. I zoned out and thought about how Asher had defended me and what he’d said. It was strange to hear Asher talk so openly about gay issues. Obviously, he really had made some sort of breakthrough. Suddenly, he seemed more comfortable about what was going on than I was. Of course, he wasn’t the one who was out to the entire school.

After Mrs. Berdan finished her mini-seminar on giving yourself permission to grieve, one of the other guidance counselors lectured us on how to recognize the signs of depression.

Finally, the police officer came forward to tell us about the precautions we could take to avoid being the next murder victim. Of course, he didn't put it in exactly those terms, but that's what it boiled down to. He recommended the buddy system.

Asher ran a finger across the back of my hand. "Want to be my buddy?" he whispered with an evil grin.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing, but I couldn't stop the jump in my pants. I had trouble concentrating on the rest of the officer's speech.

When he was done, Principal Martinez stepped back up. "Thank you, Officer Porter. Does anyone have any questions?"

I turned to see hands fly up all over the auditorium. Several teachers were positioned around the room to hand cordless microphones to those with questions.

The first person called on was a freshman from the looks of him. "Is it true that Zack Phillips had crabs all over him when they pulled him out of the water?"

A few girls shrieked as Martinez sputtered. The teacher snatched the mike from the boy's hand and gave him a dirty look. He sat down sheepishly.

"I cannot comment on the investigation," Martinez managed between clenched teeth. "Are there any questions that do not involve obscene curiosity about the gory details of Zachary Phillips's unfortunate death?"

Every hand dropped.

Martinez shook his head disappointedly. "If there are no further questions, one of your fellow students has asked for a few minutes to speak to you. Asher?"

My mouth fell open as Asher stood up. He gave me a quick wink before jumping up on stage.

"I think everyone knows me," he said, taking his place behind the microphone. "I'm Asher Davis, and I'm on the soccer team."

Several people in the audience cheered. We were the current state

champions, and Asher was one of the star players.

Asher grinned, then grew solemn. “I’m not here to talk to you about sports, though. I want to talk about something much more serious. Zack Phillips was my teammate and friend, but he wasn’t the first student to be murdered this year. That was Seth Connelly.”

“Faggot!” someone in the back of the room called out.

Several teachers moved in that direction while Asher went on. “As some moron just proved, most of you knew that Seth was gay. He didn’t make any secret of it. What you may not know is that the harassment he faced on a daily basis as a result of his sexuality is illegal. Anyone who called him names or threatened him could have been suspended or even expelled.

“Either Seth didn’t know that, or he decided he could handle it on his own. Seth was also receiving threatening notes, also considered harassment. He didn’t report those, either. Maybe if he had, he wouldn’t be dead now.”

Many in the audience gasped.

Asher looked out over his fellow students. “It’s possible that Seth was murdered because he was gay. That would make it a hate crime. Imagine being hated for something over which you have no control. Imagine being picked on every day because of who you are. Now imagine being killed because of it.

“Many of you sitting out there were among those who teased and taunted Seth. While some of you may not have tormented him yourselves, you probably looked the other way while others did. No one in this room—” he paused and turned to look directly at the faculty on stage “—no one is innocent in Seth’s death. We all participated in creating an environment that allowed something like this to occur.

“That’s why, with the approval and cooperation of Mr. Martinez, I’m proposing we start a gay/straight alliance in our school. You don’t have to be gay to be a member. You only have to believe that building understanding and tolerance is more important than fostering fear and hate. We’ll be revealing the details of the first meeting during the morning announcements soon. Thank you.”

Asher started to step away from the podium and Martinez came up behind him, but then he spun around and grabbed the mike again.

“Oh, I almost forgot. By now, most of you have probably heard about Killian Kendall’s big announcement yesterday morning in homeroom.”

Several people turned to look at me as I tried to sink down in my seat. I wondered if Adam would appreciate the difference between me announcing I was gay during an assembly and Asher doing it for me.

Asher grinned. “Yeah. I’m his boyfriend.”

For a moment, the auditorium was so quiet you could have heard a mouse fart. Then someone slowly started clapping. Someone else joined in. Soon, the entire place was roaring with applause, whistles, and screams.

Asher jumped off the stage and dropped down next to me. He took my hand in his and squeezed it. I was still too shocked to even react.

Martinez had to yell for quiet several times before he got the room calmed down.

“Thank you, Asher,” he said when he could finally be heard. “We are supporting the formation of the gay/straight alliance 100 percent. As Asher said, we’ve unfortunately been very lax in enforcing the state’s nondiscrimination policy. That ends now. From here on, we have zero tolerance for discrimination of any kind. If you feel you are the victim of harassment based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability, report it immediately.

“That ends our program for today. You may return to class.”

The room erupted into excited chatter as I slowly turned to face Asher. “I can’t believe you did that!”

“Me, either.” He grinned. “I’m shaking like a leaf.”

Once he mentioned it, I noticed his hand trembling in mine.

“How long had you been planning that?”

“Well, I started thinking about it after the party last Saturday. I

talked to my mom and dad, and they supported me, so I talked to Mr. Martinez on Monday. I've stayed after school every day this week to talk to him about it. He took a little convincing at first — he's more afraid of all the Christian parents than he'd like to admit — but he came around."

I shook my head in wonder. "I can't believe you."

"Believe it, baby."

He jumped up, pulling me with him. A teammate from the soccer team walked by and gave Asher a high five. Right behind him, several girls stopped to tell us how awesome they thought it was that we were brave enough to come out. Soon, we had a small crowd around us, all of them offering support and goodwill. I simply couldn't believe what was happening. I felt as if I were in a dream, but it was a good one for a change.

Then, in the background, I noticed Jake staring accusingly at me and Asher. My heart skipped a beat as I realized how he must have felt hearing about Asher and me in that way.

"I'll be right back," I whispered in Asher's ear and left him to his circle of admirers.

"Jake," I started as I approached him.

"You couldn't even tell me to my face?" he snapped, cutting me off.

"Jake, I'm sorry. I didn't know—"

"God, I was so wrong about you. You're just a self-centered jerk."

"Jake, listen—"

"No, Killian, you listen. Stay the hell away from me and my family or you'll be sorry."

I bit my lip as I watched him storm away. What a life-changing day. Asher had officially outed us as a couple, announced the formation of a gay/straight alliance, and ensured that the school would enforce a nondiscrimination policy. Unfortunately, one simple fact overshadowed all else. I'd lost a friend and gained an enemy.

Chapter 22

The next few weeks passed by in a haze that only someone who has experienced those first intoxicating days of new love can understand. Everything revolved around Asher. Nothing else seemed to matter — or if it did, it did so only in the abstract, as if it were all far removed from us.

I did keep up with the developments on Seth's and Zack's murders, even though results seemed to be few and far between. At least, the police were now taking both killings very seriously. They insisted they were still examining the evidence and were confident they would find the killer.

I wished I could share that confidence. Despite my displeasure with their progress, however, I was too caught up in my new romance to be a detective. Besides, Adam watched me like a hawk to make sure I left everything to the police.

Jake refused to speak to me after the big announcement. I'd tried several more times to explain to him that I hadn't known what Asher was planning, but he never let me get more than two words out. Finally, I gave up.

Like her brother, Gilly was still pretending I didn't exist. In fact, the only person in the Sheridan family who still acknowledged my existence was Todd, and that was only to glare daggers at me every time I ran into him in the halls.

For the most part, no one else really seemed to care that Asher and I were gay and dating. In fact, several people who I would never

have expected to do it had gone out of their way to let us know they supported us.

The first meeting of the gay/straight alliance came off without a hitch. Only ten people showed up — all straight females with the exception of Kane — but we weren't expecting a miracle. We had confidence that in time it would grow.

Of course, not everything was a fairy tale — no pun intended. A few jerks still made crude comments under their breath every time one of us walked by. There were more than a few incidents of name calling, but we knew it could have been worse. As time went on and it became obvious that our supporters outnumbered our detractors, those incidents became more and more infrequent.

Despite my earlier antipathy, I was starting to feel worse for Jesse than for Asher and me. He'd really changed since Zack's death, becoming quiet and withdrawn. I knew Zack was the real brains behind their dynamic duo — what little brains there were — and I was sure Jesse must have really been missing him. I almost reached out to him a couple of times — after all, we did grow up together and we'd once been friends, sort of — but each time, I remembered how he'd made my life a living hell and I kept my distance. Besides, I had enough stuff to deal with on my own. I could only hope he was getting professional help.

Before I knew it, Thanksgiving was upon us. I was super excited. Mom was coming down for a huge feast that Adam and Steve had been planning for weeks. In addition to Mom, we were also expecting a few other couples whose families were either too far away or not exactly welcoming.

Adam and Steve spent the entire day before Thanksgiving cooking and making preparations. Kane and I helped out where we could, but mostly just stayed out of the way.

Thanksgiving morning, I woke up early, too excited to stay in bed any longer. I couldn't wait to see Mom for the first time since she'd moved to Pennsylvania to live with Aunt Kathy. She had called the night before to make sure it was okay with Adam if she brought one

of my cousins along for the ride. They expected to get there a little after noon.

I'd never met this particular cousin before, at least not since we were little kids. I didn't remember him at all. I could only really remember meeting Aunt Kathy and all my cousins one Christmas when I was about five, and there had been so many of them they'd all blurred together in my mind.

The time flew by quickly as Steve kept everyone busy with preparations for the meal. Altogether, we were now expecting thirteen people. Adam jokingly called it our very own coven, and Steve commented that he hoped it wouldn't be our last supper. I lived with a bunch of would-be comedians.

Kane and I had put all the leaves in the dining table and set up a couple of card tables. Adam and Steve had been in the kitchen since daybreak, and the whole house was filled with the aroma of roasting turkey, dressing and sage.

We were so busy with our preparations that no one even noticed Mom pull up until we heard her knock on the door. I almost broke my neck yanking it open and throwing myself into her arms.

After a long hug, I stepped back to take her in. She looked fabulous, better than I had ever seen her. Her hair was a little longer than it had been when she left, and she'd had it styled. She had makeup on — the first I had ever seen her wear. It was just enough to accentuate her natural beauty. She looked younger than I'd ever seen her.

“You're so pretty!” I gasped.

She grinned. “You don't have to sound so surprised, you know. I was young when I had you. And you look pretty good yourself there, sport.”

“True love must agree with him.” Adam had a grin of his own as he came up behind me. “Hello, Meg. It's great to see you. I'm so glad you were able to come.”

“I wouldn't have missed it for the world, Adam.” Then, with a raised eyebrow, she turned her attention back to me. “And what's this

about true love? I know my baby can't be in love."

I felt a blush creep up my neck as a new voice entered the conversation. "He doesn't look like a baby to me, Aunt Meg." It had to be my mystery cousin, although I couldn't remember his name.

Mom stepped aside, and I caught my first glimpse of whatever-his-name-was. He looked nice, with wavy dark blond hair and bright green eyes that reminded me of a cat's. He was older than I was by a few years at least and also taller. There was something about him that made me think he smiled a lot — as he was doing at that moment. He had a great smile.

"Killian, this is your cousin Aidan," Mom introduced. "He's thinking about transferring to Pemberton University next year."

Pemberton was one of several colleges in a nearby town. It was among the schools I was thinking about applying to.

I waved a greeting, and he responded by wagging one of the suitcases in his hands.

"Oh, excuse my rudeness!" Adam exclaimed. "Let me help you with those. Come on in, and I'll show you where you'll be sleeping. I hope you don't mind sharing a room with Killian and my son Kane."

"Sounds like fun." Aidan followed Adam in as Mom and I trailed behind.

"Aidan, this is Adam," Mom said a bit belatedly. "I guess you could say he's Killian's surrogate father now that Killian is living with him."

Kane was in the hallway so our little entourage paused long enough for another round of introductions, which was repeated again a few seconds later when Steve wandered in to see what all the commotion was about.

Once their bags had been stashed away, Steve assigned everyone a last-minute task. We all worked busily until the other guests began arriving. Ilana and Lysander were the first on the scene, with a bottle of wine in hand. Then Asher made his entrance, after having begged off from his family dinner so he could eat with us. Everyone else got there at the same time, which made me wonder if they had all come

together. They were the two couples from our celebration dinner a few weeks back, Bryant and Calvin along with Heather and Nila.

They hadn't changed much, except Calvin seemed to have paled even more. His thin blonde hair, practically white eyebrows, and almost colorless blue eyes made him look as if he had faded out. Actually, most of the time he did seem to fade into the background. Bryant was definitely the dominant force in their relationship.

Heather was also quiet, though not to the extent Calvin was. Her long brown hair was pulled back into a braid that hung to her waist, and her brown eyes peered out uncertainly from behind her glasses. She was wearing a white shirt and plaid skirt that made her look like a Catholic schoolgirl. I thought that with a little more confidence she could have been very attractive, but she would always pale in comparison with her partner.

Nila's dark bronze skin practically glowed. She was wearing her hair in many tiny braids with a gold bead at the end of each one. The beads complemented the other gold jewelry she wore — multiple earrings, a nose ring, a necklace with a stylized African animal I thought might be a lion, bracelets on both wrists, one arm cuff, and several finger rings. On anyone else, it would have been too much, but somehow she pulled it off. With her ankle-length form-fitting white dress, she made a stunning entrance. It was hard to take your eyes off of her.

Dinner was fantastic, as I knew it would be. The conversation was lively, and by the time we were scraping the last bites of pie from our plates, I felt as if we were all old friends.

We left the dishes to sit while we gathered in the living room, accompanied by various moans and groans about having eaten too much.

"Let's go around the room and each of us say one thing we're thankful for," Aidan suggested once we had settled into various states of semiconsciousness.

"Let's not and say we did," Mom teased. "I think I'm going to fall asleep."

"Come on, it's Thanksgiving," I backed Aidan up.

“Just one thing?” Bryant asked mischievously. He threw a lascivious grin at Calvin, who giggled.

“Yes, just one thing,” Adam agreed, “and please remember that this is a family show.”

We all laughed.

“Who wants to go first?” Kane asked.

Steve spoke up. “Why doesn’t Aidan go first since it was his idea?”

“Okay. I have mine already anyway. I’m thankful that I have already made so many good friends down here, and I haven’t even moved yet.”

“Awwwww,” we all said in unison and then burst out laughing again.

Aidan looked to his left. “Nila?”

“Hmm, let me think. I’m thankful for all of you, also. It’s hard to be so far away from my mother at holiday time, but it’s nice to be here with my father and such good people. And I’m always thankful for Heather.”

“Hey, that’s two things!” Bryant yelled as Heather turned bright red.

“Judges?” Kane asked Adam and Steve.

They exchanged a look. “We’re allowing it,” Adam ruled. “Heather, you’re next.”

“I’m thankful for having met Nila,” she said quickly and turned to Bryant.

“Oh, is it my turn already? Hmm...let me see...where to begin?”

“You’re gonna lose your turn if you don’t begin soon,” Adam threatened jokingly. Everyone laughed.

“Okay, okay...jeez!” Bryant pretended to pout for a second, then turned serious. “I’m thankful for people like Adam and Steve who do such selfless things as taking in kids who need a place to live, then inviting their friends to Thanksgiving dinner when their own families tell them they aren’t welcome. The world is a better place

because of you.” He raised his wine glass in a salute.

Everyone sat silently for a moment, batting their eyes furiously.

“And I’m thankful for Calvin. Ha! That’s two!”

Everyone laughed, and the moment was gone.

We all looked to Calvin expectantly. He blinked as if surprised to find himself the center of attention. He cleared his throat nervously, then began to speak so softly I had to lean in to hear him. “I’m thankful for the support and encouragement that Bryant gives me. I don’t know what I’d do without him. If it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t even be alive.”

It was the most I’d heard him say all evening, and I wasn’t surprised to see tears suddenly appear in Bryant’s eyes. He reached over and took Calvin’s hand while swiping at his eyes with his other hand. There had to be more to their story than met the eye, and I wondered what it was. I knew it was really none of my business, but as usual, that didn’t temper my curiosity.

“I’m thankful to have this beautiful woman as my wife,” Lysander said into the silence that followed Calvin’s little speech. “And honey, why don’t you tell them what else we have to be thankful for.”

Ilana positively beamed. “I’m pregnant.”

The room erupted into a cacophony of congratulations, back slapping, hugs, and how-far-alongs. Eventually everyone settled back into their seats.

“My turn?” Steve asked.

“Yup,” we all chorused.

“Well, I’m thankful that Adam and I have decided it’s time for me to move in here.”

Another round of excited chatter followed this announcement. This was even news to me, albeit welcome news.

Then it was Adam’s turn. “I’m thankful for so many things. It’s hard to choose just one.”

“It was your rule!” Bryant complained.

“Rule overruled,” Adam shot back with a grin. “Seriously though, I am very thankful this year. More so than years past. Losing Seth made me appreciate what I do have so much more. And even though I lost one son, I regained a son I thought I had lost forever and gained a new son I never expected. I love both of you boys so much. You are truly my greatest blessings in life.”

I felt a lump form in my throat, and from the look on Kane’s face, I knew he was as touched as I was.

“Wow, I have to follow that, huh?” Kane’s voice was a little shaky. I noticed several people dabbing at their eyes. “I’m thankful for my family — my whole family: Steve, Dad, and Killian. Your turn, Asher.”

Asher turned to look at me for a moment before facing the room once more. “I’m thankful that sometimes true love does conquer all.”

This was met with another chorus of “awws,” and I knew I was blushing again.

I regained my composure and took my turn. “I’m thankful that for the first time in my life I feel completely loved and accepted by everyone who is important in my life.”

I heard several more snuffles from around the room. It seemed like almost everyone was fighting tears by that point.

When Mom began to speak, her voice was thick with emotion. “As I sit here and look at my son — happy, healthy, safe...in love and loved by so many people — I can’t help but be so very thankful that God spared his life. I know what a gift that truly is, and my heart aches for you, Adam.”

I looked at Adam to see his shoulders shaking with barely suppressed sobs.

“You’ve lost so much,” she continued, “and yet you’ve given so much. I can’t even begin to tell you how thankful I am for the way you’ve taken Killian in, even to the point of loving him like your own son.”

She stood up and crossed the room to hug Adam as he seemed

to collapse under his grief. I'd been so caught up in my own pain and drama that I had hardly ever stopped to consider how much Adam must have been hurting. Without even thinking, I moved to hug him as well, and it wasn't long before I felt Kane at my side. When I went back to my seat, everyone in the room was openly wiping away tears.

Once we got ourselves back together, a concerted effort was made to lighten the mood. We played a few games until everyone who wasn't spending the night had to leave.

The rest of us stayed up a little longer, talking and relaxing, but soon it was time to go to bed. At my urging, Asher called home and got permission to stay over.

"Are you sure four people can sleep in your room?" Adam asked doubtfully when Asher hung up.

"Why not?" I replied with a shrug. "We have sleeping bags."

"Did you even check with your cousin? I hope you're at least planning on giving him your bed."

"The floor is cool with me," Aidan spoke up quickly. "Reminds me of summer camp."

"It'll be like a slumber party," I said with a laugh.

"Oh! Can we do each other's hair and makeup too?" Kane added mockingly.

I chased him up the stairs and tackled him on my bed, where I proceeded to commence tickle-torture.

He was screaming with laughter when Asher and Aidan joined in. They came to Kane's defense by attacking me. It quickly turned into an all-out tickle war, until Mom called a stop to the ruckus.

After we'd calmed down, we hashed out sleeping arrangements. Kane ended up giving his bed to Aidan and roughing it on the floor in a sleeping bag. Asher and I shared my bed. With two other people in the room, there wasn't much chance of anything happening.

After the lights were out, we cuddled into each other. I was almost asleep when Aidan's voice snapped me back from the brink.

"So, uh...no one said as much, but you guys are, like, a couple,

huh?”

No one said anything at first. When the silence began to stretch a little thin, I finally spoke up. “Yeah, I guess we just figured you knew. I thought Mom might have said something. Does it bother you?”

“No, not at all. I’m pretty open about stuff like that. If it bothered me, I wouldn’t have jumped into that little tickle fight — or even been here at all for that matter. I think I was the only straight person here besides Aunt Meg.”

“I’m straight,” Kane piped up from the floor.

“Sorry, and Kane.”

“And Ilana and Lysander,” Kane added.

“Okay, okay...I was exaggerating to make a point. I won’t do it again, I promise.”

“I guess there were a lot of gay people here tonight,” Asher said thoughtfully, or maybe he was just tired. It was hard to tell in the dark. “You were definitely in the minority. That’s weird.”

“Not really,” Aidan said. “If you think about it, it kinda makes sense. You know that old saying, ‘Birds of a feather flock together?’ I think in a way it’s true. I mean, you’re naturally going to want to be around people who accept you for yourself and who are most like you. That’s probably the real reason Aunt Meg invited me to come down here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, she said she thought I’d like to see the area before I moved down here next year. I’ve been here before when I was visiting campuses, though, and I’ve already put in for the transfer, so it’s not like I’m going to change my mind at this point. I think she knew it was going to be mostly gay people here today, and this is her way of telling me it’s okay with her if I’m gay.”

“Why would she think you’re gay?” Kane asked.

“Kane!” I said in exasperation.

Aidan just laughed. “It’s okay. He’s just being upfront about it. I respect that. And to answer your question as honestly as I know how,

Kane...it's probably because I'm not real sure myself."

"You said you were straight earlier," Kane insisted.

"I know, but I think it's just from habit. Sometimes I'm not so sure. I guess you could say I'm still trying to figure things out. Maybe I'm bi."

"Oh," Kane said.

"In a way, I envy you two — Killian and Asher, I mean. You've got everything all figured out and you have each other and you seem so happy together."

"It's not been easy," I pointed out.

Asher snorted. "That's putting it mildly."

"My brother was killed because he was gay," Kane's voice was filled with pain.

"I know," Aidan replied simply. "I'm sorry."

"Killian almost died, too," Kane continued.

"I knew that, too, but I've never heard what happened exactly."

Between the three of us, we told him the whole story — from the first time I met Seth to the present.

"Wow! You guys have really been through hell and back."

"Tell us something we don't know," Asher mumbled. He seemed to be getting very tired. He buried his face in my chest, and his hair tickled my chin.

"But it's awesome how you've each come out stronger because of it. And in a way, it forced you to deal with issues you probably would have let sit unresolved until you were completely confused...like me."

"I guess," I said slowly, "but for me, it wasn't that I really thought I was straight. I'd never actually thought about it either way. Once I did, I knew. It was just a matter of admitting it to myself. I mean, you have to know whether you're attracted to guys. If you are, then you're at least bi, right?"

"Jeez, Killian, and you yelled at me," Kane grumbled.

"No, it's okay. He's right," Aidan cut in quickly. "I should know

by now. It's something I need to figure out. I can't just keep going along in this limbo."

"I think it'll wait till tomorrow. Go to sleep." Asher's voice was muffled from where his face was still on my chest, but his annoyance came through loud and clear.

"It is late," Kane observed.

"You're right," Aidan agreed. "And Asher's right, too — it's waited this long, it can wait till tomorrow. Can I talk to you some more in the morning before I leave, Killian?"

"Sure, but I don't know what I can tell you. It's not like I'm an expert on this stuff."

"More of an expert than I am — at least you've been through it. Good night."

"Good night."

"G'night," Kane added.

Asher mumbled something that might have been "good night," but it was really anyone's guess.

Chapter 23

The next thing I knew it was morning, and Adam was banging on our door, telling us we'd slept late enough. Personally, I felt as though I had just fallen asleep. My arm was numb from Asher's lying on it all night. When I pulled it out from under him, he blinked sleepily up at me. There was an imprint on his face from my T-shirt, and with his hair mussed up and his eyes all bleary he looked so cute I couldn't resist leaning in for a lingering good-morning kiss.

"Bleah!" Kane yelled. "Not before breakfast, please!"

We all laughed. Asher and I tumbled out of bed onto the floor, where we engaged in an impromptu wrestling match. Aidan sat watching us with an amused smile on his lips and a thoughtful look in his eye. I had a feeling he wasn't thinking about the scene before him at all.

The morning flew by as everyone pitched in to clean up the mess from the previous evening. Before I knew it, the time had come for Mom and Aidan to leave for home. I realized that Aidan and I hadn't had time for our talk, but then I didn't know what I could have told him anyway, so it was just as well.

The goodbyes weren't too drawn out. Mom would be back in a few weeks for Christmas, and there was a chance Aidan would be coming with her.

As they were getting in the car, Aidan paused and turned to me. "Oh, Killian, about our talk last night. I've been thinking about it all day, and I'm pretty sure I've got everything figured out — it's guys.

Thanks.” With that, he ducked into the car.

Mom and Adam both shot me quizzical glances. I just grinned and gave Aidan a thumbs-up. I’d let him tell them in his own time.

A couple of days later, Asher and I were cuddling on the couch watching a movie when Adam stuck his head in the door. “Hey, boys, Steve and I are going to run over to his place to start packing up. He’s decided to move as soon as possible so he’ll be settled before Christmas. Kane is coming with us. Do you two want to come along or stay here?”

I looked at Asher and grinned. “Stay here,” we answered in unison.

Adam rolled his eyes. “How’d I guess? Just behave, huh?”

I gave him my best innocent expression. “Of course.”

He shook his head and sighed.

The door had barely closed behind them before our lips met. Soon, the movie was forgotten as we made out. When the credits came on, we surfaced for air long enough to turn the TV off, then returned to the business at hand.

We were interrupted a few minutes later by my phone.

“Let it ring,” Asher growled as my head popped up.

“It might be Adam checking in on us,” I protested.

I sat up and grabbed my phone. I frowned. “It’s Jake.”

Asher mirrored my frown. “Why would he be calling?”

I shrugged and answered. “Hello?”

“Hello, Killian.”

The hoarse voice wasn’t Jake. It sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. Why did it fill me with such a sense of foreboding?

“We were interrupted at the party. I won’t let that happen again.”

Then it clicked. The last time I’d heard that voice, its owner had been wearing a Batman costume. “Who is this? How did you get my

number?”

Asher sat up with a concerned expression on his face.

“I know all kinds of things about you, Killian.”

Something in his voice made my heart skip a beat. “What do you want?” I sounded frightened even to myself. I hated to be so obvious.

He must have heard it as well because he chuckled, a throaty, rusty sound. “We have unfinished business.”

“Just leave me alone!”

“Who is it?” Asher whispered.

I shook my head. My mind raced. Could it be Jake? Was this some sort of sick joke? Was he trying to scare me because of what had happened with Asher? But he’d been on stage at the party when Batman had me alone.

Then Batman spoke again, and I knew it was no joke. “I can’t leave you alone. It’s gone too far now. It’s time to put an end to this once and for all.”

“Put an end to what? I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you? You’re the one who keeps stirring things up. I know you’ve been snooping around, asking questions. And as if that wasn’t enough, you have to go spreading your filth everywhere you go. I should have killed you in the park when I had the chance.”

I suddenly grew cold all over as I realized who was on the other end of the line. I’d been looking for him for weeks, but Seth’s killer had found me first.

Asher put a hand on my arm, and I jumped. I’d almost forgotten he was there. “Who is it?” he asked again, louder.

I stared at him wide-eyed, unable to answer.

“I’ve decided to go out with a bang,” the killer went on, “and you’re going to help.”

“I’m not helping you with anything!”

“I think you will. In fact, you’re going to come to me.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m hanging up and calling the police.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. See, I figured you’d put up a fight, so I arranged a little insurance policy. There’s someone here who’d like to say hello.”

“Killian?” The voice on the line was filled with such pure terror, it was almost unrecognizable.

“Jake?”

“Oh, God, please do what he says!”

“Are you okay?”

My only answer was a horrifying whimper before the killer’s voice filled my ear once more. “You have exactly half an hour to get to here before I kill him. Your time starts now.”

“Wait! Where? I don’t know where you are.”

“Oh, Killian. I thought you were smarter than that. I’m disappointed. Where was the last place we talked?”

“The Sheridans’ house...”

“Exactly. I’ll be watching for you. If I see anyone except you come near the house, he’s dead. If I even suspect you’ve called the police, I’ll kill him slowly. You’ve got twenty-nine minutes. Tick, tick, tick...”

“Please, don’t hurt him—”

“Twenty-eight minutes.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

“His death will be on your conscience.”

I heard a strangled cry in the background and screamed, “No!”

“You’ll be here?”

“Yes,” I choked out.

“Good. Time is ticking. Oh, and bring Asher. I know he’s there with you.” He hung up.

I slumped into the couch, staring at the phone in shock.

“What’s going on?” Asher asked. “Should I call the police?”

“No!”

My head was spinning. The room grew darker. I gasped for breath, then suddenly everything went black.

I was in the park, lying on the ground looking up at the dark outline of the killer looming over me. An excruciating pain shot through my side, and the taste of fear was sour in the back of my throat.

All at once, the figure above me morphed into Asher. He knelt down next to me. “Are you okay?” Panic edged his voice.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. You must have fainted or something.”

I sat up. “We have to go.”

“Go where? What are you talking about? Who was that on the phone?”

I scrambled to my feet but had to lean against the wall again as the room started spinning. “It was the murderer. He has Jake.”

Asher’s eyes grew wide as he leapt to his feet. “I’m calling the police.”

He reached for the phone, but I snatched it from his hand. “No police! He said he’d kill Jake unless you and I show up at the house alone within thirty minutes.”

“Me?”

“He must have heard you talking. You have to come with me.”

“Killian, are you crazy? We can’t go over there! We have to call the police. They’re trained professionals. They have guns—”

“I can get a gun.”

Asher stared at me as if I’d lost my mind. “Where are you going to get a gun?”

“My dad has guns. I had to learn how to shoot them. Remember?”

“No way, Killian! No fucking way!”

“I can’t let him hurt Jake. This is all my fault.”

“How is it your fault?”

I pushed away from the wall and stumbled toward the door. “We’re wasting time! You can stay if you want. I’m going.”

I was in my car with the engine running when Asher slid into the passenger seat. “There’s no way I am letting you go there alone.”

I threw the car into reverse without answering him. I broke every safety law in the books on my way to my old house. I was very relieved to see that no one was there when I came to a screeching halt in the driveway. It would make breaking and entering so much easier.

Leaving the engine running, I sprinted up the front steps. Without even pausing, I grabbed the brick we kept there to use as a doorstop and smashed the decorative windowpane so I could reach through and unlock the door. I took the stairs two at a time up to my parents’ old bedroom. I yanked open the bedside-table drawer, breathing a sigh of relief when I saw the pistol was still there. I took it out and examined it carefully. It was loaded, just as I’d hoped. I’d despised the shooting lessons at the time, but I was very grateful for them now. I shoved the gun into my pocket and raced back downstairs.

I passed Asher on my way out, and the car was already moving when he jumped in again. We peeled out of the driveway and tore off down the road at very unsafe speeds. Asher clenched his teeth and held onto the dashboard with white knuckles, but he knew better than to say anything.

Sometime during the drive, a cold fury overtook me. I felt strangely removed from everything, as if it were happening to someone else and I were merely watching from a distance.

We barely beat our deadline to the Sheridans’ house. It was completely dark except for an odd, muted flickering in the window of the door. The only illumination besides the moon was the single security light at the end of the driveway. I parked the car under the light and pulled the gun from my pocket. I carefully checked to make sure the safety was on before tucking it into the waistband at the small of my back.

Asher watched my movements with wide-eyed horror. “Oh, my

God! Please, please don't do this."

"You don't have to go inside. Just get out of the car and walk up to the house. You'll be safer that way."

"I have never been so scared in my entire life, but if you think I am going to let you go in there alone, Killian Kendall, then you don't know me very well."

Not even Asher's heartfelt outburst seemed to penetrate the emotional armor I had donned. I was filled with a seething hatred for this person who had killed Seth and made my life hell in the months since. I wanted him dead, and I wanted to be the one who killed him.

"Let's go." My voice was deceptively calm.

I stood for a moment, staring defiantly at the house. Although I couldn't see anyone, I knew the killer was watching us from one of those blank windows. I began to stride purposefully toward the front door with Asher right at my heels muttering, "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" with every step. The dark house seemed extremely sinister, but my pace never faltered.

The door was unlocked and swung soundlessly open when I turned the knob. There wasn't even an ominously creaking hinge. The source of the flickering light turned out to be a small oil lamp sitting in the center of the floor. I stepped cautiously into the hall and glanced around, but I could see nothing beyond the limited circle of illumination cast by the almost ineffectual flame. I flipped the switch next to the door, but nothing happened. The electricity had been shut off.

I took a closer look at the oil lamp and noticed a scrap of paper tucked under its base. As I leaned down to pick them both up, the security light we had parked under went out. The meager glow the lamp provided suddenly seemed less than adequate. I felt a little of my bravado slip away, and a tendril of fear began to creep into the space left by its departure.

I stared down at the paper and the three words written on it: "HIDE-AND-SEEK."

“What does that mean?” Asher whispered.

“It means the bastard is playing games with us. He wants us to find him.” My fury rushed back with a vengeance. This little game might have been meant to scare us, but it only served to make me more determined to see the killer die before the night was over. I patted the gun and thought that the game was more like tag..and I was it.

“Let’s call the police,” Asher hissed.

“No!” My voice sounded unnaturally loud in the complete silence that surrounded us. “No, let’s find him.”

We began to search the downstairs. I tried to picture the house from the few times I had been in it, but everything took on a different perspective in the warped light from the oil lamp. Doors I thought were close by now seemed so far away as I attempted to find them in the eerie shadows. It was a nerve-wracking process, made worse because the wick kept threatening to gutter out and leave us in total darkness. The mystery of every nighttime game of hide-and-seek was intensified by the life-and-death situation we faced.

We were moving cautiously down the hallway when I stepped in something wet and sticky. I looked down and saw a dark stain on the floor. I knelt down to examine it closer and realized it was red.

Asher gasped. “Is that...?”

I stood back up with a sick, sinking feeling. What if we were too late? What if Jake were already dead?

Asher gripped my arm so tightly it hurt. I hissed in pain, and he relaxed his hold. He pointed shakily at the wall, where I noticed a smeared, bloody handprint. My head started to spin again as my stomach lurched. I leaned against the wall while I pulled myself together.

“Let’s leave,” Asher insisted. “Now!”

I shook my head. “Not without Jake.”

“Then please, let’s call the police. We need an ambulance.”

I thought for a minute, then nodded grudgingly. “Call them.” If

there was chance someone could still be saved time was crucial, but now I had to find Jake before the police and ambulance arrived.

Asher whipped his phone from his pocket and quickly dialed 911. He held a whispered conversation with the dispatcher.

“Tell them not to use their sirens or lights,” I warned him at the last minute.

He nodded and relayed my request.

“They said to wait for them outside,” he said as he hung up.

“No. We have to find Jake.” I pushed away from the wall and continued toward the kitchen, Asher shadowing my every move.

“This is stupid. The police are coming. We should do what they said and let them handle—” His words died in his mouth when he saw the room.

There was blood everywhere, sprayed obscenely across the front of the white cabinets, streaked all over the door of the refrigerator, even splattered on the ceiling. There was a puddle of dark fluid on the floor that looked as if something had been dragged through it. The drag marks led toward the back stairs. I’d never been up that way before, though, and wasn’t inclined to start when I was already disoriented by the darkness.

We backtracked to the entrance. We’d searched the entire first floor and found nothing but blood. I looked up the wide staircase that seemed to lead to nowhere, the top lost in inky blackness.

I took a deep breath and stepped onto the first stair, Asher pressing close behind me. We climbed cautiously, paint fumes filling our nostrils as we went. Upstairs, we found every door along the hallway closed tight. Several cans of paint and paint thinner were stacked about halfway down, evidence of a renovation in progress.

I stared at the closed doors as it occurred to me that the game of hide-and-seek had taken a sudden, more sinister turn. It now felt more like the game show *Let’s Make A Deal*, except we’d be losing much more than money if we chose the wrong door.

I remembered which room was Jake’s. Afraid of what I might find there, I went to the room across from his first. I slowly turned

the knob and pushed the door open. The feeble light from the lamp spilled through. Even before I saw the figure on the bed, the pastel pinks and blues told me we were in Gilly's room.

She was laid out on top of the bedspread, her arms lying limply at her sides. The front of her white shirt was stained crimson with her blood. I knew she was dead.

Asher retched behind me. I quickly backed out and shut the door. I leaned my forehead against the cool wood, trying to decide if I could go on. Maybe if we left now we could still escape. I knew I wouldn't, though. If there were even the slightest chance of finding Jake still alive, I owed it to him to at least try and save him. Besides, I had unfinished business with the killer. If I could only figure out his identity, that might help level the playing field.

I strongly suspected that Seth had been killed because he'd rejected the killer's clumsy overtures, but how did that connect to Zack, Gilly, and Jake? What was the common denominator? I knew it had to be someone from our school, someone who was attractive, someone who was at the Halloween party, and someone with access to Jake's house.

Suddenly, everything fell into place. I knew who the killer was.

I was still reeling from my epiphany when Asher grabbed my arm again. He pointed to the crack at the bottom of Jake's door. A very dim glow showed through.

As I stood there looking at that sliver of light, I felt my remaining reserves of courage drain away. A sense of dread washed over me so strongly that my knees buckled. I had a feeling, a premonition of death waiting in the room beyond. Every sense I had was demanding that I get out. It took all my strength not to run screaming from the house.

I closed my eyes, making a concerted effort to summon back some of the courage I'd felt earlier. I handed the lamp to Asher, whose shaking hands caused the light to jump and bounce eerily around the hall. He looked disturbingly pale, but I need both hands free.

I drew myself up as straight as I could, squared my shoulders,

and threw open the door. A single candle had been left flickering in the center of the room. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dimness, but when they did, I couldn't hold back the cry that escaped my throat.

Jake was laid out on his bed much as Gilly had been, and for a moment I thought I was too late. Then he rolled his head toward me, his eyes wide with terror, and I realized he was tied to the bed. A piece of tape covered his mouth.

The moment I took a step toward him, I sensed movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I saw the dark figure out of my nightmares emerge from the shadows. Just as in my dreams, he was dressed in black from head to toe, his face obscured by a mask. I resisted the urge to flee and instead confronted my enemy. "Hello, Todd."

The killer stopped and cocked his head to one side. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he reached up and pulled off the mask. Todd stared back me with burning hatred. "You think you're so damn smart, don't you, Killian? A lot of good it did you. You're going to die tonight."

I've always heard that Lucifer was God's most beautiful creation. Standing there looking at Todd, I had no doubt that evil could wear the mask of beauty quite easily.

"You said you'd let Jake go if I came." I tried to keep my voice steady.

"I lied. I do that a lot. Never trust someone who's tried to kill you."

"You can have me. Just let Asher and Jake go."

"I can have you? Oh, how generous! Here's a newsflash for you — I already have you. And Asher. And Jake. You're all going to die. It's just a matter of who wants to go first. You? Jake? Or maybe Asher and Jake first while you watch it all?"

I heard Asher whimper behind me, but I kept my gaze on Todd.

He continued, "Personally, I like that last one, but what about you? Do you have a preference?"

“You’re insane,” I whispered.

“Probably, but I’ve always thought that sanity was highly overrated.”

Part of me just wanted to grab the gun and blast the smug look off his face, but a larger part needed to understand his reason for doing this. So many questions were left unanswered. They all bubbled to the surface with one word: “Why?”

He seemed momentarily disconcerted. “Why what?”

“Why all this killing? Why Seth? Why Zack? Why...why kill Gilly and Jake?”

His expression hardened. “Seth was a fucking faggot. He deserved to die.”

“Then why did you kiss him?”

Emotion flashed across his eyes, but it was gone before I could identify it. “How did you know that?”

“I read it in his journal. Is that why you killed him, Todd? Because he turned you down?”

“He didn’t turn me down!” He took a threatening step toward me, and I instinctively reached for the gun. “I don’t know what he wrote, but he kissed me. I stopped him and told him he was going to hell. That’s where all fags go. He’s burning now, and you’ll be joining him soon.”

My hand tightened on the butt of the gun nestled in the small of my back, but I left it where it was for the moment.

“What about you?” I asked quietly.

“I’m not gay!” He made an angry slashing gesture through the air. A quick metallic glint took me back to the night in the park when he’d stabbed me. He was once again holding a knife, and some disconnected part of my brain wondered if it was the same one he’d used to kill Seth and stab me, and maybe Gilly too. I’d read somewhere once that serial killers often use the same weapon as a sort of lucky talisman.

I forced my mind away from those thoughts. “Why did you kill

Zack? He wasn't gay, was he?"

Todd shook his head. "Just stupid. Stupid people are dangerous. He saw me smash your windshield and leave the note, which he read after I left. I almost had you that night, but then we were rudely interrupted." He cast a furious look over my shoulder at Asher. "I was so angry I got careless. The idiot actually had the nerve to try and blackmail me in exchange for staying quiet. He's quiet now, isn't he?" He laughed coldly, and I felt a chill run down my spine.

"And what about Gilly?"

He was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice carried a note of regret. "I didn't want to kill her. She got in the way, and I didn't have a choice."

"What do you mean?"

"I had just killed Mom and Dad when she came home."

The matter-of-fact tone he used as he described murdering his parents horrified me. I wondered if they were laid out on their bed the way Gilly and Jake were.

"She started screaming, tried to call the police." He shrugged. "I didn't really have a choice."

"You...you killed your parents?"

"Slit their throats. I'm getting really good at it now." He grinned manically. "I killed Dad first. He was reading the paper in his recliner. I just walked up behind him and—" He made a slashing motion across his neck with the knife. "Mom was harder. She walked in and saw Daddy Dearest bleeding everywhere and started screaming. I had to chase her down the hall and into the kitchen before I caught her. That's when Gilly came home. She was supposed to be out with friends until later tonight. I was expecting Jake, but not her."

I stared at him in horror.

"Don't look so shocked. It was long overdue. Everybody thinks we're such a fucking perfect family. Dad's an elder at church, and Mom volunteers at every function. If only you knew what goes on behind closed doors. We're punished at any imagined sin. Dad beats the shit out of us every time we do anything he decides is wrong, and

Mom just stands by and watches. Nothing is ever good enough. I'm never good enough. I'm just a fucking—" He broke off suddenly and ran his hand through his hair, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

"Todd, I'm sorry you were abused, but the killing has to stop. How will killing Jake help now? What difference will it make?"

He looked up at me through his hair. "He'll be the most fun." He turned to look at Jake, who had been following our exchange with terror-filled eyes. "Isn't that right, Jakie? You see, Jake here was always the golden boy. It seemed he could do no wrong. I was the older brother, so I was supposed to know better. Half the time, I took the blame even when it wasn't my fault, just to spare him and Gilly. I was always trying to be the good big brother. Do you know how many beatings I took for you, Jake?"

Todd walked over to the bed as I slid the gun from my waistband, still keeping it behind my back.

"And how did you repay me?" Todd was now speaking solely to Jake. It was almost as if he'd forgotten I was there. "By turning into a little faggot and screwing around with Gilly's boyfriend. Maybe I should have seen it coming. You were always so pretty." He dragged the point of the knife down Jake's cheek as Jake whimpered through his gag.

I aimed the gun at him. Things had gone far enough. "Todd, drop the knife and back away."

Todd glanced idly over his shoulder, freezing when he saw the weapon in my hands. "Well, well, well. It looks like Killian grew a set. I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"But you didn't. Back away from Jake now. I won't shoot you unless you give me a reason."

He looked at me and sneered. "Like I haven't given you enough reasons already? You're a pussy, Killian. You'll never shoot me. You can't do it." He turned back to Jake.

I looked down the sight on the barrel of the pistol and centered it on Todd's back. My finger tightened, but I couldn't help wondering if he was right. What if I couldn't pull the trigger when it mattered

most? I'd never shot anything except paper targets before.

"Besides, it all ends tonight one way or the other. Go ahead and shoot me if you want." His voice was oddly detached now. "I told you on the phone, I'm going out with a bang. I'm dying tonight with or without your help. First, though, I have a score to settle with my little brother." He reached out and ripped the tape off Jake's mouth.

"Please, Todd...no..." Jake begged.

"Back away now!" I ordered.

Todd ignored me. "Love you, Jakie..." He leaned over and kissed Jake on the mouth. Then he straightened up and, in a sudden flash of movement, drove the knife toward Jake's chest.

"No!" I screamed, pulling the trigger.

Everything went into slow motion, each detail engraving itself permanently into my memory. The sound of the gunshot was deafening. The bullet hit Todd just as he brought the knife down, striking him in his left arm. The impact spun his body so he was facing me.

Todd stared at me in disbelief as I stared back in shock. Then, without breaking eye contact, he reached with his right hand for the knife protruding loosely from Jake's chest. I fired a second shot, this time hitting Todd squarely in the chest. His body jerked as the bullet ripped through him, sending him stumbling backwards. The knife bounced with a clatter as it hit the floor. Todd's mouth opened in a scream, but no sound came out. I raised the gun slightly and fired a third shot right between his eyes. He slammed into the wall, slowly slid to the floor, and slumped to one side.

I heard the sound of shattering glass behind me, but I didn't turn. I kept the gun trained on Todd, my hands shaking and my ears ringing. He remained motionless.

I seemed unable to take it all in. I had just killed another human being. And I didn't regret it for a second. I felt an immense sense of satisfaction for having removed this vile person from the world. That scared me. I stood with the gun still pointed at him for a long time — I couldn't begin to guess how long. I was in shock. It could

have been seconds, it could have been minutes, it could have been hours. Gradually, I became aware of a crackling sound and a steadily increasing heat at my back. I dropped the gun and slowly turned around.

The lamp Asher had been holding lay shattered on the floor, and the oil had caught fire. He was valiantly trying to stomp out the flames, but they were spreading faster than he could work.

“I dropped the lamp.” There was a hysterical edge to his voice.

“Quick! Help me with Jake. We have to get him out of here.”

I rushed to Jake’s side and stared down at him with my heart in my throat. There was so much blood. He looked dead. For a second, I feared it had all been for nothing, but then I noticed the shallow rise and fall of his chest. There was still hope.

I began fumbling with the knots, which were slippery with Jake’s blood. I wasted several precious seconds before Asher appeared at my side holding Todd’s knife in his hands.

“Cut them,” he ordered softly.

I glanced up at him, then grabbed the knife and quickly sawed through the thick ropes. By the time the two of us got him untied and off the bed, the flames had completely engulfed the doorway.

“How’re we going to get out?” Asher cried.

“The window.”

We dragged Jake to the window, and I looked out. There was no way. We were on the second floor with nothing below us but the hard ground.

“We can’t!” Asher wailed. The smoke was growing steadily thicker, and it was becoming harder to breathe. “Open the window. I need air.” He burst into a fit of coughing.

I lowered Jake to the floor where the air was a little clearer, then tried to open the window. It wouldn’t budge. It must have been painted shut. Asher was coughing even harder.

I grabbed the desk chair and smashed the glass outward. Cool air rushed in, allowing us a few precious breaths.

Then, with a deafening whoosh, the fire behind us suddenly burst into a raging inferno fed by this new source of oxygen. Asher screamed and shielded his face as a blast of superheated air washed over us. We both dropped to the floor next to Jake.

For a few seconds, all I could think about was the pain. Slowly my mind began to function again. *So we die anyway*, I thought.

“Killian, do you hear something?” Asher asked.

I listened intently and thought that maybe — just maybe — I heard a voice calling over the roar of the flames.

“Is someone there?” I screamed.

“Killian?”

Someone was there!

“Please, help us!” I called back. “It’s me, Asher, and Jake. We can’t get through the fire.”

“Is the bed burning?”

I looked over at the bed. The flames hadn’t yet reached it.

“No.”

“Get the comforter and wrap it around yourselves, then run through the fire as quickly as you can.”

“Are you sure?”

There was a pause. “There’s no other way.”

Asher had already pulled the heavy quilt off and crawled back to me and Jake. We got into crouching position, supporting Jake between our shoulders. Then we draped the quilt over our heads and tucked the loose ends tightly around our bodies. The heat was almost unbearable by that point. The light from the fire even penetrated the thick material of the quilt so I could see Asher’s face quite clearly.

“If we don’t make it —”

“We will,” he cried.

“But if we don’t, I want you to know I’ll always love you.”

“I love you, too, Killian. Always and forever.”

“Let’s go!” I screamed.

I squeezed my eyes shut and ran as fast as I could in the direction of the door. It was as if we were running in a three-legged race with a dead weight between us. The heat was like nothing I had ever felt before. Every nerve in my body seemed to be shrieking in agony, and every breath seared my lungs and throat. The quilt began to unwind from around us, tangling in my feet and tripping me. I would have fallen, but I crashed into what I could only assume was the doorframe with a bone-crunching thud, the full weight of Jake’s body adding to the impact. I ricocheted off, and the momentum actually carried us through the door and into the hall.

“This way!” a voice shouted from off to our right.

We ran blindly in that direction and didn’t stop until we slammed into something soft.

“Oof!” our obstacle grunted from the impact. We went down in a tangle of smoldering fabric, arms, and legs. The quilt was ripped off us, and I saw our rescuer. It was Jake’s aunt, Judy.

“Hurry!” she yelled. “We need to get out of here. That fire is spreading fast. This old house is going up like dry tinder.”

“Jake is unconscious,” I gasped, greedily gulping the comparatively cool air. “He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Then we’ll have to carry him. Move!”

When we lifted Jake, an excruciating pain shot through my shoulder. I almost dropped him but clenched my teeth and tried to ignore the torture. We stumbled toward the stairs and careened down as quickly as we could without falling.

At the bottom, we paused for a moment to catch our breath, just as a small explosion rocked the house. The flames must have reached the cans of paint thinner stored in the upstairs hall.

“Come on,” Judy cried.

We hefted Jake once more, but we hadn’t gone more than two feet before yet another blast thundered above our heads. It was followed by an ominous creaking that stopped us dead in our tracks seconds before a large section of the ceiling crashed down only a few feet

away, showering us with sparks and burning debris.

Suddenly, the front door flew open with a bang to reveal several uniformed police officers. We all stood staring at each other in surprise before the officers leapt into action. Someone scooped up Jake. Other strong arms rushed the rest of us out of the burning house. Heavy blankets were wrapped around our shoulders as we were herded toward a group of cruisers and a single ambulance parked in the yard away from the fire.

“Is there anyone else in there?” one of the officers asked.

“No one alive,” I answered numbly. He gave me a startled look, but I just turned to look at the house. Flames were leaping from the window of the bedroom where we’d been only minutes before. They could already be seen behind the glass of some of the other windows as well.

I heard someone call for the fire department and more ambulances, but everything was receding now, as if I were hearing it from afar. The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground staring up at the stars.

An emergency medical technician with a concerned expression knelt beside me. Over his shoulder, I saw an anxious Asher.

“I’m okay,” I mumbled. “I just passed out. Take care of Jake.”

“He’s being cared for,” the EMT replied. “Are you injured anywhere?”

“My shoulder hurts. I ran into the wall.”

He checked me over carefully, but I still gasped with pain when he pressed on my shoulder. “You’ve dislocated it,” he reported. “It’s easy enough to treat, but that’ll have to wait till we get back to the hospital. Out here, all we can do is immobilize your arm and give you something for the pain. Think you can handle it?”

I nodded.

He worked quickly, and he had me fixed up with a sling in no time. “Just try to keep it still as much as possible. I’m going to go check on your friend now, but if you need anything more, just holler.”

Asher quickly took his place. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I think so. Are you?”

Tears welled up in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. “We almost died in there.”

I tried to sit up, but pain shot through my shoulder once more. I managed to force myself into a sitting position using my other arm. Asher threw himself around my neck, sobbing into my shoulder. I returned his hug the best I could with my injured arm cradled between us. We rocked back and forth on the lawn. Over Asher’s shoulder I watched the house burn while thinking about how close we really had come to dying — but we had survived.

Not everyone had been so fortunate. It was too late for Gilly and her parents. I glanced over to the ambulance where they were working on Jake. I could only hope it wasn’t too late for him.

Another ambulance screamed onto the scene, lights flashing, and one of the EMTs working on Jake ran by us.

“Excuse me,” I called out to her.

She paused.

“The boy you’re trying to save, will he be all right?”

She gave me an encouraging smile. “You got him out in time. He’s going to make it.”

I sagged against Asher in relief. Every square inch of my body was in agony — I only hoped the painkiller would kick in before the adrenaline wore off — but Asher and I were alive, and Jake was going to be okay. For the moment, that was all that mattered.

Chapter 24

I hesitated in the door to the hospital room.

A nurse stopped on her way out and gave me an encouraging smile. “It’s all right. He’s just sleeping. You can go on in.”

I walked slowly to the bedside and stared down at Jake. His hair had been singed by the fire, and someone had cut it short. It suited him. He looked so peaceful lying there. You’d never have known that just a few weeks before his entire family had died violently.

He must have sensed my presence because, after a few minutes, his eyes fluttered open and found mine. All the pain and confusion I had expected suddenly came into focus.

“I didn’t think you were going to come.” His soft voice held an accusatory tone.

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t really have an excuse. He’d been out of the coma for over a week. I just hadn’t been able to force myself to go see him. I didn’t know what to say. I still didn’t.

He made an attempt at a smile but didn’t quite pull it off. “At least you’re here now. How long have you been standing there?”

“Not long. A few minutes maybe.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Hey, I’ve been in the hospital. I know how little sleep you get.”

He gave me another sad smile. “So what do you think of my hair?”

“I like it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“I keep reaching for it, but it’s all gone.”

“Short hair suits you.” There was an awkward pause. “How are you feeling?”

He made a face and glanced away. “Better some days than others.” His eyes met mine once more. “Why don’t you pull up a chair and sit down? I think we need to talk.”

I’d been dreading this moment, but I did as he said. I decided to take the initiative and get the hard part out of the way. “I guess I should...say I’m sorry.”

He looked surprised. “For what? Saving my life?”

“Well, I mean, I—”

“Killing Todd?”

I winced.

“Killian, you did it to save me...and yourself. I don’t blame you for what happened. In fact, I owe you my life.” I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off. “I admit there are some days I don’t know how much I’m worth, but if you hadn’t done what you did, I wouldn’t be here at all.”

“If I’d waited for the police maybe—”

“If you’d waited for the police, I’d be dead and you know it. *You saved my life.*”

“But I killed your brother.”

“You didn’t have a choice.” He paused. “Aunt Judy told me you may have to go to trial.”

I nodded miserably. “It’s looking that way.”

“You were just defending yourself and saving me.”

“The lawyer Mom hired says we don’t have anything to worry about, that it’s only a formality. Since Dad clearly has a conflict of

interest, they're moving the trial to Wicomico County. The lawyer thinks I'm pretty much guaranteed a ruling of justifiable homicide. Even so, it's scary. This case has gotten so much publicity, they couldn't just ignore it." It had been all over the papers and local news. Several national television networks had even called and asked for interviews.

"Speaking of your dad, how are things there?"

"We haven't spoken since he beat me up, but things aren't going great for him right now." I shrugged. "Not that I have any sympathy for him. Everything is his own fault. This case has drawn a lot of attention and that means people who matter are taking a closer look at him. After all, he basically tried to cover up Seth's murder, beat up his own son, abused his wife, and then his son used a gun registered in his name to kill a serial killer. It's...not good optics. I think it's probably safe to say his career is over. He may even face jail time if the state brings any formal charges."

I realized I was talking almost entirely about myself. "But I mean... that's all nothing compared to what you must be going through."

He looked away. After a few minutes, he started speaking, his voice thick with emotion. "I feel you deserve to know more about what happened, about why Todd...did what he did."

"Jake, you don't have to—"

"I know I don't have to, but I feel I owe it to you. You almost died trying to save me. At the very least, you deserve to know why — and I need to get it off my chest. My therapist thinks it will be good for me to talk about it with someone besides her."

He took a few deep breaths. "Todd told you a little. I guess the technical term would be that Dad physically abused us. He beat all of us, but he seemed to be a lot harder on Todd, especially after Mom found the magazines under his bed. They were bisexual porn. I don't even know where he got them, but Dad freaked out. I thought he was going to kill Todd. Dad just kept hitting him and saying it was for his own good, that he was a sinner and had to be punished. Todd was so beaten up he couldn't go to school for a week. Mom told them he had the flu. I guess Todd had always been a little odd, but

he changed after that. He became really obsessed with church, as if he was trying to make up for something.”

I remembered a comment Jake had made once in the school parking lot. “One time you told Todd that if he didn’t leave you alone, you’d tell about the magazines under his bed. Is that what you were talking about?”

“Yeah. That was a really fucked-up thing to say. I’m sure he didn’t have any magazines anymore. I was just trying to get to him.”

“So...Todd was gay? Bi?”

Jake shrugged. “I don’t know. We never talked about it. After that time he caught us together, he went on and on about how it was a sin, yet the whole time he was just staring at me with this really creepy expression. I almost felt like he was jealous or something. Then he asked me why I hadn’t told him.”

“What did you say?”

“That it was none of his business. It wasn’t like he’d told me about himself. He just stormed away. We didn’t really talk about it after that.”

I could tell he was leaving something out. “So what happened? What finally pushed him over the edge? I’d pretty much given up and left the investigation to the police. I wasn’t bothering him anymore. What made him snap like that?”

Jake stared up at the ceiling. A single tear escaped and slid down his cheek. “That was my fault.”

I shook my head in confusion. “How could it have been your fault?”

He didn’t answer for a few seconds, then began falteringly. “Dad...I...” He stopped and drew a shaky breath. “After Asher made his big announcement at the assembly, I was really upset.”

“Jake, I’m so sorry about that. I should have told you right away about Asher and me, but I didn’t know how. And I didn’t know he was going to come out like that on stage.”

He shrugged slightly. “What’s done is done. But like I said, it

really upset me — to the point where I was having all kinds of really dark thoughts about hurting myself.” He paused and gulped a few times. “Then I found one of those flyers that Asher was passing out all over school about the GSA. It had some hotline on it for gay and lesbian youth, so I decided to call. I ended up talking to some counselor for like an hour. I guess it helped, because I really didn’t think about it again until Dad found the flyer in the trash. Well, I think by now you can guess his reaction. He went ballistic. He assumed it was Todd’s flyer, and for whatever reason, Todd didn’t bother to correct him. He just took the beating...and I let him. I was scared to admit it was me. I just kept telling myself that at least it wasn’t as bad as the time before.

“That night, though, Todd came to my room after everyone was asleep.” Jake started crying. “He said I owed him. He...he...”

“Jake, you don’t have to tell me anymore.” I was horrified. I didn’t think I wanted to hear the rest of it.

He shook his head and pulled himself together. “He wanted me to...do stuff with him. I told him no, but he kept insisting. I told him if he didn’t leave me alone, I’d tell Dad he tried to rape me. We both knew if I did that, Dad would probably kill him. He left me alone, but the next day...”

“Jake, I’m so sorry.”

“It was all my fault.”

“No! It wasn’t. Todd made his own decisions. It’s not your fault!”

Jake turned his head and looked directly into my eyes. “Isn’t it? If I had told you the first time you asked me that it was Todd I saw with Seth, maybe you would have figured it all out sooner. And you know what the worst part is? I even suspected that maybe Todd had something to do with Seth’s and Zack’s murders. I just couldn’t bring myself to tell you. Then when I talked to him about it, he promised he’d tell you himself. I knew he wouldn’t, but it took the pressure off me.”

“Okay, maybe you should have told me, but still, you’re not to blame for his actions. You didn’t know for sure he’d done anything except talk to Seth. Todd was obviously very sick.”

He laughed bitterly. “My whole family was sick. Every one of them was crazy. So what does that make me?”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so we sat in awkward silence for a few minutes. The only sounds in the room were Jake’s sniffles. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore. “So what happens now?”

Jake wiped his face with the back of his hand. “I guess I’m going to live with Aunt Judy. She’s the only family I have left now. She wants me to move to California with her.”

“Are you going to go?”

He shrugged again. “I guess. It’s not like I really have a choice. She says it’ll be a fresh start for me.”

“In a way, she’s right. It’s almost as though you have the chance at a new beginning.”

He looked me in the eye once more. “Then why does it feel like the end instead?”

I didn’t stay much longer. We didn’t seem to have anything else to talk about. I couldn’t really tell him about my relationship with Asher. Or how everyone at school was treating me as if I were some sort of hero. I certainly didn’t feel like a hero. I woke up screaming almost every night. Adam had finally found a counselor, and I was going twice a week for sessions, but so far the nightmares hadn’t let up.

I ran into Judy as she was coming off the elevator. “Killian!”

“Hi,” I replied awkwardly. She’d stopped by the house to see me a few times since that eventful night, but I’d managed to avoid being there each time.

“Did you just come from seeing Jake?”

I nodded.

“Thank you. I know that meant a lot to him.”

“It was rough.”

She gave me a sad smile. “I’m sure it was. You know, I’ve wanted

to see you. I've been to your house a few times, but it seems you're always at Asher's."

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"It's okay. Do you have a minute right now?"

I couldn't very well say no without appearing rude, so I allowed her to lead me over to an empty waiting room. Once we were seated, I looked everywhere but at her. I was staring at an outdated magazine cover uncovering some scandalous celebrity affair when she started speaking. "First off, I wanted to thank you for saving Jake's life. I'm only sorry I didn't get there sooner."

I looked up at her. "Why were you there at all?" That question had occurred to me several times since that night. "I thought you were flying back to California."

"I did. Then I started having nightmares every night about my family dying in a fire. I finally flew back to Maryland without telling anyone why I'd come. I spent the first couple of nights at the house, but I couldn't sleep at all, so I moved to a hotel. That's where I was staying when everything happened. That night, I just knew something was wrong. I tried calling the house several times but didn't get an answer. Eventually I couldn't stand it anymore so I drove out there."

"I'm glad you did. You saved our lives."

She shook her head. "You saved your lives. I just helped a little." She tipped her head to one side and gave me a measuring look. "I make you uncomfortable, don't I?"

"No!" I said quickly — too quickly.

"Is it because of my Gifts?"

I started to deny it again, then decided there was no point in lying to a psychic. I shrugged instead.

"You shouldn't be afraid of them, Killian. Mine or yours."

"I don't have any Gifts."

She raised one eyebrow. "Maybe not, but I think you do. If it turns out I'm right, you'll be forced to deal with them eventually."

“Trust me on that.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a card. “If it ever happens, I want you to feel free to call me. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

I reluctantly accepted the card.

She stood up and stared down at me expectantly, so I rose as well. She enveloped me in a hug, which I returned halfheartedly at best. She stepped back and gave me a smile. “Good luck, Killian. You have a bright future ahead of you, as long as you keep your eyes open.” She winked at me and walked away.

I stared down at the card she’d given me. It simply read, “Judy Cassara, Interior Decorator,” with her phone number and address in California printed underneath. I hadn’t even known she was an interior decorator. It struck me as such an innocuous occupation for someone like her.

I tucked the card into my pocket and started for the elevators once more. Asher was waiting for me at home. If ever I’d needed a hug from my boyfriend, it was right then.

Adam parked the car, and we climbed out. Several months had passed and spring had exploded full force upon the Shore the way it always did — without warning. The week before, temperatures had been in the low forties, while that day we were comfortable in short-sleeved shirts. Brightly colored daffodils were blooming in clusters, and the sky was a brilliant, clear blue. It was an idyllic scene except for one thing: We were in a cemetery. We’d come to plant a flower on Seth’s grave.

Wordlessly, Adam, Kane, and I knelt in a small semicircle in front of Seth’s simple granite headstone. Adam dug into the soft earth, then shook the plant out of its pot and placed it tenderly in the hole. I filled in the dirt around it, and Kane watered it from the small jar we’d brought.

It was a bleeding heart. It wasn’t blooming yet, but it would in time — just as we would heal in time. Already, signs of healing were evident. My nightmares were growing further apart, Adam wasn’t quite so afraid to let us out of his sight, and we were at last able to

talk without tears about what had happened.

Still not speaking a word, we stood up and started to leave. As Adam and Kane went on, I paused and turned back to the grave. I half expected to see Seth standing there, but of course he wasn't.

I smiled as I thought about the letter he'd written me. "Hey, Seth. I think I chose the right path. Thanks for helping me open my eyes. I love you."

About the Author

Josh Aterovis fell in love with mystery novels in the fourth grade when he discovered the Nancy Drew series in his school library. He soon moved on to Agatha Christie, which led to a lifelong love affair with whodunits, culminating in his award-winning Killian Kendall mystery series.

His first book, *Bleeding Hearts*, introduced gay teen sleuth Killian Kendall, and won several awards, including the Whodunit Award from the StoneWall Society.

Aterovis grew up on the bucolic Eastern Shore of Maryland, which, coincidentally, just happens to be the setting for the Killian Kendall books. He now lives in the quirkiest city in America — Baltimore, Maryland — where, besides writing, he is also an artist and, sometimes, an actor.

