



These Arcane Days (The Crossing #2)

Author: *Lyra Haven*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: With the secrets of the past revealed and put to rest, Donovan Parker just wants to build a life with his boyfriend. Of course, the path to love never did run smooth.

When I gave up my job and the life I'd built in Chicago to move to the tiny mountain town of Lowery's Crossing, Colorado, even I wondered if it was the right choice. Then I met Alex Copeland at his best friend's coffee shop and my life turned upside down.

After surviving a deadly killer with a personal vendetta, we've settled in and are looking forward to some peace and quiet together.

Unfortunately, sometimes the past holds on a little too tight. Alex has been through a lot in his life and some days I wonder if he'll ever fully trust me.

When teens start going missing in Lowery's Crossing, disappearing without a trace, I'm left scrambling to find them before it's too late. Aided by a new friend, Alex and his strange gift may be the only hope of tracking them down before it's too late. What we find together will change everything we thought we knew.

Nothing could have prepared us for the real truth of The Crossing.

Total Pages (Source): 24

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

Chapter 1

Donovan

“T here’s a ghost in the corner by the smut table.”

I automatically glanced across the massive room, but of course I didn’t see anything there. Not surprising, really. I wasn’t the psychic in this relationship.

“I didn’t take ghosts into consideration,” I admitted. “Do you want to leave?”

When I’d first come up with the idea of taking a trip to Denver for a book-lover’s convention, it’d seemed like a great way to spend the weekend after Valentine’s Day together. I hadn’t thought about the fact that my boyfriend, Alex Copeland, could see and talk to dead people. Nor had I considered that a hotel built over two hundred years ago might just have a few dead people hanging around.

The event center bustled with authors, readers, and publishers everywhere. Tables and booths were set up where people could buy books and industry professionals could network. Alex had been wanting to do more at his bookstore, A Likely Story, and this seemed like a great chance to get some ideas and meet new people.

Alex tilted his head and I realized he was watching the ghost. He didn’t look scared or worried, which was a welcome change from the only other ghost experience I’d had with him. It had been three months since that incident, but the memory still gave me nightmares.

“I think we’re okay,” he finally said. “She’s kind of keeping to himself. I don’t think she realizes anyone can see her.” Alex paused, then chuckled. “She’s checking out the books at the sapphic romance table over there now.”

“At least she’s enjoying herself.” I wrapped my arm around Alex’s waist. “We can head somewhere else if you want to.”

He shook his head. “Thanks, but I want to keep looking. She’s just another bookworm here to enjoy the event. She can’t help that she’s dead.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Positive. Now, come on, I want to check out that big table over there.”

Alex pointed toward the east end of the convention, where it looked like several vendors had pushed their tables together to create one big unit. Standing signs in bright colors stood out among the more demure logos and the table was draped with sequined runners, cheerfully proclaiming them all as drag queens.

“Lead the way.”

He didn’t have to be told twice. Keeping a firm grip on my hand so we wouldn’t get separated in the crowd, Alex guided us through like a seasoned expert, managing to avoid getting pulled into sales pitches and conversations by the various publishers we passed along the way.

“It looks like they have pamphlets. I wonder if they do drag queen story hours? That would be fun,” Alex mused as we stood behind a group of older women chatting with the vendors.

“Do we have any drag performers in Lowery’s Crossing?”

Alex shrugged. “I don’t know, honestly. There’s never been a venue for anyone who wants to try, but it might be worth putting some feelers out to see if there’s any interest. After talking to your mom about it, I really want to do more community events at the bookstore.”

When we’d gone to meet my family for a late Christmas last month, Alex and my mom had bonded immediately, just like I’d hoped. As a former teacher, my mom had given him all kinds of ideas about things that might interest both kids and parents and get them into reading.

“Have you talked to Raina and Camille about it yet? If you gave out Camille’s pastries, you’d have people lined up out the door, no matter what kind of event it is.”

“They’re already on board with any ideas I come up with. That’s why they’re my best friends,” he grinned. The crowd shifted enough for him to step up to the table and he immediately struck up a conversation with the vendor sitting there. On a normal day, Alex was the introvert of the two of us, saving his social battery for customers at his shop. Any time he got a chance to talk about books, though, he could happily go on for hours.

Space at the table was limited, so I took a small step back, allowing others to approach the table. It also gave me a rare chance to just watch Alex without him getting self-conscious. He’d already warmed to the conversation, eyes sparkling and an excited smile on his face.

Those intense green eyes had been the first thing I noticed that day in Buns ‘n’ Roses, the coffee shop I later found out was owned by Alex’s best friend, Raina. Had it really only been about six months ago?

I’d been even newer to town than I was now, only three months into my new life in Lowery’s Crossing, still trying to shake off the memories of the things I’d seen in my

time with the Chicago PD. My new partner, Will Dodd, had gotten me hooked on the croissants at the shop, which was co-owned by his twin sister, Camille. I stopped in two to three times a week, enough that the baristas recognized me and knew my name.

One morning, after a long night spent investigating the death of an elderly woman named Zofia Kostek, I'd walked into Buns 'n' Roses and there he was. Sitting at a small table by himself, holding a massive cup of coffee, was one of the most intriguing men I'd ever seen. His overly-long brown hair had been mussed and dark shadows smudged the skin beneath his eyes, but something about him had called to me and I'd taken a chance.

Six months and one murder later, here we were. All because I'd been running late to get my morning coffee.

So much had changed since then. Alex had been kidnapped, possessed by a ghost, and shot. I'd learned that ghosts and psychics were real. We'd fallen in love and formed our own little family, consisting of us, Raina, Camille, and Will. And Alex's fat cat, Louis, of course. Alex's former roommate, Charlie, who also happened to be a ghost, had passed on, and I always held him a little closer on those nights when the grief hit. Time was helping to heal that wound, though, and we were slowly building our life together.

The line at the table started getting longer and Alex wound down his conversation, but not without trading email addresses with the drag queen he'd been talking to and promising to keep in touch about Drag Queen Story Hour.

His smile when he turned dazzled me, my heart clenching with just how much I fucking loved this man.

"Looks like you had fun," I grinned. I offered my hand, but he looped his arm

through mine instead. He stood just a bit taller than me, but not so much that it made it awkward to walk together. He tilted the business card toward me before putting it in his pocket, letting me see her name emblazoned on the front: Anya Marx. I had to grin.

“She had so many amazing ideas and even offered to come do story hour herself if there weren’t any local performers interested. She seemed really interested in the town, too, when I told her how surprisingly chill it is there.”

“I don’t blame her. I hear a lot of stories about how some small towns can be unwelcoming to anyone not just like them, but the Crossing really is different.”

Alex beamed at me. “Look at you, calling it ‘the Crossing’ just like a true local. I knew we’d trap you one way or another.”

“Well, what can I say? The job is good, cost of living is low, the people are nice... why wouldn’t I want to stay?”

“Those are the only reasons?” Alex poked me in the side and I had to laugh.

“Well, there’s also this bookstore I really love.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” I tugged him out of the flow of traffic and into my arms, so close our breaths mingled in the space between us. “The owner is a pretty intriguing guy.”

“Intriguing?” Alex raised a brow.

“Yep. I’ve never met anyone like him before. Honestly, I’m kind of crazy about him.”

“You only say that because you’ve never met any other psychics. Winning is easy when there’s no competition. For what it’s worth, I’m kind of crazy about you, too.” He gave me a sheepish smile. “Third person just felt awkward.”

“Agreed,” I laughed, resting my head against his. “About the third person, anyway. I fell for you before I knew anything about your ability. I knew right away that you were someone special.”

“I’m not sure ‘special’ is the word I’d use.” Alex glanced over toward the corner, where I assume the ghost was still perusing smut.

“I saw you in Buns ‘n’ Roses and there was no way I was leaving without at least talking to you. I didn’t even know if you were into men or if I was about to completely embarrass myself.”

“Donovan, dear, have you looked in a mirror lately? Even the straightest of straight men would probably give you their number.”

“Doubtful, but my ego appreciates the compliment,” I teased. “Lucky for me, you flirted back. I haven’t been that happy about someone being into men since that pop singer came out.” At his questioning look, I shrugged. “I had a crush in high school. He was my bi-awakening.”

“You are completely ridiculous.” He pressed his lips together, obviously trying to hold in a laugh.

“Maybe, but you’re the one who agreed to date me, so where does that leave us?”

“Acting like idiots in the middle of a convention center.”

I had to kiss him, and not just because I’d burst out laughing otherwise. I’d dated

before, men and women, but no one had ever gotten me like Alex. Falling for him had been effortless and inevitable, from the moment he looked up at me with those gorgeous eyes and flustered smile. He still had doubts occasionally, the sometimes-literal ghosts in his past coming back to tear him down, usually on the nights his nightmares kept him awake. On those nights, I held him a little closer, reminding him that he wasn't alone anymore and I wasn't going anywhere. No matter how long it took, I'd keep telling him that until he believed me.

"Hey," I murmured against his lips. The heat in his eyes when he looked at me made me want to drag him back up to our hotel room. "I really love you."

Alex smiled, warm and soft and happy, and how could I not have fallen in love with him when he looked at me like that? "I really love you, too." He kissed me once, twice, then broke away before we got too tangled up in each other.

I took his hand in mine, a move as natural as breathing. "Can we go check out the monster romance table? I have so many questions."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

Chapter 2

Alex

S now swirled outside the window of A Likely Story and I groaned out loud.

“Oh, come on. It’s nearly April already!” I whined, and Raina laughed.

“You’ve been back here for almost seven years now, Alex. It’s springtime in the mountains; we could still get a blizzard between now and May.”

“You’d better knock on wood. Don’t put that out in the universe,” I warned. “Just because I’m used to it doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

She just rolled her eyes. “It’s barely coming down. It probably won’t even stick. Now sit down, eat your lunch, and tell me about this idea you had.”

With one last glare at the offending snowflakes, I put down the water bottle I’d gone to retrieve and settled on my comfy stool behind the counter at my bookstore. Raina sat beside me, unpacking the lunch her girlfriend had made. In exchange for books, Camille fed me almost daily, except on my days off or whenever Donovan joined me for lunch. He and his partner had gotten called out to help with an accident on the highway outside town, leaving me to my own devices for the afternoon.

“I already told you about Drag Story Hour, right?”

“Yep. You wouldn’t shut up about it after you and Donovan got back from Denver,

remember?”

“I mentioned it twice,” I grumbled, ignoring her teasing smile. “Anyway, if Camille’s friend is still interested, could you pass along my number?”

“I’ll let her know. We’ll advertise at the shop, too, once you set the dates. I bet Mr. Delaney would bring his kids and spread the word if we asked.”

Julian Delaney’s twins, Evie and Arlo, were two of Raina’s favorite customers, and mine as well. They were turning four this year and two of the politest kids I’d ever met. Cutest, too, and they knew it.

“Perfect. I appreciate you.” I paused long enough to bite into the chicken salad sandwich she’d brought. Camille had been experimenting with the idea of serving lunch at the coffee shop and I was her more than willing taste-tester.

“Good?”

“Perfect. You guys are the reason I’ll never be skinny, you know.” The sandwich had come with a freshly baked brownie and my usual brown sugar cinnamon latte, made by Raina.

“You’re cuddly,” she shrugged. “I bet Donovan appreciates it.”

“Okay, moving on.”

Raina laughed, always enjoying a chance to tease, but she did gesture for me to continue.

“Anyway, I was thinking that I could do something for adults at the shop, too. A kid story hour will draw in parents, but there’s really not a whole lot to do in town for

adults outside the seasonal events and festivals.”

“True. Lack of a nightlife is a downside to small-town living,” she agreed. Lowery’s Crossing all but shut down after nine most nights. Most businesses closed, except for the two bars in town. There was one movie theater, with only one screen, and the owner preferred to play moves from the 70’s and 80’s. It could be fun, but after a while, the novelty wore off.

“Exactly. So I actually had a few ideas I wanted to run by you.” I flipped open the notebook I kept by the cash register and pulled out a pencil. “One idea was pretty straightforward. I was thinking about hosting a book club once a month.”

“I bet Mrs. Sharper would run it for you. She runs her euchre club like a mafia don.”

“She’s also the biggest gossip this side of the Mississippi,” I pointed out. “Maybe not the best idea, in case I have to leave in the middle of a meeting because of... reasons.” Raina knew my secret, as did Camille and Will, but talking about it still felt strange. Even saying the word ‘ghost’ out loud still made me squirm.

“Ooh, good point,” she winced. “It’s a good idea, though. We can see who turns up, then see if anyone volunteers to head it up?”

I made a note of it next to the entry in the notebook. “Okay, the next idea was kind of similar, but not really.”

“Helpful.”

“Raina...”

“Sorry, sorry. Continue, please.” She sipped at her coffee with an innocent smile that I didn’t believe for a second.

“I thought a themed event could be kind of fun, and less commitment than a book club. Like, one of those murder mystery things where everyone dresses up and they have to find the clues and all that.” I’d actually found the idea on a book forum and immediately wanted to dismiss it, given the events in my life, but the enthusiastic replies had made me grudgingly consider it.

“Are you sure about that?” Raina asked quietly. I must not have kept my expression as even as I’d hoped.

“I saw it online and everyone said it sounded amazing. Honestly, I was thinking I’d maybe ask Will if he wanted to host it, or maybe another officer. Ginny Lake is a regular here. Maybe she’d be interested?”

“Just because it’s a popular idea, doesn’t mean you have to do that theme. We could brainstorm other ideas that are a little less triggering.”

“I’m that obvious?”

“Only because you’re my best friend. You went through some serious shit, Alex. You don’t need to relive any of that just to boost sales. There are a ton of other things you could do.”

“I’ll put a pin in that one,” I agreed quietly. It was a good idea, despite my hesitations, so hearing someone else agree that I should wait gave me that validation I didn’t know I’d needed. “The others are simpler, mainly themed events around holidays or coinciding with popular books. I’d planned to ask you and Camille if I could hire you to do food and drinks, just easy snacks and stuff.”

“Like we’d say no to you. Cami used to cater, so that’s no problem, and I can relive my bartender days from college.” From her grin, Raina was even more excited about doing it than I was.

“Only if you promise to go light. I’d like my bookstore to be standing at the end of the night,” I warned.

“Spoilsport. I’d pay you to let me get Mr. King drunk. Lord knows he needs it.”

Mr. King was the local grump in town, the stereotypical ‘you kids get off my lawn’ kind of guy. Despite only being in his forties, he acted like a crotchety old man to anyone who caught him on a bad day, which seemed to be most days. He’d lived in Lowery’s Crossing his whole life and he’d been like that even back in his twenties, back when I’d been a scared preteen.

“He’d never show up to anything social and he definitely wouldn’t get drunk,” I reminded her. “The only time he willingly goes around people is when he shops at the farmer’s market.”

“Good point. Okay, no getting anyone trashed,” she agreed with a sigh. “It sounds like you’ve got some solid ideas, though. Cami and I are happy to help.”

“I love you, even though you’re mean to me all the time.”

“It’s how I show affection.” Raina ruffled my hair, laughing when I squawked in protest and pulled away.

“Come on, my hair is bad enough on a good day. I swear I’m going to shave it someday.”

“You’d look like Mr. Potato Head. Don’t do that to Donovan. Speaking of which...”

I took a big bite of my sandwich, knowing that whatever came out of her mouth next would be something evil. She was my best friend in the entire world and I adored her, but that smile did not bode well.

“I couldn’t help but notice that Donovan’s car has been in your driveway every morning for the last week.”

Yep, she was evil.

I took my time chewing the bite, but she waited me out, elbow resting on the counter and a sweet-as-honey smile on her face.

“Why are you noticing my driveway? You can’t see it from Buns ‘n’ Roses,” I said instead of answering. They lived in a sunny loft apartment over the shop, so if she wasn’t bluffing, that meant she was just being nosy.

“We like to go for a walk in the mornings before we start work,” Raina shrugged.

I side-eyed her. “You two start working at like three in the morning. Who goes out walking that early?”

“Says the man who went out walking at three in the morning with the ghost of an old woman?”

“Ugh. Fair point. But at least I had a reason.”

“If we don’t go outside before we start prepping for the day, we don’t get fresh air until one of us brings you food. Besides, it’s kind of nice to walk around town when it’s quiet and everyone else is asleep.”

“From anyone else, that would sound kind of creepy.”

“But it’s from me, so it’s adorable. Now stop avoiding the question.”

“You didn’t ask me a question. You made a statement.”

Raina reached over and lightly tugged a lock of hair. “Alex, come on. I need the details!”

I batted her hand away and stalled by taking another long, slow sip of coffee, mostly just to make her groan. She was my best friend, so of course I’d tell her, but like a true best friend, I’d torture her just a little bit first.

“Yes, Donovan’s car has been in my driveway every morning.”

She waited, eyebrows raised, but I just smiled and drank my coffee. I did pull my sandwich a little closer, though, in case she decided to throw it at my head. It wasn’t outside the realm of possibility.

“I swear, you are so lucky I love you.”

“I know. I love you, too.”

“Jerk,” she muttered. “Alright. So, does that mean that Donovan has stayed the night at your house every night for the last week, then?”

Not even my coffee cup could hide the smile that came with the memory of the last week. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Don’t give me any dirty details, but that’s awesome!” Raina’s smile matched mine and she leaned in a little closer. “Well, if you wanted to share a few details...”

Laughing, I pushed her away. “Not happening. It’s been nice, though. I’m still getting used to waking up with someone, but... yeah. It’s nice.” Really, though, ‘nice’ didn’t even begin to cover it.

“Have you guys talked about maybe moving in together yet?”

“We’ve only known each other since the beginning of October,” I reminded her. “That’s a little fast, isn’t it?”

“I’m hardly the best judge of that. Camille and I moved in together after like four dates.”

“Way to downplay lesbian stereotypes,” I teased, and she just rolled her eyes. “That was different circumstances, though. She needed a place to stay while she settled in town. Donovan already has his own place. He rents that little house down on Columbus Avenue, remember?”

“You should tell him he’s wasting that rent money. How often does he actually ever use that house?”

“He does his laundry there sometimes.” More often, I just tossed his dirty clothes in the washer with mine, something neither of us commented on other than a quiet ‘thank you’ from Donovan when he found his clothes folded neatly in the drawer I’d cleared for him.

“Just admit it. You two live together now.”

“It’s only been six months,” I protested, but it sounded weak even to my own ears. I didn’t even know why I was arguing it, but it just felt like I should. “It’s too soon... isn’t it?”

Raina sighed softly and turned on her stool so she faced me directly, so I did the same. She took the cup from me, put it on the counter, and took both my hands in hers. “Alex. I’m your best friend and I love you.”

“That’s not at all dire.”

“Hush. Now, I know you have your reasons for being anxious about this, and I get it. Before I met Camille, I was the poster child for toxic relationships.” She gave my hands a little squeeze. “Fuck what anyone else has to say about your relationship. Donovan seems like one of the good ones.”

“He really is. I keep expecting him to help an old lady across the street or rescue a kitten out of a tree.”

“Exactly. How long did it take you to know for sure that you loved him?”

I did a quick mental tally in my head. “Barely two months. But we were seeing each other nearly every night, so we had time to get to know each other.”

“You don’t have to defend yourself to me or to anyone, Alex,” Raina said. “When you know, you know. Why do you think I asked Camille to stay with me so quick? I knew by the end of our third date that she was the one for me. My point is, you do what’s right for you and Donovan, not some arbitrary timeline made up by society.”

The words hit like a sledgehammer, which is what she’d likely intended. I had been judging my relationship with Donovan on what other people would think, hadn’t I? Even after I’d met his mom a few months ago and she’d said nearly the exact same thing Raina was saying now, I was still hesitating. What was wrong with me? Here I’d managed to find an amazing man who put up with my weird psychic bullshit and I was dragging my feet?

Something squirmed in my chest, a dark little ball of anxiety that only grew with every self-doubt and fear I fed it. I ruthlessly squashed it down, taking a deep breath and hoping I could hide it from Raina when I looked up at her.

“That was romance movie-worthy. You should be a motivational speaker.”

“I will throw that chicken salad sandwich at your face.”

Success, then. I laughed, and she laughed along with me, giving me time to lock down the negative thoughts.

“Thanks, Raina.” I let out a slow breath. “I’ll talk to him about it soon.”

“Don’t let me influence your relationship too much, either, much as it pains me to say it. Don’t do it if you’re not ready, but at least remember that I’ve got your back, no matter what.”

“I’ll do it when the time is right,” I agreed, and it only felt a little bit like a lie. “So, can I finish my lunch now?”

Raina laughed, finally releasing my hands. “You are such a brat. Yes, finish eating. I need to get back and relieve Cami, anyway, so she can take a break and go feed Will.”

“You know that Will, Donovan, and I can get food, right? You two don’t have to feed us every day. Not that I’m complaining,” I added quickly, in case she took it to mean I didn’t want Camille’s food every day. I could cook, but not anywhere close to what Camille made.

“We like doing it,” she shrugged. “Besides, where else would we find three willing test subjects for our recipes?”

“Just... no more gross stuff, please?” I’d learned the hard way exactly what ‘Rocky Mountain oysters’ were and now looked up any food they brought me that I didn’t immediately recognize.

“We got those at a discount from our supplier and had to at least see if anyone was

interested,” Raina said with an apologetic wince.

“That’s a hard ‘no’ on those, but a definite ‘yes’ on the chicken salad. You can tell Camille that it’s delicious and I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Raina laughed, then said her goodbyes and headed back to work. Weekday mornings at the bookstore were always slow, so once she was gone, I was left alone with my thoughts and, despite my best efforts, the doubts and anxiety came bubbling back to the surface, making my stomach churn.

The rest of my lunch went uneaten.

The bell over the door jingled at ten after five on the dot, as it almost always did these days. I didn’t even have to look up to know who had arrived, and I started smiling immediately.

“Hey,” Donovan’s warm voice greeted me as he came around the counter, leaning in and kissing me when I looked up at him.

“Hey,” I hummed. I’d just seen him this morning as we were getting ready for the day, but I took another moment to just stare because... damn. With his olive skin, golden brown hair, and impossibly dark eyes, Donovan Parker was easily one of the most attractive men I’d ever met. He wore nice slacks and a button-up for work most days and when he shrugged off his coat, I saw that he’d rolled up the sleeves to bare his forearms.

I would never understand why he’d chosen me, of all the people in town, to take a liking to. Working at the bookstore was a pretty sedentary job, so between that and Camille’s pastries, I desperately needed to hit the gym. I’d never been a particularly

fit guy, but since coming to Lowery's Crossing, I'd gained weight. My hair was always too long, I was always pale, and none of that was even taking into account the whole 'seeing ghosts' thing. Donovan could have had anyone in town, but he'd chosen me for some reason, so I'd do whatever I could to keep him.

"How's the day been?" He took up the stool Raina had vacated hours ago, facing me.

"Slow, as usual. Mrs. Denton bought out half the self-help section, but I was too afraid to ask why. I get the feeling Mr. Denton is going to be sleeping on the couch soon, though, if he's not already."

Donovan laughed. "Until I met you, I never realized how much you could learn about someone just by their reading choices."

"Aunt Lizzie used to let me sit behind the counter when I was feeling more social and she'd spin all kinds of stories for me. She knew just about everything that happened in town and we used to try to guess why someone was buying a certain book," I admitted wistfully. I missed her still, but time had dulled the sharp edges of my grief, allowing me to remember her and smile.

"One of these days, you really have to let me see her photo albums. I want to see little teenager Alex."

"No, you really don't. I was completely hopeless at thirteen," I grimaced. "I mean, I'm not much better now, but—"

"Nope." Donovan cut me off, shaking his head. "No putting yourself down on my watch."

I rolled my eyes and it took a real effort not to smile. "Just telling the truth."

“You, Alex Copeland, are anything but hopeless. You’re smart. Kind. Funny. And you’re gorgeous.” He leaned in, punctuating each word with a little kiss until my face burned.

“Okay, okay, no more self-deprecating. You win. Now stop complimenting me,” I conceded, squirming in my seat. “I think that qualifies as a form of torture.”

Donovan laughed again and stole another kiss. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep saying it until you believe me.”

“Or you could not do that and you can take this.” I reached under the counter and pulled out the book I’d ordered for him. He took it and looked at the cover, a smile soft and warm as the sunrise spreading across his face. He was always an attractive man, but when he looked at me like that, my breath caught and I remembered all over again how much I loved him.

“You noticed what I’ve been reading?”

I nodded, giving myself a moment to remember how to speak. “Yeah. You looked like you were close to finishing the first one the other day, so I went ahead and got the next one, in case you wanted to read it.”

Since we’d started officially dating, Donovan had been spending his evenings at A Likely Story with me. I ran the shop alone from 10:00 to 7:00 most days. Since Donovan got off work at 5:00, unless he was on an urgent case, there were two hours between our quit times, which meant we only got a few hours to spend together each night. Donovan had solved that problem by coming here after work and hanging out.

At first, we’d just talked about our days and ourselves and each other, getting to know each other more. After one particular evening where I’d gotten a bit worked up about a new book that’d come out that I’d adored, Donovan had asked to borrow it.

For the next three days, he'd come in, given me a kiss, and curled up in a cozy armchair nearby, devouring the book. That had become our new routine, and Donovan claimed I'd turned him into a bookworm. I was okay with that.

"You sat there trying to convince me that you're not perfect, when you ordered me a book just so I wouldn't have to wait to keep reading it?" He shook his head, still smiling.

"It's not a huge deal or anything, I just..." I shrugged, fiddling with the hem of my sweatshirt. It was an older one, emblazoned with the store's logo on the front, and the edges were ragged from years of me picking at them.

Donovan noticed, of course. He always noticed. He placed the book on the counter, then took my hands in his.

"I appreciate it. I did finish the last one yesterday," he said, and I could have kissed him for not trying to heap on praise or anything right now. "I'm going to settle in while you wrap up, okay?"

"Okay. It's my night to make dinner. What sounds good?"

"I can think of something," he murmured, his dark eyes looking me up and down and leaving me squirming in my chair.

Closing time couldn't come fast enough.

Chapter 3

Donovan

When I'd first turned in my resignation to the Chicago PD, my old partner had pulled me aside and asked if I needed help of the professional variety. I couldn't entirely blame her. Burnout had me in its grips, but I didn't let it show, even to her. I questioned the decision even as I packed my apartment and moved across the country to a town I'd never even set foot in before. My mom and my brothers supported me, of course, but even they didn't fully understand.

The questions and doubts in my mind disappeared the first day I stepped into the Lowery's Crossing Police Department. The entire single-story building could have fit in the reception area of the Chicago PD with room to spare. In contrast to the high-tech, modern CPD, the scratched-up desks lined up in the main workspace held ancient computers that looked old enough to vote. Faded carpet stretched across the floor, while windows that definitely weren't energy efficient lined the walls, letting in the warm summer sunlight.

I loved it immediately.

Meeting the chief in person, meeting my new partner, all of it just felt right in ways I couldn't explain. Instead of spending my days delving into the darkest depths of human depravity, I now helped investigate hunting accidents and the drug problem in the mountains. I still saw things that kept me up at night, but nothing like the cases I'd seen in Chicago.

The one-year anniversary of my arrival in Lowery's Crossing was coming up this summer and I didn't have a single regret about leaving my old life behind and taking a chance on this tiny mountain town.

Maybe I was biased, though, because I'd met Alex three months into my time here and that certainly colored my views on my life. I know some people likely thought we were moving too fast, but what Alex and I had was the real thing.

A crumpled piece of paper hit my forehead, bouncing off to land in my empty coffee mug.

"I'm requesting a new partner," I grumbled, fishing the paper out and tossing it in the trash can beside me.

"Good luck with that," Will snorted. He sat across from me, his back to the door, leaning back in his chair. Blonde-haired and blue-eyed, William Dodd could have been the definition of the "All-American boy next door" if it weren't for the sparkle of mischief in his eyes.

"Maybe Camille is interested in the job. I think I'd rather work with the good twin."

"The town would riot if she left Buns 'n' Roses."

"I'd be more scared of Raina hunting us down for stealing her girlfriend away. I guess that means I'm stuck with you." I dug an old report out of the trash, carefully folding it. "Can I ask why you assaulted me with paper?"

"You had that look again and I needed it to go away."

I paused in my folding and raised an eyebrow. "What look?"

“That heart-eyes look you get whenever you’re thinking about Alex,” he shrugged. “Honestly, it’s terrible and you should be embarrassed.”

“So, I should throw things at you whenever you start thinking about—”

“We’re talking about you, not me.”

“Smooth.”

“Thanks.” Will flashed his most charming grin, sighing when I ignored him and went back to folding the paper. “I do have a serious question, though.”

“I’d believe you more if you hadn’t started the conversation by throwing something at me, but fine, I’ll bite. What’s up?”

He didn’t immediately respond, which was enough to get my attention. Will was not the type of guy who hesitated much, especially not around me.

“Will?”

“I just wanted to ask how Alex is doing?” He didn’t quite meet my eyes, his gaze hovering somewhere around my shoulder.

“He’s fine,” I said slowly. “Why do you ask?”

“Just... with all the stuff with his ex a few months ago and the whole thing at the farm.” He glanced at the door to make sure no one could overhear. “I haven’t really seen much of him since then, so I just wanted to ask.”

That made a little more sense. Will had been with us when the ghost of Thomas McAvell possessed Alex. I still had nightmares of that day, seeing Alex standing

there, pointing a gun at his own head.

“He’s getting there. I think leaving town for a while helped.” We’d spent a late Christmas with my family in Chicory, Illinois, as soon as Alex recovered. My mother had immediately taken him under her wing and they still talked and texted several times a week.

“Good. That’s good,” Will said, but he still seemed slightly off, like something was still bothering him. I didn’t get a chance to keep pushing, though, because the chief let herself into our office at that moment.

“Parker, Dodd,” she said by way of greeting. “I’ve got something for you to look into.”

Will was closer to the door, so she handed him the slim folder she’d brought with her.

“What’s up?” I asked, coming around to read over his shoulder. The very top sheet was a homemade missing person flyer, with a picture of a teenage girl front and center.

“Rebecca Perez’s parents just reported her missing. They say she didn’t go to school this morning and they haven’t been able to reach her all day.”

“But they did see her this morning?” Will asked.

Chief Cornell nodded. “Rebecca has a history of running away. This is the third time in a year she’s disappeared. The last two times, she came back after a few days when her money ran out. That doesn’t mean we’re not going to look for her, though.”

“Agreed. We’ll get to work on it,” I said. “Are the parents still here?” I glanced at the flyer and saw the names ‘Joseph and Eva Perez’ listed at the bottom, along with what

must be their home phone number.

“They’re in the interview room waiting. I told them you’d be right in.”

There was only one interview room here at the LCPD, and it doubled as a storage room. Thanks to Alex, I also now knew it was haunted by the ghost of an old detective.

The mystery of what was bothering Will would have to wait. I moved it to the back burner so I could focus on the case at hand.

“Alright, let’s get to work.”

A long day of chasing down leads on Rebecca Perez got me exactly nowhere. Her parents said they’d seen her walk out of the house on her way to school that morning, but somewhere along the way, she’d just disappeared into thin air. Everyone in the house had been running late this morning, so they hadn’t kept as close an eye as they usually did.

The Perez family lived just outside of town, so Rebecca usually walked down the road to her friend Amelie DeVor’s house and the two girls got a ride to school with Amelie’s older brother, Landon.

When we spoke to Amelie and Landon, however, they claimed Rebecca never arrived. They’d waited for her, but given her history of skipping school and running away, they’d assumed she was just being her usual self and left without her when it got too close to first period.

The two houses were less than a mile apart, but only if Rebecca cut across a stretch of

trees between the two houses. Otherwise, a curve in the road doubled the distance. In bad weather, Landon said he'd drive up the road to pick her up, but Rebecca usually preferred to walk. When pressed, Amelie admitted that her friend usually used the walk to call her boyfriend. She didn't know his name, only that he was older and Rebecca's parents had absolutely forbidden the relationship. Naturally, being a teenager, that had just made Rebecca want him even more.

Since she'd run away before, her parents had installed a tracking app on her phone to keep tabs on her location. When they'd pinged it earlier, they'd found it sitting on Rebecca's nightstand, still plugged into the charger.

Will and I spent the rest of the day walking the same path Rebecca would have taken, knocking on doors, and putting out word on the town's social media to call us if anyone got any tips, but so far, we had nothing to go on.

Just before the end of the day, we reconvened in our office to go over everything. We were both tired, cold, and muddy from trekking through the fields, with nothing to show for it.

"What do you think?" Will asked. The case notes were spread out on our shared desk space; the office was so small we had to push them together to have any room to move.

"Honestly?" I sighed heavily. "I think she ran away again."

"Me, too. I just felt like a dick saying it," he admitted with a wince.

"Amelie said she always talked to her boyfriend on the walk, so it's hard to imagine her forgetting her phone, even in the chaos of the morning they had. The most likely scenario is that she left it on purpose, knowing her parents could use it to track her."

“I’d do the same thing if I were her and wanted to meet my secret boyfriend.”

“There’s nothing between the two houses but the trees and we didn’t find any signs of her or of any sort of struggle.” The ground was too frozen for any tracks to be visible, but there was a faint path winding through the trees. The Perez and DeVor families had been friendly for years, and generations of kids going to play with each other had created a trail of beaten earth between the two houses.

“That curve in the road would be a great place for someone to wait for her,” Will added. “Once it bends around, you can’t see it through the trees from the Perez house. If her boyfriend were smart, he’d wait there and pick her up.”

“If he were smart, he wouldn’t be dating a sixteen-year-old girl.”

“True.” Will glanced over at the door, which we’d closed this time upon arriving back at the department. “Hey... this feels weird to ask, but you haven’t heard from Alex, have you?”

“Alex? I mean, I texted him to let him know I wouldn’t be able to make it for lunch, but I haven’t talked to him much otherwise.” It hit me then, what he was trying to ask. “Oh! No. He promised he’d call one of us if anything happened.”

“That’s good news, then, right? She’s missing, so if anything bad had happened to her, Alex would know. I think? Even after he explained it, I’m still kind of hazy about how this all works.”

“Me, too,” I admitted. “But he said the ones that come to him are usually people who wouldn’t be found otherwise, or don’t want family to find them. Rebecca would fit that.”

“Which makes it even more likely she ran away.”

“Exactly what I was thinking. We’re not going to stop looking, though.”

“No, definitely not. It does make me feel a little better, though.”

“There’s not much more we can do here tonight, though. Let’s wrap up and head home. We’ll come at it with fresh eyes tomorrow.”

“With any luck, she’ll realize her boyfriend is a jerk and be back before then,” Will said, stretching as he stood up. “I passed the information on to the surrounding towns, too, so maybe we’ll get a hit on them passing through.”

Together, we put the case file back together, locked it up, and left for the night. Will headed for his house while I went up the road to A Likely Story.

There was only an hour until closing, since I was running a little late tonight. Sunset approached, casting warm golden light across the little town and glinting off the leaded windows of the bookstore. Soft light emanated from within, inviting passersby to wander through the doors and peruse the shelves. A wooden sign hung over the door, installed years ago by Alex’s aunt and maintained lovingly by him since he’d taken over.

A tiny bell jingled when I stepped inside, and immediately the worries and tension of the day eased. I’d never been much of a reader as a kid, not like my brother Dane, so I hadn’t spent much time in bookstores. Still, even I could tell that A Likely Story was special.

The checkout counter, a long length of solid wood, ran to the left of the door, while tall bookcases spanned the right wall, with shorter shelves perpendicular to them creating aisles. A wall of open shelving separated the store in half, filled with plants and store merchandise.

The back half of the store was devoted to reading, with cozy nooks set up amongst the shelves. This was where I spent most of my evenings now. I even had a favorite spot; along the right wall, near the tall windows, in a plush loveseat. It offered a peaceful view of the town, but more importantly, it was in direct line of sight of the counter, so I could watch Alex working.

“Donovan!” Alex’s smile when he saw me walk in soothed any lingering tension I’d been holding. He was checking out a customer, a woman I vaguely recognized but couldn’t put a name to, so I waited until he finished to come around the counter and kiss him.

“Missed you,” I murmured, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“You saw me at breakfast,” he laughed, but he hugged me right back and his lips met mine, anyway.

“How’s your day been?” I stepped back only because he was still working, and the doors would be unlocked for another hour.

“Better than yours, it sounds like. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really. It’s not bad, just messy,” I said, shaking my head. Alex had enough nightmares of his own to deal with. I did my best to make sure I didn’t add to it.

“I’ve got your book stashed under here, if you want to relax while I finish up?” He reached under the counter, pulling out my current read and handing it to me.

“I don’t deserve you, you know that?”

Alex blushed, rolling his eyes. “Go chill out. I’ll come find you once I lock up.” He gently pushed me toward my spot and I let him, only pausing to steal another kiss

before retreating to my cozy corner.

Once there, though, I didn't open the book. The day had worn me down and my brain had decided it was time to go offline for a while. Instead, I just relaxed, letting my mind wander, making idle plans for Alex's birthday. It was a month before Mom's, so summer was going to be busy, but I couldn't wait to spoil him. I couldn't think of anyone who needed pampering more than him. If I couldn't help him deal with ghosts, the least I could do was take care of him afterward, and since there weren't exactly any other psychics I could turn to for advice...

That thought caught and snagged in my mind, reminding me of something Alex had joked about just a few nights ago. When he'd teased that he was the only psychic in the world, I'd laughed along, but now I couldn't help but wonder. I'd never given much thought to the paranormal before. Psychics had always been the stuff of movies and cheesy TV shows, not reality. Once, when I'd been a detective in Chicago, we'd had a woman call claiming to be a medium. She'd very firmly told us that the man we were looking for was dead and we would find him at the bottom of a drainage ditch. We'd found him the very next day, alive and hiding out in a motel room with three prostitutes. Needless to say, it'd given me a healthy skepticism of so-called psychics.

Then Alex Copeland stumbled into my life, and I'd been forced to reevaluate. Seeing the ghost of a murderer possess him was more than enough proof to make me a believer, but only in him. If someone else were to make the same claims, I'd doubt them, probably assume they were a fraud. But what would be stranger: Alex being the only person in the world with abilities, or there being more people out there with gifts and somehow they'd stayed hidden all this time?

That question nagged at me, forcing me to rethink every strange interaction I'd ever had. I'd spent my early years as an officer in downtown Chicago, so there were plenty to consider.

I completely forgot about the book in my lap and I had no idea how long I sat there, poring through my memories, before the loveseat dipped and I blinked to find Alex settling in beside me.

“You okay? You’ve been staring at that bookshelf like it personally offended you.”

“Just thinking. Nothing bad, I promise,” I added, before he could get the wrong idea.

“Pizza for your thoughts? I’m all done and I was thinking maybe movie night at my house?”

“It’s a deal.” I hesitated, though, trying to figure out the right way to word this.

“Uh oh. That bad?” Alex shifted in his seat so he faced me. “Maybe talk first, then pizza, because that face is freaking me out.”

“My thinking face freaks you out?” I aimed for a teasing tone, but I must have missed the mark because he just looked worried. “It’s nothing. Just... something you said a few days ago just got stuck in my head and now I need to figure it out.” I drummed my fingers across the book cover. “You joked that part of the reason I fell for you was that you were the only psychic out there, so there was no competition. Do you remember that?”

“Vaguely,” he said slowly. “I’m not following, though.”

“It got me wondering if it was really true.”

Silence. When I stole a quick look at Alex again, his brows were wrinkled into a frown, his lower lip caught between his teeth like he did when he was thinking hard about something. I let him be, letting him turn it over in his head like I’d been doing for the last hour.

“So, you’re wondering if there are other psychics out there somewhere?” he asked. “I mean, I know of at least one other.”

“Wait, you do?” What the hell?

“Yeah. You do, too.” He raised an eyebrow. “Thomas McAvell was psychic, according to the story. That’s supposedly why he went crazy and killed his family.”

“Huh. I guess in all the chaos that day, I forgot about that.” I trailed off, adding that new information to the questions circling in my mind. “What are the odds that two people who can see ghosts would live in the same state, let alone nearly in the same town? Does that mean it’s way more common than we thought?”

“I wish I had some answers for you, Donovan, but I have no idea. I’ve spent most of my life avoiding anything to do with my abilities,” Alex confessed, voice soft. “If there’s anyone else nearby, the ghosts don’t seem to know about it, because they all come to me.”

“Would it be something you’d consider researching?” I asked carefully. With how much Alex appeared to hate his gift, I didn’t want to push him. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to, of course, and I’ll drop it if you’d prefer we just leave things as they are.”

Again, Alex was quiet, eyes distant. No matter what he decided, I’d stand by him, but I did hope he’d at least consider looking. If there was someone out there who could help him, maybe that would give him some peace.

“The way things have been hasn’t been so great,” he finally said. He kept his eyes straight ahead, the picture of calm, but he kept tugging and twisting the hem of his sweater, tugging at a loose thread.

“You have a whole team backing you up now, though,” I reminded him. “You don’t have to handle it all alone anymore.”

“Yeah, but I still can’t control it. I didn’t even know I could use crystals to protect my house until my asshole ex did it. Even then, I haven’t tried to learn anything about how to do it myself.” He sighed heavily, his head falling back against the loveseat. “I guess we should at least look into what possibilities are out there. As much as I hate him, Nate knew more about my own abilities than I do. There’s a freaking crystal shop in town and I’ve never even set foot in there.”

“There is? Where?” I ran over my mental map of Lowery’s Crossing, trying to place a crystal shop.

“It’s on Race Street, right by the dog grooming place, remember?”

We’d walked the town end to end, backward and forward and sideways, on our evening dates, but it still took me a second. “I thought that place was a plant shop or something. I assumed that’s where Raina got all hers.”

“Nope,” Alex shook his head. “I mean, I’ve heard they do sell plants there and they keep a lot in the windows, but mostly they sell crystals and stuff like that.”

“You’ve really never been in? I thought you were basically on a first-name basis with all the small businesses in town.”

He flushed, tugging harder at the thread. He was going to unravel the whole sweater at this rate. “It’s kind of stupid, but I never went in there because it... I don’t know. I guess it felt like I was validating what I could do if I did? It doesn’t make sense, but going in there would have made it feel more real, somehow? As if going out at midnight to find dead bodies isn’t real enough. I told you it’s stupid and I just—”

“Alex.” I leaned in and kissed him, my preferred method of slowing the avalanche of self-doubt that sometimes slipped free. I grasped his hands in mine at the same time, forcing him to relinquish his stranglehold on his sweater. “Hey. You’re not stupid and you’re allowed to feel however you want about your ability. If I were in your shoes, I don’t think I’d be nearly as calm about it as you’ve been.”

“If you were in my shoes, you’d have your house protected and have the ghosts trained to knock at the door already.” He laughed when he said it, but that self-mocking undertone was still there.

“After everything you went through with your mom, moving around, and trying to run your own business while dealing with something like this on your own, with absolutely no support... Alex, you’re fucking amazing. It kills me that you don’t see what I see.”

“I believe that you believe I’m awesome. That counts, right?”

I prided myself on being a level-headed man, but there were times, like this, where I truly hated the people in Alex’s past who’d made him feel like this. The worst offenders being his own parents just made it all the worse.

“That counts,” I agreed, running my thumb across his knuckles until his shoulders loosened. “I’ll just keep telling you until you actually believe it, too.”

“I still say that counts as a form of torture. Compliments are so awkward,” he groaned.

Laughing, I leaned in and kissed him again, lingering until I had to pull away or risk getting us into a compromising position. The doors of the shop were locked, but the windows faced the street and if I did what I truly wanted to do, we’d get arrested for public indecency.

“We’ll continue this discussion when we get back to your place,” I murmured against his lips and finally saw a smile.

“Promises, promises. How fast can you get us there?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

Chapter 4

Alex

The following morning, Donovan's suggestion still ran circles in my head, no matter how I tried to distract myself.

From the windows of A Likely Story, I could just barely see the street sign for Race Street, but the post office on the corner hid the storefronts on the small side street. A small boutique took up the corner building, followed by a tiny unit for the Crossing's lone tattoo artist. The crystal shop took up another small building, with the only dog groomer in town on the far corner.

Most of the owners of those businesses were acquaintances, at least. Melissa, who ran the boutique, bought classics off my shelves from time to time to decorate her shop. Bel, the tattoo artist, was a regular at Buns 'n' Roses and had a wicked sense of humor, according to Rachel, one of the baristas. The groomer at the far end, Quinn, was a regular, but also one of the shyest people I'd ever met. He was always unfailingly polite, but I got the feeling that he worked with dogs to avoid dealing with people as much as possible.

The crystal shop, though... Try as I might, I couldn't think of the name of the owner. I made it a point to at least know who my fellow small business owners were, yet somehow, I couldn't put a name or even a face to them. Come to think of it, I couldn't even come up with the name of the shop itself.

"That's a very serious thinking face. Should I come back?"

I'd apparently been so caught up in trying to remember that I didn't hear the door open or Camille walk in. Donovan would just love my situational awareness.

"You're fine," I assured her, shaking my head. "What's up?"

She held up a bag and a cup in response. "Lunch time."

"Already?" I glanced at the tablet on my counter, shocked to see it was nearly one o'clock. "Damn, I lost track of time."

"Is everything alright?" Camille asked, putting the bag and cup on the counter near my elbow. Despite being friends for a few years now, she didn't come around the counter like her girlfriend always did. Instead, she leaned against the solid wood, elbows on the counter and her chin resting on her hands. She unzipped her heavy coat and I caught a glimpse of the evil eye necklace hanging around her neck. I'd never given it much thought before, but now it caught my attention.

"Yeah. Actually, you might be able to help me."

"You know I'm always happy to do what I can."

"Because you're an awesome person," I said, just to make her smile. I loved Camille, and she deserved every single compliment in the world. "I was just wondering about the crystal shop down on Race Street."

She tilted her head, long blonde hair spilling over her shoulder. "Esoteric Oddities? What about it?"

"How did I not know that name?" I'd have thought I'd remember a name like that. "Do you know who owns it?"

“Sure. Ori Castellós has run it as long as I’ve lived here,” she shrugged. “They’re pretty nice, too, once you get to know them. I’ve never met anyone who knows more about crystals and magic.”

Lowery’s Crossing had a population hovering around ten thousand, maybe fifteen thousand when tourists came through in the summer months on their way to the mountains. I’d lived here for six years as a kid, moving in with Aunt Lizzie when I was twelve years old, then visited frequently while I was in college. I’d moved back permanently almost seven years ago, at age 24, when my aunt died. I knew most people by sight and, thanks to the gossip baristas I saw every day, had at least heard of those I didn’t know.

Not once had I ever heard the name Ori Castellós.

“I’m surprised I’ve never met them before,” I said slowly, searching my memory and again coming up blank. Part of what Camille had said finally registered, though, and I blinked at her. “Wait. Magic?”

She tilted her head. “You’re literally a psychic, but you’re going to be skeptical about the existence of magic? Haven’t you spent half your life in Lowery’s Crossing?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Alex, within a month of moving here, I’d heard at least a dozen stories about the strange happenings around this town.”

I didn’t roll my eyes, I wouldn’t disrespect Camille like that, but I did sigh. “Everyone always gets so superstitious about mountain towns. When I was younger, all the kids talked about the witches out in the woods and swore they heard the howls of werewolves under the full moon. None of that is real, though.”

“I agree with you about the werewolves, at least,” Camille said with a soft laugh. “But witches are very real. Not the ones on TV, with pointed hats and magic potions, but witchcraft, as a practice, is quite common these days.”

“You’re right, sorry. I guess I just didn’t realize it was common enough that we’d have a shop like that here in town. I’m also surprised that it’s been open this long and I’ve never been inside or met the owner.”

“Considering your skepticism, it’s not that shocking,” she said. “Are you wanting to learn more about crystals and things like that? I’d be happy to share what I know, or I could introduce you to Ori, if you wanted.”

“It’s just something Donovan and I talked about yesterday. After everything that happened, I’m realizing that I’ve never really tried to get any sort of control over my ability.” I slumped forward, resting my elbows on the counter and mirroring Camille. “That asshole Nate used crystals and those weird symbols to banish Charlie and keep him out of my house. I didn’t even know that was possible.” Thinking of Charlie brought with it a familiar twinge of bittersweet grief.

“There are quite a few ways to protect a home. I can stop by and do it for you any time you’d like.”

It was tempting. I couldn’t deny that. If I blocked them from entering my house, would they be forced to leave me alone for good? Would they disappear when they couldn’t draw off my energy? I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to go to bed at night without that tiny nugget of worry in the back of my mind that I’d wake to a ghost in my bedroom. To never again go out in the dead of night in search of a dead body. It sounded like pure bliss.

Right on the heels of that thought, though, reality came crashing in.

What would happen to those people if I didn't help them? Would they be able to move on, or would they be trapped here? Would their bodies remain missing or hidden forever? How many families would suffer, waiting for news of a loved one that never came?

Could I live with myself if I let that happen?

"I don't want to bar them completely, but... I don't know, maybe something to help me focus? Or maybe they have something that can teach me how to get some control over this?" I slumped forward on the counter, letting my forehead rest on the cool wood. "I don't know what I'm doing, Camille. I don't even know if there's anyone else out there who can do what I do, so how do I even know what to look for?"

A gentle hand touched my head, stroking through my hair, soft and soothing. "You let your friends help you, first of all," she murmured. "We'll see what we can find and we'll experiment until we figure out what works for you. If you don't feel comfortable going to see Ori, I'll go talk to them and at least see what kind of information I can come up with."

I turned my head just enough to peer up at her. "What did I do to deserve such awesome friends?"

She laughed, tugging at a lock of my hair in a move she'd picked up from Raina. "That's easy. You're a good person and a good friend. Now, sit up and eat your lunch. I need your opinion on this new sandwich. We're thinking of adding a lunch menu beyond just savory pastries, but we're still testing the waters."

"It'd be nice to have a little variety." I did as ordered, sitting up in my chair and reaching for the bag she'd brought. "What's the drink today?"

"Your usual. Raina decided to save the experimental drinks for next week. The

sandwich is roasted vegetables, sundried tomato pesto, and goat cheese on ciabatta.”

I paused in the middle of unwrapping the sandwich. “Where did you even get goat cheese in Lowery’s Crossing?”

“I had to take a trip to Denver to get it,” she admitted. “If it’s not a fan favorite, it won’t make the permanent menu, but I’m hoping I can get enough people to give it a shot. I’ll die of boredom if we just do turkey and cheese sandwiches or something.”

If I weren’t getting it for free, I’m not sure I would have tried it, either. Not that I’d tell Camille that. I took my role as guinea pig seriously, especially since it meant my friends fed me most days.

“I think I want to at least talk to Ori and check out the shop. If you have free time in the next week or so, would you want to come with me?” Maybe I was just being a chicken, but I didn’t want to go alone, and Donovan would be even more clueless than me. It seemed smartest to take someone who at least knew what she was talking about.

“I’ll stop by your house tomorrow after we close, if you’d like,” she agreed easily. “Ori stays open fairly late. Raina will probably come, too. She’s not as into it as I am, but she likes their incense selection.”

“You’re the best. I’ll give you a review of the sandwich in the morning when Donovan and I stop by for breakfast.”

“Have the two of you spent a night apart since you got back from visiting his family?” she teased, blue eyes twinkling. She and her twin Will shared that devilish streak, though she was more subtle about it than her twin.

“Nope, and I’m perfectly fine with that.”

“I’m sure you are.” She shook her head, still smiling. “I’ve got to head back. I’ll do a little research tonight when I get home and let you know what I find in the morning.”

Buns ‘n’ Roses was only a block away, but Camille bundled up like she was preparing to trek the length of Antarctica. After a quick hug, she was gone, leaving me alone with my lunch and way too many thoughts.

By the time I closed up the bookstore the next day, I’d already had second (and third and fourth) thoughts about this whole venture, but it was too late to back out after I’d already agreed to go with the girls. Donovan and Will were both putting in extra hours on the Perez case, so after Donovan left my bed this morning, I’d rattled around the empty house alone. Louis had been clingier than usual, like he knew something was bothering me, and followed underfoot no matter where I went. A few extra treats on my way out the door distracted him enough for me to leave.

Weekday mornings were usually slow, leaving me free to focus on the administration side of running the store. Once again, I silently thanked my aunt for not leaving me with a mortgage or lease on this place. Things would be a lot tighter if I had to worry more about losing the building.

I’d been exchanging emails with Anya Marx about setting up Drag Story Hour at the shop, which would hopefully draw in some new business. A lot of parents brought their kids to A Likely Story in bad weather to take advantage of the well-stocked kid’s section, but that didn’t always end in a purchase. Most of the time, the kids just played with the puzzles and flipped through picture books for awhile until they got bored.

The sun had already begun its descent when Raina and Camille walked into the store together, arm in arm and giggling about something that would probably make me

blush.

“Perfect timing,” I said, powering down the tablet that I used as a cash register. The big clunky thing Aunt Lizzie had used was now in storage and no longer taking up half the counter with its bulk. It was one change I thought she’d appreciate.

I bundled up in my thickest coat before we left and even then, the first touch of cold air on my face made me whimper. I loved living in the mountains, but sometimes the wait for winter to let go was maddening.

“I did a little research last night,” Camille said. She walked in the middle, with Raina on her left and me on her right, closest to the road. “There are a few sites I trust to have decent information, usually.”

“Did you find anything interesting? Every time I tried to look, I ended up on some website that wanted my credit card information in exchange for a 90 second reading from the world’s best psychic medium. After the fourth one making that claim, I gave up.”

“You lasted longer than me,” Raina said. She walked arm in arm with Camille still, huddled close to her girlfriend for warmth. “After the second one that played new age elevator music on full blast, I let Cami handle it.”

“You just have to know where to look. I’ll send you some links,” Camille said with an easy shrug. “I don’t know if any of the people claiming to be psychic are telling the truth or not, but most of them said the same thing.”

“Meditate?” I guessed, trying not to groan. I’d seen some variation of that advice on nearly every website I’d checked out. Yoga was another popular one, usually followed by a ‘buy a subscription to my yoga instructional videos for only fifty bucks a month’.

“No, which is probably a good thing for you,” she teased, giving me a playful nudge. “They say that the first thing you need to do is accept your gift.”

“What does that even mean?” I frowned, glancing over at her. “I know that I can do this. It’s not like I’m pretending it’s not real. I’ve accepted it.”

“No, you haven’t. You’ve resigned yourself to it.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, so suddenly that the girls walked a few more feet before realizing I wasn’t with them. Camille’s simple words had more power than a gut punch and she’d knocked the breath right out of me.

“Alex? Are you alright?” Raina asked. They came back to me and I found myself in the middle now, protected on both sides by my friends.

“Sorry, your girlfriend just kind of blew my mind.” I managed a weak laugh, shaking my head. “You’re right, Camille. I never thought of it that way before, but you’re right.”

“Alex...” Camille hugged me, resting her head on my shoulder.

“I hate what I can do, but I do it anyway because I have to. I thought that meant I’d accepted this stupid ability.”

“I don’t blame you for feeling like that,” she said softly. “I think anyone in your position would. If you truly hate it, though, I think it will be difficult to ever gain any control, because you’ll be too busy resenting that you have to.”

I peeked over at Raina. “You just had to go and fall in love with the smartest woman in the state, didn’t you?”

“Yep!” Pride shone in the smile she gave Camille, along with the kind of deep, abiding love that made my eyes well up. I adored these two.

“Okay, so accepting is the first step,” I said and Camille released me so we could keep walking. Lowery’s Crossing was small enough that we were already almost there. “Anything else I should know?”

“Well, there are some crystals that are supposed to help you focus, and several people recommended meditating.” Camille winked at me, unimpressed by the dry look I shot her. “What? It could be worse. Quite a few of the recommendations involved certain substances that will help you ‘see into the beyond’.” Her attempt at a faux-mystical voice fell apart when she started giggling, drawing Raina in and leaving me shaking my head.

“I’m not going to start popping ‘shrooms to help me see dead people,” I said, which just set off another round of laughing. “You guys are lucky I love you too much to call you crazy.”

“Please, our crazy is why you love us,” Raina scoffed. “Come on, there’s the shop. Let’s get in out of the cold and see what we can find.”

Trepidation slowed my steps, but Raina and Camille hustled me inside before I could change my mind.

The front section of Esoteric Oddities looked much the same as the windows. Plants hung from the walls and roof, while shelves along the wall held all manner of items. To the left was a variety of incense and all the paraphernalia to go with it. To the right were crystals of every size, shape, and color imaginable. They sat in boxes, in mesh bags, some stood alone, some in clusters. Further back were more shelves, some holding books, others with things I couldn’t even begin to identify.

I was immediately overwhelmed.

“Camille. It’s been awhile.”

The warm voice caught my attention before I could spiral too far, and I focused on it. In the rear of the shop, against the wall on the right, a small counter jutted out and behind it sat someone who could only be Ori Castellos.

Even perched on a tall stool, I got the impression that they were shorter than me. Dark hair fell well past their shoulders, held away from their face with jeweled clips. I couldn’t say for sure, but I would guess they had some Filipino heritage. Tattoos swirled up their arms, disappearing beneath a loose short-sleeved shirt, and expertly applied rainbow polish glittered on their nails.

No matter where they went, Ori would stand out in a crowd, and yet I knew for a fact that I had never seen them before in my life.

“Hi, Ori.” Camille herded Raina and me over to the counter, her smile warm and relaxed. “I didn’t realize how long it’s been since I stopped in. We’ve been pretty busy lately.”

“I’ve seen the lines at the bakery. Congratulations,” Ori replied. They had a faint accent, but nothing that sounded familiar to me. “Raina, it’s a pleasure to see you. And you’re Alex Copeland.” They turned to me, dark eyes taking me in from head to toe.

“Um... yes?” I coughed, clearing my throat. “I-I mean yes. I am. Alex. That’s me.” I pressed my lips together, stopping the nervous flow of words before I could make an even bigger fool of myself.

Thankfully, Ori just smiled. “I visited your bookstore awhile back. I’m glad to see it

stayed in the family, after Lizzie passed.”

“You’ve been there?” That was news to me. The only way I would have missed such a memorable person would be if they’d come in while I’d been in the thick of my relationship with Nate, when he’d convinced me to stop spending so much time at the shop so we could be together. At the time, I’d thought it was romantic and agreed to hire on a local teenager to help. “I’m sorry I missed you.”

They waved it off. “Water under the bridge. But what brings you in here today? I have to say, you seem a little uncomfortable to be here.”

“I convinced him to stop by with me,” Camille said, looping her free arm through mine. “We were hoping to get more information about the different qualities of crystals and what they do.”

“Was there something in particular you were looking for?” they asked, watching me with an odd look in their eyes, like they knew something I didn’t.

“I’d heard that certain things can enhance psychic abilities and help focus them,” I said before Camille would respond. The plan had been to let her take the lead and not mention what I could do, but for some reason, I wanted to tell Ori at least a little of it. Surely someone who ran a spiritual shop like this was used to people coming in asking about becoming psychic?

Some of Ori’s reservation faded and their smile became a bit warmer. “It depends on what, exactly, you’re looking to do, but yes. Are you trying to activate latent abilities or control an existing one?”

“That. The second one,” I nodded and Camille took a step closer for support, with Raina at my back.

“Can I ask what you can do? You are under no obligation to share any information, but it will help me find what will help you best if I at least have a general idea.”

This was it. Telling Donovan had almost been easy, in a way. He’d already been inclined to believe me. Raina and Camille hadn’t doubted me for a second and Will had seen a ghost possess me, so of course he was going to believe. This would be the first time telling someone I didn’t already trust. In a town this small, they’d either laugh at me or tell someone and by tomorrow morning, the gossip mill would be churning out the rumor that Alex Copeland had finally cracked and gone nuts.

Besides that... I’d just met them. Could I truly trust Ori with this? Camille seemed friendly with them and they seemed nice enough, but trusting them enough to talk about this felt big. Did I really have that much choice, though? I couldn’t get any further on my own, I’d proven that, and Ori seemed confident enough. This would be a massive leap of faith, but I needed the answers they might have.

“Everyone’s power is their own and many choose to keep it hidden. I don’t blame you for doing the same,” they said, misinterpreting my silence as a refusal.

“No, it’s not that,” I assured Ori, then paused, replaying their words in my head. “Wait. What do you mean? Are there other people that can see ghosts, too?”

Shit.

“You can see the dead?” Their brows rose in surprise. “I’ve actually never met anyone who can do that. Well, not anyone on this side, anyway. That’s quite unique. I’m sure I can help you, though.”

I didn’t miss how they neatly glossed over my questions. And what did they mean by ‘not anyone on this side’? What the hell had I just stumbled into? I had so many questions.

“Alex is really private about this, so we’d like to keep this between the four of us,” Camille said, glancing around the shop. Thankfully, we were alone. I really should have checked before spouting my secrets like an idiot.

“Naturally.” Ori leaned forward, resting their elbows on the counter, eyes bright with excitement. “So. Tell me everything.”

Chapter 5

Donovan

After two days of working the Perez case, we'd hit a brick wall. Sitting together in our cramped office, Will and I pored over the notes we had, sparse as they were. For all intents and purposes, Rebecca Perez had walked out her front door and disappeared from the face of the Earth. Not a single person in town had seen her, no trace of her had turned up anywhere despite numerous searches, and her parents hadn't received any word from her. Eva Perez called almost on the hour, not that I blamed her, and having to tell her we hadn't made any progress didn't get any easier.

"We had to have missed something," Will said, running his hands through his blonde hair, which was already a mess. He pulled a picture of the path between the two houses closer, staring at it. We'd walked that path countless times in the last two days. We'd gone together, separate, with Rebecca's parents, with Landon and Amelie DeVor, and still hadn't found a trace of Rebecca. The chief organized the patrol officers into a search yesterday and together, we'd all walked the length of County Road 4 for miles. Still, we'd found nothing, not even a single thing we could trace back to Rebecca Perez.

"She might still be off with that boyfriend," I pointed out, but the chances of that grew slimmer with every passing hour. We didn't even have a name for the guy she was dating. Amelie told us he went by Striker and that it was a nickname, but Rebecca had never called him anything else in front of her. Lowery's Crossing was hardly a hub of gang activity, so we couldn't trace where the nickname came from. No one had ever seen Striker, so we didn't even have a description of him or what

kind of vehicle he drove.

“The parents say she’s never been gone for more than three days before. That’s tomorrow morning.”

“I know.” I knew the odds and statistics, but I wasn’t quite ready to give up on Rebecca just yet.

“She wasn’t a half-bad student, considering how many classes she’s skipped. Maybe she just wanted a few days off and now that we’re getting into the weekend, she’ll be ready to come back?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I shrugged, but neither of us believed it. He was grasping at straws just like I was. Truth was, we had absolutely nothing to go on and until we either got a tip or found Rebecca, we were completely stuck.

“Parker? Dodd?” The chief knocked on the open door, glancing at the case notes on the desk, then back up at us. “Any news?”

“No, ma’am,” I said. We’d been running down everything we could find and weariness bled into my words. “Nothing but a lot of dead ends.”

She’d been keeping abreast of the case, helping with the search effort, so there wasn’t much need for a long-winded update.

“Go ahead and pack it in for the night. We’ll start fresh in the morning.”

“We’re fine to keep going,” Will protested. “I just need to find a fresh angle.”

“It’s 8:00. You’ve both been here all day. You’re no use to me and to Rebecca if you’re too tired to think straight. Go home, sleep, and come at it again in the

morning.”

“It just feels wrong to go home and sleep in my bed when we don’t know where she is,” he admitted. His eyes drifted to the missing person poster, where a picture of Rebecca Perez stared up at us, smiling and happy.

“I know. Unfortunately, sometimes that’s part of the job. I know you want to find her. We all do, but we’re also human, which means we need to rest if we’re going to function.” She lightly clapped him on the shoulder. “Night shift is already on duty. If anything changes, they’ll call you. Go home, William.”

Neither of us spoke as we packed up and left the station, the silence following us out onto the street.

“This doesn’t feel right,” he said finally, pausing on the sidewalk beside me.

“Believe me, I get it. Cornell is right, though. We have to eat and rest and give our minds a break if we’re going to find her.” I knew Will, though, and I doubted he’d take much of a break when he got home. That sparked an idea, though. “Why don’t you come over?”

“Come over? Where, to Alex’s place?” He still didn’t quite look at me, but I knew he was ready to refuse. Ever since the McAvell farm, he’d been awkward around Alex. I’d need to deal with that eventually and make sure Will really was okay with Alex and what he could do, but that was a problem for another time. I’d seen too many officers go down the road Will was on, obsessing over a case until it burned them out. I didn’t want that to happen to him.

“No, over to my house. We can order some pizza, maybe catch a replay of a game or something, and just chill out a little.” I did want to see Alex, but right now, Will needed me more. He lived alone and I just knew he’d go back to his apartment and

spend the entire night awake, thinking about the case.

He still hesitated, but in the end, he nodded. “Yeah, sure. Just for a little while, I guess.”

I shot off a quick text to Alex as we walked, letting him know I might not make it tonight. He reminded me that I had a key and to come by any time if I wanted. Depending on what time Will headed home, I might just take him up on that.

My little rental house sat between two nearly identical houses about half a mile away from the station. An old fence had once surrounded the single-story property, but I’d removed it for the landlord in exchange for half-off my first month’s rent. Like most houses in Lowery’s Crossing, it was old and a little run-down, but it had solid bones and the roof didn’t leak, so it worked for me.

“You’ve lived here almost a year?” Will asked once we were inside and getting settled. He glanced at the cardboard boxes still in the corner of the living room, gathering dust. I’d mostly unpacked, but a few still lingered.

“You know I spend most of my time at Alex’s house. That’s mostly old, sentimental stuff that I haven’t found the right place for.”

A plush couch sat against one wall of the living room, facing the big TV I’d brought with me from Chicago. It perched on a short stand, with my old DVD collection on a shelf beneath it. A coffee table and a lamp made up the rest of the furniture in the room. A calendar hung on the wall by the kitchen, still showing December of last year.

“I’m surprised you haven’t just moved in already. You might as well, at this point, right?”

“We just haven’t talked about it,” I shrugged. I thought about it almost every day, but if Alex did, he hadn’t said anything. Something about the timing just didn’t feel quite right yet, which made no sense, and yet I couldn’t shake that feeling.

“My sister moved in with Raina after three dates or something like that. Trust me, compared to them, you guys are a glacier,” Will snorted, a hint of his old humor coming back.

“Hilarious. Here.” I tossed him the remote, snorting on a laugh when he fumbled it, but caught it before it hit the floor. “Find something to watch while I call Martinelli’s. What kind of pizza do you want?”

“From Martinelli’s? It has to be the traditional Sicilian.”

“No argument from me,” I agreed. There were two pizza places in town, but Martinelli’s was by far everyone’s favorite. “Pepperoni and spicy sausage?”

“Hell yes,” he agreed immediately.

I left him to channel-surfing while I called it in. Luckily, since it was Friday, they actually had a few delivery drivers working. On weeknights, it was pickup only, unless Paula Martinelli’s oldest son was willing to run deliveries. It was an eighty-twenty shot. Considering the entire town was only a few miles across, it wasn’t exactly a hardship for most. Weekends were busy enough for her to justify paying whatever local teenager wanted to make a few extra bucks to deliver pizzas.

“Twenty minutes or so,” I reported once I hung up. “Water or soda? That’s all I’ve got in the fridge right now.”

“Water’s fine. Seriously, though, you’re wasting so much money even keeping this place.”

He caught the water bottle I threw at his head a lot easier than he'd caught the remote.

"Anyway. Moving on." I sat down on the other end of the couch, getting comfortable while we waited. "What'd you find?"

Will hit 'play' and pulled up a replay of last night's NCAAW basketball game. That same tense silence from before blanketed us as we watched the game, waiting for the food to arrive. To make matters worse, when I opened the door to the delivery driver's knock, Landon DeVor stood on the other side. He looked tired, worry and strain making him look older than he was.

"Hi, Detective Parker. I didn't realize this was your house." Like every other time I'd talked to him, he was soft-spoken and unfailingly polite, but in a quietly confident way that gave me hope for the kind of man he'd grow into.

"Hey, Landon. Thanks for bringing this," I said, taking the box from his hands and putting it on the floor by the door.

Landon noticed Will and from the sudden silence in the living room, Will had also realized who was at the door.

"No problem. I sometimes work for Mrs. Martinelli for extra gas money." He fidgeted while I quickly counted out money, including the biggest tip I could manage with what cash I had on hand. He pocketed it with a murmur of thanks, but didn't take a step back. I knew why he lingered, of course, and I couldn't blame him.

"We're still looking for her, Landon," I promised. "We'll find her."

"And maybe she'll come home soon on her own. She did before," he agreed, but he didn't believe his own words even as he said them.

“That’s what we’re hoping.” I gently gripped his shoulder, an even weaker comfort than my words, but it was all I had.

“Yeah.” He took a shuddering breath, forcing a tiny smile when he looked back up at me. “I’ve gotta get back. Thanks, Detective Parker.”

Once he left, I took the pizza box back to the coffee table. It smelled amazing, but my appetite seemed to have left with Landon.

“Donovan...” Will leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, hands buried in his hair. “We’re going to find her, right?”

“One way or another, she’ll likely turn up, yes.” I slumped on the couch, turned slightly to face Will.

“But if she doesn’t come home by the end of the weekend, it’s not looking good, is it?”

I couldn’t give him hopeful lies, like I had with Landon. “No, it’s not.”

“I just keep hoping that, since Alex hasn’t seen her, that she’s okay somewhere. Is that messed up? I’m a detective. I trained for years for this, and now I’m sitting here hoping a psychic doesn’t end up doing my job for me.”

“Believe me, I get it, Will. This isn’t something they covered in any training manuals,” I agreed. “Listen, I know we never really talked much about what happened that day at the farm with Alex.” Beside me, he tensed up and for a moment, he didn’t even breathe.

“What about it?” he asked carefully, without looking at me.

“It was a fucked up night,” I said, and he snorted.

“That’s an understatement.”

“A lot of really weird crap went down, and I just wanted to make sure you’re okay, I guess.”

“It was crazy, but it is what it is. I’m fine.”

“That’s the biggest load of bullshit I’ve heard since Carly Pearson tried to convince us she was only holding that beer for a friend.” Honestly, no one had more audacity than a drunk 17-year-old trying to get out of trouble.

“Last I heard from her mom, she’s still grounded,” he said, and his smile probably would have convinced most people it was genuine, but not me.

“Good. Maybe she’ll learn a lesson. I’m not getting distracted, though. Tell me what’s wrong, Will. Please?” I tacked on when he got that stubborn look on his face, like he was going to shut down on me.

He grabbed a piece of pizza and took a bite, clearly stalling, but I could be as patient as he could be stubborn. He choked down another bite, then put the slice back in the box. When he finally spoke, his voice was smaller than I’d ever heard it and he curled in on himself, shoulders hunched.

“I fucked up and I don’t know how to fix it.”

That wasn’t even on the list of things I’d been anticipating. “What are you talking about? What do you think you fucked up?”

“You both almost died because of me. There’s no way to undo that, Donovan. I don’t

understand how you guys don't hate me."

"Will, I'll be honest here. I have no idea what you're talking about. You restrained Nate and kept him from hurting anyone."

"Alex or Thomas or whoever nearly got his hands on that gun because I fucked up and didn't secure it like I should have. What would have happened if you hadn't been able to hold him? We'd all be dead right now."

Everything finally clicked, and memories of that day rushed back. Alex, possessed by Thomas McAvell, holding the gun to his own temple. Alex fighting not to pull the trigger and me tackling him to the ground. The gun had fallen and I'd counted on my partner to secure it so I could focus on Alex. Except... Will hadn't, too stunned to react until I yelled at him.

"Fuck, Will," I breathed. "I'm not mad at you about that."

"How could you not be? It's basic training for every officer. If a weapon is loose, that's our top priority. But instead, I froze like an idiot and he almost got his hands on it again." He finally looked up at me, blue eyes dark with recrimination and guilt.

I shifted around on the couch until I faced him. "We walked into a situation that no amount of training could have prepared us for. You got the perpetrator restrained and still tried to help me get the gun from Alex. Yes, it should have been secured when it hit the ground, but all things considered... we did the best we could. They don't exactly cover 'dealing with ghost possession' in training. You grabbed it before anyone else got hurt, and that's what matters."

"If I'd been a second later—"

"But you weren't," I interrupted before he could go further down that road of self-

loathing. “You did your job. Every single one of us has fucked up at some point in our careers. What happened at the farm is barely a blip on the radar compared to some of the shit that I’ve seen.” I grasped his forearm. “Will, I’m not mad at you and I know Alex isn’t, either. You showed up, you handled the situation, and you’ve kept Alex’s secret. You’ve gone so far above and beyond the call of duty that I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to repay you.”

Shock, confusion, and doubt roiled in his eyes before finally melting away into relief so profound it almost hurt to see. “You’re seriously not upset with me?”

“It never even crossed my mind to be mad. I just wish I’d known what was bothering you sooner, so you didn’t have to suffer.”

“Suffering in silence is kind of a Dodd family trait,” he said, and finally I saw a glimpse of the old Will peeking through. “Camille and I have mastered it over the years.”

“I get it, but we’re partners. You can talk to me about this shit, okay?”

“Okay,” he agreed. He still didn’t look entirely convinced, but the haunted look in his eyes eased. It would take time, but that was one thing we had.

“Good. Now, let’s eat before it gets cold.”

Will grabbed his slice with more gusto and we settled in to watch the game. It’d been awhile since Alex and I spent an evening apart and while I didn’t want it to become a habit, spending time with Will wasn’t a hardship. Slowly but surely, my life here in Lowery’s Crossing was coming together.

Will stayed until well after midnight, both of us just trying to relax and let go of some of the tension we'd been carrying since Rebecca went missing. Clearing the air about the McAvell incident had gone a long way toward easing Will's mind, and when he left, I knew he'd be okay, at least for the night.

The smartest thing would be to go to bed, myself, and get some rest. We'd both be working tomorrow, searching for any leads and hoping Rebecca came home on her own. I'd already told Alex I might not come by that night and it'd been weeks since I slept in my own bed.

When it came to Alex, though, I didn't want to do the smart thing. I wanted to sleep in his arms, even if only for a few hours.

I didn't text him before I locked up and left my house. He might be awake, lost in a book, but it was more likely he was asleep and I didn't want to disturb him.

The drive to Alex's house was a short one and I parked in my usual spot, beside the little hatchback he rarely drove. Everything he needed lay within walking distance of his home, after all.

The house was quiet, lit only by the soft glow of the streetlights through the window. Louis, Alex's fat old ginger cat, blinked one golden eye open when he heard me walk in, but otherwise didn't move from his cozy perch on the back of the couch. He even deigned to let me scratch his head as I passed by, something he only did when he was well and truly comfortable. The two of us had a tentative truce, but he still made it a point to startle me at least once a week. For a cat his size, he could squeeze himself into some pretty small spaces if it meant he could scare me.

A whisper of sound caught my ear while I pet the cat and we both went still. His ears twitched toward the back of the house, where the bedroom was, but whatever he heard, it wasn't odd enough for him to go investigate. Maybe Alex was still awake?

I didn't call out, just made my way down the short hallway. Years of police training were hard to undo and after the incident with Nate Applebaum, I couldn't help but worry.

The bedroom door opened before I could reach it and Alex stepped out, fully dressed and pulling his thickest hoodie on over his head. He went stock-still when he saw me, clearly surprised to see me standing there.

It didn't take a genius to see the signs and realize what was happening. Even in the darkness, I could see that Alex had gone pale and his hands shook as he hurriedly tugged the hoodie down. His eyes kept darting to a spot just behind me, focusing on something in the empty space.

There was clearly a ghost standing just a few inches from me, and just as clearly, Alex had dressed to leave the house and help them. My phone sat in my pocket, with no missed calls or texts from him waiting for me, so he'd planned to go alone.

"Donovan..." His voice came out a cracked whisper, a plea, but I shook my head.

"Don't. I'm going with you. It's cold out, so grab your jacket."

I went back into the living room to wait by the door, anger and anxiety roiling inside me. Were we about to find out what had happened to Rebecca Perez? As much as I wanted to find her, I didn't want it to be like this. Who else could it be, though? This was a small town. Unusual deaths were pretty rare.

I had to focus on the mystery at hand or I knew I'd lose myself to my anger. Alex had promised, he'd promised, that he'd never go out after a ghost alone again. He had me, Raina, Camille, and Will all saved as his emergency contacts for this very moment, but I knew just as surely as I knew my own name that he hadn't called any of them, either. If I hadn't missed him enough to come back tonight, would I have

ever known about this?

“Donovan,” he whispered again, closer now, and I turned to see him standing behind me, wearing his thick winter coat. “I have to help her.”

“I know. Let’s go.”

“It’s late and you have to work in a few hours. You don’t have to come with me. I can handle it.”

He was testing me, even if he wasn’t aware of what he was doing. No matter how many times I’d vowed to come with him, this would be the first time I’d faced the reality of it. The only other time I’d seen him deal with a ghost had been at the McAvell farm, when he’d been kidnapped, and we’d been swept into the chaos.

As angry and frustrated as I was with him at the moment, I understood. I could tell him I’d be there until I was blue in the face, but sometimes, words weren’t enough. How many times had his own family failed him when he’d asked for help? How many hours had he spent alone in a psychiatric ward as a terrified twelve-year-old, trying to tell the truth and being told he was sick? That he was crazy? That kind of wound couldn’t be healed with vague promises.

“I’m not even going to dignify that with an argument. I’m coming with you. End of story.”

The night air held a crisp chill to it, winter still clinging to the mountains, no matter what the calendar said, bringing with it an icy breeze. The sky remained clear, though, and an endless array of stars spanned overhead, sparkling in the midnight darkness. Lowery’s Crossing lay silent around us, the peace of the night undisturbed.

“What now?” I asked when he hesitated on his front porch.

“Now we follow her.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. ‘Her’, he’d said. We had to follow ‘her’.

Please don’t let it be Rebecca .

“I know. I’m coming,” he whispered to whoever stood in the emptiness beside him, and we started walking. Neither of us spoke, keeping the delicate truce between us. The inevitable argument would have to wait until we dealt with this.

We walked in silence, heading toward the east end of Lowery’s Crossing. Alex and I had walked this town end to end together on our date nights, talking and getting to know each other. It had always been one of my favorite ways to spend time, just the two of us and the town we both loved.

Now the darkness slid between us, burrowing into the cracks I’d never known lay hidden in our foundation. The silence that was usually so comfortable was now riddled with tension, guilt and anger overriding the calm security we’d wrapped around ourselves.

Frustration hounded my every step, my thoughts running in circles, asking why . Why hadn’t Alex called me? Why had he broken his promise? Why didn’t he trust me? Corraling those words and holding them back took almost more willpower than I possessed, but they had to wait until we were done here.

“Do you know who it is that we’re following?” I asked after a few blocks and he stumbled, like he’d forgotten he wasn’t alone.

“She looks familiar, but I can’t remember her name. She hasn’t said anything except asking me to help her. I don’t think it’s fully sunk in for her that she’s...” He didn’t finish the sentence, glancing at the empty air ahead of him.

“It’s okay. I get it,” I said, hating the tiny surge of relief that washed through me. I’d talked about the case with Alex and showed him Rebecca’s missing persons flyer and he’d told me he knew the family. Someone in our town was dead, but it wasn’t her.

Just like every town, there was a rougher side to Lowery’s Crossing. The houses here showed more signs of neglect, with overgrown yards and sagging fences. Here and there, a few determined people kept immaculate houses, but that only made them stand out like a sore thumb.

The home Alex took us to was one of those. Whoever lived here had clearly tried to make this place cheerful, with pretty floral designs painted on her wooden porch. Flower beds sat dormant along the front, but once spring finally hit, they would likely be a riot of color. Lacy curtains hung in the windows and sparkling wind chimes danced in the night breeze, tinkling and spinning. Children’s toys were scattered across the deck, protected from the elements by the simple metal roof overhead.

The sight of those toys gave me pause, my heart sinking.

“It’s not a child, is it?”

“No. I remember her now. It’s Jaime Smalls.”

No wonder this place looked so familiar. I knew Jaime. She’d been one of the first arrests I’d made as a new member of the LCPD, ending up in cuffs for public intoxication. If my memory was right, she’d done court-ordered rehab and seemed to have turned her life around. I’d seen her waiting tables at one of the restaurants on Broad Street, looking happy and healthy.

“This is where she lived,” Alex murmured.

“She still hasn’t said anything?”

Alex shook his head and he looked so tired that I wanted nothing more than to call this off and take him back home, where I could put him to bed and hold him until the cold went away. As mad as I was, I hated seeing him like this. It reminded me too much of the day he'd found Andre Marcel's body and he'd ended up in the hospital, sick and freezing.

Alex shivered, staring up at the house. "She's scared."

"We have to keep walking, maybe look for a back entrance. If someone else is in there, they'll see us and the last thing we need is a fight." I tried to urge him on, but Alex planted his feet. "Alex, please."

"She wouldn't bring me here if it wasn't safe," he insisted.

"We can't know that for sure. Please. We'll go further down the block and call the police." I cursed myself for not thinking to grab my holster out of the lockbox in my car. I hadn't expected to need it when going into my boyfriend's house.

Still, he didn't move. "She's scared, Donovan. She's running out of strength, but she doesn't want to let go until she knows she's been found. I can't leave her."

Every instinct I possessed, both as a detective and as just a cautious person, insisted that we don't go into that house. We were unarmed, no one knew where we were, and anybody could be in there. Could I really take the word of a dead person who I couldn't see? Try as I might, I couldn't pick up even the tiniest flicker of the woman who supposedly stood three feet in front of us.

"Alex..."

"It's fine. I'll go by myself," he snapped and actually made it to the door before I caught up to him. The anger in his voice caught me by surprise, even though it

probably shouldn't have, but there was no way in Hell I was letting him go in there alone.

Alex went to one of the chimes hanging on the porch, reaching into the thin metal tube and pulling out a hidden key. Not a bad hiding spot and one he wouldn't have been able to find so easily without Jaime's guidance.

"Alex, wait."

He paused on the front step, key in the lock, but didn't look back at me. "I'm going to help her."

"I know. I'd feel better if I went first, but I'm more worried about those." Finally, Alex glanced at me and I nodded toward the toys on the porch. "Are her kids in there?"

Alex paled, the connotations of those toys finally sinking in. He looked to his right, where I assumed she stood. "Jaime? Are Misty and Levi inside?" He waited a moment, then closed his eyes, pain written all over his face.

"They are, aren't they?" I asked, and he nodded. This made things so much more complicated.

"Levi is fourteen," he whispered. "She got pregnant our senior year. Misty is only three."

"We can't just go walking in there. If we wake up the kids, we don't have a good explanation for why we're here. If he calls 911, we're fucked."

"If you're that worried about getting in trouble at work, you could have just stayed in bed," he hissed, and I'd never heard such anger in Alex's voice. Not directed at me,

anyway. “She needs me, Donovan. She doesn’t want her kids to find her like this, and I’m not going to let her down. I’d rather scare them for a second than let them live with the trauma of finding their mother dead.”

“I’m not saying we won’t help her, just that we need to think about this and come up with a plan.”

“I have a plan. I’m going to help her.”

Before I could stop him, Alex had the door unlocked and he was past the threshold. I could either stand out here spinning my wheels or follow him inside, protecting him like I’d promised I would.

I made sure to close the door behind me when I stepped inside.

Even in the darkness, Jaime’s touch could be seen in the small home. Bright paintings hung on the walls and soft blankets covered the worn couch, adding a touch of warmth to the space. Shelves dotted the walls between paintings and I could just make out the shapes of crystals and little statues. A tiny child-size table sat tucked against the half-wall separating the kitchen from the living room, covered in paper and crayons. The kitchen itself was neat and organized, with only a few dishes in the sink.

From the door, a small hallway went right, leading to three doors. One stood open and I could make out hints of a bathroom. The other two were closed. One had a giant needlepoint sunflower hanging from it, while the other held a poster of some band I didn’t recognize. Those had to be Levi and Misty’s bedrooms.

Alex silently made his way left, across the living room, to another small hallway, and I followed. There were only two doors down this way, one of which was another bathroom. The door at the end was also closed, displaying the delicate ivy painted on

its face. He didn't wait for me to catch up, just opened the door and slipped inside, leaving me with no choice but to do the same.

The smell hit me the second I stepped into the small bedroom. During my years working up the ranks in Chicago, I'd seen my share of drug overdoses. Death is never pretty, but overdoses were always especially ugly. Jaime Smalls was no exception. Her final moments had been frantic and messy and I could only hope whatever drugs she'd taken dulled the pain of her passing.

"I won't, I promise," Alex murmured. He didn't look at the bed where Jaime had breathed her last. Instead, he addressed her ghost, who must have been standing near the window. "They'll be alright." He paused again, then smiled, so sad it broke my heart. "I don't know what comes next, but I think it will be beautiful."

For a moment, I could have sworn I saw a faint pulse of light, just a brief flicker, then Alex turned back to the bed. He'd gone pale and there was a faint blue cast to his lips that I didn't like. As angry as I was, my worry for him came first. When I reached for him, though, he neatly sidestepped me to go to the nightstand.

"Don't touch anything," I warned when he reached for the drawer beneath it. "If this gets investigated, we don't want your fingerprints anywhere on the house."

"Too late for that." He pulled open the drawer anyway, carefully withdrawing an envelope buried inside. "She wanted to make sure her dad got this letter." Alex put the envelope on top of the stand and up close, I saw an address written in neat cursive. Creases marred the letter, the ink faded, as though it'd been handled over and over. "Besides, you and Will would be the ones investigating. Are you going to arrest me?"

The sarcasm in his words reignited my banked anger, battling with my concern for him.

“Of course not, but any officer can look at evidence. What do you think will happen if someone gets bored and looks through the files and sees that I ignored my boyfriend’s prints at a scene he shouldn’t have been at?” I shot back, barely remembering to keep my voice down. The kids’ rooms were on the other side of the house, but the walls were thin.

“I told her I’d make sure it got to her dad and I am. Would you rather I mail it and have people wondering how she sent a letter after she died?”

A truck rumbled to life, breaking the tense silence that followed. Now wasn’t the time to fight about this.

“We’ll talk about this later. We need to get out of here before someone finds us.”

“Fine, but we’re only going outside. I promised her I wouldn’t let her kids be the ones to find her like this.” Alex finally peeked at the bed, eyes shuttering with grief. “She’s my age. We went to school together.” The words were little more than a whisper. Before I could respond, he walked out, leaving me with no choice but to follow, carefully closing the door behind me.

All thoughts of our argument fled when I walked into the living area just behind Alex and found a teenage boy standing there, fear in his eyes and a rifle in his hands.

“Who the hell are you? What did you do to my mom?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

Chapter 6

Donovan

This had to be Levi, Jaime's son. His voice cracked with fear and his hands shook, but he didn't lower the gun and his finger hovered dangerously close to the trigger.

"My name is Donovan," I replied, my hands in front of me. "We didn't hurt your mom."

"Then what are you doing here? And don't try anything stupid. I already called the police."

He was a terrible liar, which was the only thing keeping me from grabbing Alex and making a run for it. Fuck. This entire night was turning into a massive disaster.

"Levi, it's Alex Copeland," Alex said softly, stepping forward just enough to let the light from the window hit his face. "You guys used to come into my bookstore a lot, remember?"

Levi hesitated, the muzzle of the rifle drooping a little when he recognized Alex. "What are you doing here?" he repeated, sounding close to tears.

"It's going to sound crazy, but I promise we didn't hurt your mom." Alex took another step forward and my heart leaped into my throat, every instinct screaming that I needed to protect him, to get him away from the clear danger.

“Is it—” Levi’s voice broke and a stifled sob escaped. “The guys at school said you found that dead body back in December. Is that what you do? Is... is that why you’re here?”

Please, just lie to him, Alex. Come up with something. Please.

Alex nodded and it took everything I had not to groan.

“Is my mom dead?”

“I’m sorry, Levi,” Alex whispered. Levi dropped the rifle, his shoulders curling in, his skinny arms wrapping around himself as though he could hold in the pain.

I couldn’t stand there and do nothing. Pausing only to nudge the gun out of arm’s reach with my foot, I went to Levi and carefully wrapped my arm around his shoulder, leaving him plenty of room to get free if he wanted. Instead, he collapsed into me, his whole body shaking as he cried, desperately trying to hold back his sobs. Belatedly, I remembered his sister still slept in the other room. This teenage boy was trying to contain his cries so it didn’t spill over and wake her.

I held Levi through the storm of his grief, only releasing him when he stepped away. Tears mottled his face, his eyes red-rimmed and raw, but he pulled himself together in a way most people three times his age would envy.

“What do I do now?” he whispered, voice broken and rough, but steady.

“If people know we were here, they’re going to ask questions,” Alex said softly. “No one knows about me. I hate to ask you to do this, but do you think you can wait until we leave, then call 911?”

Levi nodded, his breath shuddering as he fought back tears. “I-I had a feeling,” he

admitted, eyes dropping to the ground. “She always acted different when she started using again.” The words were strained, a terrible truth he hated to reveal, but a truth nonetheless. “She’s a good mom,” he added immediately. “She tried so hard...”

“Do you two have somewhere to go? Do you have any family nearby?” I didn’t know the families of Lowery’s Crossing like Alex did, not yet.

“My aunt. I’ll call her after,” he whispered.

“I don’t want to leave you, but we have to go,” Alex said, wincing, but Levi nodded his understanding.

“I just...” He paused, blinking back more tears. “When did you get here? Was she alone?”

“We were with her after. She stayed until she was sure you and your sister would be taken care of.” Alex paused, waiting until Levi looked up at him to continue. “Your mom didn’t want to leave you. She didn’t mean for this to happen, but even in the end, she wanted to protect you. She kept telling me how much she loved you two. Don’t ever forget that, okay? She loved you so much.”

His words nearly crushed me, but Levi held himself together, managing a tight nod. Anything more and I knew his facade would shatter, leaving him in broken pieces on the floor.

“Don’t go into her bedroom, Levi,” I said, gently clasping his shoulder. “As soon as that front door closes behind us, call 911 and your aunt. Let them take care of her. You focus on yourself and your sister.”

Leaving Levi Smalls standing alone and grieving in the middle of his living room while his mother’s body lay only feet away went against everything in me, but what

choice did I have? I wanted to protect him, but I also needed to protect Alex. Maybe it made me a terrible person, and it certainly felt that way, but I did just that, escorting Alex out the front door. He stopped just long enough to return the extra key, then we were gone, ducking between two neighboring houses.

By unspoken agreement, we lingered around the block until we heard sirens. If I remembered the schedule right, Ginny Lake was on duty tonight, so she'd be arriving alongside the paramedics. Will and I shouldn't be needed for this one, which meant I could get Alex home.

"We'll take the side roads," Alex muttered. He took off walking before I could reply, leaving me jogging to catch up. The sickly yellow glow of the streetlights washed out what little color remained in his face, but I could tell Alex was pale. He kept his eyes straight ahead, a clear indication that he didn't want to talk. Since I didn't know what to say, I accepted it and walked in silence. For now. It gave me the time I needed to organize my thoughts, but did nothing to cool my anger.

I could understand where Alex was coming from, to a degree. He knew far more about this than I did, no question, and if I were in his shoes, I'd be pissed at anyone trying to tell me how to do my job. On the other hand... he'd promised me that he'd never go out alone and he'd attempted to break that promise the very first time it happened.

That made me pause, missing a step.

Was this the very first time? I wracked my brain, going through the cases I'd worked since Alex's run-in at the park. None of them fit and, to the best of my knowledge, nothing similar had come through in the last few months. That should have been a relief, but having to wonder if my boyfriend had lied to me about this just made everything that much worse.

The walk home didn't take long, but with nothing but quiet to fill the time, my anger simmered, nearly reaching the boiling point by the time we reached Alex's front door. His hands shook when he unlocked it and where usually I'd step in, now I waited, letting him get the door open. A wave of cold air followed us inside, sending Louis from his perch on the couch to the bedroom with all the righteous indignation of an inconvenienced cat.

"You have to get ready for work soon, right?" Alex didn't look at me when he spoke, keeping his back turned and shrugging out of his jacket. He couldn't have made it any clearer that he wanted to avoid the conversation we needed to have. Unfortunately for him, I was nothing if not stubborn. I flipped on the overhead light, breaking up the darkness of the witching hour.

"It's not even four in the morning. I think I can manage it in five hours."

"In that case, I'm going back to bed."

I stepped around him, cutting off his escape route and leaving us face to face. Near enough, at least, considering he refused to look me in the eye.

"Alex, we need to talk."

"We don't, though." He winced and now that I could properly see him, I could see I was right about the blue cast to his lips.

I muttered a curse, rubbing my hands over my face. "Come on, you need to warm up."

"Do we need to talk or warm up? Make up your mind," he snipped, but I refused to let him distract me. Taking his hand, I guided him to the couch. I settled in with my back against the arm and drew him into my lap, his body cradled between my thighs.

He didn't fight, but he didn't help me, either. He kept a throw blanket on the back of the couch, which usually served as a cat bed, but now I wrapped it tight around Alex in a blanket burrito.

"Once you're warm, we'll talk." As badly as I wanted to clear the air between us, Alex's safety came first. "How are you feeling? Do we need to go to the hospital?"

For a moment, I didn't think he was going to answer me, but he finally shook his head. "It's not bad this time. She barely drew anything from me and I kind of had an idea of what we were walking into, so it wasn't as shocking as..."

Months later, Alex still struggled to talk about what he'd seen the night he found Andre Marcel. Not that I blamed him. Even after years spent working homicides in Chicago, I'd never become desensitized to the violence humans could inflict on each other.

"I guess that's the best-case scenario, given the circumstances." I kept my arms around him just in case, though. I'd carry the memory of Alex in that hospital bed, pale as death and freezing cold, for the rest of my life. No matter how tense things were between us, I would never let him get that bad ever again.

"The worst part was the kids." He said it so quietly I almost didn't hear him at first. "There's never been other people there before. He was just a kid, and I left him there with his dead mom so I could protect myself. What kind of person does that make me?"

I tightened my hold on him, my concern rapidly overriding my anger. "One who's used to having to hide."

"That doesn't make it any better. What if it'd been Misty who woke up and not Levi? I'd have left a toddler all alone just to keep myself from getting arrested. You know

who does things like that? Monsters.”

“You are not a monster, Alex,” I said sternly. “You wouldn’t have left her if that’d been the case. I know you. And you wouldn’t have been arrested. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

He shifted in my arms, pulling away enough to turn and face me. “How many dead bodies do I have to turn up with before Chief Cornell decides it can’t be a coincidence anymore? She knows about Mrs. Kostek and... and Andre.” He took a quick, stuttering breath. “She knows about Nina, too. You were suspicious of me at first and you were already dating me. How much longer can I do this without getting caught? Part of the reason I never went back to Indianapolis after I left was because I’m already on the radar there after finding Nina. I called in three when I was in college, so now I’m scared to ever go near Seattle again. Am I going to have to leave Lowery’s Crossing, too? Is this stupid curse that I never even asked for going to force me to give up everything again?”

Alex was shaking by the time he fell silent, tears in his eyes and genuine fear in his voice. Any lingering anger I held disappeared in the face of his distress.

“You’re not leaving. This place is your home.” I brushed a single tear from his cheek before it could fall, letting my hand linger on his chilled skin.

“I might not have a choice. I can’t ignore them forever, Donovan. Even if I learn to control it, I’ll still eventually get caught again. Every day, part of me is scared that one of your coworkers is going to show up at the bookstore and take me in again. I can’t live like this forever. It’s too hard.” Alex’s voice broke and he blinked back a fresh round of tears.

How could I not have known he was this scared? There were days I wondered when the chief was going to sit me down and ask more questions about Alex, but so far,

she'd let it be. How had it never crossed my mind that Alex would be even more worried about that than I was?

“You're right. It's hard, and it's not fair to you,” I agreed softly. The spark of an idea flickered, but I got the feeling Alex wouldn't like it at first. There were only two ways out of this situation, though, and I'd be damned if he left his home. “Maybe there's another way.”

He must have heard something in my tone because he extricated himself from my hold and settled on the other end of the couch, facing me. “Like what?”

“Maybe we could talk to Chief Cornell and tell her the truth?”

Silence met my words. Alex blinked once, twice, before he dropped his shoulders and let out a slow sigh.

“So, my options are to leave town or to tell the truth and have everyone in town think I'm insane?”

“We don't have to tell the whole town,” I said, shaking my head. At least he wasn't calling me an idiot yet. “Just the chief. She already knows something strange is going on. Why not give her the rest of the information? That way, you can keep doing what you do without worrying about hiding.”

“You say that like she's going to believe me. Why the hell would she think that me talking to ghosts makes more sense than me being a secret serial killer or something?”

“I believed you,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, because we were dating . You knew me well enough to know the truth.”

“So does she, though. You said you’ve known her since you were a kid, right? No one in this town would think you hurt anyone, Alex. Even when word got out about what happened back in December, no one thought you’d done anything.”

“This is different!” Alex pushed himself to his feet, some of the anger I’d expected earlier finally breaking free. “It’s one thing for them to believe I wouldn’t hurt anyone. It’s something else entirely for someone who’s basically a stranger to believe I’m a fucking psychic!”

I got up, as well, putting us on a more even keel. “Bev Cornell is a smart woman. Give her some credit. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You’re joking, right?” He crossed his arms over his chest. “The worst thing that could happen is I tell her the truth, she decides I’m clearly unwell and a menace to myself and to others, and she has me locked up in a psych ward to make sure I can’t hurt anyone.”

“That’s not going to happen. She wouldn’t do that.” I wouldn’t let her.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought about my mom and look where that got me.” The raw pain in his voice broke me, but Alex stepped away when I reached for him.

“Alex... I won’t let that happen. You’re not going to get locked up anywhere. I’m just trying to help you.”

“By asking me to put my faith in strangers when my own family turned on me for telling the truth? No, thank you,” he scoffed.

“This time is different,” I insisted. “Will and I know the truth. So do Camille and Raina. None of us thought for one second that you were lying. Will and I can tell her what we saw that day, too, and she knows about the people you found that died of

natural causes, in ways that you couldn't possibly have affected. She'll believe you."

Alex looked away, his knuckles going white where he gripped the sleeves of his shirt. He was wavering, so I pushed the slight advantage I'd gained.

"Just think of what that would be like. You could do what needed to be done and one of us would be with you the whole time. We'd get there and Will or I can deal with the body without you ever having to see it. No more anonymous 911 calls, no more having to hide and run all the time. If the chief knew the truth, it could even help us get justice for some of them. We could take what they tell you and actually act on it."

I should have stopped there. Looking back, I wish I had, but now I was caught up in the idea, thinking of the possibilities. "If the truth is out, just think of the ways we could use what you can do. Every detective in the world wishes we could just talk to the victims and get answers. They'd kill to have a tool like that in the arsenal."

It was exactly the wrong thing to say. The faint light of hope in Alex's eyes sputtered and went dark. I wanted to call the words back, to shut my brain down before it got carried away and said those damning words, but it was too late.

"So that's it?" he asked quietly, his voice completely devoid of emotion. He got to his feet and I scrambled to follow, but he took a step away from me. "You want me to tell the truth so you guys can exploit my power to help yourselves. Awesome."

"That's not what I meant. Yeah, it'd be nice to be able to help people, but that's not—"

"No." Alex cut me off neatly, shaking his head. "No, I really don't want to hear whatever justification you're going to try to come up with."

"Alex, please." I held out my hand again and again, he stepped away from me.

“I think you need to leave.”

My blood ran cold. “What?”

“I think you need to leave,” he repeated. “Go home, Donovan.”

“Will you at least let me explain?” I wasn’t above pleading, but I’d crossed the line and we both knew it.

“Not right now, no. I need you to leave. We obviously have different priorities, and I’m going to need some time to figure out what that means for us.”

“Alex...”

“Go. Home.”

Before I could say another word, Alex turned on his heel and walked away. A moment later I heard his bedroom door shut, followed by the faint click of the lock engaging, leaving me standing in the middle of the living room, alone.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

Chapter 7

Alex

For the first time in longer than I can remember, I didn't go to Buns 'n' Roses before work. I didn't put it past Donovan to wait there for me, even if it made him late to work. Eventually, we would have to talk, but right now I couldn't handle it. His words ran in circles in my head, taunting me while I walked to work, purposely taking the long way to avoid walking past the coffee shop and the police station. It meant going several blocks out of my way, but it gave me time to think. Too much time, probably.

I'd started all of this by breaking my promise to him, true. I could admit that I'd fucked up, and I could also admit that, despite the tension, it'd been amazing to have someone else there with me while I helped Jaime move on. What would I have done if I'd had to deal with Levi Smalls alone? Just because I'd once been a traumatized child, that didn't mean I knew how to comfort one. Case in point: I was still a mess almost twenty years later.

Arguing with Donovan about how to approach the situation may not have been ideal, but we could have worked past that eventually. He'd only been looking out for my safety and in his place, I probably would have freaked out, too. We would have talked it out afterward and gone to bed for a nap, curled up in each other's arms.

Instead, I was walking to work alone in the frigid cold of a Colorado spring morning, trying to keep the cracks in my heart from shattering completely.

They'd kill to have a tool like that in the arsenal.

As if this cursed ability I had was the same as keeping a bloodhound on the roster. Oh no, someone died. Time to wind up the psychic and send him toddling out to get answers.

Hearing that from anyone else would have just pissed me off. But for Donovan to say it... to hear myself reduced down to just a tool by the man I loved...

That hurt. The words were thorns, digging into my heart and piercing every protective layer I had left. I'd let Donovan through my walls, let him get close, and now I'd been brought low, attacked from within by one of the few people I trusted. Odysseus himself couldn't have done it better.

Walking into A Likely Story always felt like being wrapped up in a hug from Aunt Lizzie, and today was no exception. The soft stillness of her shop welcomed me when I let myself in and I took a moment to just breathe. I let myself pretend for a moment that she was there and I'd find her in her office, relaxed in the comfortable leather chair I'd never replaced. She'd hold me close while I poured my heart out, then comfort me and somehow come up with the perfect solution, because Aunt Lizzie always seemed to have all the answers.

Except Lizzie was gone, had been for almost seven years, and when I stepped into the office, the chair was empty and I was alone.

The quiet haunted my every move as I went through the motions of paperwork, ordering, and getting the bookstore ready for the day. It wrapped around me, dulling the sharp edges of my emotions, leaving me in a fog of apathy. This was easier. One step at a time. Open the store, work, close the store, go home. Get through the day and then I could go home and lose my shit in private.

It worked, too.

It worked for exactly one hour and eleven minutes.

Then the front door of A Likely Story flew open and Raina walked in, her dark curls tangled from the wind and a flush to her cheeks. She held a cup in one hand, a bag in the other, but the look on her face told me I wouldn't be getting either until we'd had words. I should have expected it, really, but I'd been so focused on Donovan that I forgot how persistent my best friend was.

"Good morning," I said, trying and failing to muster a fake smile. Probably for the best. She would have seen right through it, anyway.

"Good morning. I love you. We're sorting this out." She dropped the bag on the counter without pausing, coming around and grabbing what I'd come to think of as her stool. She pointed to my chair. "Sit. Talk."

"Woof," I muttered, earning me a glare until I did as she'd ordered. "What do you want, Raina?" It came out more snide than I'd meant it, some of my frustration leaking out.

"First of all, I want you to lose the attitude." Her eyebrow arched at my tone.

"You're the one who came in here barking orders, so maybe you need to lose your attitude," I reminded her sharply. I don't know why I was trying to pick a fight with my best friend, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

Raina pressed her lips together and took a slow breath, visibly trying to calm herself before she lost her temper. It was the smart thing to do, but exactly the opposite of what I apparently wanted right now.

“If you’re here to yell at me, you can leave,” I went on when she didn’t speak right away. “I’m really not in the mood to deal with anymore bullshit this morning, especially from you.”

“Alex... don’t,” she warned, locking eyes with me. “I am your best friend and I love you. I’m sorry I came in and started bossing you around. Let’s start over.”

“Wow, did that physically hurt you to apologize like that?” Stop it, stop it, Alex, she’s your best friend, stop lashing out at her! “Maybe I don’t feel like talking to anyone. You should leave.” Leave like I made Donovan leave. Like everyone always leaves.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

It was hard to keep up my anger in the face of her calm tone, but I did my best.

“I’m serious, Raina. I don’t want to talk to you or to anyone right now, okay? Just leave.”

“Look, I’m not going to force you to talk.” She slid the bag and the cup of coffee over to me, a peace offering if ever I saw one. “But I’m not leaving.”

“It’s going to be awkward to sit here and eat while you’re watching me,” I grumbled, but the smell of bacon was too alluring to resist, my stomach reminding me quite forcefully that I hadn’t eaten today. Opening the bag, I found two of Camille’s mini quiches inside, one bacon, one that looked like chorizo and peppers. “I thought Camille took these off the menu until summer?”

“She did. She made a small batch so you could have them today.”

Great. Now I was officially the biggest jerk on the planet. The lingering remnants of

my anger, already weakened in the face of Raina's apology, now flickered and died, leaving me lost in that sea of apathy.

"Will you tell her I appreciate it?" I hated how small I sounded.

"Yeah, no problem," she murmured, then nodded toward the coffee cup. "I made you a brown sugar cinnamon mocha. I figured it was too cold for anything iced."

"Thank you. You're a good friend." That's what I meant to say. Instead, what came out was: "Donovan and I got into a fight this morning and he said something really shitty and I told him to leave and now I don't know what to do because he really fucking hurt me and I don't know how to not be mad at him for it even though I love him."

Tears stung my eyes by the time I paused for a breath, my hands shaking and my heart hurting all over again. Raina blinked, absorbing my barrage of words. The moment it sunk in, she slid off her stool, closed the distance between us in one step, and silently pulled me into her arms, hugging me as tightly as she could. The warm scent of coffee, vanilla, and cinnamon wrapped around me, and the second my head hit her shoulder, I lost it.

The grief for Jaime, the agony of leaving Levi there, the deep hurt of Donovan's words, all of it came rushing out in a torrent of tears. The harder I tried to pull it back, the worse it got, leaving me a sobbing mess. Raina held me through it without a word, letting me pour it out until I could finally breathe again, my throat burning and my eyes swollen.

"It's going to be okay, Alex," she whispered in my ear, rubbing my back as she held me.

"I hate this." It sounded like I'd gargled broken glass, my words rasping and raw.

“This curse takes everything away from me.”

The bell over the door jingled before Raina could speak. The one day I have an emotional breakdown would be the day I got an early Saturday morning customer, which almost never happened. Of course.

“Go to the bathroom, get a drink of water, and put some cold paper towels on your eyes. I’ll take care of him,” Raina promised, urging me away from the counter. I didn’t fight her. I needed the time and I trusted her.

I physically flinched from the reflection I saw looking back at me in that bathroom mirror, grateful again that Raina had stepped in. Except for the redness around my eyes, my face had gone completely pale. My green eyes were bloodshot and swollen, my hair a mess where it’d lain mussed underneath my hat. I’d never fixed it after getting into the shop.

I kept myself focused on pulling it together, doing exactly as Raina suggested and not letting myself think of anything but the next step. Cup my hands under the faucet to get a drink and soothe my throat. Wet a paper towel with cold water and lay it over my eyes to take down some of the swelling. Breathe. In for four, hold for four, out for four. Breathe again, then again, until my heart slowed to a steady pace. Remove the paper towels, wash my face, take another breath, then back out to face the world.

By the time I finished, the customer was gone and Raina had flipped the sign on the door to ‘Closed’. There was a note alongside it, but I couldn’t read it from here.

“This is going to take a minute, so I bought us some time,” she said when she saw me return. She had the bag and cup in her hands again and nodded toward one of the cozy loveseats scattered in the reading area.

“Don’t you need to get back to work, though?” I didn’t want her to leave, but I had to

ask.

Raina shook her head. “I called Camille already. Rachel and Ashley have the front covered and she can back them up if needed. She ordered me to stay with you.”

“I don’t deserve you guys,” I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment when I felt the too-familiar sting of tears again. A soft touch to my elbow helped me ground myself and I allowed Raina to guide me over to the seat, settling in close to the middle with her pressed along my side.

“Here. Eat and get a little caffeine in your system, then tell me what happened and we’ll see what we can do to fix it, okay?”

My appetite had fled in the face of my tears and now the thought of food made me gag, so I reached for the coffee. It’d cooled slightly, but the taste of brown sugar and cinnamon warmed me from the inside out, loosening the knot in my chest enough for me to speak. Leaning against my best friend for support, coffee cradled in my hands, I told her everything, starting with Jaime’s ghost and my broken promise and ending with Donovan’s damning words.

She didn’t interrupt, though once or twice I could tell it was killing her not to say something. When I finally finished, somehow without becoming a blubbing mess again, she took a moment to compose her thoughts before she spoke.

“Well, that explains why Donovan came in this morning looking like absolute crap,” she said. “So, you both fucked up and now you don’t know how to work it out, is what I’m gathering.”

“I know I should have called someone, but I’ve gone out alone every other time I’ve dealt with this and been fine. Donovan went out with me one time and he’s already talking about exploiting this ability.”

“From what you told me, it doesn’t sound like he planned to do that. I can’t imagine him trying to force you to do anything you didn’t want to. Besides, can you really look me in the eye and tell me that the same Donovan Parker who openly worships the ground you walk on would really do something like that?”

“Raina, he literally said other cops would kill to have a tool like me in their arsenal.” Even repeating the words hurt, every syllable a jagged knife to the stomach.

She winced. “Yeah, that was a really terrible choice of words,” she admitted. “That’s one that you’ll have to talk about with him, but seriously, it’s hard to imagine him doing that. I was with him in the hospital after what happened with Nate, remember? I’ve never seen anyone so scared in my life. He didn’t leave your side the entire time.” She paused, but the silence felt loaded, like she wanted to keep going but was stopping herself. It wasn’t too hard to figure out what she wasn’t saying.

“You think he’s right, don’t you?”

“Not about you being some kind of psychic bloodhound for the cops, no. Absolutely not,” she said, shaking her head. “But... maybe working with the police wouldn’t be the worst idea.”

“I can honestly say I never thought I’d hear you say those words of your own free will.” I sipped at my coffee, but this time it couldn’t soothe the uneasiness building beneath my skin.

“Trust me, I never imagined I’d say that, either. I know that maybe it’s not the worst idea, though, and I love you enough to put aside my personal feelings if it’s what’s best for you. I was in that hospital room, too, and if there’s anything that can keep it from happening again, I’m all in.”

“What difference would it make? I’m the one who has to talk to them and help them

do whatever needs done. That pain doesn't go away just because I can call the police directly instead of anonymously."

"Maybe not, but now you have us to help with that pain," she murmured, resting her hand on my knee. "If you take Donovan or another cop with you, that means you never have to see the actual bodies again. You said that was the worst part and that's why you reacted so badly to Andre Marcel. Wouldn't it be easier if you could get most of the way there, help the ghost, then let the people who are actually paid to deal with bodies do the rest?"

It was essentially what Donovan had said, but without the heat of an argument warping the words in my mind. I hated how logical she made it sound, but only because I felt stupid for not realizing it earlier.

"As my best friend, aren't you supposed to be on my side in a fight?" I grumbled instead of answering.

"As your best friend, I'm supposed to look out for you, and in this instance, that means pointing out that Donovan's idea is a good one," she said with a shrug. "Will you at least think about it?"

"Yeah, fine, I'll think about it." Even I wasn't stubborn enough to shoot down a good idea just because it made me wrong. Mostly, at least. I'd still probably drag my feet for a few days before admitting defeat.

"Good." Careful not to knock the cup out of my hands, she gave me a quick hug. "Now. Let's circle back to you going out on your own, because I distinctly recall that you promised you'd never do that again."

Of course she'd remember that. I'd hoped it would be forgotten in light of everything else, but I really should've known better.

“I didn’t want to bother anyone. Donovan and Will have been working nonstop trying to find Rebecca Perez, and it was almost time for you and Camille to get up for work, so I didn’t want to make you late if it took awhile.”

“Every single one of us knew what we were agreeing to when we said we’d go with you,” Raina said sternly. “Losing an hour or two of sleep wouldn’t have killed me and neither would getting to work late. I mostly go in that early to keep Cami company while she bakes. She would’ve been fine alone for one morning.”

“Maybe, but... it’s my problem, not anyone else’s. Why should I make you guys suffer and lose sleep when I can handle it on my own? How many times will you guys get a late night call and have to come out in the cold or the rain before you get sick of it? How long would it take for you to start resenting what I can do?”

How long would it take for you to start resenting me? I didn’t say those words out loud, but they were there, echoing in the back of my mind.

“Alex. There is nothing on this planet that could make me resent you, especially for something you can’t control.” Raina said each word slow and clear, her dark eyes locked with mine. “You could call me every single night, rain or shine, and I would never get upset with you.”

“That’s easy to say now, but it’s not always a quick walk out to the park and back,” I protested, but it was weak. “With... what happened in December, I walked all the way out to Silver Lake and through the woods in the freezing cold. It took over an hour. How can I ask someone to go through that with me?”

“How can you ask any of us to make you go through that alone?” she countered immediately. “Look, I’m going to say something you’re not going to like, but as your friend, I think I have to.”

“That doesn’t sound very promising.”

Raina took the nearly empty paper cup from me and grasped both my hands in hers. “Me and Camille and Donovan and Will... we are your family. We love you and I need you to understand that we are not your parents.”

I tried to jerk my hands back, but she held on tight, never breaking eye contact with me.

“I know that,” I protested. Something shuddered inside me, panicky, a trapped bird battering itself against the bars of its cage.

“I don’t think you do. What they did to you was wrong , Alex. They made you feel like you were a burden and they left you when you needed them the most. That fucking sucks and I hate them for that. I hate them for making you feel that way all these years later and making you think everyone will be the same as them.”

The trembling spread through my body and my hands would have been shaking if Raina weren’t holding them so tight. “I know you’re not like them,” I said, but it came out soft, the whisper of a frightened child.

“You know in your heart, but maybe not in your head, and I don’t blame you for that,” she said with a faint, sad smile. “I’ll prove it to you as many times as I need to. You are not a burden, Alexander Copeland. Can you promise me you’ll call me if and when it happens again? Promise me and mean it.”

Making that promise had been easy in the hospital. Still reeling from the trauma of being kidnapped, shot, and possessed, agreeing to call them had been easy, a balm to soothe my fear. Now, with a clear head and decades-old wounds seeping, the words were almost impossible to say. The pain in Raina’s eyes made the decision for me, though. She wanted to keep me safe and protect me, just like Donovan did, and he’d

worn the same pain this morning. By breaking my promise to them and trying not to be a burden, I'd hurt them both. Could I live with myself if I did it again?

Slowly, still shaking, I nodded. "I promise. I'll take someone next time, no matter what."

"And you'll talk to Donovan," she prompted gently.

"And I'll talk to Donovan."

Raina drew me into a hug and I let her, leaning against her slender shoulder, all the while silently praying I would never have to put that promise to the test again.

For the second time in less than a day, I broke a promise.

My phone sat in front of me on my coffee table with the text thread to Donovan opened, but no matter how long I stared at the screen, I couldn't bring myself to type anything. And honestly, the longer I stared at the screen, my emotions simmering and roiling up inside me, the less I wanted to. Why should I be the one reaching out first when Donovan had been the one to say those things? Yes, I'd fucked up, too, but mine had been a general fuck-up. Donovan's had been personal.

Raina's words from this morning tried to sneak through the miasma of hurt, anger, and fear encircling me, slipping in to remind me that this was a two-way street, but it was far too easy to let the chaos within me wash those words away.

"This sucks," I groaned and Louis looked over at me. He lay sprawled across one of the bags from Esoteric Oddities, which had to be uncomfortable, but I guess to a cat, a little discomfort was worth causing a minor inconvenience.

Maybe I needed a distraction, then I'd be ready to talk to Donovan?

Getting Louis off the bag was too easy. A shake of his treat bag and he was winding around my feet, yowling like he was starving.

"Charlie always said you trained me well," I said to the cat and a bittersweet swell of grief slid into the tangled mass of emotions I was trying to hold back. In the nearly seven years I'd moved back in, not a day had gone by without him and I couldn't get used to his absence. It was easier when Donovan stayed, but at times like this, I missed my best friend with a ferocity that stole my breath.

"I hope you're driving all the angels crazy up there," I murmured, pausing by the front window. He used to spend hours people-watching from here. He deserved whatever happiness I knew he had to have found.

Distraction. I desperately needed a distraction.

I grabbed the two bags before Louis, having gulped his treats, could nap on them again. Between Ori's directions and Camille's suggestions, I'd ended up with far more than intended. One small bag held nothing but various types of crystals, each in their own little mesh bag with a little card describing its attributes. Simple enough, even if I still didn't quite believe in all that.

Because apparently, despite my own psychic abilities and Nate's proven use of crystals to block Charlie, I remained skeptical that rocks could have some sort of mystical powers.

The second bag tested my limits to the breaking point. I'd ended up buying a book on psychometry, which was apparently the ability to find someone just by holding something of theirs. Camille gifted me a brand new tarot deck, because apparently it was good luck for your first deck to be a present? According to her, it would help me

find answers, whatever that meant.

Incense, an evil eye necklace almost identical to Camille's, and a few other things I'd already forgotten the name of made up the rest of the bag. At some point while I wasn't looking, Ori had slipped in a slim book on meditation and visualization, hiding it beneath the other book like they knew how I felt about it.

"Maybe I should start with that? It seems pretty straightforward, right?"

Louis stopped licking his butt long enough to fix me with the kind of dry, judgmental look only a cat could give, then promptly went back to his bath.

I pulled out the book and pushed everything else to the side, out of the way. Surely meditation would be the easiest thing to start with. All I had to do was sit here, right? I flipped through the introduction, where the author talked about her journey to finding inner peace or whatever, and found the 'how to' section.

"Okay, sit somewhere comfortable. Easy." I was already cross-legged on my living room floor with my back against the couch. "Unfocus my eyes and turn my mind inward. What the hell does that mean? Observe your breath and allow your mind to be set free."

It went against my personal code as a bookseller to throw a book, but this one was testing my limits.

Still, I'd promised Camille I would at least try. I put the book aside, out of reach just in case, and closed my eyes. That seemed easier than trying to unfocus, whatever that meant. I'd learned how to breathe through panic attacks as a kid, so I tried that. In for four, hold for four, out for four.

After a few slow breaths, my heart rate slowed and the embarrassment faded, so I

tried the next step. I had no idea how to set my mind free, so I just kind of drifted, trying not to pay attention to anything. So naturally, my mind had other plans.

This is so stupid. How do I not think about anything? I should stop thinking words, right? Okay, just drift. What was that sound? Probably Louis. Why have I never noticed all the background noise in my house? Is the fridge supposed to be that loud? Should I have Donovan look at it? Except he's not here, is he? I screwed up, as always, and now he's gone. Not surprising. I should have known I'd screw this up. I always do. I'm the common denominator here, after all.

"Oh my God, brain, shut up," I groaned, opening my eyes to find myself under intense scrutiny. Louis was no stranger to my weird bullshit, but apparently this pushed the limits even for him, because my fat cat was staring at me like I was a complete idiot.

"You're not allowed to judge me. You were literally just licking your own ass," I reminded him. He flicked his tail and I'm pretty sure he would have rolled his eyes if he could. "This is a lot harder than it looks, okay?" Maybe I shouldn't have attempted this while fighting with Donovan.

Still, it was this or sit and stare at the last message from him, so I reluctantly pulled the book closer, looking for some tips. In a later chapter, the author suggested picturing a flame and pushing any random thoughts that wandered into my brain into that flame.

"Okay, mental arson. That sounds a little easier."

I took a few more breaths to calm down, then closed my eyes and pictured a flame. Well, I tried to, at least. I made it about five seconds before my asshole brain started changing it, because a disembodied flame is kind of weird. It should be at the end of a candle or something, right? Maybe a red candle, like at the restaurant we'd gone to

for Valentine's Day. Even though we'd only been together a few months at that point, Donovan had spoiled me and we'd gone to Denver for a nice dinner. We'd planned to watch a movie on the couch after we got back, but ended up spending the rest of the night in bed. I certainly didn't mind that. Still, was it normal to know you loved someone in that short a time? Despite what Donovan's mom had told me back in January, it sometimes still felt like it was too soon.

"Fucking fuck, I did it again!" I groaned, realizing the flame had long since disappeared from my mind and I'd wandered off on another tangent. "Why is this so hard?"

I sighed on instinct, waiting for a dirty joke in response, only to be met by silence. Charlie couldn't deliver the jokes and innuendo I'd grown used to because Charlie was gone. Years of having him with me every single day, of groaning at his bad jokes and secretly enjoying his rants about dating shows, and now all I had were the memories.

Tears stung my eyes and I leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. "I miss you, Charlie," I breathed into the silence. The grief grew easier to bear every day, but I didn't think it would ever disappear. Charlie and Aunt Lizzie would share space in my heart for the rest of my life. Without them, I wouldn't have this life that I loved. I wouldn't have Raina and Camille and Will. Worst of all, I wouldn't have Donovan. I took some comfort in the memory of Charlie's wicked smile right before he'd passed on. Whatever had been waiting for him, whatever he'd seen, it delighted him, so I had to assume he was off causing more chaos in whatever came next for ghosts.

A heavy thud jarred me out of my thoughts. Louis, apparently sick of my angst, had jumped off the coffee table and now proceeded to clamber into my lap, his paws digging into my inner thighs and leaving me wincing. He didn't lay down, because that would be far too easy. He stood on my left thigh and made biscuits on my right leg, reminding me (quite painfully) that he was overdue for a nail trim.

“Fuck, you need to go on a diet.” I was going to have paw print bruises on my legs at this rate. “We both need to go on a diet. Time to lay off the snacks, huh?”

That was a word he knew and he pushed off my legs, scrambling to get to the kitchen, because just saying the word was a contractual obligation to snack time.

“Might as well. This meditation thing clearly isn’t happening. Snack break, then we’ll try again later.” Or not. Probably not. There was only so much humiliation I could handle in a day, even if there was no one to see it but me.

I left my phone on the table, still open to the texts with Donovan, and pretended not to notice when the screen faded, then went to black, without a single new message between us.

Chapter 8

Donovan

“I think you need to leave.”

Alex’s words haunted my every step as I stumbled through Saturday. I’d fucked up, and I knew I deserved his anger, but I hadn’t expected him to kick me out. Except, did it still count as being kicked out if I’d never lived there officially?

“Donovan, I swear to God I’m going to buy a water gun during my lunch break and keep it in the fridge so the water is ice cold.”

I frowned, tuning back in to find my partner glaring at me across our desks. “Why are you going to buy a water gun?”

“Finally,” he grumbled. “I’m going to get one so I can shoot you with it every time you space out. I said your name like five times.”

“Sorry. It’s been a shitty morning,” I said, sighing. “What’s up?”

“I asked if you’d heard about the OD Lake caught last night? The chief is pushing the county for more funds to crack down on the drug flow around here, and we’re probably going to get pulled in.”

“Jaime Smalls? Yeah.” Memories flickered behind my eyes. Her thin body on the bed. Levi Smalls, standing alone in the living room. Alex’s grief. Those damned

words. “Alex found her last night.”

“Wait, what?” Will reached back without looking and shut the door to our office. It was tiny enough that he didn’t even need to stretch to reach it. “That’s not what Lake said. She said the son called it in?”

“Yeah, because we told him to.” I quickly relayed the story to Will, wincing when I admitted we’d left the kid alone to deal with it.

“Poor kid,” Will said, shaking his head. “I get why you had to do it, but still...”

“Tell me about it. I didn’t want to, but what other choice did I have? Alex is determined to stay anonymous, so things like this are going to keep happening.”

“Honestly, I’m pretty sure the chief knows there’s something weird going on there. I’m betting she let it go because the case was solved and now she’s dealing with bureaucratic crap, but once that’s wrapped up, don’t be surprised when she comes looking for answers.”

“That’s what I was trying to explain to him. I just let myself get too caught up and I may have accidentally implied that his power would be a great tool for investigators.”

I’d never realized how very loud silence could be until that moment. I completely deserved the appalled look Will gave me, and I buried my face in my hands, groaning in defeat.

“Donovan, please tell me you only thought it. You didn’t say that out loud.”

“I did,” I mumbled, voice muffled in my hands. “I didn’t mean it that way, though.”

“There aren’t a whole lot of other ways that can be taken.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face, palms scraping against the stubble I hadn't bothered to shave this morning. "Believe me, I know I fucked up. I just got carried away. I was trying to come up with ways his power could be useful, so maybe he wouldn't hate it so much. I'm pretty sure I ended up doing the exact opposite."

"Did you at least apologize?" Will sounded pained, like he was embarrassed for me.

"I tried to, but he told me to leave."

"Damn. Did he say for how long?"

"Basically all of my things are at his house, so hopefully just for the day." I peered at my partner through my fingers. "I don't know how to fix this, Will."

"You're definitely going to have to do a lot of groveling. Mostly, though, I think you need to talk to him. Have you guys ever really sat down and discussed his power and how to handle it? Besides that day in the hospital with me and the girls?"

I took a moment to comb back through my memories, then shook my head. "No, not really. He doesn't like talking about it, so I didn't want to bring it up while he was recovering. After we got back from meeting my family, it just never came up, I guess." It sounded like a lame excuse in my head. Saying it out loud didn't make it any better.

"Yeah, so that sounds a lot like you were both avoiding it and hoping it just kind of solved itself," Will said dryly. "Look, I'm hardly the expert on long-term relationships, but even I know that you have to talk about the big stuff. I'm pretty sure the fact that Alex finds dead people and you're literally a detective falls under that category."

"Alex said he trusts me and I think he wants to, but after what happened with his

parents when he was a kid, I'm not sure he fully trusts anyone anymore." It was probably a good thing I'd never meet Alex's parents, because I didn't think I'd be able to keep quiet if I did. What kind of people abandoned their traumatized 12-year-old in a psychiatric hospital?

"No one knows how to ruin a kid's life better than their parents," Will muttered, and the rancor in his voice distracted me from the less-than-pleasant suggestions my mind was offering for Alex's parents.

Will's bright blue eyes had gone dark and he stared down at the scarred desk like it held the mysteries of the universe. We hadn't been partnered together for long, not even a year yet, but long enough that I had an idea of what was going on.

"Your parents called?" I guessed, and he nodded.

"Just after Christmas. They went on and on about how disappointed they were that their boys didn't join them for Christmas," he sneered. "They kept deadnaming Camille and whining about how they missed us being a family, except they made sure to keep mentioning 'our boys'."

"Jesus. I'm sorry, Will. Did they say the same thing to Camille?" She'd seemed okay after Christmas and Alex hadn't mentioned anything, so hopefully not.

Will shook his head. "She was smart enough to block them years ago once she realized they'd never really accept her. I hung up on them, but I still haven't blocked them. I wish I could, I just..."

"There's nothing wrong with hoping they'll come around, Will," I murmured.

"They're not going to. That would mean they'd have to admit they were wrong about something and I'm pretty sure they'd rather die." He sighed heavily. "Sorry, we're

supposed to be fixing your problems right now, not mine.”

“We can multi-task. Besides, mine can’t really be solved until I can talk to Alex.”

“And mine won’t be solved until I grow a pair and block my asshole parents.”

I leaned back in my chair while Will slumped forward on his desk, but our tired sighs were identical. Both problems looked easy to solve on the surface, but the reality was so much harder.

Adding salt to the wound, the Perez file lay open between us, reports and paperwork scattered between us where we’d spent our entire Saturday morning and most of the afternoon re-reading everything, searching for anything we’d missed. Her parents still hadn’t heard from her, none of the surrounding precincts had reported sightings, and we were out of leads. Every day we didn’t find her was another day we failed the Perez family. In comparison, my own problems were inconsequential.

Will must have had the same thought, because he moved at almost the same time as me, grabbing a file and pulling it closer. We might not be able to solve our own problems, but we’d do everything in our power to bring Rebecca Perez home.

Shift change came and went unnoticed as we worked, reading and re-reading every interview, staring at the photos of the path through the trees and the road she would have been on. Things we’d already done dozens of times, but did again now because what else could we do?

Lost in the frustratingly useless clues, trying to wrest some sort of answers from them, I didn’t even hear the phone in our office ring, only snapping back to reality when Will’s startled exclamation echoed in the tiny office.

“What?” His eyes were wide and he sounded stunned. “Just a second.” He fumbled

with the ancient phone on the desk and hit the speaker. “Can you repeat that?”

Eva Perez’s voice came through, shaking and tearful. “Rebecca’s home. She just walked in the door. She’s okay.”

“Is she hurt at all? Did she say what happened?” I asked, business-mode overriding my shock.

“She left with that boyfriend of hers, but she said he started acting like a jerk, so she ditched him and found her way back home.” Mrs. Perez laughed, though it sounded more like a sob. “She’s grounded for life, but she’s home. Thank you both for looking for her.”

Will wrapped up the phone call while I sank back into my chair. We stared at each other across the case file, and I wondered if he felt as numb as I did. Days of desperate searching, flinching every time the phone rang in case it was someone reporting a dead body, all for her to just walk back home like it never happened. It was the best possible outcome, and I was happy for her family, of course, but...

“I need a drink,” Will rasped.

I closed the folder in front of me and ran my hands through my hair. “Yeah. Let’s go get a fucking drink.”

Lowery’s Crossing only had two actual bars in town, one of which catered toward the rougher side of the population. Surprisingly few fights broke out there, but it was never outside the realm of possibility.

By unspoken agreement, we skipped that bar in favor of Lynn’s Tavern. Family-

owned since the founding of the town, according to the plaque behind the bar, they leaned a little too heavily into the old-timey tavern aesthetic, but the drinks were good and the clientele here didn't instantly get cagey when two cops walked in.

The seats at the bar were all filled and a decent number of the tables, as well, but Will and I managed to get drinks and settle down into a high-top table in a corner out of the way. We drank the first round in silence, Will staring down at the table while I idly scanned the patrons, not seeing a single one of them. The reality of the case crashed in and we both just needed a minute to convince our minds that we could breathe now.

Will grabbed us a second round of beers, returning to the table and setting in with a heavy sigh.

“What the hell.”

“Amen to that.” I echoed his sigh, taking the second mug. I didn't take a drink, though, content to nurse this one for awhile.

“I'm glad she's home safe, of course. This is the best outcome we could have asked for, just...” He glanced up at me. “Has anything like this ever happened to you before?”

“Honestly? No. It was much more common for these things to go the other way.”

“At least the paperwork will be easier.” Will took a long drink, then put his mug down, shoulders slumped. “What a fucking day.”

“Tell me about it. At least we can actually go home for the rest of the weekend and not live in the station.” Since Rebecca's initial missing person report, it felt like we hadn't left the station except to sleep and even that had been limited.

“Awesome. Can’t wait to spend an entire day alone with my thoughts,” Will muttered and took another long drink. He’d already nearly drained his second round while I’d barely sipped at mine. Looks like I’d be the sober one tonight.

“You’re welcome to come crash at my place, if you want. I’m not really looking forward to spending the weekend alone, either.”

Will winced. “No messages from Alex?”

“Nothing yet. I’ll probably have to be the first to reach out, knowing him, but I don’t want to push him, either. I really screwed up.”

I pulled out my phone and laid it on the table, but my text thread with Alex remained exactly as it’d been, without a single new message from him.

“Like I said before, I don’t know much about relationships, but giving him time to cool down has to be a good idea, right? The last thing either of you need is to get caught up in the heat of the moment again and say something you’ll regret.”

“Too late for that, unfortunately. I don’t know how to make this right.” I locked the phone before I gave in to the temptation to text him. “Sorry, we’re supposed to be trying to forget all the bad shit right now.”

“We both know that’s going to be impossible.” Will pulled out his own phone, putting it on the table beside his mug. He pulled up his contact list and scrolled down to one, opening the information. Even reading it upside down, it was obvious it was his parents.

Will didn’t talk about them much, but I’d heard enough in our time as partners to know I wanted to meet them about as much as I wanted to meet Alex’s parents. They were deeply religious and they’d raised their kids in a strict, controlled environment.

From Camille, I knew she'd waited to come out until she was a legal adult and could live on her own, which proved to be smart when they disowned her. She'd been no-contact with them ever since and Will had kept his contact to a minimum. He hadn't completely cut that last tie, though, despite his staunch support of his sister.

"Are you going to call them?"

Will stared down at the screen. The profile picture showed an older couple, just as fair-haired as their children. The woman wore a long skirt and a modest shirt, while her husband was in slacks and a button-up. I got the feeling those weren't formal clothes, but rather their usual attire.

For a moment, just a fraction of a second, Will's finger hovered over the 'call' button. He stopped himself, though, and instead scrolled to the bottom and, without hesitating, hit the 'block' button.

"No," he growled. The second they were blocked, he shoved the phone away and drank the last of his beer in one long pull. "Fuck them. If they're too stupid to see the amazing daughter they have, then I don't need them in my life. We don't need them."

It didn't take a detective to see the pain in his eyes as he said it. I'd gotten lucky with my parents, but I'd seen it over and over again in my line of work, as people were forced to deal with the reality of their loved ones, rather than what they'd hoped they would be. Will was grieving for the parents he and Camille should have had. The ones they deserved.

"For what it's worth, I'm proud of you," I said, then headed to the bar to give him a few seconds of privacy. I pretended I didn't see the tears in his eyes when I walked away and when I got back, they were gone. I slid another mug in front of him and he took it without a word, taking a long drink.

My own drink sat ignored in front of me while Will worked his way through his third, then fourth, drink. I cut him off after that, when he toed the line of being actually drunk.

“Told you we couldn’t forget the bad shit today,” he mumbled. His elbows rested on the table, his head in his hands. “Why does every relationship have to be so damn complicated?”

“I wish I had the answer to that. I really do.” My phone still sat on the table and I tapped the power button, bringing up my lock screen. It was a selfie of me and Alex, taken at my mom’s house in January when we’d visited. He was looking at the camera, his green eyes dancing with laughter and happiness. Me, though? I was looking at him in the picture, and there was no disguising how I felt about him in that moment. It was my favorite picture of us.

“You know it’ll be okay, right?”

I looked up to find Will watching me, surprisingly serious for having four beers in him.

“I hope so.”

“No, it will,” he insisted. “You two remind me of Raina and Camille.”

“Thank you, I think? I’m not sure what you mean, though.”

Will shook his head. “I worried about Cami after she left. She didn’t really settle down after that. She got into catering and traveled all over, but I think she was just looking for something. Then she came through town for work, met Raina, and the next thing I knew, she was calling me to tell me she’d gotten an apartment here.”

“I’ve never heard the full story of how they got together, but I got the feeling it was a pretty fast connection,” I said, and he smiled.

“They met, went on a date, and Camille decided to stay in town after that one date,” he laughed. “I was in Academy at the time and my dad wanted me to join the force at home in Colorado Springs. After Cami called me, I looked up Lowery’s Crossing and saw they were accepting applications for new officers. It felt like a sign, honestly. She seemed really excited when I told her about it, so I applied. Next thing I knew, Chief Cornell was welcoming me to the force and I was apartment hunting here in town.”

“The Crossing has a way of pulling people in when we least expect it,” I agreed. “That’s kind of what happened to me. Is that what you meant, about us reminding you of Camille and Raina?”

“I forgot that was the point I was trying to make,” he admitted sheepishly. “But the point is, the first time I met Raina in person and saw how she was with Camille, I knew they were it for each other. They’re endgame. When I look at you and Alex, it’s the same thing. You two were meant for each other.”

“I’ve never met anyone like him. I thought that even before... the other stuff.” The table closest to us was empty, but I still kept my voice down. The last thing I wanted was to spill Alex’s secrets. “I just hate that I don’t know what to do.”

“Again, not an expert, but like I said, give him some time, then apologize. That sounds like a pretty solid plan.”

“Maybe you’re right...”

“Does that mean you’ll buy me another drink? Today has sucked so bad.”

I chuckled. “Nope. It means I’ll drive you back to my place and we can keep each other company, so neither of us can get too far into our own heads.”

Will glanced over at the bar for a moment, then shrugged. “Sounds good to me. Let’s get out of here.”

We’d driven separately, but even though Will hadn’t crossed the line into being drunk, he still had enough alcohol in him that neither of us wanted him behind the wheel. He locked up his car and handed me the keys, settling in the passenger seat of my car while I drove us back to my place.

I’d have to figure out what I was going to do sooner rather than later. Will’s advice was decent, but I knew Alex well enough to know that he shouldn’t be left alone too long with his thoughts, either. Until I knew for sure how to fix this, though, I didn’t want to reach out and risk making things worse than they already were. If he didn’t reach out over the weekend, I’d call him Monday morning. I couldn’t handle the distance between us longer than that.

With a plan in mind, I could relax a little. I loaned Will some clean clothes to sleep in and we crashed out on the couch, watching bad action movies and trying not to think about anything at all.

Chapter 9

Alex

Stepping into A Likely Story felt like coming home.

Aunt Lizzie had carefully planned every inch of the shop out and even now, almost seven years after her passing, her touches could be seen everywhere I looked. I'd updated a few things and rearranged some furniture, but the heart of the place remained.

When I'd first taken over, walking through the doors had sent me to my knees, the grief stabbing through me like a knife. Coming inside now brought me more comfort than just about anything else. Even now, weighed down by everything on my mind, a sense of soft comfort settled over me when I unlocked the doors.

Saturday had passed with no word from Donovan. Sundays were a short day for me at the shop, but I'd left my house at my usual Sunday time, which meant I still had an hour to kill before I officially opened. I almost always used that time to linger over a late breakfast at Buns 'n' Roses, but going there meant admitting to Raina I hadn't talked to Donovan, so I'd skipped it today. She'd probably be by at some point asking questions, but I'd deal with that if and when it happened. Eventually I'd have to cave, though, because I wanted to talk to Camille and see if she'd go visit Ori with me again sometime. I clearly needed more advice, but going alone was intimidating.

I left the main lights off and made my way into my small office. The skylights overhead let in more than enough morning light for me to see, not that I needed it. I

knew this place better than I knew my own home.

Last week had been a surprisingly decent sales week, so ordering new inventory took up a decent chunk of time. I wanted to feature more independent authors and added just as many books to my to-read pile as I did to the shop's inventory. I kept a newsletter for the store and spent the last few minutes before opening preparing an email with tentative dates for Drag Story Hour. Hopefully, I'd get some decent interest from it.

After one final walk-through of the store, I flipped over the sign and unlocked the door. Sunday mornings weren't exactly bustling, so I usually spent the time taking care of the plants scattered all over the shop. I could count on one hand the number of customers I'd had on Sunday morning for the past month and have fingers left over.

So hearing the bell over the door jingle as I made my way over to my monstera came as a bit of a surprise. Naturally, a customer would walk in while I had a heavy watering can in my hands that I now had to find a spot for. It ended up tucked between two shelves, out of the way, so I could hurry to the front.

Instead of my usual weekend clientele, I found Ori Castellós standing at my front counter, looking completely at ease. If I believed in that kind of thing, I'd almost think I'd summoned them by thinking about them earlier.

"Good morning," I stammered, quickly burying my surprise and pulling on years of customer service experience. "How're you?"

"I'm doing well. And you?" They smiled, but I couldn't tell if they were being friendly or amused at my reaction.

"Good. I'm good. Um... did you need help finding a book?"

They shook their head. Ori had bound their hair up today in a messy bun, long strands of dark hair framing their face. Despite the freezing temperatures outside, Ori's jeans were artfully ripped, and they'd opted for a lightweight coat that definitely wasn't suited for Colorado winters. Or Colorado springs, which were basically Colorado winters, the sequel. My weather app called for snow before the end of the day.

"I actually stopped by to check in with you," they continued, pulling me back to the conversation at hand. "We went over a lot of information when you stopped by and I had a feeling I should come visit. I just wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help?"

I made a mental note to revisit that whole 'summoning' idea later.

"Actually, I was thinking about stopping by to see you sometime this week," I admitted. "Turns out I suck at meditation."

"Most people do, don't feel bad," they assured me. "If you have some time to talk, maybe I could help?"

"I have nothing but time at the moment."

"Mornings are slow for me, too. That's why I changed to later hours," Ori laughed. "Alright. Can I ask why you decided to start with meditation?"

"Well, it seemed like the easiest option. I don't really understand how to use those crystals you showed me and some of the other stuff is a little out there, even for me." I'd admitted my skepticism the first time we'd talked, but it still felt weird to say it to someone who made their living around this stuff. "Sitting on the floor relaxing should be easy, right?"

"We'll come back to that second part some other time, but as for meditation being

easy..." Ori shook their head. "It's one of the hardest practices to master."

"So, I'm guessing that means it's more than just relaxing?" I leaned against the counter beside them, trying not to slump in defeat. Why was this all so hard?

"Kind of the opposite, actually. Meditation is about learning to be comfortable within your mind without trying to control every thought. That's extremely difficult for most people, myself included. Letting go of your thoughts can also send your mind wandering to places you'd rather not go."

"But if the point is to not try to control my mind, that means if I start thinking about some bad memories, I'm supposed to just let it happen?" That sounded like literal Hell to me.

"Some people do, but I don't recommend it, especially if it's a memory associated with something traumatic. Linger on it will make it pretty much impossible to focus on meditating and it would likely lead to not wanting to do it at all." Ori's dark eyes went distant for a moment and I couldn't help but wonder what dark memories they avoided thinking about.

"So what should I do?" I asked quietly.

They blinked their eyes back into focus and gave me a small smile. "I can't speak for everyone, but I've found that if I take a moment to acknowledge the memory, then turn my focus away, it helps. Many people use their breathing as a focus. I have a mantra and I pull myself back to that. The person who taught me to meditate recommended writing down any unpleasant memories that came up during meditation and journal about it to help resolve them."

Again, that sounded terrible. "Do you?"

Ori laughed again. “Absolutely not. I pay a therapist to help me resolve my shit.”

That startled a laugh out of me before I could stop it, easing the tension between us.

“Do you want to sit?” I asked, nodding towards the reading nook nearest the front door. “Am I keeping you from your work?”

“I don’t open until noon, usually. Micah can handle it alone if we run over,” they shrugged, following me over and settling in one of the plush armchairs.

I thought I knew just about everyone in town, but clearly not. First Ori, now whoever Micah was? I needed to get out more.

“So, what would you recommend for a novice like me?” I asked once we were comfortable. “I really want to try to master this. Once a ghost finds me, I have no choice but to help. I want to, of course, but I hate that I have to put my entire life on hold to deal with it. Maybe if I can control it, the shock won’t be quite so bad, either?”

I’d never liked my ability, but it wasn’t until Andre that I’d truly feared it. If I hadn’t managed to call 911 in time, I could have died out there with him. I’d researched hypothermia afterward and between the shock and the amount of energy Andre drained from me, I’d been dangerously close to freezing to death. I’d absolutely not told Donovan about that. He could easily find out on his own, of course, but no need to add fuel to the fire of his protectiveness.

“That’s a very real possibility,” Ori agreed. “By accessing your power purposefully, you’ll be more mentally prepared. I think having a support system will make the biggest difference, though, and you seem to have that in place already.”

“Yeah. I’ve been threatened with decaf for the rest of my life if I ever attempt to go

out with a ghost alone ever again.”

Donovan’s face flashed into my mind, the hurt and shock when I’d told him to leave. With it came a fresh rush of guilt, followed closely by pain as I remembered his words. It took a real effort to bundle it all up and shove it to the back of my mind so I could focus on what Ori was saying.

“Having someone there with you should provide the emotional support you need for what you do.” They shifted, getting more comfortable in the chair. “Honestly, I don’t envy you your power.”

“I wouldn’t wish it on anyone else. If I could get rid of it, I would in a heartbeat. No hesitation.”

“For your sake, I wish it worked like that, but since that’s not an option, the best we can do is learn to control it. I’d like to do more research, but it sounds like one of the main goals, aside from consciously using your ability, is to figure out a way to limit the amount of energy the ghost can draw from you.”

“I’d like that,” I agreed immediately. Just because I lived here in the mountains, didn’t mean I enjoyed being cold. It’d gotten better without Charlie constantly drawing energy from me, combined with basically living with a man who loved to snuggle. “It kind of feels like once I can control it, I’ll be able to manage the drain. It just feels connected in my head, if that makes any sense?”

Ori shrugged. “It’s your power, so I’ll trust you on that. For now, if you have the time, perhaps we can work on mindfulness? It’s slightly easier than meditation, though the two complement each other. It will help you focus on the present without judgment and is just a daily quality, where meditation is a focused exercise.”

“Okay, and what do I have to do?” I asked, hoping it didn’t come out too skeptical.

I'd heard one too many online influencers talking about 'practicing mindfulness and gratitude' to take it as seriously as I should be. Ori's little smile said I wasn't entirely successful at reining in my tone, but they didn't comment on it.

"As simple as it sounds, the first thing is to just pay attention. Take in the moment around you, paying attention to your body and your thoughts. Don't judge yourself for whatever thoughts come to mind, but pay attention to them and when you notice your mind wandering, consciously pull yourself back to the present and focus on your breathing."

"That sounds way easier than it probably is. I'm game to try, though. I guess the worst that can happen is a repeat of yesterday."

"We'll start short. Five minutes," Ori said. "Also, it might not be the same for you as it was for me, but the first time I tried this with someone sitting with me, I spent the entire time worrying I was wasting her time and I should be entertaining her or something. If that's the case, just know that I'm going to be focusing on myself, so it's perfectly fine to ignore me. Just keep your breath steady and choose to keep your attention on that rhythm. I've found that counting helps, at first."

That must be all the tutorial I was getting, because Ori closed their eyes, going still in a way that I envied immediately. They'd obviously been doing this for a long time, to the point that it was nearly effortless. I didn't have to be psychic to know it wasn't going to be nearly as simple for me, but I had to try. I had nothing left to lose and everything to gain at this point.

Closing my eyes, I got as comfortable as possible in the plush chair. Focus on my breathing. Easy enough, right? I pulled on the breathing exercises I'd learned as a kid again. In for four, hold for four, out for four. Holding the number in my head and feeling each breath as it moved through my body turned out to be more helpful than expected.

Maybe with Ori's help, I could get a firm grip on this and not have to worry Donovan anymore. When we'd gone to visit his family back in January, he'd been willing to cancel the whole trip for fear of me running into whatever ghosts haunted Chicago. How many people would back out of a trip to visit the family they hadn't seen in months for the comfort of their new boyfriend?

Oh. This must be what Ori had meant about wandering thoughts.

Focus, Alex. In for four, hold for four, out for four. Pull your attention back. No judging, just counting.

I repeated the instructions over and over, focusing on each breath, holding the numbers in my head. To my surprise, it actually did get a little easier, and I was able to bring my wandering mind back fairly quickly. It felt like no time at all before Ori spoke, breaking the quiet.

"How was that?" they asked.

"Surprisingly, not bad." I blinked, looking around the shop out of habit before turning back to Ori. "My mind kind of wandered at first, but I pulled it back. I feel more relaxed, too."

"That's great progress, Alex. The more you practice, the more you'll be able to do it without even thinking about it. Did noticing your breathing help?"

"Yep. I counted out the seconds and it helped to give my brain something to hold on to. Guess all those panic attacks as a kid had to be good for something," I joked, then immediately winced. Ori wasn't used to my weird sense of humor like my friends were. Luckily, they just laughed.

"I get it. I've had anxiety almost as long as I've been able to understand what it was.

A lot of the practices at managing it line up pretty well with mindfulness and meditation. It's not a great trade-off, but sometimes, any win is better than nothing."

"Completely agreed. So, how often should I do this?"

"As often as you feel comfortable doing it," they said with a shrug. "You can start working on some of the crystals you picked out whenever you feel comfortable. The clear quartz would be a good one for when you're focusing on mindfulness. You can put it in the room with you or hold it in your hand as a focus."

"I was wondering about a few of them. That black one... I forget what it's called?"

"The black tourmaline?"

I nodded. "That one. Someone used it to completely bar spirits from entering my house. If I kept it with me all the time, would that keep ghosts from being able to approach me?" I hated to ask, hated that a little part of me wished I could keep them away forever and not have to deal with this anymore, but I had to know.

"That depends," Ori said slowly. "If you push those intentions toward the stone, it'll likely do just that. I've seen others use it as a way to focus their abilities because it has a strong psychic connection. It really depends on what you want to do with it."

"You keep mentioning all these 'others'. Are there more people with abilities like me out in the world?"

Ori smiled. "Alex, there's so much more out there than you can likely imagine. Their stories aren't mine to share, though."

"You are the most helpfully unhelpful person I've ever met," I grumbled. I respected them for it and it was good to know Ori wouldn't be telling the whole world about

me, but it left my curiosity unsatisfied and that freaking sucked.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” they laughed. “I think we’ve covered quite a bit today. I’m going to head over and relieve Micah of opening duties and let you get back to work. If you have any questions, stop by any time. You can text me if the shop is closed and it’s urgent.” They fished a battered business card out of their pocket and handed it to me.

“Thanks, Ori. I really appreciate all your help. I promise I’ll try to be more open-minded about all of this.”

“It’s a lot for anyone to take in. I’m happy to help however I can. That’s what friends do, right?”

They headed out into the cold with that, leaving me with a phone number, a mess of thoughts, and apparently a new friend.

Sundays were fucking weird.

By evening, a jittery anxiety had settled beneath my skin, leaving me on edge but also oddly despondent. My phone remained silent and every time I opened it to text Donovan, my brain shut down, leaving me staring at the blinking cursor until the screen went dark again. Since Donovan and I started dating, Sunday nights had become one of my favorite nights of the week. We would take turns cooking dinner, then settle in for a relaxed evening together. With us fighting and Charlie gone, this would be my first Sunday night alone in this house.

“Well, Louis, I guess it’s you and me tonight,” I said to the cat. Since Charlie passed on, I’d picked up the habit of talking to him when I was alone. He judged me pretty

heavily for it, but tolerated it in exchange for extra treats that he certainly didn't need.

"It'll be fine. We'll eat, then go to bed." It would hardly be the end of the world. I'd eaten alone before, obviously. It'd just been a long time. From the first day I'd set foot in this house, I'd had Charlie and his nonstop running commentary on the world, life, and reality TV. Donovan filled the void when I lost Charlie, giving my thoughts no time to linger on the quiet.

It filled the house now, the silence nearly deafening. This place had never been meant for just one person. The open layout suited a busy family, not one man standing alone in the kitchen. When I'd been a teenager, the kitchen had been the heart of the place. My uncle David loved to cook and Lizzie loved to keep him company, so Brock and I usually spread out our homework on the kitchen table while David made dinner. My aunt would sit with us, ask about our days and listen to our problems, then distract her husband with hugs and silly stories. She loved music and, more than once, she'd dragged him away from the stove to dance around the tile floor. He'd just smile at her, spinning her around the room while her laughter filled the air.

Watching the two of them together made me believe that soulmates were real. The love they'd shared shone bright and proud and it fully encompassed me and my cousin. As a scared, traumatized twelve-year-old, I'd soaked up that love like a withered flower, slowly coming back to life under its warmth.

Years had passed now since anyone had danced in this kitchen. The scarred up old table sat empty most days, cluttered with old mail and the detritus of the day. Donovan and I usually ate in the living room now, or occasionally at the small island in the kitchen. We never sat at the table and for the life of me, I didn't know why. Had part of me been avoiding it? Come to think of it, I hadn't used it since I'd moved in. It seemed silly for one person to sit there, so I just didn't. I'd never consciously meant for it to become a junk table, but that's what happened, anyway.

Dinner forgotten, I focused on the table, suddenly anxious at the sight of old mail and bags of cat treats scattered across it. Years of memories, of laughter and dancing and light, buried under junk. I'd clean it up and then Donovan and I could start using it again. Besides, we'd need the space if his family came to visit this summer like we were planning. Surely we'd move past this by then, right?

I got to work on the pile of junk mail, filled with more drive than I'd had in a long time. As I sorted it, most of it going straight into the recycling, I focused on logistics. This house wasn't huge, but we should be able to accommodate everyone. Donovan's mother, Rose, could have my aunt and uncle's old bedroom. Even though it was the biggest room in the house, I'd kept my childhood bedroom. It didn't feel right to sleep in their old bed. David had taken everything when he'd moved, so it was just me being sentimental, but still.

Brock's old room was the second largest and if I moved a futon or something in, that would be fine for two of his brothers. Aunt Lizzie had insisted on a tiny guest bedroom and that would fit whichever brother won the battle for his own room, if all three of them came.

Thinking of that little bedroom stopped me in my tracks, a few envelopes still in my hands.

"Louis?" I murmured. He'd perched on the kitchen island, out of the way of my sudden cleaning spree. He tilted his head when I spoke, which was good enough for me. "Charlie said Aunt Lizzie let him stay in the little apartment over the bookshop, but do you think he ever stayed in the guest room, too? I'll bet she let him sleep there until he was back on his feet, then moved him over there."

Abandoning the rest of the old mail on the table, I went to the guest room. Once upon a time, when the house was built, it'd probably been a workroom or office of some kind. It sat tucked off to the side, near the main bathroom. I couldn't remember the

last time I'd gone in, now that I thought about it. I had my routine and with the door shut, the room was out of sight, out of mind.

There was an old, musty scent when I opened the door now. Not an unpleasant smell, just stale air and neglect. It was as tiny as I remembered, with barely enough room for a full-size bed and a dresser. I recognized the quilt on the bed, the wild array of colors clearly marking it as one of Miss Penny's creations. Penny Featherworth had been old when I moved here as a kid and yet didn't seem to have aged a day since then. She made quilts out of whatever fabric she got her hands on and sold them at the farmer's market and at every town event. On the rare occasion someone new moved to town, she gifted them one. New baby? Graduation? Death in the family? New quilt. I don't think there was a house in town that didn't have at least one of her blankets somewhere.

The dresser was empty when I checked the drawers and the minuscule closet held nothing but hangers and dust. An old shelf secured to the wall displayed a few books, likely overflow from the stuffed bookcases in the living room, but nothing personal. The only other furniture in the room was a small nightstand, tucked in the corner beside the bed, with an old glass lamp on it, one I remembered sitting on the living room end table years ago. I'd assumed David had taken it with him. Had it been in here the whole time?

My fingers left a trail in the thin coating of dust on the nightstand when I touched it, but the drawer slid open soundlessly. The drawer itself was shallow, barely deep enough to fit a book. It was, however, the perfect size to hold a tattered spiral-bound notebook. Cracks and creases marred the faded green cover, one corner completely torn off while the others were dog-eared and worn. Whoever this belonged to, they'd handled it extensively.

"It's probably Brock's." Even saying it out loud didn't make me believe it. There was absolutely no reason anything of my cousin's would be in the guest bedroom. There

might be a slight chance it belonged to my aunt, but that felt even more unbelievable. As far as I knew, this room had sat untouched for almost a decade now.

I couldn't explain the shake in my hands when I carefully drew the notebook out or the pain in my chest when I touched the cover. It was just paper bound by cheap cardboard, but I knew it was more than that. I could almost feel the desperate longing and aching loneliness of whoever the notebook belonged to. It didn't make sense, and I'd never felt anything like it before, but the feelings wouldn't go away.

Steeling myself, I opened the front cover. The first page was nearly blank, but the sight of my aunt's messy cursive at the top stole the breath from my lungs. Tears stung my eyes before I even read the words, and I had to blink them away before I could continue.

I lasted exactly one word.

'Charlie.'

"Fuck," I breathed, staring up at the ceiling and battling the urge to cry. I'd been prepared to see bits and pieces of Charlie's life, but not my aunt's. Stupid, really, since she'd clearly been an important part of his life. It took a few slow breaths to battle back the grief enough for me to continue.

'Charlie, I know you're dealing with a lot right now. I won't push you to talk about it if you're not ready, but maybe writing it down will help? Sometimes, just seeing the problem laid out on paper helps me figure out what to do. This notebook is yours and yours alone. If you decide to use it, you could leave it on the kitchen table surrounded by flashing neon signs and I'll never open it. The last few days have been a lot to take in and I hope this can help even a little bit. If nothing else, it'll make some killer paper airplanes! ~Lizzie Rowencourt.'

I choked on a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. Aunt Lizzie's sincerity shone in every word, and I knew she meant every bit of it, including the paper airplanes. At some point, she'd taken Charlie into her home just like she'd taken me in. What I didn't understand was why she'd never told me. Sure, I hadn't visited as often as I would have liked once I moved out and went to college, but we talked on the phone at least four times a week, usually more, and never once had she mentioned anyone staying there with them.

The next page held another short paragraph, written in shaky printing. Charlie never told me exactly what happened and why he died, only that he'd made bad choices, but from the way his letters sometimes ran together and the lines shook, I had a feeling I knew. What he wrote only confirmed it.

'I don't know why I'm bothering to write in this. She says it will help, but I doubt it. Nothing will. At least no one can find me while I'm here, not that they'd bother to look. Everything is such a mess. I don't know why I keep screwing everything up like this. I don't want to, but I can't seem to stop. I thought it would be easier with Vanessa helping, but she couldn't stay clean, so what hope do I have of getting through this?

This is the worst. The stuff they gave me at the hospital helped, but it's all worn off and now I just feel sick. I can't stop shaking. Will Lizzie let me stay here if I puke all over the bed? I'm only doing this for her sake. She literally saved my life, so now I have to at least try, right? Even when I mess up, at least I can say that I tried.'

The entry ended there, the last few words so faint I could barely read them. Those hopeless, beaten-down words weren't the Charlie Taggart I knew. I'd spent six years with him and his snarky sarcasm and biting wit. How had someone so vibrant ended up so defeated? Which was the real Charlie?

There were more entries. I could make out writing through the thin paper, but I

couldn't bring myself to turn the page. The anxiety that had kept me on edge all night deserted me, leaving behind only exhaustion and a dull apathy. I was done with this day. Completely and utterly done.

I hesitated a moment before sliding the journal back into the nightstand. Taking it out of the room just didn't feel right.

Food forgotten, my phone still sitting on the coffee table, I stumbled to bed. Screw this day. Screw this whole week, actually. I'd deal with everything tomorrow.

Chapter 10

Donovan

Monday morning brought with it a chill wind and gray clouds. The local weather forecaster smiled brightly as she warned everyone to stock up on supplies, because all the makings of an early spring snowstorm were stirring up in the mountains. I wasn't one to obsessively watch the news, but after the chaos of the last week, I needed the noise to keep my mind distracted.

After sleeping in and getting Will back to Lynn's Tavern to pick up his car, I'd gone in to work for a few hours on Sunday afternoon to close up the case and finish the reports, just to avoid carrying it over into this week. We'd go over the details with Chief Cornell at some point and likely brainstorm ways the LCPD response time could be improved, but for now, I could start Monday with a clean slate.

Well, with one jarring exception.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone this long without talking to Alex since I'd asked him out that first time. Even in the beginning, we'd texted and met up for breakfast nearly every day. Some people might say getting some space might be healthy for us, given the circumstances, but it just made me want to crawl out of my skin. I missed his smile, his awful jokes, even that demon cat of his. The only way to fix this was to talk, though, and if he wasn't going to reach out first, I would.

Alex had started getting up earlier these days, but with sunrise barely kissing the horizon, I'd be pushing it. Text was too easy to ignore, though, so I took a chance and

hit his number. My heart thudded in my throat as it rang... and rang... and rang.

Just before it switched to voicemail, the ring stopped and his soft voice filtered through the line.

“Donovan?”

“Alex,” I breathed. I had to sit, my knees going weak with relief.

“It’s seven in the morning...”

He’d answered, at least. He’d answered and stayed on the line.

“I know. I wasn’t sure if you’d be awake, but I had to try. Can we talk?”

“We already are.” I heard rustling on his end, like he was moving around. Maybe he was still in bed?

“I’m sorry for what I said.” He deserved more than a simple apology, but it was all I could do right now. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just got carried away. I know you don’t like any of it and I shouldn’t have pushed you. It’s your power and your choice. I was completely out of line and all I can say is that I’m sorry and I hope you can forgive me.”

He stayed silent for so long I had to double-check to make sure he hadn’t hung up. The call was still active, though, so I waited. I owed him my patience, at the very least.

“Do you want to come over?” he finally asked, and he sounded so sad, so small, it broke my heart.

“I can be there in five minutes.” I didn’t even bother changing out of my flannel sleep pants, pausing only long enough to throw on a shirt as I went for my shoes.

“It doesn’t have to be now, if you don’t want to. You probably have to get ready for work and I get it. Just whenever you’re free. I’m off today, so literally whenever. Or we could talk on the phone, if that’s easier.”

“Alex.” I cut him off when he paused for breath. “I’m walking out my door right now. I’ll be there in four minutes, okay?”

He took a measured breath and I could almost see him sitting there, trying to stem the anxious flow of words likely bubbling up inside him.

“Okay. I’ll see you in four minutes.”

We disconnected and silence accompanied me through the early morning streets of Lowery’s Crossing. It took me three minutes to get to Alex’s house with a little cautious speeding. My heart rattled in my chest the entire way, hoping against hope that he wouldn’t change his mind when I arrived.

I had a key, but I knocked anyway, given the circumstances. The door swung open so quickly that Alex had to have been standing on the other side waiting for me to arrive. His too-long brown hair was mussed and shadows darkened those green eyes I loved so much. He was barefoot, in sweatpants and the LCPD sweater he’d shamelessly stolen from me last month.

Without a doubt, he was the most beautiful man I’d ever met.

He stepped back to let me inside and the second the door shut, I swept him into my arms, hugging him tight. He froze for a moment, startled, and I started to let go in case it was too soon, but then he hugged me back and my heart started beating again

for the first time in days.

We stood in the darkened entryway holding each other, neither of us willing to let go.

“I missed you,” he whispered against my shoulder, and I hugged him even tighter.

“I missed you, too.”

“You’ll miss me more if you don’t let me breathe.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I chuckled, but loosened my hold and took a step back. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I needed that. At least until my oxygen supply got a little critical.” Sadness and pain still tinged his soft smile, but it was progress.

“I’m so sorry, Alex. I shouldn’t have said what I did. It was completely out of line. I just...” I shook my head. “I’m not going to make excuses. I fucked up.”

“Come on. I think we need to sit for this one.”

Alex led the way into the living room, sitting cross-legged on one end of the couch and leaving the other for me. He tugged the throw blanket down to cover his legs and bare feet, taking his time tucking in the ends, stalling for time.

“I shouldn’t have tried to tell you what to do with your ability,” I went on when he seemed to get stuck. Alex usually avoided confrontation, so I knew this wasn’t easy for him. “You’ve told me over and over how you feel about it, but I got carried away.”

“It’s not that. Well, it is, but not entirely,” he murmured. The sweatshirt didn’t have strings to play with, so he started fiddling with the edge of the blanket.

“Whatever else it is, I’m sorry, Alex. I never meant to hurt you.”

“I know. I needed some space to process everything, but even that night, I knew you didn’t mean it. I’ve had some time to think, and I think the hardest part for me is that you didn’t trust me.”

I frowned, confused. “I do trust you, though.”

“No, you don’t. Not about this.” Alex finally peered up at me, a lock of hair falling across his eyes. “I’ve been doing this for a long time. I know I don’t always act like it, but I know what I’m doing. What happened with Andre wasn’t normal. I knew it was safe to go into Jaime’s house and you didn’t believe me.”

Running back through the details of that night, I realized he was right. My instinct, both as a detective and a boyfriend, had been to be cautious, scope out any potential threats, and keep Alex out of it, which was impossible.

“I just wanted to protect you.”

“And I get it. If I were in your shoes, I probably would have done the same thing,” he admitted. “But some ghosts don’t have a lot of strength. Jaime was running out of time while we stood on the porch bickering. I don’t know what would have happened to her if she’d passed on with unfinished business. I need you to trust me when I do this.”

Could I do that? Could I take the word of a ghost and trust that they would be honest with Alex? The next time he got called out, would I be able to rein in my protective instincts and let him do what he needed?

On the other hand, though, how could I not? Alex was right. He’d been doing this since he was a kid. I didn’t understand any of it and I’d been trusting Alex’s word

since the day I found out what he could do. The alternative would be... what? Not going with him? Letting him deal with this on his own?

When boiled down to the bare bones, my answer ended up being as easy as breathing.

“Alright.”

“Alright?” he echoed. “Simple as that?”

I nodded. “As simple as that. You’re right, and I can admit that. I should have trusted you. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy and I might slip up sometimes, but only because I wish I could protect you. I can’t keep the ghosts away, so all I can do is try to keep you safe from everything else out there.”

He quickly looked down, but not before I saw a glimpse of tears in his eyes, and when he spoke, his voice was thick. “Thank you.”

“I love you exactly the way you are, Alex. Our friends do, too. No matter what happens, no matter what you choose to do or not do with your power, you’ll never lose me.” I wanted so badly to pull him into my arms, to hold him tight and pretend it was enough to take away the hurts from his childhood. The way he sat, though, with his shoulders curled in, protecting himself, told me he wasn’t ready for that yet. Something was still bothering him. He pulled and twisted at the corner of the blanket until it broke free, the threads too worn to hold on any longer.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I owe you an apology, too.” He’d blinked back his tears when he looked back up at me. “I shouldn’t have tried to go out without calling one of you. I broke my promise not only to you, but to Camille and Raina and Will.”

“Can I ask why you didn’t?” I didn’t want to pick at the wounds, but it’d been bothering me this entire time.

“It’s complicated. I know in my head that you all said to call any time, but actually doing it is harder than I thought it would be. It was so late at night and I started thinking about how you and Will had been working so much and how early the girls have to wake up to work at the coffee shop. I felt like an inconvenience.” He paused, lips pressed together, the sentence dangling like he wanted to say more but was holding it back.

“And?” I prompted.

His hold on the blanket threatened to tear it in half and that small, sad Alex slipped back into his words when he finally spoke. “I started telling myself that you all would get sick of me if I kept calling at crazy hours of the morning. I know it’s stupid and none of you would do that, but my brain doesn’t make sense all the time and I just got scared that I’d be making your lives harder and it was just so late at night.”

I couldn’t stop his anxious rambling earlier when we’d been on the phone, but I could now. Closing the distance between us, I pulled him back into my arms and hugged him tight.

“You are not an inconvenience, Alex,” I whispered fiercely. “I know you sometimes don’t believe that, but it’s true. I love you so fucking much I can barely breathe sometimes. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, up to and including going out in the cold at three in the morning to follow ghosts. I’ll remind you as often as you need me to.”

With a shaky breath, the lingering tension in his body fled and he collapsed against me, shaking with silent tears. I held him through the storm, letting the pain and frustration and hurt of the last week slough away from us. For the first time in days, I could finally breathe. We still had so much to work out, but we were going to be okay.

Sunlight filtered into the room through the gaps in the curtains, illuminating Alex's face where it rested on my shoulder. We were tangled together, stretched out on the couch with my arms around him. A gentle silence wrapped around us, allowing us to just exist in this moment. There was still work to be done repairing our foundation, but for this moment, we had each other and that would be enough.

Eventually, though, reality began to intrude. The sounds of Lowery's Crossing coming back to life around us invaded the quiet, reminding us both that we'd have to leave this safe cocoon.

"How long until you have to be to work?" Alex asked, eyes still closed. I craned my neck enough to see the clock on the wall near the kitchen.

"An hour or so. There's nothing urgent waiting for me, though. Rebecca Perez came home this weekend."

He leaned his head back enough to look at me. "She did? And she's okay?"

"Her mom says she's fine, just under permanent house arrest. Ran off with a boy, which was kind of what we'd been hoping."

"That's such a huge relief." He slumped back against me. "Since you told me she went missing, I've been so scared that something would happen and her ghost would come to me. Honestly, that anticipation is worse than just being surprised by it. It reminds me too much of when I was little and Nina Martingale was missing."

How had I not realized how triggering this situation could have been for Alex? In my desperation to find Rebecca, it'd never crossed my mind that the very first ghost Alex had ever seen had been Nina, another missing girl. Unlike Rebecca, Nina's story

ended in tragedy and had deeply traumatized a young Alex.

“I should have been here with you. I’m so sorry.”

Alex reached up, his hand resting lightly on my cheek. “Hey, it’s okay. Don’t keep apologizing. We’ll never get past this if we keep bringing it up to hurt ourselves and each other, right?”

“You’re right. That’s pretty damn wise, actually.” I couldn’t help a little chuckle, and he smiled sheepishly in return.

“After the asshole, I read some of the relationship books at the shop. It took me going through three before I really started to believe that I wasn’t the problem. I picked up some tips on the way and I wish I’d thought of them the other night. I shouldn’t have asked you to leave. We should have sat down and talked it out.”

“What’d you just say about using it to hurt ourselves?” I pressed a soft kiss to his forehead. “We were both worked up. Getting some space was probably a good idea in the long run. We needed to get our heads together.”

“No more going to sleep still mad at each other from now on, though, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. “And I know you hate asking for help, but whatever I can do to help you deal with this ability, I will.”

“I’ve actually been trying to work on that a little,” he admitted, and he seemed almost embarrassed about it. “Camille took me to that shop I told you about and the owner gave me some books and supplies to start with.”

“That’s great. How’s it been going?”

Alex shrugged the best he could while still laying on his side, curled up against me. “It’s still early. They have me working on clearing my mind right now. It still feels weird if I think about it too much, though.”

“How so?” I asked, looking down at him. “I remember you said you were hoping you could learn to control it.”

“And I want to,” he nodded. “I just didn’t think it would involve me sitting on the floor counting and holding a rock in my hands.”

I knew next to nothing about this stuff, only what I’d gleaned from our friends and brief web searches, so I was far from an expert on this, but it sounded like whoever Alex had talked to was.

“If it helps, it’s worth it, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” He snuggled a little closer, which was no mean feat considering how close we already lay. “I guess I was hoping it’d be a fast process. Unrealistic, yeah, but a quick fix would have been great. I can sometimes get the ghosts to wait for awhile, until I can get space, so I was kind of hoping maybe I could figure out how to keep them corporeal longer, so I don’t have to stop my entire life the instant they appear.”

“I didn’t know you could get them to wait at all,” I said, surprised. Looking back, though, I really shouldn’t have been. I’d avoided asking questions about his ability because I knew he hated it and I didn’t want to upset him.

“It’s not much. I can usually get a few minutes before it gets bad, but for the most part, I pretty much have to drop everything and help them.”

Alarm bells went off in my head. “What do you mean by ‘it gets bad’?”

“It’s nothing malicious,” he said quickly, like he wanted to reassure me. “The spirits that have come to me have always been people who either didn’t think anyone would find them or, a few times, they didn’t want their family to find them first. That’s what happened with Mrs. Kostek.”

“I’d wondered why she was one that you’d called in.” The idea of them hurting Alex had me on edge, but I made myself wait. This was Alex’s story and his ability, so he could tell me at his own pace.

“She was afraid her son would come looking for her and find her there, I think. But in general, it’s usually people who are afraid they won’t be found at all. When they realize I can help them, I think they kind of latch onto me, as close as I can tell,” he said. “They’re scared and desperate. Once or twice I tried to ignore them, hoping they’d go away.”

“I’m guessing they didn’t.”

“That would be correct. I basically ended up being haunted. I didn’t know this until Charlie told me, but apparently ghosts draw energy from me to stay in this world, so the longer they were there, the more they pulled. The first thing I noticed is that I was colder than usual. Not nearly as bad as you saw, though. Probably because they weren’t pulling as hard as...” he hesitated, Andre’s name sticking in his throat. He’d admitted before that, even after the months that had passed, it hurt to think about him.

I gently stroked his cheek, my thumb brushing his soft lips. “It’s okay. I know who you mean.”

He managed a weak smile. “Thanks. Um... yeah, so it wasn’t that bad, but it was annoying. I started getting really bad headaches, then migraines. It took me two days to realize that it had to be because of the ghost. As soon as I helped him and he passed on, my symptoms cleared up. However, I’m a stubborn brat sometimes and

thought it was just an anomaly, so I did it again. Not my smartest move ever. Plus, Charlie called me stupid when he figured out I did it twice. So I've learned my limits and now I basically just drop everything and help them as soon as I can."

"Which makes it hard to go about your day-to-day life." No wonder he so desperately wanted to find a way to control it.

"Luckily, I own my own business and can close down for a bit if I need to. And it doesn't happen that often. It's a small town, so it's rare that someone goes missing."

"Thank God. Part of the reason I moved to Lowery's Crossing was the low crime rate," I muttered, and it got me the little laugh I'd been hoping for. Some of the darkness in Alex's eyes eased, and I even got a hint of a smile. "How long had it been since you dealt with a ghost before you met me?"

"Over a year, actually. Before Mrs. Kostek, it'd been so quiet I started to let myself believe it'd never happen again. Which is kind of dumb, because there were bigger gaps when I was a kid." He wrinkled his nose. "No one ever accused me of being the sharpest tool in the shed."

"Hey, don't do that." I leaned my head against his, catching his eyes. "Don't put yourself down like that. You're allowed to hope that it had gone away, after everything you've been through. There's nothing stupid about that."

"Yeah, but—"

I silenced him with a gentle kiss, lingering until he relaxed again. "No buts. You're not dumb. You're one of the smartest, bravest people I've ever met. How many other people do you think could have handled this alone their entire life and still manage to stay sane and have a sense of humor about it?"

Alex's soft laugh whispered across my lips. "Look, I'm going to need you to stop being so damn perfect, okay? You're setting the bar way too high. I don't stand a chance."

"I'm pretty far from perfect," I murmured. "Besides, I'm already crazy about you. You don't have anything to prove, especially to me."

We both pretended not to notice the tears in his eyes when he hugged me again. We laid together in silence after that, spending every second we could reconnecting before reality intruded. Together, we'd weathered the chaos and in that moment, I knew that the worst was over.

Chapter 11

Alex

“A ww, now there’s a sight for sore eyes!”

“We should have eaten at home,” I groaned to Donovan the second we walked into Buns ‘n’ Roses. One of the perks of how much time I’d spent there was that I’d become friends with the two baristas, Rachel and Ashley. The downside of that was that they’d become friends in return and treated me as such, rather than as a customer.

Case in point, Rachel stood at the cash register with a teasing grin on her face. I wouldn’t call myself particularly tall, but Rachel barely reached my shoulder. What she lacked in height, though, she made up for with sass and a touch of evil.

“At least they’re busy, so she has to deal with customers instead of interrogate us,” Donovan murmured back. “I always thought she’d be a terrifying detective if she ever wanted to change jobs.”

“The rest of the police department would be out of a job if she worked there. Everyone would be too afraid to do anything bad if it meant dealing with her.”

“I can tell you’re talking about me!” she called down the line, despite the customer standing right in front of her. Anyone who came to Buns ‘n’ Roses regularly knew how it went, though. It never felt like walking into a corporate coffee chain, but rather more like a bustling family kitchen that also happened to take your money.

“It’s not too late to run,” I whispered.

“Yes, it is. She’s spotted you. It’d be like trying to run from a velociraptor.” Ashley, her arms full of mugs and plates from the table she must have been clearing, paused beside us and grinned. “The chase just makes it more fun.”

“You two have been spending too much time together. You used to be so sweet.”

“I just put on a good front,” she laughed. “I’m glad to see you both back in here together, though. The last few days just felt wrong.”

“I’m so glad we can provide gossip and entertainment for everyone here.”

“It’s a small town,” she shrugged without a bit of remorse.

“It’s good to have things back to normal,” Donovan cut in, taking my hand in his. “Those mugs look pretty heavy. We won’t keep you from taking them to the kitchen.”

“Very smooth. Fine, I’ll leave you alone. You still have to face Rachel, though, so have fun!” Ashley disappeared into the kitchen to deposit the dishes, but now we were at the front of the line.

“So, you two obviously worked everything out,” Rachel said immediately, already punching in things on the computer without even asking for our order.

“What would you do if we wanted to try something different today?” I asked instead of responding.

She just rolled her eyes. “Donovan has been getting the same thing since he started coming here and you let yourself be at the whim of Camille and Raina, but sure.

What can I get for you?"

"It's like having the little sister I never wanted," Donovan teased. "I'll have my usual."

"And for you, sir?" Rachel's smirk was all evil, brows raised as she waited for my inevitable answer.

"The raspberry coconut coffee and... whatever that is," I pointed toward the new item in the bakery case.

"The breakfast torta? That one's eggs, beans, bacon, and avocado. It's a Mexican recipe Camille wanted to try. So, basically, you're putting yourself at their whims and ordering the two experimental items."

"The customer service here sucks," I muttered, earning a laugh from her and from Ashley, who'd come back out to run orders.

"I'll give you all the money in the tip jar if you say that to Raina's face," Rachel said. I noticed she didn't type anything in, just totaled up what she'd already ordered for us before my little tantrum.

"I'd like to live to see tomorrow, thanks." I reached for my wallet, but Donovan beat me to it, handing over his card.

"One of these days, you have to let me pay."

"Maybe one day," he said and his smile was so warm, so familiar, that it wiped away any further token protests. It'd only been a few days, but I'd missed him so damn much.

“The last few days were so boring without a real life romance movie playing out at my cash register,” Rachel said, handing Donovan’s card back.

“And we’re done here. Come on, let’s go grab a table.” I tugged Donovan out of line before Rachel could keep teasing us, but also, the place was filling up fast, so getting a table fast would be smart.

“I’ll let them know you’re here!” she called as we fled.

“That felt like a threat,” Donovan said. He brought us back to a table near the windows, one of the last open spots available.

“It was,” I assured him. We had a few minutes before Raina and Camille came out, though, and I planned to use a bit of that time just looking at him. Sunlight had always favored Donovan, picking out the glints of gold in his hair and eyes. Even in winter, his skin kept a warm glow courtesy of his Italian heritage, and seriously, how had this gorgeous man chosen me?

“You’re staring,” he murmured, a little smile tugging at his lips.

“If you had this view, you’d be staring, too.”

Donovan very deliberately looked me up and down. “Trust me, I’m quite happy with my view.”

“Awww, you two are so cute,” Camille said, skirting the table closest to us and putting two plates in front of us.

“Or something like that.” Raina appeared on her heels with two mugs, setting them down before leaning on my shoulder. “Everything good?”

“Seriously, we should have just eaten at home,” I whined to Donovan. He had the grace to take it all in stride, though, and just smiled up at the girls.

“We’re good. Thank you for caring enough to check in, though.”

“You sure know how to suck the fun out of teasing, don’t you?” Raina pouted a bit, but behaved herself surprisingly well.

“We just wanted to come and see you two and say hi,” Camille said. “Oh, and Alex, I wanted to check in with you. If you’d like me to go visit Ori with you again, I’d be happy to.”

“Thanks, but I think it’s going alright. They stopped by the store yesterday and worked on some focusing exercises with me. I was planning to practice some more today, actually, and see how it goes. I appreciate you, though.”

“I’m happy to help. And now we’re going to let you two eat and have some alone time,” she went on when Raina started to say something. She grabbed her girlfriend’s hand and smiled. “Let me know what you think of the torta. Rai, let’s get back to work before the line is out the door. Donovan, could you stop at the counter before you go? I want to make sure Will eats this morning.”

“Absolutely.”

“I love them so much,” I murmured when they walked away, leaving Donovan and me in peace.

“We’re pretty lucky when it comes to friends,” he agreed. “It sounds like you made another one? I’m glad Ori has been helping you.”

Right, I’d been so busy making up with Donovan that I hadn’t mentioned Ori

stopping by. While we ate, I gave him a quick recap of the weekend. I didn't mention Charlie's journal, though. I trusted Donovan completely, but he hadn't known Charlie and in my gut, I knew Charlie wouldn't want other people to see that vulnerable side of him. He probably didn't want me to see it, either, which I assumed was why he'd never mentioned that notebook in all the time we'd lived at the house together.

"That sounds like pretty good progress," Donovan agreed once I'd caught him up.

"I guess. I'm hoping it'll get easier the more I practice, so I wanted to spend a good chunk of time today working on it."

"Today shouldn't be too crazy, so let me know if you need anything. And don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

"I'll try my best not to sit and breathe too much," I assured him, biting back a teasing grin.

"You're such a brat." Donovan rolled his eyes as he said it, but the love and affection in his voice made it sound more like an endearment.

A comfortable peace settled between us as we finished breakfast and went our separate ways. For the first time in days, I walked back into my house with a smile on my face.

"Alright, Louis. Let's meditate."

Thoroughly unimpressed, Louis oozed over onto his back, splayed out in a patch of sunlight, and promptly went to sleep.

"That's the spirit." I sorted through the supplies I'd bought from Ori, most of them still in the bag. I couldn't decide what I wanted to do with them yet. Having a bunch

of crystals just sitting around seemed like a recipe for disaster, with my limited knowledge and experience.

One of Ori's suggestions included swapping out the quartz for amethyst, because that apparently helped? Thankfully, they'd included a small card identifying each stone, otherwise I'd have no idea which was which. The little chunk of purple rock didn't seem like much, but I'd made a promise to myself to take this seriously. Or at least to not outright dismiss the idea that it could help.

Still, I couldn't shake the self-consciousness when I sat down on the couch with a book in one hand and the stone in the other. I knew no one could see me, not anymore, but it still seemed crazy.

"Nope. Not going down that road," I murmured, pulling my thoughts back. Acknowledging those words would just lead me back down the road to grief and missing Charlie.

Focus, Alex.

Concentrating on my breathing came a little easier this time after practicing with Ori.

Maybe I'm getting the hang of this, after all. Ori was pretty helpful. I still can't believe I'd never met them before. How is that possible?

"Shit," I whispered. Counting out the rhythm of breaths in my head helped bring my wayward thoughts back, and a soft sort of peace settled around me as I drifted.

In for four, hold for four, out for four.

Rather than words, hazy images of the town drifted through my mind. The colors were muted, as though I was seeing it through a snowstorm. No one place stuck out

and after a few seconds, my mind wandered further, into the trees and mountains surrounding Lowery's Crossing.

In for four, hold for four, out for four.

Cold pricks my skin, tiny snowflakes landing and melting the moment they touch me. The smell of pine and snow waft past, carried by the wind coming down from the mountains. I run through the trees, but not out of fear. No, it's simpler than that. I run because I can. Because it brings me pleasure. No matter what anyone else says, I'm whole and I'm fine. I'm better than fine. I'm free.

A sharp sting in my hand pulled me out of my mind and I flinched, opening my eyes and looking down to see the amethyst stone biting into my palm. The smell of trees and touch of snow vanished, but for a moment, they'd felt so real, like I'd actually been standing outside in the snow.

"Okay, I think that's enough meditation for today."

Louis, naturally, didn't so much as twitch an ear as I got up and put the crystal back in the bag. For some reason, the hair on my arms was standing on end and an odd unease curdled my stomach. Why, though? Of all the places my mind could have wandered to, being outside in the fresh air was the best possible choice.

A glance at the clock showed I'd only lost an hour to this little endeavor, which left me with a whole day to myself. Maybe I'd read before I hit the grocery store?

Rubbing my arms to ward off a sudden chill, I paused and grabbed the LCPD sweater I'd left on the back of the couch and tugged it on. Even after a cycle in the washer, it still smelled like Donovan and I shamelessly snuggled up in it as I curled up in my armchair with my book. All thoughts of meditating and snow and mountains flitted away as I immersed myself in the story. Two chapters later, I'd completely forgotten

anything strange happened at all.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

Chapter 12

Donovan

For once, I beat Will to the station. I usually lingered with Alex over breakfast and Will basically lived here some days, so being the first one in was rare. I put the bag and cup from Camille on Will's desk, front and center. Camille would have sent over his favorites, like usual, and I'd grabbed another coffee to go on my way out the door.

The final report for the Perez case needed to be written up still, so I worked on that while I waited for my partner. Since it thankfully hadn't ended with an actual crime, putting it all together was fairly routine. I was deep in the middle of transcribing our interview with Landon DeVor when Will walked in.

"Am I late?" He paused in the doorway, pulling me out of the monotony of the report. He made a show of looking at his watch, then at me. "Or are you early?"

"A little of both, maybe?" I shrugged. "We left Buns 'n' Roses a little earlier than usual to escape the interrogators."

Will blinked, turning those words over in his head for a moment. "Okay, clearly I'm going to need caffeine for this." He grabbed the cup I'd left on his desk, sniffing it before taking a sip. "Apple tea today. Cami must've been in a good mood." He took another sip and settled at his desk directly across from me. "Okay. You said 'we'. Last I heard, that was an issue, so it sounds like something's changed since Saturday."

I gave him the quick rundown of the morning, leaving out anything too personal. Since he already knew about Alex's ability and actually was the only one who didn't know he was working on controlling it, I filled him in on that, too. Again, I left out the details, though. That was Alex's story to tell, if he wanted.

"Awesome. So the two of you have matching hero complexes?"

I threw a ball of paper at him, smirking when it hit his forehead.

"Very mature," he grumbled. He fished it out from where it'd fallen and dropped it in the trash can. "Seriously, though, it's great that you two made up, and I totally get why he wants to have some control over what he can do. I just worry, I guess. It was hard enough to get the chief to lay off him after what happened with the Marcel case. If anymore anonymous calls come in, he's going to be the first person she wants to talk to."

"I thought about that, actually. I just haven't brought it up to Alex yet," I confessed. "It never felt like the right time."

"He's probably realized it already. He's smart."

"That's what I told him when he got upset that he couldn't get this sorted out in one day." I leaned back in my chair, resisting the urge to chug my coffee in one go. "I want to help him, but I don't know what to do. I don't know anything about this stuff."

"Cami will help. All her protective instincts are riled up now. She knows all about that weird stuff. She's been into it since we were kids."

"I just hate feeling helpless. I'm supporting him as much as I can, but I want to do more."

“So learn with him.”

“What do you mean? I can’t see ghosts,” I reminded him.

“Neither could that asshole ex of his, but he managed to put all those rocks and symbols in Alex’s house that blocked ghosts, remember? Cami doesn’t have any weird psychic powers or anything, and it doesn’t stop her from learning about magic and crystals and all that kind of thing.”

Alex truly was the smart one in this relationship. How had that never occurred to me? Nate was a psycho who was on his way to prison for a very long time, but he’d still blocked Charlie from Alex’s house.

Worse, one thing I knew about Alex Copeland was that he absolutely hated accepting help. I should have insisted on helping, or at least on learning more.

“I’m a dumbass.”

“I mean, I wasn’t going to say it, but...”

I didn’t even have it in me to glare at Will. It was true, after all.

“I’ll talk to Alex tonight once we’re home and settled in.”

Will tilted his head. “So, I know I asked you this already, but seriously... why are you still bothering to pay rent at your place? Have you spent the night there since you two met?”

“Hilarious. If I weren’t paying rent there, I’d have been crashing on your couch this past weekend instead of you hanging out at my place.”

“You need a new couch if you’re going to stay there, but at the rate you two are going, I’m expecting a summer wedding,” he said with a grin, which only grew when my jaw dropped. “I’d better be the best man, or you’re going to have to find a new partner.”

“We’ve only been dating for a few months. Slow down a little,” I choked. Not that I was opposed to the idea, but there was rushing, and then there was rushing .

“I said what I said,” he shrugged. “Okay, now that we’ve sorted out your relationship, we should probably actually get some work done before the chief comes looking for those reports.”

Easier said than done, now that Will had put that idea into my head. It took actual effort to push it to the back of my mind and remember that Alex and I had other things we needed to worry about. Then I had to put those thoughts to the side so I could try to focus on my actual job.

“We’ll have to do follow-up interviews in the next day or so,” I said, pulling up the report I’d been working on and skimming over it. “One from the Perez family and probably one from the DeVor kids, just to cover our bases.”

“Joseph and Eva Perez would be within their rights to press charges against Rebecca’s boyfriend, too, if they wanted. If he crossed state lines with a minor, that could end up with federal charges.”

“Do you want to talk to them or the DeVor family? Or we can go together.”

Will shook his head. “Probably better to split up and get it over with. I’ll call and set up something with the DeVor kids if you want to take the Perez house? You took lead on the first interview, so it makes the most sense for you to be the one to wrap it up, right?”

“I can’t help but notice it also gets you out of writing the longer report,” I said dryly.

“I hadn’t even thought of that. Honestly, I just thought you’d want to finish what you started.”

“Did your sister slip espresso in your drink today? You’re being extra annoying.”

“Rude. And no, because espresso in apple tea would be disgusting,” he added, taking a sip from his cup. “Anyway, I’ll call and get my interview set up.”

“I’ll do the same. I’ve already got the report started, so if we can get these done by Wednesday, we should have it all finalized and ready to turn in by the end of the week.”

“Works for me,” Will agreed. He finally dug into the bag Camille had sent with me and his eyes lit up as he pulled a massive frosted brownie out. “So. Much. Sugar.”

This was going to be a very long day.

Alex’s house sat dark and quiet when I pulled into the driveway that evening. It was a little after 7:00 pm and the sun had set, so the lack of lights was definitely unusual. I’d made a stop at my rental house, making sure everything was still okay and taking the time to do a load of laundry. Alex had a washer and dryer, but at this point, I felt like I should at least get something for my rent money after Will’s comments.

Since Christmas, I really had spent nearly every night at Alex’s. My first excuse had been that he needed someone to take care of him after the shooting. He’d been in a sling for a month and with fresh stitches in his side, he’d been mostly stuck in bed. Then the nightmares started and there was no way I was leaving him like that.

Now, I had to admit that I just didn't want to leave. Alex and I had a routine and it worked for both of us. Maybe we'd gone from 'casually dating' to 'basically living together' a little fast, but it just felt right.

Sunday and Monday nights were usually a sort of casual date night for us, since I was usually off Sundays and he worked shorter hours. Alex closed the shop on Mondays, making it his one full day off. He'd started attempting to make dinner, with wildly varying results. We kept a few frozen pizzas in the freezer, just in case. Since he'd planned to use the day focusing on what he'd learned, I assumed it was going to be a pizza night.

Leaving my clothes in the car for now, I let myself in using the key Alex had made for me after he'd gotten out of the hospital. Light from the streetlights outside filtered through the open curtains, enough for me to make out a lump on the sofa. Upon investigation, I found Alex crashed out, a book on the floor beside him and Louis laying on his chest, glaring at me like he knew I was going to wake up his bed.

"I won't bother him yet," I promised the cat, who seemed unconvinced. I turned the oven on to preheat, then retrieved my clothes hamper from the car. My button-ups for work shared space in Alex's closet, while everything else went into the second drawer of his dresser.

He hadn't woken up by the time I changed and came back to the living room, nor did he budge when I put a pizza in to bake.

"Sorry, buddy," I murmured to Louis, then flipped on the overhead lights in the living room. Alex didn't budge, which I'd expected. Careful not to piss off the cat anymore than I was already about to, I knelt beside the couch and pressed a soft kiss to Alex's forehead. "Rise and shine, beautiful."

He groaned, twisting to roll onto his side and dislodging his passenger in the process.

Thoroughly done with both of us, Louis thumped to the floor and wandered away.

“Alex, time to get up,” I singsonged, brushing his hair out of his eyes. Another little kiss, this time to the tip of his nose, finally got a flutter of his eyelids. When I kissed his cheek and his lips twitched in an aborted smile, I knew he was finally awake.

“What time is it?” he mumbled, his voice rough with sleep.

“About 7:30. I see the meditation went well?” I tried to hold back my laugh, but he heard it in my voice and finally peeled one eye open.

“You think you’re funny, but you’re really not.”

“I’m hilarious and you know it.” I pushed myself to my feet and held out a hand. “Come on, time to get up. I’ve got a pizza in the oven. I bet you didn’t eat lunch today, did you?”

“I thought about it,” Alex said, slipping his hand into mine and letting me pull him to his feet. He didn’t stop the momentum, stumbling forward until he rested against my chest. I wrapped him up in my arms and felt him sigh contentedly. “I sat down on the couch to read and I guess I crashed.”

“Any luck with your project?”

He snorted, burying his face against my shoulder. “No, no luck with my project,” he teased. “Seriously, though, I may have to go back to Ori for some ideas. It’s getting better, but I still can’t stay focused for more than a few minutes at a time.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Not unless you know a way to make my brain shut up so I can concentrate.”

I had quite a few ideas about how to make his mind shut down, actually, each of them more enticing than the last. “Well...”

Alex turned his head just enough to glare at me. “I know what you’re thinking and no. With my luck, I’ll somehow Pavlov myself into seeing ghosts every time you make me come. Absolutely not.”

I tried not to laugh, I really did, but once that image lodged in my brain, I was a goner. Alex huffed his annoyance, but he just poked me in the side and let me ride it out instead of pulling away.

“It wasn’t that funny,” he grumbled when I finally caught my breath, which just threatened to set me off all over again.

“Except it kind of was.” I freed a hand and tilted his face toward mine, kissing the pout right off his lips. “I’m sorry I laughed.”

“You’re forgiven, this time.” He nuzzled closer and the feeling of his body pressed against mine sent heat pulsing through me. I loved every part of Alex, but something about having him in my arms when he was like this, all soft and warm and sleepy, made me want to hold him and never let go.

“How about we get dinner ready, watch a movie, and you can take a break from all of that and just relax for tonight?” I suggested. “You don’t have to master this in a day.”

“I know, I just...” He leaned his head against mine. “I feel like I’m failing before I’ve even started. What if there are other ghosts out there who need my help?”

“They’ve always found you before, right?” I waited for his reluctant nod before continuing. “Then you’re fine. The ones that truly need you have always found their way to you. Anyone else has already been waiting, so a little while longer won’t hurt

them. Besides, this is a small town. I don't claim to be an expert at this sort of stuff, but there can't be that many ghosts lingering around here, can there?"

Alex took his time considering it from that angle, probably looking for a reason to castigate himself for not doing enough, but finally, he nodded once. "I guess you're right. I've only seen a few in town and they ignored me, so maybe it's okay?"

"It is. You're doing the best you can and that's all anyone can ask for."

Alex's arms came up around my neck, his pretty green eyes still worried, but at least he was smiling. "You're way too good at getting into my head and calming me down when I'm acting ridiculous."

"Someone has to be the logical one around here," I said, and Alex scoffed, flicking the back of my head in retaliation. "Seriously, though, I understand why you're stressed about this, but I meant what I said. It's going to take time and patience."

"I hate being patient. I feel like I'm a kid again and trying to learn how to handle something impossible."

I hugged him as tight as I could, tight enough to get a little squeak of surprise from him. Officer of the law or not, if I ever met Alex's parents, I couldn't guarantee I wouldn't try to fight them for what they'd done to their son.

"You did it, though. You faced something no one should ever have to deal with, especially not a child, and look at you now." I shushed his immediate response with another kiss. Knowing him, it would be another self-deprecating joke. "I'm serious, Alex. Not only did you survive, but you thrived. You have friends, you run your own business, and you've managed to keep your demon cat appeased."

He snorted, which would have been more adorable if his face hadn't been less than an

inch from mine.

“Now who’s being ridiculous?” He tightened his arms, clinging to me just as tightly as I held him. “I really, really love you, Donovan. Thank you.”

“I was just stating the truth,” I murmured. “And I really love you, too.”

We stayed there in each other’s arms in the dimly lit living room until the tension drained from Alex’s body and I finally saw a real smile from him. He looked relaxed and soft and all I wanted to do was drag him into the bedroom and spend the rest of the night worshipping him, showing him how much I truly loved him. The answering heat in his eyes was all I needed to see, and we made it three steps down the hallway before a shrill screech dumped a bucket of ice water on us.

“Didn’t you say you were cooking a pizza?” Alex asked over the incessant alarm, and I groaned.

“Yeah, I was. I’ll deal with that while you shut off the smoke alarm?”

“Teamwork makes the dream work!” He winked at me, every inch a brat.

“I take it all back. You’re absolutely ridiculous.”

Alex just laughed and laughed.

Hours later, the house was still dark and Alex was asleep again, this time curled up against me with his head on my shoulder. He’d taken care of the smoke alarm and ordered food while I scraped the burnt bits of cheese and crust out of the oven, then we’d retreated to the bedroom. Alex was always beautiful to me, but when he let go

of his insecurities and stress and got caught up in pleasure? He was transcendent. I'd wrung two breathless orgasms from him before he'd finally surrendered to exhaustion despite his earlier nap.

I couldn't find oblivion quite as easily, though.

Satisfied that Alex was safe in my arms, my mind latched onto something Will had mentioned earlier.

"So learn with him."

He'd said it so simply, like he was surprised I wasn't already doing it, and now that the thought was in my head, it surprised me, too. Somehow, I'd fallen into the habit of taking a back seat to anything related to the paranormal, letting Alex handle it while I supported him. Except, even then, I'd taken on a more passive role. He was the one doing research, learning everything he could, even going to the crystal shop, which I knew had grated at him at first. Why was I leaving so much on him when I had access to the same resources?

Now there was no way I would be able to sleep.

Careful not to wake Alex, I slid out of bed, tucking the blankets up around him. I couldn't help a smile when he immediately snuggled into my pillow in his sleep and I was tempted to get right back in with him, but I was much too awake for that.

Navigating the house in the dark was easy now, and I made my way to the living room before turning on any lights, flipping on a small table lamp next to the cozy armchair. It rarely saw use unless people were over, with us preferring to sit together on the couch. Louis currently occupied my usual spot there, though, glaring at me as if daring me to try to dislodge him.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, your Highness,” I murmured, grabbing my laptop and settling into the armchair instead. At least the cat hadn’t laid on the messenger bag I carried for work again. Last time, he’d nearly cracked the lid of the laptop before I’d moved him.

Once it booted up, though, I didn’t know exactly where to start. Alex seemed to have the research on meditation and crystals and things like that locked down. Or at least, he had Camille and Ori helping him, which would be far more useful than any website I could find. He’d gotten very lucky that there was a shop in town run by someone like Ori. In a small town like this, the odds weren’t exactly on his side.

That gave me pause and I glanced up at Louis, who still glared at me like I was the bane of his existence.

“Why does a town this small have such a well-stocked shop like that?”

He just blinked at me, then very deliberately licked his paw, giving himself the laziest bath in the history of feline-kind.

“Your help is noted and appreciated,” I muttered, turning back to my browser. I knew the basics of Lowery’s Crossing just from living here and what I’d looked up before moving here, but I’d never dug that deeply into the history. Could there be something about the town that helped explain why at least two psychics had been here? Thomas McAvell wasn’t the best example, but it was likely he’d seen the same things as Alex. Or he’d seen something , at least, and it’d driven him insane. Some of what he’d said in his ramblings almost seemed to imply there’d been others before him, too.

A basic search of the town didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know. Location, population, distance to the nearest actually interesting city, things like that. The only location of note listed in the entry was the Silver Lake Reservoir and even that only mentioned that it was a popular hiking and swimming spot.

Clicking away from the official sites, I kept digging, scrolling through the results until a forum a few pages into the search caught my eye. The site wasn't one I frequented, but I'd been online enough to recognize it as the kind of place that loved a good conspiracy theory. The headline on the search page was for a subforum on the site, called 'Havens for the Paranormal'. Buried in the subheading, I saw Layton County, Colorado listed.

Curious, I followed the link. Instead of the cheap DIY website I'd been expecting, the forum that popped up was surprisingly polished and well-organized. The subforum I found myself in was nestled under a larger forum called 'Hiding in Plain Sight' and each category seemed to list supposed sightings of paranormal activity.

It took a little more scrolling to find the original post that'd caught my attention, buried a few pages back in the forum posts. The most recent posts seemed to be some sort of heated debate over whether Salem, Massachusetts was real or a tourist trap, with a few cooler heads tagging moderators to shut down the argument. The post about Layton County turned out to be one of the shorter ones, posted by someone with the username 'AllWhoWanda'.

AllWhoWanda: I can't believe no one has mentioned Layton County, CO! My great-uncle lived there as a kid and he told me all kinds of crazy stories. He said he'd seen a shapeshifter out in the woods and there were rumors of a coven living out there, too. He even said one of his neighbors was well over a hundred years old. The strangest story is about a psychic, though. A guy named Thomas McAvell went crazy and killed his whole family, except his wife. His dad, his kids, all the ones who shared his blood. His wife didn't say much after, not surprising, but I guess before it happened, she told one of her friends that her husband was acting strange and talking about seeing ghosts. I bet that's why he snapped. This isn't just a rumor, by the way. Here's the link to a news story someone did on the fifty-year anniversary.

A link attached to the post redirected to an article from a true crime blog, talking

about the case. Just to be cautious, I checked through that blog's posts but didn't find anything relating to Alex's incident at the farm. I knew it'd made local news, obviously, but I was still relieved to see it hadn't seemed to spread much beyond that.

Only a few people replied to Wanda's post, two of them saying they'd never even heard of the place, while the third waved it all off as hearsay. The tag next to that poster's name seemed to mark them as a moderator of some sort.

SpeakerForTheLost: One verified incident doesn't make a place a haven, especially when there's no proof that the guy was even psychic. Maybe he was just went psycho from living on a farm in the most boring place I can imagine? We'll put a pin in this one until we can get some verified information. Thanks for bringing it to our attention, @AllWhoWanda!

The posts ended there, with no follow-up from Wanda. It wasn't much, but it was enough to make me curious. Clicking on her profile showed she hadn't posted anything before or since and her direct messaging option was turned off. Still, it was a start, proving that other people had heard strange things about Lowery's Crossing.

Another hour of digging around didn't turn up much more than that, but it was enough to get me thinking. Maybe there was something more to this? Something deeper? Could there be something about this town that drew in people with unique abilities, like Alex? A remote mountain town in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by woods, seemed like an excellent option for anyone looking to hide.

"Donovan?"

A sleepy voice pulled me out of my thoughts and I looked up to see Alex standing in the doorway, hair rumpled, wearing only one of my shirts that fell just to the tops of his thighs.

“Hey. I didn’t mean to wake you up.” I bookmarked the site I was on and shut down the laptop, putting it on the table out of the way as Alex crossed the room. He crawled into my lap, straddling my legs and resting his head on my shoulder.

“What were you doing?” He still sounded half-asleep, his words mumbled and slurred.

“Just some research. I couldn’t sleep and I didn’t want to bother you.” A warm, sleepy, half-naked Alex in my lap was the perfect distraction, shunting all my questions and theories to the background. I ran my hands along his legs, tracing a line from his knee to his hips, grinning when I felt him shiver.

“Sounds like we need to try harder to exhaust you,” he murmured and his lips brushed my throat, soft and teasing. He rolled his hips forward, his arms sliding around my neck, plastering his body to mine.

I groaned, long and low, and he laughed, lifting his head and catching my lips in a heated kiss. When he rocked forward again, my hands went to his ass, naked under the shirt, and pulled him closer, grinding up against him.

“Bedroom,” I breathed, and he immediately slid out of my lap, but not without another kiss that made my head spin and my cock ache. Taking my hand in his, Alex pulled me through the house back to the bedroom, closing the door behind us. His shirt and my sleep pants fell to the floor and Alex tumbled back onto the bed, pulling me on top of him and into the cradle of his thighs.

My research could wait.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

Chapter 13

Alex

“I think it’s time to reassess my weekday hours,” I grumbled to the empty air. There was no one in A Likely Story to hear me and there hadn’t been in over an hour. The shop had always opened at 10:00 in the morning every weekday, since the day Aunt Lizzie had established the place. Once I’d taken over, changing anything she’d created just seemed wrong, so I’d left it as it was, but maybe it really was time to consider a change.

Most of the time, I was lucky to see one person a week before noon on a weekday. The morning hours were usually when I did stocking, inventory, and all the other administrative tasks that came with running a store, just to fill the time. Maybe opening later would be a good way to save on energy bills, too? I made enough sales to keep the place open, but not enough to pay any staff, and I certainly wasn’t rolling in money. If Aunt Lizzie hadn’t paid off the loan on this place, I’d be screwed.

There was one other good thing about being in the bookstore in the quiet morning hours, though. The shop, even more than the house, brought me peace like nothing else. This place had been my safe haven as a scared child, a place to lose myself in fantastic stories of brave knights and magic and adventure. When I opened a book, my own problems and fears disappeared and I could be in a world where, no matter how terrible things seemed, there was always a happy ending.

Slipping into a relaxed headspace was the easiest thing in the world when I was here.

I settled down on the same loveseat Ori and I had sat on when they'd helped me with my focus, getting comfortable. The bell over the door would let me know if anyone walked in, and I wanted to keep working at the meditation exercises. It came easier now, but I still had a long way to go if I wanted to move past just breathing and attempt any sort of control over my ability.

Counting out each breath, I closed my eyes, allowing myself to relax. Almost immediately, a soft, relaxed haze settled over me, my body and mind already learning that it was time to relax and just be.

Usually my mind just latched onto the numbers as I counted, repeating them until they meant nothing and everything became soft static. Today, though, something felt different. The static still came, a gently humming fog that permeated my thoughts, but instead of wandering into nothingness like usual, a faint image of trees flitted behind my eyes.

With everything going on, I'd forgotten about that strange experience Sunday morning. It came back in a rush now, but the urgency couldn't break through the haze in my mind.

The smell of pine and earth and crisp, clean snow permeated the air, fresh and clean. Tiny snowflakes clung to my eyelashes, nearly invisible in the wind. I'd never felt so alive, so free .

“Who the fuck are you?”

A deep, rumbling voice jerked me out of the forest, fear stealing the breath from my chest. That wasn't the whisper-soft question of a scared ghost. That was confusion, suspicion, even a hint of anger. Whoever this was, he was pissed.

Spirits were always harder to see in the daylight, their forms colorless and nearly

translucent in the sunlight, but I had no problem spotting the man standing by the coffee table. I wasn't short by any means, but this man towered over me by at least four inches. Dark brown hair even more in need of a haircut than my own fell in his eyes, which were a shade of pale blue I didn't think was possible without colored contact lenses. His scruffy beard nearly brushed his chest, which I only then realized was bare, as were his feet. He wore only a threadbare pair of jeans that clung to heavy muscles.

Basically, he looked like he'd stepped off the cover of one of the romance novels I kept in stock for Chief Cornell.

"I asked you a question," he barked, and I flinched back against the seat. Until Thomas McAvell, I'd never been afraid of the ghosts who came to me once I'd grown up enough to understand what they were. Now the feeling of a ghost beneath my skin clung to me, a constant reminder of how easy it had been to lose control of my own body.

"My name is Alex," I replied cautiously. "Do you need me to help you?"

The man snorted, some of the tension draining from his shoulders. "Ah. You're one of those ."

"I... I don't know what you're talking about." Maybe he didn't realize he was dead yet? "I don't know why you came to me, but we can figure it out, okay? Do you remember where you were before you came here?"

"A fucking novice? Are you kidding me?" He rolled his eyes. "I didn't come here. You came to me. Look, are you one of Ori's people?"

"What? I mean, I know Ori, yes, but—"

“Fucking figures,” he growled. “Look, tell Ori I don’t need their help, okay? I’m fine. You all can leave me the fuck alone.”

Then he was gone, disappearing as though he’d never been there, leaving the lingering scent of pine and snow behind him.

“What the actual hell?” I breathed.

The man’s words ran circles in my head, but no matter how I twisted and turned them, they refused to make any sort of sense. I kept circling back to his question, though. ‘One of Ori’s people’? What did that even mean?

One way to find out.

I was halfway through scrawling a note to slap on the door of the shop when I remembered my promise. This wasn’t a ghost in the traditional sense, but it was close enough that I knew my friends would be pissed if I didn’t call them.

A quick glance at the clock showed it wasn’t even noon yet. All four of my ‘ghost emergency’ contacts were at work right now. This close to lunch, Raina and Camille would be slammed with customers, which left Donovan and Will.

“Hey, Alex.” Donovan picked up on the second ring, his voice warm and relaxed when he spoke. I hated to take that away, but I couldn’t break my promise to him again. I just couldn’t.

“Hey, Donovan,” I replied, and I didn’t realize just how anxious I was until I heard my voice quivering.

“What’s up? Do I need to come to the shop?” he asked, instantly on alert. I heard faint sounds in the background, like he was shuffling paperwork, probably already on

his way out the door.

“Yes, please. I think I just saw a ghost.”

“I can be there in two minutes,” he said. His voice grew muffled for a moment, like he’d put his hand over the phone, but I heard him tell Will that he was taking an early lunch to meet me. Will must have understood the double meaning, because when Donovan came back a moment later, he just said, “I’m on my way now. Do you need to close up?”

“I’m going to put a note on the door right now.”

“Good. Go ahead and turn out the lights. I can see the shop from here. Thank you for calling me.”

“I promised you,” I whispered as I stuck the note on the door and turned out the lights. If I peeked out the window at just the right angle, I could already see Donovan crossing the street and coming toward me. He wasn’t running, but it was close, and thirty seconds later he slipped through the doors and pulled me straight into his arms.

“Are you alright?” he asked, gently rubbing my back as he held me.

I took a second to assess myself, something I hadn’t done yet. A faint chill shivered along my skin, but nothing like the freezing, biting cold I’d once been used to.

“I think I’m okay, actually. Really,” I assured him when he gave me an appraising look. He wanted to ask again, I could see it in his eyes, but to my surprise, he just nodded. I guess I wasn’t the only one remembering our argument and how we’d promised to trust each other.

“Alright. Where does the ghost want you to go?”

“Well, that’s the thing.” I took a step back and looked around, but no sign of the man remained. “He disappeared. He knew Ori, though, so I think I need to go see them. This has never happened before.”

“Alright, lead the way.”

Esoteric Oddities appeared to be closed when we arrived, both of us flushed from the cold and disheveled, but when I tried the door, it opened easily, allowing us inside.

The faint smell of old incense curled around me when I stepped in, a scent that was somehow already becoming a familiar one. Inside, the shop was dark, save for a soft golden glow from an open door at the back of the space. The quiet click of the door closing behind me seemed so loud in the silence. I’d run out my door fueled by adrenaline, but it was already fading, leaving me regretting my decision. I should just go back to work, right? Whoever that ghost was, he didn’t want my help, so why push?

I reached back for the door handle, earning a confused look from Donovan, but the second my fingers brushed the metal, Ori appeared in the doorway, backlit by the lamplight from what must be their office.

“Alex? Is everything okay?” they asked, taking a step closer. They paused when they saw Donovan, a wariness in their eyes I’d never seen before. “Detective Parker.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said with a nod. If I’d noticed Ori’s hesitation, Donovan definitely had, which meant he also would have caught the way Ori’s eyes went to our hands, where I held onto Donovan, taking some comfort from his touch.

“Same,” they said, their attention coming back to me. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m fine, I think. I didn’t realize you were closed. I’ll come back another time. It’s really nothing, probably.”

“So, it’s definitely something, then?” Ori gave me a wry smile and my vague escape plan flittered away. “I’m just working on a side project. It’s nothing that can’t wait for now. What happened?”

They opened at noon, I remembered, which was only a few minutes away. I glanced back at the door and they caught on immediately.

“Micah is in the storeroom. He’ll be able to cover the store for a bit while we talk,” they assured me, taking a step to the side of the doorway they’d come from. “You two can come back here.”

The invitation came out almost begrudgingly, but I got the feeling it would have been a lot warmer if Donovan hadn’t been standing beside me. For whatever reason, Ori didn’t like Donovan. I considered asking him to wait outside, but decided against it. I’d tell him whatever happened, anyway, and I truly was done lying and keeping secrets from him.

We followed Ori into what was, in fact, their office. A small desk butted up against the wall with a laptop and a tablet set up on it. The laptop was off, but the tablet was paused on a video of a person holding a weird little statue that I couldn’t even begin to name. Lines of shelves on the wall were the only other furniture in the small space, leaving the floor open. Ori must have been working on their project here. A line of chalk formed a circle on the wood, with a cluster of candles at one end and an array of crystals at the other.

“Um... I can seriously come back later. It looks like you’re busy,” I offered again, trying not to stare at the circle. I still had trouble saying the word ‘psychic’, let alone describing myself as one, so this pushed the line of woowoo stuff even for me.

“It’s fine, just testing something for a friend,” they assured me. Ori went to what I’d thought was a tapestry on the wall and pulled it aside, revealing a tiny storage area. They grabbed a padded folding chair and set it out for me, careful to avoid disturbing the circle. “Okay, so, what’s going on?”

They didn’t offer the same to Donovan and I shot him a quick glance, but Donovan just shook his head once before taking up position behind me, one hand on my shoulder. I fidgeted in the surprisingly comfortable chair, twisting the zipper of my jacket nearly to the breaking point as I tried to figure out the best way to explain.

“Well... okay, this sounds weird even to me,” I admitted, sighing. “I was at work and decided to try meditating again. I don’t know what happened, but somehow that ended up with a man standing in the middle of my shop yelling at me and saying he knew you, so I panicked and came here.”

Ori tilted their head to the side, one eyebrow slowly rising and for the first time, I saw a hint of fear in their dark eyes. “I think I might need a bit more detail here, Alex. A ghost came to you and said he knew me? Did he tell you his name?”

“He didn’t say. I’m sorry.” Great. In my rush to get here, I hadn’t even considered the fact that I would be rushing to tell Ori that one of their friends was likely dead.

“Just start at the beginning and we’ll figure it out, alright?” They were doing an impressive job at remaining calm, far better than I was managing.

Donovan gently squeezed my shoulder in support and I replayed the entire encounter in my head, trying to remember exactly what he’d said in that short time. “He appeared and asked me who I was,” I said, leaving out the cuss words that had accompanied it. “Usually ghosts are pretty difficult to see in the daylight, but he must be strong, because he was almost completely solid. He seemed angry he was at my store, even though he’s the one who came to me, not the other way around.” I

frowned, remembering his words. “Well, he claimed I came to him, but that’s not how my power works. He called me a, and I quote, ‘fucking novice’ and told me to tell you that he didn’t need your help, then disappeared.”

Ori blinked rapidly, absorbing all that information. Surprisingly, the fear I’d seen in their eyes disappeared, replaced by curiosity and... was that excitement?

“He spoke to you? Out loud? What did he look like?”

“Like a romance novel come to life, until he opened his mouth,” I muttered, thoroughly confused when Ori laughed in delight.

“Did he have dark hair and blue eyes? Grumpy as a hungry bear and uses the word ‘fuck’ like a comma?”

“That sounds like him, yeah,” I said, and Ori grinned, which was not the reaction I was expecting at all. “Not to be rude, but did you not like him or something? Because if he came to me, he’s... he’s dead.”

“Not a chance,” Ori said immediately, shaking their head. “There’s no way he’s dead, and I’m not just saying that out of some misplaced grief or something.”

“Except he has to be, because I don’t see living people, remember? My power deals with ghosts.” Though, whoever that man was, he had been the least-ghostly ghost I’d ever encountered. I hadn’t even felt the loss of whatever energy he must have taken from me to appear. The one time I’d seen a ghost that solid had been when Charlie passed and the energy draw knocked me on my ass the rest of the night. Even then, he hadn’t been as corporeal as this stranger.

Ori paused, their dark eyes flitting to Donovan, then away almost too fast to perceive.

“He knows everything about me and what I do,” I assured Ori. Maybe they were just trying to protect my secret? “I trust Donovan with my life and I mean that literally. He saved my life when I got possessed and the ghost tried to get me to shoot myself.”

“I think I’d like to hear that story sometime,” they murmured. They took a breath and let it out on a quiet sigh. “Alright. Remember how I told you there were others out in the world who were slightly different?”

Donovan’s hold on my shoulder faltered and I realized I’d forgotten to mention that part to him. Though, honestly, I’d all but forgotten until now.

“I remember you saying there were others, but not who or what they were,” I said slowly. “What, was he a poltergeist or something?”

“His secrets aren’t mine to tell, sorry. However, I will tell you that he was wrong, and he does need my help. He’s actually part of the project I’m working on for that friend,” they said, nodding toward the chalk circle. “He’s not dead, but he is lost, whether he wants to admit it or not.”

No matter how I twisted those words around in my head, they still didn’t make a bit of sense.

“Okay, now I’m the one who’s going to need more detail. What, exactly, do you mean by that and why did a ghost who’s not a ghost appear in my living room? What the hell is going on, Ori?”

Ori hesitated long enough for me to realize they were trying to come up with a way to explain without actually telling me anything. As a person with secrets of my own, I could appreciate the lengths they went to in order to protect their friend. As someone

who'd just had an apparently not-dead dead person appear in my house, I just wanted to know what the hell was happening to me.

"Let me start by saying you're probably not going to like my answer," Ori finally said. I'd been expecting that outcome, but not for them to be so open about it.

"At least you're honest." I waved for them to continue, already bracing myself.

Again they glanced at Donovan, biting their lip in the most obvious display of discomfort I'd seen from them yet.

"Is there a reason you don't trust me?" Donovan asked, the first time he'd spoken since he'd greeted Ori. "Nothing you and Alex talk about will leave this room. All I care about is making sure he's safe."

Ori winced. "Please don't take it personally. Our community hasn't had a great history with law enforcement in the past and that discomfort around authority runs deep."

"Wait, what community?" I asked. "Okay. Ori. I swear on my life that Donovan is trustworthy. He's a good person with a moral compass that's much stronger than mine and a protective instinct that would put a German Shepherd to shame."

"Thanks, I think," he murmured.

I reached up and laid my hand on his, smiling when he immediately turned it so he was holding onto me. The angle was awkward, but it was worth it.

Ori watched that little interaction closely, their dark eyes lingering on Donovan, assessing him in a way that sent an odd chill through me. It didn't scare me, exactly, but I abruptly remembered the strange feeling I'd had a few days ago at home, when

my mind had wandered through the mountains and trees around Lowery's Crossing. I didn't realize it at the time, but I'd been cold the rest of that night, similar to the early chill I felt when a ghost first appeared.

"I won't give details or names," Ori finally said, breaking the loaded silence. "But yes, there is a small community here made of up those of us who possess abilities or those who are not human at all."

"Wait." I held up a hand to stop them, trying to process those last few words.

What the actual hell? For the most part, I'd accepted that I was psychic, as much as that word made me cringe to even think. I'd even accepted that Ori likely had some sort of unique ability, even if they hadn't given me any details. But I'd assumed we were anomalies, outliers in a world full of 'normal' people.

Now Ori stood here, calm as anything, implying that there were enough people like me out there to have a community ? That there were nonhumans in that community? What did that even mean?

"Alex? Are you alright?" Ori asked, the concern in their voice interrupting my increasingly panicked thoughts.

"No, not really." I leaned forward in the chair, resting my elbows on my knees and burying my face in my free hand. Donovan immediately knelt beside me, not that he had much choice when I all but dragged him, clinging to his hand. "You can't just drop something like that on me, then ask if I'm okay."

"I'm sorry. I forget sometimes that you're still new to all this."

"I've been dealing with this psychic crap since I was a kid. I'm not new. I'm just..."
Confused? Scared? Slightly panicked? All of the above?

“That’s true, but you’re new to the community,” they amended. “If we’d known about you when you lived here as a kid, someone would have tried to help you. I’m not sure what we could have done, since your ability seems to be quite unique, but we would have tried.”

“No one knew. Just my aunt.” I peered up at him through my fingers. “There’ve been people like me here all along?”

“We were here before the town was settled by non-paranormals. Back then, this area was just known as The Crossing. The man who bought up all the land tacked his name on to appease his ego, and it became Lowery’s Crossing. Our people decided to protect themselves by assimilating into the community, but we didn’t lose our roots.”

“How is that possible? How have you stayed hidden this long?” My mind was reeling and I was likely going to have a major freakout when I finally made it home. Right now, I just focused on one thing at a time, trying to process what Ori was telling me.

“ We have stayed hidden by just making ourselves part of the town.” I didn’t miss how the pointed look they gave me when they said ‘we’. I just chose to ignore it. “It’s easy, in a town like this. Those of us that can blend in do. Those that are more obviously different have settled deeper into the mountains, where they have more room to be themselves.”

“Wait, so those ghost stories I heard as a kid are real? About that cult that lives out in the woods?” The story went that they caught and ate kids who found them, but I stopped before repeating that bit.

“They’re not a cult. They’re shifters,” Ori said, shaking their head, and they spoke so calmly that it took a solid ten seconds for me to actually realize what they’d said.

“Shifters?” Donovan repeated. “Like werewolves?” His voice was impressively even,

without a hint of judgment. I wasn't sure I'd have been able to manage that equilibrium right now.

"Shifters and werewolves are not the same thing and do not ever imply that in the presence of either one," Ori warned. "And no, I'm not kidding."

"They both shapeshift, right? How are they not the same thing?" I'd officially cracked. This had to be a fever dream. I'd fallen asleep while meditating and now I was in some weird, upside down world where everything I'd ever known was now turned on its head.

"Shifters can choose when to assume their other forms and they are in full control when they do. They appear fully human in that form and fully animal when they shift. Werewolves look human, but they're ruled by the moon and for the three nights it's full, they are forced to turn. They have no control over the beast they become and no one would ever mistake that form for any sort of natural creature. Implying that a shifter is a werewolf is an insult that will likely end in a fight, at best."

"So, not only is there a hidden community in the town I've spent half my life in, but that community has its own politics and prejudices. Awesome." Even to myself, I sounded slightly hysterical.

"Every group of people, no matter what abilities they have, is going to have some internal conflict, but in the end, we take care of each other. We look out for each other and we keep each other's secrets, which includes dealing with our own issues and problems, without outside intervention."

"Intervention like the local authorities?" I guessed, and they nodded.

"Exactly. I mean no offense, Detective Parker."

“You can call me Donovan, and no offense taken,” he said. “I understand. Historically, those in authority haven’t been exactly fair to anyone they considered to be different.”

“People are afraid of what they don’t understand,” Ori said, softer than I’d ever heard them before. “There are those of us who could never walk down a street in a normal human town. Keeping our existence secret is how we’ve survived this long.”

“You don’t think it would help to have at least one or two people in town that know and could help when situations arise that can’t be handled internally?” Donovan asked. “Or something too big to keep hidden happens?”

Ori raised a single, perfectly shaped brow. “Do you think we haven’t already considered that?”

“Does that mean there are people who do know?”

I could almost see the thoughts running through Donovan’s mind as he tried to figure out which of his coworkers might know about this secret other community.

“I’m telling you both this only because, Alex, you are one of us. It is entirely up to you what you do with that knowledge. If you want to reveal your secrets, I can’t stop you and I won’t try. That’s not my business. All I can do is ask you to show the same respect to the others.”

With just a few words, Ori had me neatly trapped. “Well played,” I grumbled. “Alright, but I can’t promise not to revisit this with you down the road.”

“I wait with bated breath,” they drawled, but with a smile.

“I still think telling at least the chief of police would be a good idea, if only to help

protect everyone in both communities, but you're right. It's not my job to out people against their will," Donovan agreed.

The tension in the room eased and the distrust in Ori's eyes gave way to a begrudging respect with Donovan's words.

"Very well. Let's table the discussion for another day and get back to your visitor."

"Right, the not-dead one." Honestly, I'd completely forgotten about him for a minute there, too caught up in the mess of new information Ori had thrown at me. "You said he was alive, but lost. Care to clarify?"

"What did he say to you, exactly?"

"He asked who I was, so I told him, then I think I asked him if he needed help. He got annoyed and said I was one of those . Do I want to know what he was referring to?"

Ori snorted. "Knowing him, probably not. Anything else?"

"Yeah. I asked if he remembered why he was in my house and he called me a novice and said I'd come to him, which isn't possible, so I have no idea what he meant. Then he asked if I was one of your people and when I said I knew you, he basically told us all to fuck off and leave him alone. Then he disappeared."

"He always said he hated drama, then he pulls something like that," Ori muttered under their breath. "Go back, though. He said you'd come to him? What was around you? Did you see where he was?"

I shook my head. "We were still standing in my bookstore. I can't go out looking for someone. That's not how my power works, so he must've been confused and not realized he'd somehow wandered into my house. I hate to keep pushing, because I

don't want him to be, but are you certain he's still..."

"Alive?" Ori asked when I trailed off. "I'm sure. His brother would have called me if anything happened. I'll double-check, though, because I can tell you still don't believe me."

There was an old landline phone sitting on the tiny desk in their office, and Ori quickly dialed a number. They were surprisingly calm, considering the circumstances. I didn't want their friend to be dead, of course, but I didn't see the living, so there really weren't that many other options.

"Hey, Lil. Sorry to bother you. I just wanted to check in." Ori paused, a little smile quirking their lips at whatever the other person said. I leaned in a little closer, but I couldn't make out the other half of the conversation or discern who Ori was talking to. I didn't know anyone named Lil, though. A few months ago, I would have said I knew everyone in town at least by sight, but now I found myself wondering if I knew a damn thing about the town I'd made my haven.

"Yeah, that's what Tir said. That's part of why I was calling, actually. Have you seen your brother today?" Ori paused, then sighed. I hadn't even realized they'd tensed up until the tension released and they leaned back in their chair. "I figured you would call me if anything changed, but I just wanted to be sure. If he gets cranky, tell him I'll come over and sage his house again." Ori chuckled at the person's response before exchanging a few pleasantries and finally disconnecting.

"Who was that?" I asked, practically vibrating with curiosity. Only Donovan's hand on my shoulder kept me from jumping out of my chair. "What did they say? Is your friend really alright?"

"Take a breath," Ori laughed. "That was my friend Lil. I guarantee you don't know him. He's Rian's brother and looks out for him. Rian is currently at his house right

now, being an asshole. He's as fine as he gets and not even close to dead."

Great. Had being possessed somehow opened some metaphysical door and now anyone with any kind of ability, living or dead, just wander into my life? "I'm glad he's okay, but I don't get it. How did he find me if he's not dead? That's not how any of this works."

"Are you sure?"

"What do you mean?" I frowned, unsure if I liked the look on Ori's face when they asked that.

"Are you sure that's how your power works?"

"I've been dealing with this for almost nineteen years, so yes, I'm pretty sure I know how my own ability works."

Ori turned in their chair to face me directly and I decided that, no, I did not like the look on their face.

"I'm saying this as your friend, Alex, so please don't take this personally," they said, which did not bode well. "But, as you said, you've been 'dealing with' your power. From what you've told me, you suffer through it, do what you need to, then try to act like it doesn't exist the rest of the time."

Of course, I immediately took it personally. "Anyone who was in my shoes would probably do the same. Who wants to spend their days seeing dead people?"

"I'm not blaming you. All I'm trying to say is that you can't be sure that's the extent of your power if you've never tested it. It's been a passive ability, something that happens to you. I'm just suggesting that perhaps there might be more to it."

“Like what?” It came out sharper than I’d intended, but I couldn’t help myself. If what Ori said was true, then everything I’d thought I knew about myself was wrong. I absolutely could not handle an existential crisis on a random weekday afternoon, especially not after just recovering from the fallout of fighting with Donovan.

As if thinking his name summoned him, Donovan wrapping his arms around my shoulders from behind in a loose hug, his chin resting on my head. I soaked up the silent support, clinging to it as I tried to keep it together.

“I’m not sure, but I think Rian was right.” Ori spoke cautiously, like they realized how close I was to falling apart. “It sounds like you found him , because I know him and he’d never go to anyone for help, even if he’d lost a limb and was bleeding out.”

“That was graphic.”

“But true. So if he didn’t seek you out, then the only other option is that you found him.”

“Why, though?” I protested and even to my own ears, I sounded whiny. “I’ve never been able to find someone like this, especially not while they’re still alive. It’s always been the other way around. It’s just not possible.”

“How do you know? Have you ever tried to find anyone? Have you ever tried to actively use your ability?” they countered.

I didn’t respond. I didn’t have to. We both knew the answer to that. I’d spent over half my life hiding from this power, doing the bare minimum to avoid being stalked by ghosts, then hidden it away in the back of my mind until the inevitable next time. I heard the echo of Camille’s voice in my head from the day we’d first come to see Ori.

“You’ve resigned yourself to it.”

Ori and Camille were right. I hadn't accepted my ability and I certainly hadn't tried to learn to control it. They'd given me the tools to learn, but for the most part, I'd ignored them, falling back on my old reluctant resignation.

"I'm not judging you, Alex," Ori said, softer now. "You're right. If I were in your shoes, dealing with something like that with no one to support me, I'd probably do the same as you."

"He does have support, though," Donovan countered, hugging me tighter. "Not just me, either."

"I do now, but Ori's right. Most of my life, I was trying to deal with this alone." I breathed in and out, the slow breaths I'd been practicing, and they both stayed quiet until I could center myself. "You really think there's more to what I can do?"

"I do. It may be too early to say, but to me, it seems like your ability isn't speaking to the dead so much as it is finding the lost," they said. "I can't begin to guess the extent of it, but as your friend, I'll help you test it as much as you're willing, if you'll let me. And you have a community that would gladly lend what knowledge we can, if you'll let us."

Could I do this? Did I want to do this? Until now, my power had always been something to be avoided, to lock up in the back of my mind. As I'd told Ori, it was something I suffered through, something I endured until I could go back to pretending I was normal. If what they said was true and I started expanding my ability, there would be no more pretending. There would be no going back.

"I need time. This is too much right now. It's all just... I can't..."

"I get it, Alex. Believe me, I get it. There's no hurry. Take your time and think about it as long as you need. I'll support you either way."

“You know I will, too,” Donovan murmured in my ear and despite the turmoil in my head, I took comfort in the support they were both showing me.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “Ori, I’ll let you know if anything else happens with Rian.”

“Lil and I would both appreciate that,” they said with a gentle smile. “If you decide you want to look into your abilities, I’ll be here, but know that I won’t judge you if you decide not to. It’s your life and I’m your friend, no matter what.”

A tangled mess of emotions followed Donovan and me out of Esoteric Oddities. My head ached, overfilled with too much information.

“Do you want to go home?” Donovan asked quietly. He still held my hand, a steady anchor in the storm.

“I should get back to work. You probably should, too. I think we took up your whole lunch break.”

“I don’t mind. I’m glad I could be here with you.” He stopped on the sidewalk and faced me, his free hand coming up to my cheek. “If you need anything, I’ll be right down the street, okay? And whenever you’re ready to talk, I’ll be here.”

Turning into his touch, I brushed a soft kiss to his palm. “Thank you.”

“I love you, Alex.”

“I love you, too.” More than I could ever express with words, I loved this man. I carried that love with me back to A Likely Story, holding it close while I worked and pushing everything Ori had said to the back of my mind. I’d deal with all of that later and, for the first time, I wouldn’t have to deal with it alone.

I could get used to this feeling.

Chapter 14

Donovan

Most days, I enjoyed my job. Being a detective in the sleepy town of Lowery's Crossing was a far cry from the chaos of Chicago. Instead of an endless stack of cases ranging from violent assaults to homicides, each more soul-crushing than the last, now I spent my days dealing with neighborly disputes, petty thefts, and the rare domestic abuse case. No town could be perfect, but Lowery's Crossing was the closest thing I'd found. How many detectives could say they left work at five o'clock nearly every day and almost never got called out in the middle of the night? I'd struggled at first to adjust, old habits keeping me on edge, and there were some days that were downright boring, but I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Today, the inaction grated on me. Despite the calendar saying it was early April, winter still clung to the mountains, its icy grip keeping everyone indoors. Snow still coated the ground and the local weather station was already warning of a possible winter storm in the next day or two, one last hurrah from Mother Nature before we could move on to spring. The few incidents that had been called in were being handled by the officers, leaving Will and me with nothing to do but finish reports.

"Is this what going crazy feels like?" Will whined, his eyes glued to the ancient clock mounted on the wall over our office door. "Because I think this is what going crazy feels like."

"We can get through two more hours. Let's just get this report finished and see where that leaves us." Our most recent case had been a fight between two neighbors with a

longstanding grudge that finally lead to punches being thrown, but no real injuries, so the paperwork was simple. We'd just been dragging it out as long as possible in a vain attempt to fill the day.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm glad nothing bad has happened to anyone in town, but I'd give anything to have just one interesting case right now."

"You take that back right this second," I warned. "Don't you dare jinx us like that."

"Come on, Donovan. It's Lowery's Crossing. What's the worst that could happen?"

"You're an asshole and I reserve the right to say 'I told you so' when we're knee-deep in shit later."

"I never pegged you for the superstitious type," he teased, leaning back in his chair.

"It's kind of hard not to be when dating a psychic," I pointed out.

I hadn't told anyone about what Alex's friend Ori had revealed to us a few weeks ago, but the knowledge sat in the back of my mind, taunting my curious nature. The idea of a paranormal community fascinated me, and I wanted to learn more, but I would never betray the trust Ori had reluctantly given me. Since that day, Alex hadn't brought it up again, but I knew it was on his mind. I couldn't count how many times I'd found him staring off into space, eyes unfocused, as he turned over everything in his head.

All things considered, I couldn't blame him for taking his time. His ability to see ghosts had ripped his life apart so many times that the idea of doing it more clearly terrified him. Even knowing he finally had a rock-solid support system, he couldn't make almost twenty years of trauma just disappear.

“You guys still good? I know you said it all worked out, but we haven’t really talked since then.”

“Yeah, we’re good,” I said. “That reminds me, though. The five of us haven’t really spent any time together lately. We should all get dinner together.”

Will shrugged. “I’m in. My social calendar isn’t exactly bustling right now.”

“If you want to message your sister, I’ll text Alex. If they’re free, maybe we could do it tonight? The snowstorm will probably miss us, but just in case.”

“Now who’s the jinx?” Will glanced up from his phone. “That’s how you guarantee we get a blizzard.”

He had a point, not that I’d admit it, so I busied myself sending a quick message to Alex. The bookstore must’ve been slow, because he texted back almost immediately and agreed. He even said he’d close up a little early to meet us after work, so it must’ve been an extremely slow day.

“Alex is in,” I reported without looking up from sending Alex an ‘I love you’ text.

“Cami and Raina are in, too, as long as it’s not too late,” Will said. “I will never understand how they willingly go to work at 4:00 in the morning. When we were kids, almost nothing would get Camille out of bed before noon, if she had a choice.”

“Sounds like Alex.” I slid the phone back onto my desk and stretched. We’d managed to kill a half hour, at least, and now we had something to look forward to.

“I guess I can try to get this paperwork done,” Will said with all the enthusiasm of a man walking to the guillotine.

Somehow, despite Will jinxing us, we were able to leave on time without any major emergencies cropping up. The five of us had decided on The Taphouse for dinner, which was only a block over from the police department. Despite the cold, it was easier to just walk rather than deal with parking, so we headed that way.

The Taphouse had started life as a bar, with one cook to make some basic bar snacks to keep people drinking. The food had turned out to be so good, though, that the owner wisely changed course and turned it into a restaurant. Alex and I had been here a few times and he'd filled me in on the local history.

We weren't the only ones who'd decided to grab some food before the snow, apparently, because the place was already filling up. Despite living here less than a year, I spotted quite a few people I recognized. Mrs. Sharper, the infamous town gossip, sat at a high-top table with her husband and another couple, talking excitedly about something. A few of the night shift patrol officers sat together in a corner booth with the remnants of their dinner between them, relaxing before they had to go on duty. I even spotted Julian Delaney and his twins, Evie and Arlo, seated together at a round table by the window. The kids were talking away while their dad just listened with a look of pure love on his face.

Alex must have coordinated with the girls, because the three of them bustled through the door together about five minutes later. Alex spotted me immediately and I rose to greet him, smiling when he pulled me into a soft kiss the moment he was close enough.

"Hi," I murmured against his cold lips.

"Hi," he said, eyes lighting up when he laughed.

"I'm going to put you two at opposite ends of the booth if you don't stop being disgustingly cute," Raina complained and Alex just laughed again, lingering for

another kiss before stepping away. He slid in beside me, with Raina in the middle and Camille on her left. Will and I ended up at the two ends of the booth.

“This is nice. Thank you guys for inviting us,” Camille said once we were all settled.

“Thanks for coming. I know we’re getting close to your bedtime,” I said. Alex sat pressed against my side and I settled my hand on his knee. He immediately laid his over mine, our fingers twining.

“We’ll be fine,” Raina shrugged. “I’ll have Rachel add an extra shot of espresso to my drink in the morning.”

“You most certainly will not,” Camille said. “The last time you had extra caffeine, you talked for three hours straight. I don’t think you took a breath the entire time.”

“And that’s different from her usual how..?”

Raina turned a scandalized look on Alex. “I’ll bring back that matcha lime latte and that’s all you’ll get for a week, Alexander Henry Copeland.”

“Ooh, we’re doing government names?” Will winced, but it looked like he was trying damn hard to smother a laugh. “I’d grovel now if I were you.”

“You know I was only kidding, Raina. I love you, and you tie with Camille for my favorite woman on the planet. You make the best coffee in the world, even when you experiment with things that should never go together. Without you, I would be adrift in a decaf ocean, and that would be a genuine tragedy. I would—”

“Alright, alright,” Raina laughed, cutting off Alex’s rambling apology. “Apology accepted. Now put the puppy dog eyes away and let’s order some food.”

“You used the big sad eyes on her? That’s not playing fair,” I murmured in Alex’s ear once everyone else was distracted by the menu.

“Worth it. You never had to try that latte. I’ll use whatever weapons I have to in order to avoid ever doing that again.” He leaned against my side, a soft smile on his lips when he looked around the table. The girls shared a menu, giggling about something Raina had said, and Will watched them with a fond smile.

“We should do this more,” Alex said, loud enough for the others to hear him this time. “We don’t hang out enough as a group.”

“That’s because you guys always get sappy around each other,” Will said, rolling his eyes. “As the resident single member of this group, I have a limit on how long I can deal with it when you’re all acting twitterpated.”

“That just means we need to find someone for you to make heart eyes at,” Raina teased.

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Camille said. “I think my dear brother just needs to pluck up a little courage.”

“And we’re changing the subject now. How about this weather, huh?” The low lighting made it difficult to tell, but it looked to me like Will was blushing. His eyes darted across the room, lingering for a split second before looking away. I’d bet my next paycheck he’d paused on a small round table near the window.

“Hang on. I feel like I’m missing something,” Alex protested, looking back and forth between Will and his sister.

“Me, too. What did I miss and how did I miss it?” Raina asked. She pouted at Camille, who just patted her shoulder.

“You didn’t miss anything, and if we keep talking about my love life, I’m walking out right now.”

Camille scooted over in the booth and leaned her head against her twin’s shoulder. “We’re only teasing you because we love you, but we’ll let it go if it makes you that uncomfortable.”

“I’m not uncomfortable. I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“Alright, then. Topic closed.”

That finally got a small smile from Will and even though I knew he and Camille had been born identical, for a moment there I actually saw it when she mirrored his smile.

“Okay, if we’re moving on, we should probably go ahead and actually order food before they kick us out of here for loitering,” Raina said and I had to laugh. A bit heavy-handed, but it worked, because Alex and Camille’s attention was diverted from Will to the menu and Will’s shoulders slumped in relief.

The conversation stayed light throughout the meal and as I looked around at my friends, warm contentment settled in my chest. I’d never had a group of real friends before. Not like this, anyway. I’d had work buddies, guys I’d grab a beer with after a long shift, but they weren’t the type of friends I’d call if I actually needed anything. Now, I knew I could call any one of them and they’d drop everything and help me deal with a dead body, no questions asked. Literally, since we all knew what Alex could do.

We were debating the merits of ordering the dessert sampler to split, despite how full we were, when Will’s phone rang. He looked at the caller ID and frowned, but answered immediately.

“Hello?” He paused, frown deepening. “Yes, this is Detective Dodd. I remember you, yes.”

“That doesn’t look good,” Alex murmured.

“No, it doesn’t.” I caught the server’s eye and motioned for the bill. I had a gut feeling that our night out was over.

“What? When?” Will sat up straighter, catching my eyes across the table. “No, no, you did the right thing. Give us 15 minutes and we’ll be there, okay? We’ll take care of it.” He disconnected as I handed my card over to pay.

“What’s up? Do you guys need to leave?” Raina asked, and Camille’s eyes were dark with worry when she looked at her twin.

“Yeah, sorry. Sorry to dine and ditch,” he apologized, already sliding out and putting his jacket on. I did the same, looking over at Alex.

“Can you grab my card for me?” The server hadn’t returned with it and we clearly couldn’t wait.

“I’ve got it. Be careful, okay?” he whispered and I leaned in, kissing him as long as I could.

“I will. I’ll let you know when I’ll be home.”

Leaving the girls and Alex behind, Will and I hurried out of the restaurant, breaking into a jog as soon as we were on the sidewalk.

“What’s going on? Who was that?”

“Violet DeVor. I met her and her husband when we were wrapping up the Perez case and doing interviews. She must’ve kept my number.”

“Did something happen?” I pressed. We were already back in the parking lot of the precinct and heading inside to grab vehicle keys.

“Yeah. Landon DeVor is missing.”

Will had been the one to interview the DeVor family, but I remembered Landon and his sister Amelie from the initial interviews right after Rebecca went missing. Landon was a gangly kid, all arms and legs. With any luck, he’d hit one last growth spurt and fill out some. I’d assumed his father would be roughly the same build, an older version of his son.

The man in front of me, however, couldn’t have been more different from his son. Even sitting down, I could tell he had to be over six feet tall. His broad shoulders and barrel chest wouldn’t look out of place on a pro football team and his heavy muscles spoke of either a lifetime of hard work or a daily gym routine. The callouses on his hands and knuckles told me it was the former, his skin rough when I shook his hand.

“Mr. DeVor, we got here as quickly as we could,” Will said, shaking the man’s hand as well. “What happened?”

“I didn’t want your help,” the man said bluntly, his voice deep and rough. “My family are all out looking for him, but my wife insisted we call you.”

Violet DeVor glared at her husband from her spot across the room. She couldn’t seem to keep still, her hands twisting in her cardigan in a way that reminded me of Alex. Unlike Jean, Violet genuinely looked worried.

“Well, I’m glad she did. With this much ground to cover, it’s a good idea to have as many people searching as possible,” Will said. To his credit, he kept it professional, no hint of judgment in his voice. It took an effort for me not to respond, though. What kind of parent didn’t want help when their child went missing?

“Landon knows how to handle himself in the woods. He’ll be fine.”

“Well, just to be safe, we’re happy to help look for him,” I said. “Can you tell us what happened? How long has he been gone?”

Jean muttered something under his breath. I didn’t catch it, but Violet must have, because she finally moved away from the wall and joined us. Where her husband was tall and barrel-chested, she was shorter and stocky, but carried herself with the grace of a dancer even in the middle of this chaos.

“Thank you both for coming,” she said. “The last time I saw Landon was shortly after school, so about four or five hours ago. He and Amelie were going to walk to the Perez house and see Rebecca. She’s still not allowed to go anywhere, so they were going to hang out.”

“Is Amelie alright? Did she see anything?” Will asked quickly.

Violet shook her head. “She didn’t go. Just before they left, she was out in the back pasture helping her uncle round up the horses before the storm hits. Something must have spooked them, because her horse threw her and she banged up her knee pretty badly. She’s in the kitchen.”

“So Landon decided to go alone?” I asked. Something she’d said sparked something in the back of my mind, but it was still too vague to make out at the moment.

“Yes, he did. He’s friends with Rebecca’s brother, too. I already called Eva Perez and

she hasn't seen him," she added, anticipating our next question.

"He wouldn't have met up with anyone and decided to go do something else?" Will asked and I noticed he said it carefully, likely trying to avoid implying anything about Landon.

"Landon is a good kid," Jean growled, eyes narrowing. "If he said he was going straight there, he was going straight there."

The details of Rebecca's case filtered through my mind and I remembered one potentially important detail. "Would he have taken the path through the trees?"

"It wouldn't make sense not to," Violet nodded. "Landon prefers to be outside much more than he prefers to drive and has always seemed to enjoy the walk there. Our family is looking for him, like my husband said, and I told them to start there."

"It's pretty dark outside. Is it safe for them to be out there in this?" Will asked, glancing out the window. The temperature had already started to drop, and it was looking more and more likely that the promised snowstorm would hit us.

"They'll be fine. We'll find Landon on our own," Jean grumbled. He hadn't moved from the couch, still watching me and Will like we'd somehow offended him.

"Still, we'd like to help as much as we can." I studied Jean DeVor as closely as I dared, which wasn't easy, considering how often his eyes darted to me. What was this guy's deal? "Does Landon have any location apps or anything on his phone we could try?"

"He does. We tried that and found his phone near the path, but there was no sign of him."

Of course, because why would any of this be simple?

“Is there anything else we should know before we start searching?” Will asked the two of them.

“Landon is a good kid,” Violet replied, quiet, every word laced with worry. “I love Rebecca dearly and I mean no offense to her, but he’s not like her. He wouldn’t disappear like she did. The only way he wouldn’t come home is if he physically wasn’t able to.”

“I promise you, we’ll do everything in our power to find him,” Will said. “Call me if anything changes, okay? If he hasn’t turned up by morning, we’ll organize a larger search party.”

“Thank you. Thank you both.” She reached out and gripped both of our hands. “If we find him, I’ll call you.”

I gave her my number on our way out the door, and Will and I walked back to the car in silence. Neither of us spoke until we’d backed out of the drive and were back on the county road heading into town.

“That was weird, right? With Jean?” Will finally asked. He was driving, leaving me free to type up everything in the MDT in our car. The computer was just as ancient as the ones in our office, but it did the job.

“That was very weird,” I agreed. “I’ve never seen a parent so unconcerned about their kid’s safety.”

“Seriously, if I had a kid and they’d gone missing, I’d be burning the entire world down trying to find them. He didn’t seem to give a damn about Landon.”

“This whole situation is strange. What are the odds that two kids that are neighbors both go missing at separate times? And why wouldn’t Jean want our help?”

Will cocked his head. “That one’s easy, at least. Did you see the way he looked at us? I know some people aren’t fans of law enforcement, but he took that to the extreme.” He bit his lip, coming to the same question I had. “Do you think he maybe did something to his kid, and that’s why he doesn’t want us involved?”

“Unfortunately, when something happens to a kid, the first suspect is always the parent.”

“Wherever Landon is, at least he’s probably just hurt and lost, right? If it were... anything else, Alex would know, wouldn’t he?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I don’t think every single person who passes comes to him.” Thinking of Alex reminded me of Ori and what they’d said, though, and I froze in the middle of typing. Ori had repeatedly said the paranormal community didn’t trust the police. Was it possible? Could that explain Jean DeVor’s reluctance to talk to us?

“But he told us that the ones who do are usually the ones who wouldn’t be found otherwise, and that sounds exactly like what’s happening with Landon DeVor. So if he hasn’t come to Alex, that means he’s probably not dead.” Will sounded so earnest, so hopeful, that I couldn’t bring myself to disagree. We were both experienced and trained, but sometimes blind hope was all that got us through our days. The desperate hope that, just once, the most unlikely theory would win and we’d get that fairy tale happy ending.

“I’ll call him and warn him about what’s going on, so he’s not surprised if Landon tries to reach out to him.”

Will sighed heavily, fingers drumming across the steering wheel. “I don’t think I’ve ever hoped that a kid ran away, but fuck, I hope that’s all this is.”

“I get it. I feel the same.” I scrubbed my hands across my face. So much for a quiet night at home with Alex, like I’d been hoping. “Let’s stop and grab some coffee on the way back. It’s going to be a long night.”

Chapter 15

Alex

Hours after Will and Donovan had rushed out of The Taphouse, I sat alone on my living room couch with my phone in my hands and Louis purring against my leg. The TV provided some background noise, but not enough to hold my attention. With absolutely no idea of what had happened, my imagination was left to run wild and if there was one thing my brain was good at doing, it was catastrophizing.

At this late hour, the rumor mill in town wouldn't be awake to churn out any information, so all I could do was sit and wait to hear from Donovan. If it was particularly bad, though, there was a good chance he wouldn't make it home until the wee hours of the morning.

"Louis, this sucks," I said to the sleeping cat, who didn't so much as twitch. Even on his best days, he wasn't the best conversational partner.

Grief spiked through my chest as I looked around the empty house. What I wouldn't give to have Charlie or Aunt Lizzie here to talk me out of the doom spiral in my mind. Lizzie would have held my hand and probably keep me distracted by attempting to bake. She always said cookies could solve most problems, which might have been true, except her attempts usually came out more like charcoal briquettes than anything resembling actual food. We'd laugh and clean up the mess while Uncle David took over and made something actually edible and for awhile, their love and laughter would make my problems disappear.

Charlie, on the other hand, took an entirely different approach. He'd tease and snark and sass me, probably call me a drama queen, then make me put on some trashy reality show and watch it with him. It was nearly impossible to remain sad or upset with Charlie Taggart around.

How much of that had really been him, though? He'd never even hinted at what his life had been like before he died, and if I hadn't found that notebook, I never would have known.

Thinking about the notebook immediately lodged it front and center in my brain, tempting me to look at it again. I hadn't touched it since the day I'd read that first entry, but every time I passed that closed door now, I thought about it. It just felt wrong to read more after remembering how Lizzie had promised she'd never read it. I hadn't made that promise, but digging deeper still felt like I was violating Charlie's trust.

An alert from my phone paused the war in my brain and I looked down to see a text from Donovan.

Are you still up?

Yes. Come over? I immediately responded. Donovan didn't keep me waiting.

Be there in 5.

Anxiety and relief fluttering in my stomach, I hurriedly got up and unlocked the door, dislodging Louis in the process. He meowed in response and rolled over onto his other side, but didn't actually get up. Clearly, that was too much effort.

I saw the headlights of Donovan's car pull in just a few minutes later, and I had the front door open before he'd even parked. The frigid wind cut through my sweatpants

and hoodie like they were nothing and my bare feet instantly tingled with the cold, but I waited for him anyway as he trudged up the driveway and straight into my arms.

“Hey,” I whispered in his ear, hugging him tight.

“Hey.” He sounded worn out, and he leaned against me as we stood in the open door.

“Do you want to go to bed?” I finally asked when the cold got to be too much for me. I kept hold of him, though, and we did an awkward shuffle inside. Donovan must have used his foot to shut the door, because I heard it close, but he never let go of me, either.

“Yeah. I probably should have gone back to my place, but I wanted to see you. Did I wake you up?”

“I’m glad you came. I was still awake. I wanted to make sure you were alright,” I said. We had to step away from each other to make it to the bedroom without breaking our necks, so I kept my hand in his, leading him through the darkness to the bedroom at the back of the house.

“It’s been a long night. I have to head back in first thing, but I just need to sleep for a bit first.” His words were heavy, thick with weariness and frustration.

“Can I ask what’s going on? You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” I said quickly, just in case it was a rough one. I worked as I talked, helping him out of his clothes and leaving them on the floor to deal with later.

“It’s nothing too bad yet, I hope. Landon DeVor disappeared this afternoon, and we haven’t been able to find him yet.”

“Wait, there’s another kid missing?” Everything else disappeared and it was all I

could do not to stumble back as memories crashed over me. The police vans outside Nina Martingale's house. The stories on the news about the search efforts and how quickly they turned into somber reports of her death. Finding her on the path, her tiny body tossed in the dirt and covered with leaves, like she was less than nothing.

"Alex. Alex, it's okay."

Warm hands cupped my face and I blinked through the memories to see Donovan still in front of me, watching me with concern.

"Sorry," I breathed, and I hated how ragged it came out.

"You don't have anything to apologize for. I should have realized how triggering that could be for you. I'm sorry."

I shook my head, careful not to dislodge his hands. His touch grounded me, giving me something to focus on besides those old memories. "I'm fine. Come on, let's get you settled." I took a second to kick off my sweats, then tugged him into bed, pulling the comforter up around us.

"I shouldn't have brought it up," he apologized again, and I shook my head.

"I promise I'm fine. It just shook me up for a second. I'm more worried about you right now."

Donovan slid closer, wrapping his arms around me. "I'll be okay. I still think we'll find him."

I caught a very slight hesitation in his voice, so tiny I wouldn't have noticed if I didn't know him as well as I did. It didn't take a genius to put the pieces together.

“He hasn’t come to me, so there’s a good chance he’s still alive,” I murmured and the way the tension eased from his shoulders told me I’d guessed right.

“I think the DeVor family might be part of that community Ori was talking about,” he murmured. “Jean really didn’t like that Will and I were there.”

“I can call Ori and find out,” I offered.

“I’d appreciate that, actually. Will and I are going to organize a search party early tomorrow morning and try to locate him. If Ori has any friends that would be willing to help, that could be really useful.”

From the bed, I could just make out the alarm clock on my dresser. It was already well after midnight and I had no idea what kind of hours Ori kept.

“I’ll call them first thing in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Donovan said, lifting his head from the pillow just enough to kiss me. “I’m sorry I kept you waiting up.”

“You’re worth losing a little sleep,” I teased, and it got the little smile I’d been hoping for. “After the day you’ve had, the last thing you need is to sleep alone in an empty house.”

“I do like when I wake up and you’re the first thing I see.” He smiled, so soft and warm and genuine that it stole my breath.

“You know...” I hesitated for a moment, but this was something that had been simmering in the back of my mind for awhile now and for the first time, the moment actually felt right. “If that’s the case, I’ve been thinking that maybe, and you don’t have to, no pressure or anything, but I was thinking that it’d be a good idea and you

could save some money and it'd be a lot easier and—”

Warm lips cut me off, Donovan's kiss stealing the rambling words away and calming the cycle of anxiety before it could well and truly kick in.

“Do you want to move in?” I breathed out, breaking away just enough to speak while I still had the nerve.

“Yes.” Donovan didn't hesitate, didn't ask me if I was sure, which would just set off my anxiety all over again and make me second-guess myself. No, Donovan Parker knew me and knew I needed that certainty. I'd thought I couldn't possibly love him more than I already did and in that moment, he proved me wrong.

“Great,” I said, then winced. That didn't exactly sound enthusiastic. “You don't feel like I'm pressuring you or anything?”

“Alex,” he murmured. He kissed me again, then another time, lingering a little longer and when he spoke again, his lips barely left mine. “I meant what I said. I love waking up to you every morning. I love falling asleep with you in my arms, even though you turn into an octopus in your sleep. Our nights here, just the two of us, are my favorite part of my day. There's nothing I want more than to share a life with you here in this house.”

“I'll learn to cook, so we can have dinner together more,” I blurted out. Groaning, I ducked my head, burying my face against his chest. “You gave this beautiful little speech that almost made me cry and I come back with ‘I'll try to cook better’.”

Donovan's chest stuttered beneath my cheek as he laughed and his warm arms wrapped around me. “I know what you meant. We'll figure it out together. We probably shouldn't be eating out as much as we do, anyway,” he teased.

“My uncle was a really great cook. He left his old recipe book here for me and I’ve never used it. Maybe we could try some together?” I wasn’t as close to Uncle David as I’d been to Aunt Lizzie, but he was a good man and he’d been there for me when I desperately needed someone to give a shit.

Donovan kissed me one more time, warm and sweet. “I’d like that a lot.” His lips brushed across my cheek, down my jaw, and to my throat. “I love you, Alex.” He whispered the words into my skin and stole my breath away, my chest tight with the force of my love for this man.

He slid lower, disappearing beneath the comforter, and when his mouth found me again I gasped, the sound seeming to echo in the silence. Pleasure shivered up my spine and I arched into his touch, worries and anxiety and fears slipping away as he touched me. The real world could wait until tomorrow.

Morning came far too quickly. Not even morning, actually, since the sun still hadn’t risen when the alarm on Donovan’s phone went off. I’d fallen asleep held securely in his arms and I woke up the same way, our legs tangled together and a bit of drool on his chest, which I quickly wiped away before he fully woke up.

“G’morning,” he rumbled, eyes at half-mast.

“It’s still night.”

“Yep. Time to get up, anyway.” He yawned so widely my jaw ached in sympathy.

I tried to kick my brain into gear, but the short rest and lack of caffeine made it difficult. “I’ll call Ori,” I said, reluctantly sliding out of our warm bed.

“I’ll call Will. I texted him and Chief Cornell last night. She’ll help coordinate the search party.” Donovan’s years of experience with screwed up police hours came in handy and he already looked energized. I, on the other hand, still stood in the middle of the room trying to remember what step came after ‘get out of bed’.

Luckily for me, Donovan steered me to the dresser and opened the drawer.

“It’s supposed to be cold today and that snowstorm isn’t swerving, so dress warm.”

“Yes, sir,” I said with a nod. Okay, I could handle getting dressed.

“Let me know what Ori says? I left my phone out in the living room, so I’ll plug it into the charger out there while I call the chief.”

Right. Get dressed, call Ori.

The first part went well enough. Living in the mountains meant keeping cold weather clothes on hand pretty much all year and learning how to layer properly for maximum warmth. I dressed on auto-pilot, focusing most of my attention on what to say to Ori if they answered the phone.

My phone lay on the nightstand, so I dialed Ori’s number and put it on speaker while I tugged on thick socks.

“Hi, Alex,” they said, answering on the third ring. It didn’t sound like I’d woken them, at least. “I’m a little busy at the moment.”

“Hey, Ori. I’ll keep it quick,” I promised. “I just had a question. Is the DeVor family part of the... other community?”

There was a beat of silence before Ori replied. “Why are you asking?”

“Jean DeVor reported his son Landon missing last night. Donovan and Will are organizing a search party to go look for him, but I guess Jean wasn’t very helpful. I just wanted to know, so I have an idea of what we’re getting into with this.”

“Wait, what?” I heard some fumbling, then rustling, like Ori had put their hand over the microphone. They said something, too muffled for me to make out, and I realized they weren’t alone. I didn’t get a chance to linger on that realization before they were back on the line. “Landon is missing?”

“Yeah, they haven’t seen him since yesterday evening. You said that people like us don’t usually like police and it just made me wonder.”

“Fuck,” they hissed. “Yes, they’re part of our community. They’re shifters. Landon will stand a better chance out there than a human teenager, but if he hasn’t come home on his own by now, that’s not good. I’ll round up some volunteers and we’ll look, too.”

“Thank you, Ori.” Surely, even if humans couldn’t find him, a shifter could, right? I didn’t know how any of that worked, but animals had better senses than humans usually, so that meant one of them would find Landon. It made sense in my head, at least.

“Don’t thank me until we’ve found him,” they warned. “What about you?”

“What about me? I’m going with Donovan to search.”

Even through the phone, I could almost see Ori rolling their eyes. “I still say your power is finding the lost, something that would be really useful right about now, I’d imagine. Have you tried?”

“You might be right, but I still don’t know how it works and I don’t have time to

waste figuring it out when I could be out helping in the search,” I protested, weak as it was.

“If that’s what you have to tell yourself. Whatever, do what you’d like. I’m going to make some calls.”

The line abruptly disconnected, leaving me standing in my living room even more confused than I’d already been and a little stung by Ori’s curt words.

“Was that Ori? What did they say?”

Donovan joined me in the bedroom, adjusting the sleeve of his sweater. Even under about a dozen layers, he was still unfairly attractive.

“They said they’d round up some volunteers to help look for Landon. I don’t think they wanted me to say anything, but you already know, so it’s fine, I guess. Landon and his family are... what word should I even use? ‘Paranormal’ sounds wrong, like just because they’re different, they’re not ‘normal’. I’ll have to ask Ori.”

Donovan held up a hand to stop me before I could start rambling again. “Let’s stick with ‘paranormal’ for now until we know, okay?”

“Right,” I said sheepishly. “Apparently they’re shifters? So Ori thinks Landon has a better chance out there alone than a regular human kid might, but they’re worried that he didn’t come home on his own.”

“Are Ori and their volunteers going to be working with the police search?”

“That’s not the impression I got, no.”

“Disappointing, but not surprising,” he shrugged. “I talked to the chief. She’s got

every officer not on duty rounded up to help, plus most of the fire department. They're working on spreading the word to get some more people before we head out."

"Oh, I should call Raina and Camille, if Will hasn't already. I bet they'll want to come."

"You do that. I'll throw some supplies together."

With a quick kiss, Donovan went back out to the living area to get ready. Raina answered when I called, and she and Camille agreed to join the search, along with recruiting a few others. At this rate, the whole town would be out searching for Landon.

There was a harsh bite to the pre-dawn chill when we stepped outside a few minutes later. Even bundled up, with a hat and scarf on, the air stung my bare face, and this was the warmest it'd been in days. I couldn't imagine being lost outside in this kind of cold overnight. A human wouldn't stand a chance, but I had to hold on to hope that Landon would be alright.

A small crowd waited at the old mercantile building when we arrived. I didn't see Ori, but that didn't surprise me. Given what they'd told me, I'd already assumed the non-human crowd would be organizing on their own.

"I need to talk to Will and coordinate this so we don't get more people lost out there," Donovan said, and I spotted Will at the front of the group with Chief Cornell and a few police officers. I recognized Ginny Lake and Casey Sheers, the officers who'd arrested me during the fiasco with Andre Marcel a few months ago. I made it a point to avoid the police station ever since, mostly because it was haunted, but partly because it was awkward as hell to make small talk with them after that.

“I’ll find you before we head out,” I nodded. “Go ahead.”

Left to my own devices and with Camille and Raina not here yet, I stepped to the side, out of the main group, and took a quick look at who all had volunteered. I spotted a few other small business owners I knew, along with a few neighbors and acquaintances. Even Mr. King, the town’s grumpy loner, was here, standing apart from everyone else with a scowl on his face that kept anyone from getting too close. A cluster of firefighters stood near the front, along with several paramedics in their gear. I vaguely recognized the medic who’d been at Silver Lake and taken me to the hospital.

I hadn’t realized seeing all of these people at once again would trigger so many memories. A little desperate now for a distraction, I latched onto the first familiar, safe face I saw and made my way over.

“Hi, Quinn.” He stood slightly apart from the group like I’d been, but where I’d done it to observe, I had a feeling he’d just been hoping no one would talk to him.

“Oh. Um, hi, Alex,” he mumbled.

“Did Raina call you? You got here pretty quickly.”

“N-no, she didn’t. My appointments this morning both called and canceled so they could search, so I thought I should help, too.” He shrugged, not meeting my eyes, but that wasn’t unusual from what I knew of Quinn. The few interactions I’d had with him had been pretty identical to this.

“Thank you for coming. With all of us looking, I bet we’ll find him in no time.”

Quinn just nodded, trying and failing to come up with a follow-up. As much as I needed a distraction, I didn’t want to make him even more uncomfortable. “I’ve got

to go check in with Donovan, but be careful out there, okay?”

“I will. You, too,” he said with poorly disguised relief.

I went back to wandering the perimeter of the group, nodding to those I recognized as I went past, until I finally found another familiar face standing by himself. Unlike Quinn, who kept to the edges, Julian Delaney stood near the front, fully decked out in winter gear.

“Hey, Julian. I didn’t expect to see you out here,” I said in greeting.

“I’m friends with Khalil, one of the firefighters. He called me and I couldn’t not come,” he said, sounding almost offended that I’d implied he wouldn’t be here.

“I just thought you’d need to be home with the twins, is all,” I explained hurriedly, relief flooding me when he relaxed.

“They’re actually in Aurora for the week with their grandparents. This wasn’t how I’d planned to spend my first kid-free day in three years, but I’m glad I’m able to help.”

“I’ll bet if you let Camille know when they’re coming back, she’ll bake up something special for them. They’re her favorite customers in the whole town.”

“The feeling is very mutual,” Julian laughed. “If we don’t go at least twice a week, they raise absolute hell. Trust me when I say there is nothing worse than the wrath of grumpy three-year-olds.”

“Alright, folks, listen up!” Chief Cornell called, her voice easily carrying over the small crowd. Julian and I both fell silent along with everyone else, the moment of levity disappearing as the reality of the situation really sank in. “We’re looking for

Landon DeVor. You'll be split up into groups and assigned a search area. Each group will be led by either an officer or a firefighter, who will all be in contact via radio. We're expecting the snow to pick up pretty fast in the next few hours. Our goal is to find him before it gets bad, but if for some reason that doesn't happen, we will try again as soon as it's safe. None of you are to go wandering around in the mountains on your own."

Her gaze drifted in my direction for a split second, almost too quickly to catch, and it took real willpower to not step back into the group and try to hide. Some little part of me was still waiting for her to come question me about Andre even now. How I'd stayed off her radar this long was a mystery, one I hoped would continue forever.

She was nothing if not efficient, working with Will and Donovan to split everyone up into groups. Julian ended up in Will's group, apparently to Will's surprise, because he immediately went a little red when Julian greeted him. I ended up with Donovan and I only realized Camille and Raina had arrived when they joined us. I spotted Quinn with Officer Lake and the two women who ran the little bistro on Main Street before we all split up to begin searching our assigned block.

The first snowflakes began to fall as the group separated, swirling down from ominous gray clouds. With what I knew from years of living here, we only had a few hours at best before Chief Cornell called off the search, which meant we had to hurry.

It was going to be a long day.

Three hours of searching the old Silver Lake reservoir yielded no clues about Landon DeVor's whereabouts. As expected, the snow started coming down hard, faster, reducing visibility to almost zero in just those few short hours.

Donovan, Raina, Camille, and I trudged back into town in silence, dejected and downtrodden. The other volunteers were the same, all of us waiting quietly for Chief Cornell to return. Despite the efforts of almost a hundred of us, no one had found so much as a hint of a clue. The radios stayed silent the entire time, crackling to life only to tell everyone to come back.

The chief waited until everyone was accounted for, standing straight with her shoulders squared despite the disappointment in her eyes.

“Thank you all again for coming out,” she said, her voice carrying easily across the small crowd. “I know we’re all disappointed, but I can’t risk more people getting lost out in this weather. As soon as it’s safe, we’ll go out again. Spread the word to your friends and neighbors, but under no circumstances is anyone to go out on their own. Now go home, get warm, and thank you for your help.”

“I really thought someone would find him,” Camille admitted softly. Her cheeks and nose were red from the cold, despite the pink scarf wrapped around her neck. “Do you think he’ll be okay, Donovan?”

“His dad says he’s a smart kid. Wherever he is, if he’s able to, hopefully he’ll have found some sort of shelter,” he assured her.

“What if someone took him?” Raina asked. “Has anyone even considered that?”

Donovan shook his head. “I know about as much as you do at the moment. If that’s a possibility, I’m sure the chief is working on it. If we don’t have any luck with tomorrow’s search, I’m assuming we’ll have to seriously consider that.”

“And he’s not..?” she glanced over at me with a tiny wince.

“Not that I know of. If anything happens, I’ll let you know. I promise.”

“My weather app said the snow should stop by evening, so maybe we can go out again tomorrow?” Camille suggested. “We’ll open up in the morning, then come search. Ashley and Rachel can handle the counter for one morning. Free coffee and breakfast for everyone out searching tomorrow.” She glanced at her girlfriend for confirmation, and Raina nodded.

“That sounds like a good plan,” Donovan agreed. “As soon as I get any updates from the chief, either Alex or I will text you.”

We exchanged hugs before they left, heading back to their apartment over Buns ‘n’ Roses. Donovan and I lingered until we saw them safely inside, then I slipped my hand into his.

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter 16

Donovan

By unspoken agreement, neither of us said anything on the short walk home. And Alex's house truly was home. In all the chaos, I hadn't had time to really process that he'd asked me to move in. We had a lot to figure out, but it would have to wait. All I could focus on was Landon. I'd really hoped we'd find him before it got bad.

Alex didn't push for any words once we were inside. Instead, he turned to me and gently unwound my scarf, draping it across a coat hook in the small coat closet by the front door. He did the same with my jacket, unzipping it and helping slide it down my arms before putting it away. When he went for my sweater, I gently caught his hands, brushing a soft kiss to his knuckles. Alex's soft little smile kindled a little ember of hope inside me, assuring me that we would be okay.

I took my time with him, showing the same care he'd shown me as I helped him out of his scarf and jacket. Our boots followed, kicked off inelegantly and landing in a tangled heap in the closet. Alex's laugh was music to my ears and when he stepped close and kissed me, I knew there was nothing I wouldn't do to keep him forever.

"Do we need to talk?" I breathed into the space between us when he broke away.

"It can wait."

His hands in mine, Alex drew me through the dark house to the bedroom we'd shared for months, the bedroom that was now ours. The falling snow muted the weak light

of the sun, casting the room in soft shadows.

When the door closed with a gentle click, Alex released me, only to slide his hands under the hem of my sweater, pushing it up, up, and off. It fell in a heap on the floor, immediately forgotten. Barely half a day had passed since I'd felt his touch, but it seemed so much longer.

I reached for him, but he lightly caught my wrists and shook his head.

“Let me. Please.”

I could deny him nothing and let my hands fall, giving him free rein. Alex took his time, each touch lingering, like he was memorizing me all over again. His fingertips trailed across my collarbone and down my chest, drifting across the button of my jeans. A moment later, his lips followed the same trail, leaving goosebumps in his wake. In the gentle darkness, all I could do was feel, and every moment was electric, my skin sensitized to his touch.

His breath fluttered across my stomach and I couldn't help a little shudder, arousal surging through me. Slowly, almost teasing, he sank to his knees in front of me. I could just make out his silhouette, but I didn't need to see him for my body to react. When I felt the tiniest touch of his tongue just above the top of my jeans, I groaned out loud.

“Alex...”

“I've got you,” he hummed, pressing a soft kiss to my bare skin. His hands were firm as he ran them up my thighs, avoiding where I really wanted him in favor of undoing the top button. I thought for a moment he would keep teasing me, pushing me closer to the edge, but Alex took pity on me and kept going, undoing the zipper and pushing my jeans down just enough to free my aching cock.

The first touch of his lips nearly sent me over the edge. My hips jerked before I could stop myself, and the soft huff of laughter from Alex did nothing to cool my need. I'd never wanted anyone as much as I wanted Alex Copeland. For him, I forced myself to go still, fighting the instinctive urge to move.

He tugged my jeans further down, a little impatient now, pushing and pulling until he got them to my ankles and I could kick them off. I stood bare before him now, completely naked, while he knelt in front of me still fully clothed. Need pulsed through me and I nearly cried out when he finally touched me again. His warm hand wrapped around the base of my cock, holding me steady as he slowly, so fucking slowly, trailed his tongue along the exposed length, lingering at the tip before pulling away again.

"Alex, please." I sounded like I'd gargled gravel, my voice so rough with need that I barely recognized it. I wanted to be patient, to let him take as long as he needed, but at this rate, I wasn't going to last.

He knew my body well, though, and instead of taking me in his mouth, he ran his tongue along my length again, one long, slow tease, until my knees were shaking. A quiet buzzing settled around me, a haze of pleasure blocking out anything and everything that wasn't Alex. My world began and ended with his touch.

When his soft, plush lips finally wrapped around the head of my cock, my shuddering gasp seemed to echo in the quiet room. It took every bit of willpower I possessed to not buck into that wet, warm heat. Without a thought, my hands slid through his hair, not to demand more, but just to touch him.

Alex set a slow pace at first, allowing the pleasure to build and build, a fire simmering within me, growing hotter with every stroke of his hand and flick of his tongue. Time spun away into the darkness, leaving me alone with Alex, the center of our own little universe. He was my sun, moon, and stars. My everything.

I was so far gone, so drunk on his touch, my orgasm took me completely by surprise. I tried to pull away, but his firm hands gripped my thighs and pulled me in closer. With a gut-punched gasp, I curled over Alex, my whole body shaking, my thoughts muddled and hazy. When he released me, I sank to my knees and sagged against him.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he chuckled, his voice a little rough. I just groaned in response, earning another of those adorable little laughs. He let me rest a moment, then got us both up on our feet.

“Give me five minutes to catch my breath and I’ll return the favor,” I murmured. My brain still felt slow, my body relaxed and heavy. Alex guided me over to the bed, then disappeared, only to join me as I was slipping under the covers. His bare legs brushed mine and I realized he must have taken the time to undress.

“No rush. I know you’re good for it,” he teased. He curled up beside me, facing me across the few inches of bed separating us. His eyes were distant, like he was deep in thought, but it took me a few seconds to push my own mind into action.

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah. Well, kind of. Nothing that can’t wait.”

“Tell me anyway?”

He glanced up at me. “Okay. I was thinking about today and I remembered something Ori said to me before we went out searching.”

“What’d they say?”

“They reminded me again that they think my power is finding the lost, not just the dead. They were kind of snippy about it when I said I didn’t have time to figure it out

while we were looking for Landon.”

I pushed myself up onto my elbow, forcing myself to stay awake and focus.

“What you do with your own ability is none of Ori’s business and they have no right to judge you for it,” I said. The heat of growing anger did a good job of waking me up.

“It’s okay, I’m not upset,” Alex assured me, his hand coming to rest on my chest. “Thank you for the support, though.”

“Always.” I took his free hand in mine and kissed his fingertips.

“I fucking love you,” he sighed. “But anyway, I was thinking about it and maybe they’re right. We can’t do anything until the snow lets up, right? So maybe I can try finding him somehow?”

“If you want to try, I’ll do whatever I can to help you.” I tried not to sound too eager, but I had to admit that the idea was an exciting one. I wasn’t stupid enough to go down that path again, though. This was Alex’s decision, and I’d stand by him no matter what he chose.

“I know it’s still the afternoon, but I’m exhausted. Can we just sleep for awhile?” he asked, already moving to cuddle against me. “I can try once we rest a little.”

There was only one response to a warm, sleepy Alex snuggled up in my arms.

“Yeah, we can sleep. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he murmured and between one breath and the next, he was asleep. I couldn’t let go quite as easily, but holding him close, my mind still adrift with

pleasure, I could at least drift and keep the disappointment of the day at bay for awhile.

My blinks grew slower, heavier, and the last thing I saw before sleep eventually claimed me was Alex's beautiful face, resting on my shoulder.

Chapter 17

Alex

“I feel like an idiot.”

Donovan leaned in and kissed my cheek, his hand resting on my shoulder. “Do you want me to go to the kitchen?”

“Would you mind?” I looked up at him, wincing.

“Let me know if you need me,” he said, simple as that, and gave my shoulder a little squeeze before retreating to the kitchen with his coffee, out of sight of the living room.

With no idea exactly how I’d appeared to Ori’s friend Rian that day in the bookshop, I was doing my best to recreate it. Thanks to our afternoon nap, it was now just after midnight, and Donovan and I were both awake.

The snow that had pounded Lowery’s Crossing all day was slowing, but fat flakes still drifted by the window, illuminated by the pale light of the moon. With the drifts shin-deep and temperatures below freezing, there was no guarantee of a search for Landon DeVor, so I had to try to do my part.

Focus, Alex.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to call up some of the meditation techniques I half-

remembered from my earlier attempts. Fortunately, the breathing exercise I'd learned to stave off panic attacks as a teenager also worked best for helping me focus. In for four, hold for four, out for four. I counted out each one, letting myself fall into the rhythm.

In. One, two, three, four. Hold. Find Landon. Out. One, two, three, four. In. Find Landon. Hold. Find Landon. Out.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the world around me faded, narrowing down to each measured breath and the thought of Landon. The pictures Donovan had showed me took shape in my mind unbidden, the still images slowly shifting, becoming clearer. I'd seen Landon around town, but in my memory he'd been younger, not the tall, awkward teenager he was now.

Just as quickly as his image appeared, though, it shifted again, from a smiling kid posing for a picture to a scared teenager, blond hair tangled, blue eyes wide with fear. Then he was moving, running, darting through trees and looking at something over his shoulder. Something crashed through the underbrush behind him, chasing him. I couldn't see what it was, but I felt his fear.

No, not fear. I felt his pure terror. Whatever was behind him wanted him dead. I felt it just as clearly as he did. Snow hampered his steps, slowing him down, and the thing behind him drew closer, nearly nipping at his heels now.

Landon's entire focus was on the thing chasing him. Fear blinded him and he never saw the ledge coming up in front of him. Desperate to escape whatever was chasing him, he ran right over the edge. I felt it when his stomach dropped, when he put his foot down on nothing but empty air. The fall seemed to last an eternity, but only a few seconds passed before he crashed to the ground and a loud crack echoed through the narrow gully he landed in, followed a moment later by a cry of agonized pain. I saw him from above now, saw the way his leg twisted at an unnatural angle, clearly

broken.

Whatever chased him heard his cry, too. I couldn't see what it was, but Landon did, his eyes going wide when he looked up. He was easy prey now, unable to run, and it knew it. Landon scrambled backward, desperately searching for somewhere to hide. I could only watch as he cast around, finally spotting something just as the person or creature or whatever chased him jumped off the ledge.

Crawling, dragging his injured leg behind him, Landon pulled himself across the frozen ground toward the dubious shelter he'd found. Calling it a cave was beyond generous. It was more like a narrow divot formed by fallen rocks, not nearly big enough for a person to hide in, not even a skinny teenager. It was, however, just big enough for an adolescent coyote to squeeze into.

As I watched, Landon shrank in on himself, a thick coating of gray and brown fur pushing through his skin. His body twisted, bones popping and shifting in a way that had to hurt, but if it did, his fear of whatever chased him dulled the pain. In seconds, a lanky coyote pup pushed into the narrow opening in the earth and disappeared from sight.

A furious snarl echoed through the trees when the hunter realized it couldn't reach its prey. I still couldn't see what had chased Landon, its shape nothing more than a shadowy blur, but whatever it was, Landon and I both knew it would kill him if it reached him. It settled on the ground in front of Landon's hiding spot in wait, like it knew he had to come out eventually.

The images in my mind began to blur, the edges going dark until it disappeared and I opened my eyes to see my ceiling fan above me and my fat cat looking down at me from the arm of the couch, judging me with pale gold eyes.

"Donovan," I breathed, numb and dazed. I don't know how he heard me, but a

moment later he was there, sitting on the floor beside me and taking the hand I stretched out for him.

“Any luck?” he asked. His thumb stroked across my knuckles, soothing, giving me something to focus on. He paused after just a few seconds, though, frowning. “You’re cold.”

A shiver snaked down my spine, chasing away the numbness and leaving behind a chill I was far too familiar with. No ghost had come to me, but my body didn’t seem to realize that and wrapped me in the cold armor of shock to blunt what I’d seen.

“It’s fine. It’s not that bad,” I promised. Compared to other times, this was nothing. “I think I know where Landon is. Kind of.”

“Come here.” Donovan gently tugged me up and into his lap, hugging me tight and chasing away the worst of the cold. Only then did he ask, “what did you see?”

“I think it was real. I don’t think I could make up something like this.” Even knowing what I did about paranormal beings existing alongside us, it seemed too crazy to be true. “Something was chasing him through trees. It looked like it was right up near the foothills.”

“Some thing ?” Donovan repeated. “Not some one ?”

Trust a detective to immediately pick up on that. “That’s right. I know it sounds crazy, but it didn’t feel like a person.”

He kissed my temple, hugging me a little closer. “I trust you.”

“I love you,” I murmured, then continued. “He was running and he fell off this ledge. He broke his leg, but he found somewhere to hide. Whatever was chasing him didn’t

leave, though. The last I saw, it was sitting there waiting for him to come out.”

“So he’s been trapped in the woods for a day and a half with a broken leg? If it was a wild animal, it probably would have lost interest and left by now.”

I shook my head. “It didn’t feel like an animal, either. Not a natural one, anyway. I don’t know what it was, but Landon was terrified. He can change into a coyote.” I still struggled to process that one, but the more immediate danger made that detail somehow the less important thing. “There wouldn’t be any animals in this area that he’d be too scared of, I bet. This was something else.” Even just thinking about the shadowy thing chasing Landon made my skin crawl. “Donovan?”

He hugged me closer. “Yeah?” I could see the questions in his eyes, but he kept it in check and I loved him even more for it.

“I’d... I’d know if the thing got him, right? I wouldn’t have seen him like that if he were...” I couldn’t say the word. It was like saying it would manifest it, make it real.

“We’ll find him,” Donovan promised, and I didn’t miss how neatly he avoided answering my question. Then again, I wasn’t altogether sure I wanted a straight answer.

“I should call Ori and let them know. I got a text earlier saying they hadn’t found him, either.”

“I’ll call Will and let him know what happened, if that’s okay? I’ll find out if he’s heard anything about a group going out in the morning, but with this snow, it’s not likely. I’m guess you want to go out and look, anyway?”

He knew me so well.

“Yeah. I think I could find it. I’ll tell Ori to bring some help in case that thing that was chasing Landon is still there.”

As much as I wanted to stay in Donovan’s lap until the last of the cold dissipated, finding Landon was more important. I hadn’t expected to actually see anything with whatever this ability I had was, but I couldn’t waste this chance. With one last kiss, more to embolden myself than anything, I got up and helped Donovan to his feet. He went to the kitchen and I went to the bedroom in search of my phone, each of us getting to work to find Landon as fast as possible.

Looking back, I should have known better than to stop at Buns ‘n’ Roses for food and coffee.

Ori had immediately agreed to come help us look, promising to bring backup. Knowing Landon had fallen off some kind of small cliff, we reluctantly decided to wait for sunrise before venturing out.

Donovan and I spent a few hours adding things to the backpack of supplies Donovan had readied yesterday, then he’d just held me in his arms on the couch as we waited for the first weak traces of sunlight to appear on the horizon. It’d taken awhile for the shock to wear off, but curling up against Donovan had gone a long way toward helping. It’d also given us both some time to come to grips with the reality of what I’d seen. Hearing from Ori that shifters were real was one thing. Seeing it happen to Landon in excruciating detail was something else entirely.

Now I stood at the front counter of Buns ‘n’ Roses, staring down my best friend and rapidly losing ground.

“I asked you a question, Alex,” Raina said, eyebrow raised. Ashley and Rachel,

catching the tone of her voice, had quickly made themselves scarce. Well, they'd ducked over to the other end of the counter, pretending to be busy organizing the coffee machines. Hopefully, they were out of earshot.

"Technically, you asked me two questions," I reminded her, risking life and limb in an attempt to throw her off the scent. "You asked why we were here so early and why we needed six coffees to-go."

"Do you have any idea how lucky you are that I love you?" she asked. She crossed her arms over her chest, fully prepared to wait all day. I couldn't even pretend I was holding up the line to move her along. This early, with snow blanketing the town, the dining area was deserted.

"Alex, we have to hurry," Donovan murmured in my ear. "Let's just tell her so she'll let us leave."

Donovan clearly had no idea who he was dealing with. He was right about one thing, though: Raina wouldn't let us leave until she knew everything.

"Fine." I leaned in closer, motioning for her to do the same. "I was able to use my ability and find roughly where Landon is. He's still alive," I added quickly when her eyes went wide. "But we're going to meet up with some people that can help us get to him before it's too late."

"I'm going," Raina said immediately, just like I'd known she would, but instead of being prepared with a clever comment to keep her here, I replied with the very worst thing I could have possibly said. I blamed it on the shock of everything that'd happened.

"No, you should stay here. It's too dangerous."

I wanted to recall the words even as they were leaving my mouth, but it was too late. Raina's dark eyes narrowed and I quickly leaned back, hoping to dodge the worst of her wrath.

"It's dangerous," she repeated. "And yet you're going out there anyway, probably completely unarmed."

"Not completely," Donovan protested, but she shushed him with a quelling glance.

"Who else is going? There are six cups here, so clearly you trust someone to go with you."

"Fuck," I whispered. We were supposed to be meeting Ori soon, and we were running out of time. I shared a look with Donovan, silently asking what we should do. The likelihood of whatever had chased Landon still being there two days later was small, but not impossible, and I didn't want to put my best friend in danger. On the other hand, Raina had latched on now and wouldn't let us leave easily.

"Don't you need to run the shop? I don't know how long we'll be," Donovan said.

"Rachel," Raina called, and the barista looked up from the cups she'd been organizing. Obviously she'd been trying to listen in, because who wouldn't, but I didn't think she'd gotten close enough to hear anything.

"What's up? Need me to cover the front for awhile?" she guessed, eyes darting between her boss and me as she put the pieces together.

"If you think you and Ashley can hold down the morning rush, I need to run an errand."

Rachel glanced out the window, where the snow drifts almost reached the glass.

“Yeah, I don’t think we’re going to be too crazy today. We can handle it.”

“Great. Thanks.” Raina smiled at Rachel, then leveled a glare at me. “Don’t you dare walk out that door.” She disappeared into the back, probably to grab her coat and change from her work shoes into boots.

“Think we should run for it?” Donovan murmured.

As tempting as it was, I shook my head. “She’ll just follow us, and then she’ll ban us from here for at least six months. Maybe we can convince her to stay in the car.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

We both knew there was no chance, but we waited in silence while Rachel filled up our to-go order and handed over eight coffees in cardboard carriers. I didn’t question the number, but Donovan frowned in confusion right up until the kitchen door swung open and Raina walked out with Camille, both of them dressed in winter gear.

“Rachel, all the baking is done and cooling. Ashley knows what to do,” Camille said as she tugged on her gloves. “Thank you for taking over.”

“Any time. Don’t do anything too crazy.”

Camille just smiled and ushered us out the front door of Buns ‘n’ Roses. Arguing with her would be pointless, so we just let it be.

“Should I call Will to come, too?” Camille asked as we headed outside and she detoured around the building, to the side entrance that led to the apartment they shared.

“I talked to him and told him you’d seen something. He’s going to cover for me at the

station in case we don't get back before shift starts."

When I quickly glanced at Donovan, he gave the tiniest shake of his head, which I took to mean he hadn't told Will everything . I literally trusted my friends with my life, but Landon's secrets weren't mine to share, and I was already pushing it with Ori by bringing Donovan. Already, I was trying to figure out how we'd peel away from the search before the girls saw a coyote crawl out from under a rock and change into a teenager.

"I'll be right back," Raina said and hurried up the stairs.

"I wish you guys would stay," I said honestly to Camille. "In my vision, something was chasing Landon. I just want you guys to be safe." She was more reasonable than her girlfriend sometimes, but I wasn't too surprised when she shook her head.

"We're your friends and we love you. We're not letting you go alone."

When Raina returned a minute later carrying two big hunting rifles, I nearly dropped the coffee carrier I held. Logically, I knew just about everyone in the mountains kept a rifle, mostly to scare off any wild animals that got too close, but I hadn't expected her to come down armed.

"Alright. Let's go," Raina said, handing one to Camille.

"Those can go in the trunk until we get there," Donovan said, accepting that this was an argument he wouldn't win. He locked the rifles in the trunk, then we all piled into his car and pulled out.

A few stray flakes of snow swirled around us when we arrived at the meeting place. No other car was in sight, yet Ori stood there with three other people, all of them looking quite impatient. It was plain to see that Ori wasn't thrilled I'd brought more

people, even after I whispered to him that they didn't know. The peace offering of coffee helped a little, and all four quickly drained their cups.

When we'd pulled in, Donovan informed us that one of the men with Ori was Jean DeVor, Landon's father. I didn't recognize the other two, another older man and a woman roughly Donovan's age, and they didn't offer their names, leaving the eight of us to push our way into the trees in silence. Neither of them looked particularly comfortable with Donovan's presence, even out of uniform, which made me think they were probably like Landon.

Even in my head, it felt so strange to think of them as shifters. That wasn't a term I ever thought I'd use in real life. Shapeshifters and werewolves were the stuff of fiction, like the books I secretly binged at the shop. Now here I was, wandering through the woods with three of them and whatever Ori was. They'd still never told me how they were part of the mysterious community they talked about.

Donovan grabbed my arm, catching me when I tripped over a fallen log, and I put aside my deliberation of the politics of the paranormal community to focus on where we were going.

"Thanks," I murmured, ducking my head. I could feel the judgment in the woman's eyes without even glancing at her. The three of them were completely at ease traipsing through the frozen woods, despite only wearing light jackets more suited for a spring day. Donovan, Raina, Camille, and I were bundled up to our ears, only our eyes visible between scarves and hats.

"Did we really need them to come?" the unnamed man asked Ori, not bothering to lower his voice.

"Yes," they replied, sounding like they'd had this discussion before. "Alex is the one who saw where your nephew is, remember?" I'd told Ori what I'd seen and they must

have passed it on to the other three.

“Barely,” the man scoffed. “Telling us it’s by a ledge isn’t very helpful.”

“Excuse me, I’m standing right here. I can hear you,” I protested. “I’m doing the best I can, okay? I want to find him, too.”

“And we weren’t letting him go out alone,” Camille chimed in and Raina nodded in firm agreement.

“Everyone, can we focus?” Ori’s sharp voice cut through the mutterings of their companions. “We are going to work together to find Landon. Beyond that, I don’t care if you never speak to each other again. Now, Anjeli.” They looked at the woman. “You said you had an idea of where it might be?”

She nodded. “Possibly. My cousin had an accident as a child and the area sounds similar. It’s far off the beaten path, to the northwest quite a way. We’ll have to hurry to get there before the snow starts again.” The up and down look she gave the four of us wasn’t a kind one. She knew we would slow her down. Was she a shifter, too? Would they make better time without us? But then, what happened if she was wrong?

“Shouldn’t we be concerned about what we’ll find there?” Raina asked as the group resumed walking. “Alex said someone was chasing Landon. What if they’re still there?”

“We will deal with it,” Jean said shortly. He picked up the pace, along with Anjeli and the man. Ori kept pace with us, falling into step beside me.

“Did you have to tell them about that part?” they asked quietly. “Did you tell them everything?”

That caught Donovan's attention, from the way his shoulders tensed, but he kept his eyes on the trail like he hadn't heard. Neither of us liked keeping the information from Raina and Camille, but he understood why I didn't say anything.

"They're my best friends and they're following me into a potentially dangerous situation. I had to tell them something," I whispered back.

"I appreciate that they want to be by your side, but you shouldn't have brought them. Any of them." Their eyes shot to Donovan and while there wasn't quite the same level of vitriol I'd seen in the other three, Ori's distrust shone through. Even with my assurances and Donovan's promise, they were still wary of Donovan simply because he was a detective.

I wasn't going to argue, though. Now wasn't the time. "Well, they're here, so let's just focus on finding Landon right now, okay?"

"Fine, but once we get close, they need to leave. You, as well."

The last I'd seen of Landon, he'd still been a coyote. His fur had hopefully been enough to protect him against the cold, so he would have been smart to stay that way. Not to mention, if the thing that hunted him lingered, that meant he hadn't been able to change back at all. Either way, I hadn't told my friends about that part and it wasn't a discussion I wanted to have in the middle of the woods as the tailing edge of yesterday's snowstorm threatened.

"Agreed. Now, can we please just focus on actually finding him?"

Ori gave the others one last look, then nodded and sped up to join their friends. The group wasn't quite leaving us behind, but we'd have to speedwalk to keep up.

"What was that about?" Donovan asked as soon as Ori was out of earshot.

“Ori is pissed that the girls are with us. They were worried I’d told Raina and Camille the full truth. I told them I didn’t, but...” I shrugged helplessly. “Plus, they still don’t trust you.”

“Honestly, after everything I’ve been learning and the way Ori is acting, the feeling is kind of mutual.”

I couldn’t tell if he actually meant it or not, but now wasn’t the time to figure it out.

The further we walked, the more difficult the way became. Landon must have been exhausted by the time he hit the ledge after running this deep into the woods. How long had that thing been chasing him?

“Here,” Jean said suddenly from ahead of us. He’d veered off to the left and stood looking at something on the ground. The other group hadn’t gotten too far ahead of us and it only took a moment to join them, peering down at what he’d found.

I knew absolutely nothing about hunting and tracking, but even I couldn’t miss the obvious signs of something large passing through. Branches hung off bushes, torn and trampled by something large as it pushed through. From the corner of my eye, I glimpsed Anjeli lifting her head and sniffing at the air. Could she smell Landon, even as a human?

“We can take it from here,” Jean said. He didn’t even look at the four of us, as though we were beneath his notice.

“We’re not leaving until we find him.” Donovan’s tone brooked no argument, eyes narrowed as he waited for one, anyway.

“Guys,” I cut in quickly. “We’ll go with you until we find the ledge, so I can show you where he went. After that, we’ll head back. Okay?”

Jean glanced at Ori with a slight deference I hadn't expected, and Donovan's words echoed in my mind. Who, exactly, was Ori Castellós?

"Agreed," Ori said.

"Very well," Anjeli agreed before Jean and the other man could protest. She clearly didn't like us, but at least someone in their group could be the voice of reason. Without waiting for her companions, she set off into the trees, following the trail of destruction and leaving them with no choice but to follow her.

"Let's just hurry," I said and followed after them. My friends had questions, and I owed them answers, but not now. Thankfully, they trusted me enough to simply follow my lead for now, but once we got back home, all bets were off.

"Hey, Alex?" Raina asked after we'd trudged about a mile through the underbrush. "You said someone was chasing this kid, right? Are you sure it wasn't some thing?"

My stomach dropped at the frown on her face. "What do you mean?"

"Well, my dad was into hunting and he took me out with him sometimes when I was younger. I'm not an expert by any means, but it just seems like this is a pretty wide path for a person."

She wasn't wrong. The trail of broken branches and slashed earth was wide enough for two people to walk abreast with a few inches to spare. No human could have made those marks in the frozen ground, either. I shuddered to think of how sharp and long the claws that made them were.

"I can't say for sure," I hedged. "I couldn't see what he was running from. It was literally kind of a blur. I don't even know how I saw that much, if I'm being honest. I didn't even know I could do any of this."

“It’s a good thing we came prepared, then,” Camille said, adjusting the strap of the rifle over her shoulder. “My guess would be a black bear, from the size. They’re not usually aggressive toward people, but if it was hungry or sick, it could attack someone.”

“If that’s what it was, it’s probably long gone by now, right?” Donovan asked, neatly steering them away from considerations of what else it could be. I fucking loved that man.

“Probably. Landon was smart enough to hide, from what Alex said, so a bear would’ve looked for easier prey.”

While Raina and Camille took up the job of educating Donovan on the bears so common in our area, I tuned them out and focused on where we were going. I’d only seen flashes in my vision (and even calling it that in my head just sounded so wrong), but it possibly looked familiar. All trees pretty much looked the same to me, but a few landmarks began to stand out and I realized we had to be very close. There, off to my right, was the large rock Landon had dodged as he ran. There was the gnarled root he’d tripped over.

Barely a minute later, the trees abruptly thinned out and we stood on the ledge where Landon had fallen. It was easy to see how it happened. There was no warning before it appeared and in a blind panic, running for his life, he’d never have been able to stop, even if he had seen it. This was no gentle slope, either. It looked like the land had been sheared away, leaving a vertical drop to the ground twenty feet below.

“This is it?” Ori asked, and I nodded in confirmation.

“He’s not far. This isn’t the exact spot, but it’s close to where he fell.”

“Then you can leave. We’ll handle it from here,” Jean said, a hint of a growl in his

words.

“We haven’t found him yet,” Raina protested, echoed by Camille. They looked to me to join them, but so did Ori.

This was going to go over like a lead balloon.

“I promised we would leave it to them once we found the ledge,” I said to my friends, wincing in apology. “Landon is the priority, and this is his family. They’re telling us to leave. Ori will call me once they have him secured.” I glanced over at Ori, but it hadn’t been a question.

“I will,” they agreed tightly. “Now let us deal with this, please. The snow is getting worse and we need to get him home.”

I took Donovan’s hand and met his eyes, silently begging him to help me. Despite knowing what we did and that we needed to protect Landon’s secrets, I knew it was hard for him to walk away this close to the end. It went against his nature to leave when someone was still potentially in danger. His grip on my hand tightened as he wavered back and forth, but finally, he nodded.

“We’ll be waiting for that call,” he said to Ori, but he never took his eyes off me. Raina and Camille stared at the two of us in shock. They knew even less than him about any of this, and this was their first time seeing my ability in action. I could see the questions building, ready to break free, but first we had to keep our word.

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

I felt their eyes burning into my back with every step I took away from the ledge.

Chapter 18

Donovan

Only my promise to Alex kept me walking. It went against every instinct I possessed to leave before I'd laid eyes on Landon, even though I knew there was no way we'd get close to him while we had Raina and Camille with us. I couldn't truly blame Ori for protecting their friends, but I hated leaving.

The snow continued to kick back up and I'd hoped the need to hurry back to the car would halt any questions, but it was a fool's hope and I knew it. We'd barely gone a quarter of a mile before Raina stopped and turned to face us, crossing her arms and digging in her heels.

"What are they hiding, Alex?"

A quiet stillness had settled over the woods. Snow swirled through the trees, casting everything in the distance in a white haze. The birds and animals had gone silent, likely seeking refuge from the cold. A layer of snow muffled even the tramp of our boots on the frozen ground. Her words shattered that quiet, dropping like a bomb into the serenity of the moment.

"Can we talk about it when we get home?" he asked. He hadn't let go of my hand since we'd walked away and he clung to me now for support.

"No, we can't," she insisted. "We're out here looking for a lost, injured kid and we're walking away before he's even found? What if he's hurt enough that he needs

medical attention? How are they going to get him back up that ledge? Why don't they want us to see him? I trust you, Alex, but I know that Jean DeVor and your friend Ori are lying about something, and I know you're not telling us everything. If we're supposed to just leave him here, I need to know that he's safe."

Camille mirrored me and took Raina's hand in support, but she didn't say anything. Of all of us, Camille could usually be counted on to be the most reasonable.

Alex sighed heavily. "I don't want to keep things from you, it's just... some secrets aren't mine to tell. I love you, all of you, but you have to understand that there are some things that were told to me in confidence."

"What does that even mean?" Raina asked, exasperated.

"I understand," Camille said quietly. She gave us a sad little smile when Raina and I both looked at her. "When I was younger, before I knew who I really was, I told my best friend that I thought I'd been born in the wrong body. Instead of keeping it secret, he told all our friends. The entire school knew by the next morning."

"I know none of you would tell a soul, but they trusted me not to tell anyone," Alex whispered, pleading, and I watched the foundations of Raina's stubborn defiance crumble.

"Will you tell us what you can?" she asked.

Alex nodded, but it still took him a moment to speak. "They're different," he said carefully. "Jean and Landon and the others. I can't say how, just that they have a way of protecting themselves and each other. That's how Landon was able to stay alive and mostly safe, even stuck out here. I don't know why they couldn't find him without me, but please believe me when I say that none of them will hurt him. It wasn't them that chased him. He wouldn't have run from them."

“You don’t think a bear chased him,” Camille said, reading between the lines. His explanation really didn’t give much to go on, but it was simple enough to deduce that the other group was like him, in a way.

“No, I don’t,” he agreed. “I don’t know who or what it was, but he was absolutely terrified, like it was something he’d never seen before.”

“Well, that’s fantastic,” Raina grumbled. “You swear that Landon is safe and his family can get him home?”

“To the best of my knowledge, yes. They’ll be able to take care of him better than any of us can.”

“Great. Then I vote we get out of here as quick as we can, because after that fun little talk, my skin is crawling and I keep feeling like something is watching me.”

“Agreed,” Camille nodded, glancing around the trees. Visibility had gotten worse and we’d made almost no progress, slowing to a crawl while we talked. Knowing that there were things out in the trees that we knew nothing about made me uneasy, and I understood what they were talking about. It felt like there were eyes on me, raking over me, a hunter stalking prey.

We picked up our pace, almost running through the dense underbrush, trying to follow our trail before the snow buried it. The feeling only got worse the further we got from the ledge and I heard a tiny whimper from Alex, whipped away by the snow, but leaving his panic. He felt it, too.

Where the quiet of the woods had been soothing before, now the utter stillness grated on my senses, rubbing me raw with each step. It was an unnatural silence, not a hint of birdsong on the wind or a whisper of a wandering squirrel. Even with the oncoming snow, it wasn’t normal for the woods to be so completely silent, our

increasingly frantic footsteps the only sound to be heard.

Getting to the ledge hadn't taken too long, compared to the sheer vastness of the woods. The land beyond Lowery's Crossing was mostly untamed and unsettled, a wilderness stretching to the very heart of the mountains. Going slow, looking for tracks and signs, it'd taken over an hour. We'd only left Jean and the others about ten minutes ago, but with the speed we were moving now, we'd make it back to the cars in half the time it'd taken to find the ledge.

To the left, where the trees were thickest and the snow drew up a white curtain, the snap of a branch echoed in the utter silence. We froze and the girls immediately readied their rifles, mittens ripped off and shoved deep into pockets.

"It could have been nothing," Alex breathed, his voice shaking. "A limb snapping from the cold."

It came again, closer this time, and I saw movement, something dark slinking through the underbrush, pausing a second before disappearing again. Something about it felt deliberate. Like it wanted me to see it. Like it wanted me scared.

"Call Ori. Warn them," I whispered to Alex. "Keep moving toward the cars. Don't run. Whatever it is, we don't need to give it a reason to chase us." I did as Raina and Camille had done, stripping off my gloves and slowly drawing my service weapon. I hadn't expected to need it, but habit had me grabbing it before we left this morning, something I was grateful for now.

I kept myself between Alex and the spot where I'd seen the movement, with Raina and Camille slightly in front of him and on either side, protecting him by unspoken agreement.

"Ori, there's something out here following us." Alex didn't bother with a greeting

when Ori picked up. “I think it’s what was hunting Landon. Be careful and get him out of here while you can.” Ori must have agreed, because Alex ended the call but didn’t put the phone away. “Should I call for help?”

“No one would get here in time and they’d be in just as much danger as us.” Will would drop everything and come if we called, but until I knew what we faced, I wasn’t putting anyone else’s life on the line.

The underbrush rustled, off to the other side this time, and closer. Somehow, it had slipped around us without us seeing a thing.

“How close are we to the car?” Raina asked, real fear in her voice.

Not close enough and we all knew it, but I wasn’t going to be the one to say it. “We’re going to get there.” Another branch snapped, this one even closer, and when I looked back, I saw eyes peering at us through the underbrush, an eerie, unnatural pale orange color that sent a shiver of primordial fear crawling up my spine. It blinked and disappeared and I knew it was toying with us now, savoring our fear.

“Donovan?”

I reached out and gripped Alex’s hand as tight as I could, not daring to take my eyes off the trees. We weren’t close enough to safety. Whatever hunted us had waited, biding its time until we were too far from the others to go back and too far from the cars to make it. We had to try, though.

“Run,” I ordered, giving his hand another squeeze before dropping it and clicking the safety off my gun.

“Donovan, what—”

“Run!”

Side by side, we crashed through the trees, the four of us clustered together. Raina and Alex were slower, their breathing ragged. Camille, with her longer legs, could have easily outpaced all of us, but she kept close, slowing her strides to help protect them. Trips to the gym with Will kept me fairly fit, but, like Camille, I kept pace with Raina and Alex. Fear clawed at me and every ancient instinct in my lizard brain screamed at me that a predator was near, something horrifying, something unnatural, but nothing would make me leave behind a single one of them.

The second we broke into a run, the thing began to chase us. Instead of coming directly behind us, though, it ran through the bushes, unseen but not unheard, as though sowing terror was just as exciting as the hunt. If I hadn't figured it out before, I would have known now that this was no bear. It could have easily caught us, but instead it paced us, letting us think we stood a chance while we wore ourselves down fleeing. We had no choice but to run, though. If we stopped, we were dead. I knew that as certainly as I knew that I loved Alex with all my heart.

Almost imperceptibly, the trees thinned around us, but the snow grew heavier, keeping visibility almost at zero. I'd left the car parked on a gravel shoulder of the road, right near the tree line. It wasn't far now, and an impossible kernel of hope lodged within me. Maybe it only wanted to scare us, to keep us out of the woods. I couldn't hear it beside us now. Maybe we'd left its territory? Maybe we'd make it, after all.

The creature burst out of the trees ahead of us, a blur of darkness in the falling snow, forcing us to scramble to stop. Alex slipped in the snow and went down hard, but I didn't dare take a hand off my gun to help him up, not with that thing in front of us.

“Oh, God,” Raina breathed, a tiny whimper of sound.

The creature in front of us was something wholly wrong . Big as a grizzly bear, but slender and long, more like a panther, it stared us down with those strange orange eyes that almost seemed to glow. Long fangs reached past its chin, easily eight inches or more, and razor sharp. Matching talons grew from its scaled feet and clawed into the ground as it flexed, readying itself to move. The scales ran up its legs and melded into the pitch black fur that covered its body. A long tail curved up behind it, covered in the same dark scales but ending in a wickedly pointed tip reminiscent of a scorpion, while wings not unlike a bat stretched out to the side. Even in the weak sunlight, I could make out gaping holes and fresh, jagged tears in the webbing of the wings, bad enough that it couldn't possibly use them to fly. It was a small mercy when faced with those fangs and claws.

It didn't move, just waited, body tensed and ready, blocking our only escape route. A faint tremor wracked its frame as it stood, whether from the cold or maybe even pain from its wounds, I couldn't tell.

“What do we do?” Alex whispered once he was back on his feet.

“Maybe we can scare it away,” Camille suggested. As slowly as possible, never taking her eyes off the creature, she clicked the guard off her rifle. It was such a small sound I barely heard it even a foot away from her, but the creature's pointed ears twitched and its claws dug in deeper, body lowering slightly as though to pounce. From its tail, a glistening drop of liquid dripped, sizzling when it hit the snow.

“I don't think that will work,” I said, as quiet as possible. I took a small step forward, putting myself between the creature and Alex, and the thing took an answering step toward us, a low snarl cutting through the silence. “Shoot to kill.”

The creature and I moved at the same time, like it understood what I'd said. I brought

my gun up as it lunged for me, firing off a shot. It hit the thing's shoulder, sending a spray of crimson blood splashing across the ground, but it didn't stop coming. I barely dodged out of the way, grabbing Alex just in time. The roar of a shotgun blast echoed in the silence, followed by another. Raina's shot went wide, but Camille found her mark, hitting it high on its back left leg. The creature stumbled, nearly going down, but regained its footing. It still supported weight on the front leg I'd shot, but it kept its back leg off the ground. Blood dripped down black scales, forming a small pool beneath it.

"Shit. I think we pissed it off," Raina hissed, hands shaking as she chambered another cartridge. I took another shot at the same time as Camille, but Raina was right. The creature used its shredded wings to gain a burst of speed, whipping to the side and lashing out with its tail. I heard it whistle through the air, missing me by barely an inch.

"Go for the car!" I shouted at the others as I fired again, missing its body but putting another hole in its wing. It let out a bloodcurdling cry of rage, a sound like nothing I could ever describe. Guttural and oddly shrill, it was as unnatural as the creature itself and sent primal terror crawling down my spine.

"We're not leaving you!" Alex snapped, his voice breaking. He was the most vulnerable of the four of us, the only one without some sort of weapon, and the creature's attention snapped to him, clearly realizing the same thing. With a low growl, it darted into the trees, silent despite its size. I grabbed for Alex, finding his hand and pulling him closer just as it burst back through the underbrush, landing exactly where Alex had been standing less than five seconds ago.

Raina fired off her second shot and this one hit, the bullet sinking into its back leg only a few inches from where Camille had hit. That bone-chilling cry echoed through the woods again and, to my horror, something moved in the trees behind us, from the direction we'd been fleeing.

“There are more of them?” Camille whispered, and the despair in her voice echoed what I felt. We didn’t stand a chance against one of these things. If another appeared, we’d never leave this place.

“We are not dying in the fucking woods today,” Raina growled. She fumbled to reload her rifle with shaking hands and the sound of her girlfriend’s voice bolstered Camille. I fired again to buy them time, but even as injured as it was, the creature dodged and my bullet hit the tree behind it. It used its momentum to dart toward me, ducking low to the ground to avoid another shot, but instead of slashing me with its claws, it turned at the last second and its tail swung toward me.

“Donovan!” Alex grabbed for me, pulling as hard as he could, and we both fell to the ground just as more creatures burst from the underbrush. Except...

“Are those coyotes ?”

Camille’s shocked voice sounded oddly distant, distorted as though we were underwater. I could only stare as two coyotes ran straight for the creature, drawing its attention from us. One ran behind it and grabbed its wing, the crunch of bone and tendon shockingly loud. When the creature shrieked and snapped at the first coyote, the second lunged and went for the throat. It couldn’t pierce the tough hide protecting the creature, though, forcing it to regroup and go for the other wing.

The creature’s tail swung, forcing the first coyote to retreat, followed by the second, but they took a chunk of the creature’s wing with them. Before they could move in for another attack, the creature screamed again, dripping blood from its injuries, and disappeared into the trees.

“Wait!”

The two coyotes started to give chase, but stopped when a voice called out. A

moment later, Ori ran out of the trees, their long hair disheveled, dark eyes wide. The bigger coyote shook itself, and the air around it seemed to almost ripple. A moment later, a naked man stood where the coyote had been. It took longer than it should have for me to recognize the man who'd been with Jean DeVor. My thoughts felt slow, muddled. Was this shock?

"We need to stop it before it goes after someone else!" he protested. He didn't seem to notice or care that he was standing naked in the middle of a snowstorm.

"The two of you can't take it on by yourselves. We need backup," Ori said. They looked over at the four of us and the man glanced back as well.

"Fuck," he muttered. The air rippled again and a moment later, there were two coyotes.

"It's a little late for that, Dane," Ori said with a heavy sigh. "The cat's out of the bag. Or the coyote, in this case."

"What the hell is happening here?" Camille asked and the stress must finally be getting to her, because there was an edge of hysteria in her voice.

Logically, I knew what they were. Alex had told me. But nothing could have prepared me for whatever that other creature was. I should be as horrified as Camille and I was, but like the voices, it felt distant, barely worth noticing.

"I guess I'll explain, but we need to get out of these woods first," Ori said. "Anjeli, Dane, go find Jean and Landon, and make sure they get home safe. I'll ride with Alex." They turned to us as the two coyotes ran off. "Come on, we need to get out of here."

Alex got to his feet and reached a hand out to help me up. I grabbed it, but when I

stood up, the ground tipped alarmingly beneath me. The trees spun, a sickening swirl of brown and gray and white.

“Donovan?”

I heard Alex’s voice like an echo down a long tunnel. I said his name, or I tried to, but nothing came out. Those pretty green eyes I loved so much went wide and hands grabbed for me as the ground rose up to meet me and everything went dark.

Chapter 19

Alex

Panic clawed at my heart as I fell to my knees beside Donovan. He'd gone alarmingly pale, a fine sheen of sweat coating his skin despite the freezing air.

"Donovan!"

"What happened? Is he okay?"

Raina and Camille's panicked cries went in one ear and out the other, my sole focus on Donovan. He didn't look at me, his eyes unfocused and his pupils blown wide. Hands shaking, I tugged at his jacket, searching for any signs of injury and finding nothing. I moved further down and I felt it before I saw it.

A jagged tear ripped through the thick fabric of his pants, high up on the back of his thigh, just out of sight. When I shifted him enough to look, I found a ragged wound slashed into his leg, oozing blood onto the snow. The edges were raw and red, the skin inflamed.

Then Ori was there, kneeling across from me, their fingers brushing the wound. They whispered a low curse, but not in any language I recognized.

"We need to get him back to town now ," they said and for the first time, there was genuine fear in their voice.

“What’s wrong with him? It’s just a cut, right?” I whispered, pleading.

“It got him with its tail. It must have been venomous.” Ori scrambled up. “Help me get him to the car. We don’t have long.”

My heart in my throat, I stumbled up and between the two of us, we got Donovan upright. Raina and Camille led the way, rifles at the ready, but nothing came for us as we staggered to the car. We’d been so close when the thing attacked us, less than half a mile.

I was sweating by the time we made it and Donovan’s breathing had grown shallow and thready. As carefully as we could, we laid him down in the back seat and I handed Ori the keys. There was no way I could focus on the road, not now.

“My car is parked just a little ways down,” Ori said to Raina, tossing her a set of keys. “Drive it back into town and I’ll get it later.”

“No fucking way. We’re coming, too,” she snapped. Her dark skin had gone ashen with fear and tears streaked her cheeks, but she held it together.

“Fine, but we’re not waiting,” Ori said, nodding for me to get in the car.

“We’ll be behind you,” Camille called, and the two of them ran around the bend in the road to get Ori’s car. I sat backwards in the passenger seat, facing Donovan as Ori pulled out onto the road. Donovan’s eyes had gone unfocused, his blinks sluggish and heavy, growing slower every time.

“Can you help him?”

“I’ll do my best,” they said tightly. “A creature like that shouldn’t exist. I don’t even know exactly what it was, so I don’t have anything to counteract its venom

specifically, but there are a few things I can try.”

Nothing else mattered, then. All the questions I’d had, the fear, everything fell to the wayside and Donovan became my sole focus. I didn’t take my eyes off him as we tore down the county roads way too quickly to be safe. I reached between the seats to steady Donovan with one hand, the other holding onto the bar above my seat. If we got in an accident, I was as good as dead, but I couldn’t turn away. If I did, I might miss a critical sign and I’d lose him.

“Nearly there.”

I didn’t know or care where we were going, only vaguely aware of trees around us, surrounding the road. Ori finally came to a stop, gently enough to not jostle Donovan, and all but flew out of the car. A few seconds later, I heard the screech of tires as Raina and Camille pulled in behind us.

“Run ahead, the door’s unlocked. Tell her we’re coming,” they ordered and the girls didn’t question them, just did as ordered.

“Donovan, you’re going to be okay,” I whispered, reaching back to stroke his damp hair off his forehead. His eyelids drooped and this time, he didn’t open them again.

“We need to get him inside,” Ori said and together, we got Donovan out. He was dead weight in our arms and his feet dragged behind him as we staggered up the steps of some kind of log cabin.

Inside was pure chaos. Raina and Camille stood by the door while a woman darted around the small house.

“Kitchen!” she ordered, her voice thick with an unfamiliar accent. She ran ahead, holding a small pillow in her hands. “Put him on the table so I can see the wound.”

Camille and Raina had to help Ori and I, but together we got him settled facedown on the table. The wound on his thigh had gotten worse during the drive. Red lines radiated from it, his jeans hiding how far they spread. Green pus clung to the deeper side and my stomach churned. I swallowed it back and averted my eyes, determined not to leave his side.

“What do we do?” I asked and even I could hear how close I was to crying.

The woman glanced at me, blue eyes shockingly bright against her dark skin. “Stay by his head and hold his hand. Stay out of our way.” She said it gently but firmly, leaving me no choice but to obey. Camille and Raina joined me, pressing against my back as I held onto Donovan’s hand.

Ori disappeared the moment we’d gotten Donovan settled and returned now with a tackle box. “I have antivenin, but it might not be enough. The tail looked like a scorpion.”

“It can’t hurt,” the woman agreed. “Slowly, though. I will try a poultice to draw out the poison.”

While she did something at the kitchen counter, throwing herbs and things I had no name for into a flowered mixing bowl, Ori pulled an IV bag, of all things, out of their tackle box.

“Alex, get his jacket off of him,” they said, eyes focused on whatever they were doing with the bag and an uncomfortably large needle.

“Pants, too,” the woman called. “There is a blanket on the couch to keep him warm and covered. Settle him and wash the wound.”

Raina steadied Donovan while I unzipped the jacket and peeled it off, trying not to

jostle him. Dropping it on the floor to deal with later, I got his jeans off, wincing at how far the lines of red had spread across his leg. Donovan didn't react at all, and his lips had taken on a blue tinge. Camille ran to the living area, coming back a moment later with a plaid blanket in her hands.

"Oh, God," she whispered, voice shaking when she got her first look at the wound.

"He'll be fine," Raina said. I might have believed her if there hadn't been tears in her eyes. Still, she took the blanket from Camille and draped it over Donovan's hips, allowing him a modicum of modesty.

"If you have a weak stomach or hate needles, look away now. You're not going to like this." Ori's firm voice cut through the fear and Raina immediately turned away. I desperately wanted to, but I refused to leave Donovan. Still, when Ori touched the needle of the IV to the side of Donovan's neck, my stomach churned alarmingly and I had to close my eyes.

"Done," they announced, and I hesitantly opened one eye, trying not to gag when I saw the needle inserted in the vein there.

"Why there?"

"It was that or the bottom of his foot and with antivenin, the closer to the heart, the better." They slid the bag onto what looked like a folding tripod, modified with a hook.

"That means he'll be fine, right? It'll stop the poison and he'll be okay?" I hadn't let go of Donovan's hand the entire time and I squeezed it tighter now, hoping for some kind of response, but his fingers were limp in mine.

"I wish I could say. I don't know what that thing was and we're just doing the best

we can. I'm sorry." Ori grabbed a kettle off the stove as they spoke, pouring the hot water into a basin and grabbing a cloth, immediately setting to work cleaning the wound.

"Move," the woman said, nudging Ori out of the way with her hip as soon as they finished, the bowl balanced in one hand. The concoction within was a dark green mess of herbs and smelled like a swamp, making my eyes water. She nudged the edge of the blanket up to expose the full length of the wound. It looked a little better now that it was clean, but his skin was still red and swollen and the lines had spread down to his knee and up to the small of his back.

Without hesitation, she reached into the bowl and smeared a thick layer of the mess across the tear from end to end, then added another handful, covering it completely.

"With any luck, the poultice will draw out enough poison to allow the antivenin to neutralize the rest," Ori murmured.

"How long will it take to know if it's working?" I asked.

"The IV will take roughly an hour to administer. Once it's done, we can reevaluate." They went to a small dining table tucked against the wall and grabbed a chair, sliding it up behind me so I could sit by Donovan's head.

"Thank you." The adrenaline crash hit me like a tsunami, washing away every bit of energy I possessed.

"I should call Will," Camille murmured. "I don't know what to tell him, though." Now that the immediate emergency had passed, she was looking a little white around the gills, shock settling in. Raina didn't look much better, slumped against the wall and holding Donovan's jacket.

I glanced up at Ori and found them watching me.

“They saw everything,” I confirmed, and they sighed.

“I assume Will is Detective Dodd?”

I nodded.

“And I assume he knows about you, too, and you’ll be telling him about this as well?”

I nodded again, too exhausted for more words.

With the sigh of the overwhelmingly put upon, Ori turned to Camille. “Call him and have him come here. I’ll explain once and once only. Don’t tell him Donovan was injured yet, though. No need to cause a panic.” To me, he said, “I need to get in touch with Jean and the others to make sure Landon got home safely. Then I have some calls to make about that creature. Donovan is in good hands with Lelo. Come find me if anything changes or when your friend arrives.”

They patted my shoulder, did one more quick check on Donovan’s IV, then left, leaving us alone with the woman, apparently named Lelo.

“I... I’m going to step outside and call Will. I need some air,” Camille whispered. Raina glanced at me and I nodded, knowing she wanted to support her girlfriend. She probably needed some space to breathe, as well.

Then it was just the three of us in the kitchen. Lelo busied herself with covering the half-empty bowl and washing up, leaving Donovan and me in a little bubble of silence. He hadn’t moved, his breathing still too shallow and rapid, but he didn’t seem to be getting worse. That had to be a good sign.

“You can fight this, Donovan,” I whispered, resting my head on the edge of the table beside his. “I need you to come back to me. I can’t do this without you.” I kissed the back of his hand, his skin clammy beneath my lips. “Don’t leave me alone, Donovan. I love you.”

An eternity passed before anything changed. Really, it was less than an hour, because the IV bag hadn’t emptied, but it felt like forever. Donovan’s breathing had settled into a more regular rhythm at last. It was still shallow, but the steady in and out lulled me into a daze once Lelo left us alone, and the sudden sound of voices was too loud after the quiet.

I recognized Camille’s voice, then a deeper voice. Will had arrived. I couldn’t make out the words, but she must have been warning him, because the sound of their footsteps halted, then one person broke away, running the short distance into the kitchen and freezing in the doorway.

Blinking tired eyes, I looked over my shoulder to see Will standing there, grasping the door frame to steady himself as he took in the sight of his partner on the table, half-naked with an IV in his neck.

“What...”

“Raina, could you grab him a chair?” I asked, and she hurried to grab one identical to mine, putting it beside me. Will crossed the two steps to the table and collapsed into it, almost as pale as Donovan.

“You guys were just supposed to help find Landon. How did this happen?” he asked faintly. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Ori promised to explain once we were all here,” Camille said. She stood behind her brother, a hand on his shoulder. She still didn’t look great herself, but she was trying to be strong for her brother. Both twins’ eyes were a little glassy with shock and in Camille’s eyes, I saw the same fear and confusion I felt in myself.

“Ori?” he repeated blankly. I’d assumed Donovan had been filling him in on everything, but I guess not. It looked like Will was the only one of our group who wasn’t up to date and if I had space for anything besides worry for Donovan, I would have probably felt guilty about that.

Thankfully, Raina and Camille gave him a quick rundown for me, basically explaining how Ori had been helping me learn to use my ability. He didn’t seem any less confused afterward and, on top of it, he was clearly overwhelmed.

“So, where are they? I’d like to know what happened to my best friend.”

“I’m right here,” Ori said as they came through the door, eyes glued to the phone in their hand as they texted someone. “And for the record? I don’t owe any of you any kind of explanation.” They sent off their message, then took a moment to look each of us in the eye. “I’ll explain, but in return, I need your word that you won’t keep digging.”

“What does that mean?” Will’s eyes narrowed, lines of tension bracketing his mouth when he frowned.

“There are people in this town with unique abilities, like Alex. Most of them prefer to have as little to do with law enforcement as possible, for reasons I hope are obvious. It means I need your word that you won’t go searching for them and digging into their private business. After all of you leave here, you will go about your regular lives and keep what you’ve learned to yourself.”

Their tone, hard and unyielding, was guaranteed to start a fight and, sure enough, Will sat up straighter, squaring himself up to argue.

“Will, please.” That got his attention on me and off Ori for a moment, at least. Maybe it was the sight of Donovan laying unconscious beside me or maybe it was Camille silently squeezing his shoulder in support, but after a tense moment, he backed down.

“Fine. You have my word,” he grumbled. Ori just waited, not saying anything, until Raina, Camille, and I also agreed. Even then, they took a moment to check Donovan’s IV bag before pulling up another chair and sitting down across from us.

“I am only telling you this because you’ve personally seen things that you shouldn’t have,” they began. “We’ve survived this long by staying hidden and telling anyone who isn’t one of us is dangerous, let alone four of you.”

I assumed they included Donovan in that number, but not me.

“I’m still not entirely sure what I saw,” Raina murmured. She held Camille’s hand so tightly her knuckles had gone white. Like Camille and Will, her face was ashen and I saw the same shocky look I’d seen in myself after a ghost encounter. They’d accepted ghosts because of me, because they loved and trusted me. Even I was struggling with this new information, though, so I shouldn’t be surprised they were, too.

As I said, there are people in this town with unique abilities,” Ori went on. “Something about this area draws us here and has for centuries. No one has been able to fully explain why, only that there’s a higher concentration of us here than anywhere else in the country. It’s always been known simply as ‘The Crossing’, until James Lowery tacked his name onto it. When the area became more settled, some of the original inhabitants withdrew deeper into the woods and the mountains, but some chose to integrate into the new community that formed.”

Despite the unholy combination of worry, fear, and exhaustion weighing me down, I found myself drawn into the story. I knew part of it already from talking to Ori before, but not the details. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Raina and Camille grab the last remaining chair and settle in to listen, with Raina in Camille's lap.

Will, though, wasn't inclined toward patience. "What are we talking about here? A coven of psychics living in a commune in the mountains or something?"

I couldn't blame him for his frustration, but I still winced at how he showed it. Unlike the rest of us, he was being bombarded by all of this at once, with no time to acclimate. Camille's steadfast belief in spiritualism and magic seemed to be helping her take this in. Over the years, her beliefs had rubbed off on Raina. They'd also seen the shifters change before their eyes and we'd all seen that monster. I had no choice but to accept it, since I was an involuntary member of this 'other community', and Donovan stood by me no matter what. Again, only Will had been inadvertently left out and had to deal with all this new information at once.

"Will, just let Ori tell it," Camille murmured to her twin. "Trust me. Please?"

Will's jaw clenched, but he nodded. "I'm sorry for interrupting," he mumbled to Ori, who thankfully didn't take offense. At least, not openly.

"Early on, some of those who integrated with the settlers attempted to show their true selves, usually with people they'd formed romantic relationships with." Ori cast a quick glance at Donovan and me. "As I'm sure you can imagine, it didn't go well and led to the persecution of the community as a whole. For the sake of simplicity, we'll call it the paranormal community." Their distaste for the word was obvious. "Humans fear what they don't understand, and these people were no different. Some few chose to remain and hide who they were, while the rest found safety with those who had already hidden in the mountains. And to answer your question, Will: no, it is not a 'coven of psychics living in a commune'."

Will had the grace to flush, lowering his head when Ori looked at him.

“The people in the woods... they were some kind of shapeshifter,” Raina said quietly, though it sounded more like a question.

Ori nodded. “Yes, there are members of the paranormal community who are shapeshifters of varying kinds. They fully retain their human minds and thoughts when in their other form, unlike werewolves. Yes, they are real,” they said when three jaws dropped. I guess there were still a few things that could surprise Camille, after all. “They are also very dangerous. Weres have no control when the moon forces them to change and they are deadly. They are, thankfully, few in number and kept under control during the full moon to prevent them from harming others.”

“So, what was that thing that attacked us?” I asked. My voice cracked, weariness bleeding into every syllable.

“That was something I had never seen outside of a book before, which is not something that occurs often.” Ori slumped forward in the chair, resting their elbows on their knees. “I made some calls and from what I could gather, we think it was a manticore.”

“A manticore?” Will repeated faintly.

“Like from mythology?” Something about it had tickled the back of my brain, though I hadn’t realized it through the sheer terror of the fight, and now I knew why. I’d devoured mythology as a teenager, delving through old Greek myths before leaping into mythologies of the world.

“Yes. Even in the paranormal community, they’re myths. No one has ever seen one and I spoke to several people who have been around for quite a long time.” They didn’t expand on that, I noted, which made me wonder exactly how long they’d been

alive. “According to the myths we found, mantichore translates roughly to ‘man-eater’.”

“In the stories I read, they have scorpion tails, but they had human heads and the body of a lion,” I said with a frown. “This looked like a giant cat with lizard legs and a scorpion’s tail.”

“And those wings,” Raina whispered, swallowing hard in remembered fear. Will just looked gobsmacked, staring at us like we’d gone crazy. Maybe we had. It was starting to feel like it.

“It looked almost like someone took a mantichore and added parts of a bat or something.” The word my mind wanted to supply was ‘dragon’, but that was not something I could mentally handle at the moment. “Wouldn’t that make it a chimera?”

Ori blinked, their eyes going unfocused for a moment as they thought. “You may be right,” they finally said. “Either way, no matter what it is, it shouldn’t exist, and yet it clearly does. I’ve reached out to some people who may be able to help me track it down and find out where it came from. This is where your promise comes in. Especially you, Alex.” Ori stared me down, unblinking. “I need you all to let this go. We will handle it.”

“You’re the one who helped me realize I can find more than just the dead and now you want me to not use that ability?” I protested immediately, sitting up straight. “I can help you find it before it hurts someone else!”

“That thing nearly killed all of you today. Even two strong shifters like Anjeli and Dane only survived because it was already injured. If we are unable to find it, then we can attempt to use your ability. Until then, I need you to stay clear. If it has any sort of human cognizance, there’s a good chance it will try to target you for hurting it. I’m

asking you to stay safe and not draw its attention to you. You've seen what it can do."

I turned back to Donovan, his hand still held securely in mine. He hadn't moved beyond the slow rise and fall of his back as he breathed. The poultice on the back of his thigh had grown dark and a thin trickle of blood had dried on the inside of his leg. One cut from it had nearly killed him. I didn't want to think of what would have happened if Ori and the others hadn't arrived.

"Fine, but only if you swear you'll let me help if you can't find it," I said.

"Agreed."

"I definitely don't want to see that thing ever again," Raina said with a nod. Camille just nodded, as well, wrapping her arms tightly around Raina and hugging her close.

"This is insane..."

"Will, I know this is a lot to take in, but—"

"A lot to take in?" Will repeated incredulously, staring at Camille. "It's one thing to believe in ghosts and psychics." He stumbled over the last word, gesturing at me. "I leave you all alone for two hours and suddenly there are shapeshifters and chimeras and werewolves and who knows what else? Yeah, Cami, that's 'a lot to take in'."

"We wouldn't lie to you," Raina said when Camille seemed at a loss for words.

"Well, you clearly haven't had any trouble keeping things from me," he snapped, and I flinched from the truth in his words. Without meaning to, we had been keeping things from him whenever one of us didn't take the time to tell him what had been going on.

“No one has tried to keep anything from you. It was an accident,” Camille whispered. She reached for her twin, but he pulled away.

“That doesn’t help like you think it does.” He got to his feet and took a breath. “I’m going to call the captain and let her know Landon has been found, since I doubt any of you reported he was safe?”

“I contacted my side of the community,” Ori shrugged. They seemed unfazed by the drama unfolding in the small kitchen.

“Wonderful.” Will’s voice was drier than the desert. “I’ll let her know to call off the search. I won’t tell her the volunteers have been wasting their time wandering in a snowstorm for the last hour.”

“What are you going to tell her about Donovan?” I hated to ask, but Donovan loved his job and I didn’t want him to recover only to find he’d lost it.

“Don’t worry, I’ll come up with a good lie. Seems it’s been going around lately.” Then he was gone, the kitchen door swinging shut behind him.

Chapter 20

Donovan

Consciousness returned in slow dribs and drabs, fleeting seconds of awareness between bouts of darkness. I heard raised voices, but couldn't stay awake long enough to understand what was being said. I felt a hand in mine, but my body wouldn't respond when I tried to squeeze it. A chill tickled across my bare legs, but I couldn't ask for a blanket.

The first time I stayed awake for more than a moment and my thoughts cleared, I opened my eyes to darkness. Vague shapes stood out in the shadows, enough for me to realize I was in a kitchen, but not the one at Alex's house or the one in my rental. Wherever I was, it was quiet. Even in a small town like Lowery's Crossing, it wasn't unusual to hear the sound of cars going by at all hours of the night. Here, silence reigned. No glow from a streetlight filtered through the windows, only a faint hint of pale moonlight too weak to penetrate the darkness.

In any other situation, my instinct would have been to fight or flee, to get away from this place that I had no memory of coming to. Now, though, there was a hand in my own that I immediately recognized and when I shifted my head, I found Alex beside me, his cheek resting on the edge of whatever I was lying on. From the height and position, likely a table.

Why was I laying on a stranger's kitchen table?

When I tried to muddle through my memories, they evaded me, slipping through my

grasp. I remembered searching for Landon and finding the ledge. I remembered the argument with Ori's group, then heading back to the cars with Alex and Raina and Camille. After that, everything went hazy.

I could focus on that later. Right now, I had a more pressing problem. Two of them, actually, but when I tried to move, pain shot up my leg and through my lower back, forcing a sharp gasp.

Alex immediately stirred, sitting up with a groan. He looked at me with bleary eyes, then blinked and nearly fell out of his chair when he realized I was awake.

"Donovan!" His free hand touched my forehead, then my cheek, like he just needed to touch me. "How do you feel?"

"Everything hurts right now," I admitted. My throat was raw, like I'd swallowed broken glass. "I need a bathroom."

"I'm not sure if you're supposed to move yet. Let me get Ori and Lelo. Stay still, okay?" He pressed a kiss to my dry lips, then disappeared before I could gather my wits enough to ask who Lelo was.

I got my answer barely two minutes later when Alex returned with two people behind him. Ori was familiar, of course, so the tall Black woman with them must be Lelo.

"You're awake. I was starting to worry," she said, brushing past the other two. The overhead lights came on and I winced against the sudden brightness. "Lie still for a moment. Let me check your wound."

"My wound?" I repeated. "What happened? Where are we?"

"I'll explain everything. Let her look you over first, okay?" Alex resumed his place at

the head of the table, taking my hand but remaining standing now so he could see what Lelo was doing. Her fingers were gentle as she did something to the back of my leg, but it still hurt like hell, a strange burning and tingling twining with the shooting pain.

“The lines have receded. One more application should do the trick,” she announced, which meant nothing to me but apparently meant everything to Alex.

“Good.” His shoulders slumped with relief. “Is he allowed to move yet?”

“I would prefer you didn’t until we do one more poultice,” she said to me. “I don’t want to risk elevating your heartbeat and moving the poison through your system.”

“Poison?” I’d been poisoned ? Why couldn’t I remember any of this?

“It’s okay. I swear I’ll explain,” Alex said hurriedly, dropping into the chair so he could meet my eyes.

“Okay. I still need the bathroom, though.”

Footsteps walked away, and a cabinet opened, then Lelo appeared by Alex’s head.

“You’re not going to like it, but this is the best I can offer at the moment.”

She handed Alex a plastic container, one of those cheap ones people bought for meal prepping and leftovers. Well, she was right: I certainly didn’t like it. The need was urgent enough that I couldn’t wait, though.

“We’ll step out for a moment. When I come back, I’ll reapply the poultice and we can see about getting you home tonight,” Lelo said, then departed the room with Ori.

“I can handle it.” I tried to reach for the bowl, but even that little bit of effort left me shaking, my heart thudding heavily in my chest and a hint of sweat on my skin.

“Don’t be stubborn. We’re in this together, through thick and thin, right?”

I wanted to argue, but I was weaker than a newborn kitten right now and I couldn’t wait. Flushed with embarrassment, I allowed Alex to help me shift onto my side just enough to use the bowl. That was bad enough, but even worse was listening to him deal with it afterward. He stepped out what must be a back door behind me, but it couldn’t completely disguise the sound.

Once he’d washed his hands and helped me settle, he stuck his head out to let them know we were done, then resumed his seat.

“Sorry,” I whispered, face still burning.

“Don’t be.” He stroked my hair back from my face, as gentle as always. “You’d do the same for me, right?”

I couldn’t help a little smile, and I nodded. “Any day.”

Lelo bustled into the room a moment later and I heard a rustle as she immediately threw the bowl in a trashcan. I didn’t blame her.

“You may feel some tingling when I apply the poultice, but it shouldn’t hurt. Tell me if anything feels odd.”

True to her word, there was no pain this time. Her gentle fingers spread something cool on my upper thigh. The smell hit me a moment later and I shuddered. It reminded me of the Chicago River after a long, hot day, when the smell of pollution and sewage was worst.

“I know. You get used to it,” Alex murmured. He wrinkled his nose at the smell, too, though.

Lelo made quick work of it, and almost immediately, the throbbing pain eased a little.

“I’d like that to remain on for an hour or two, then we can do one last examination and likely get you on your way.”

“Thank you. Both of you,” I added with a nod to Ori, who still stood in the doorway observing us.

“Rest. I’ll be back to check on you,” she said. Something warm draped across my legs from the knees down, then the two of them departed.

“Okay. What happened?” Getting comfortable on the hard table was impossible and I hated laying on my stomach, but I did the best I could. The small pillow helped, allowing me to rest my chin on it so I could look at Alex straight-on.

“The short version is that we found Landon, then we got attacked by a chimera on the way back to the car. It cut your leg and got its venom into you, so Ori brought us here. They gave you some antivenin, and Lelo used that nasty-smelling poultice to draw out the poison.”

A flicker of memory surfaced and I shuddered. The creature that attacked us had been something straight out of a nightmare. I still wasn’t quite alert enough to deal with that yet, so I focused on the more immediate problems. “What about Camille and Raina? Are they okay? How long have I been unconscious?”

“They’re fine,” he assured me. “Ori gave them a ride home a few hours ago. You’ve been out all day. It’s just after midnight now. Will came and went earlier, too. He made sure the search was called off and everyone made it home safely before the

storm hit.”

Something in the way he said that last part caught my attention. “But?”

“But what?”

“Did something happen with Will or the search? You sounded odd when you said his name.”

Alex’s fingers found the edge of the pillow, worrying at the seam with his fingernails. “Will might be a little pissed off at us,” he finally admitted quietly.

“What? Why?”

“Well, in all the chaos and everything going on, we all kind of left him out of the loop about... everything.”

“I told him you were working on expanding your abilities, but I didn’t give details because it wasn’t my place to tell. He gets that, right?” I hated that I couldn’t sit up for this, or even really move.

“I told Raina and Camille, so he was the only one who didn’t know. I think he might’ve understood that, but then the four of us went out together and left him to deal with the search. Then he was the last person to find out about the shapeshifting thing. I think all of that combined, plus, you know, finding out about shapeshifters and chimeras, kind of threw him for a loop. He was pretty upset when he left earlier.”

I had a sudden, vivid memory of two coyotes bursting out of the trees and attacking the creature and put the pieces together from there. “I remember that, I think. So the family are all coyotes? That was Landon’s aunt and uncle?”

Alex nodded. "I guess you don't remember them changing back after the chimera ran away. Raina and Camille saw them and it's not like they could unsee it, so..." He shrugged, but the edge of the pillow was getting a little ragged. Risking agitating my wound, I shifted just enough to free up my hand and put it over his, stilling his anxious picking.

"Once I get home, I'll talk to Will. He'll understand," I assured him. "I'll need to talk to him anyway to find out what he told Cornell. At this rate, I'll be lucky if I have a job by the end of the month." The lies were piling up, and Bev Cornell wasn't a stupid woman.

"About that..."

"Don't tell me I'm already fired?"

"No, not last I heard." I felt him start to fidget with the pillow again, but this time he stopped himself, wrapping both his hands around mine to keep from destroying it. "I've had a lot of time to think while you've been sleeping and I think you're right."

I waited for him to explain, but he didn't continue. "Not to sound arrogant or anything, but you're going to have to expand on that a little."

Alex rolled his eyes, but it got a tiny smile out of him and some of the strain in his eyes seemed to ease.

"I think you were right about telling her. Chief Cornell. About me." His grip on my hand tightened and there was a faint tremor to his quiet words. "I can't stop finding people and she's already suspicious of me, so telling her before she figures it out on her own would be smart. Not to mention, the chimera got away and it's obviously dangerous, so she should know about things like this, right?" His voice had fallen to nearly a whisper by the end.

“I agree, but only if it’s something you really want. You don’t sound too sure.”

“I know Ori doesn’t want me to tell anyone, but our friends already know now. And you trust your boss, right? I only know her as a customer, but you seem to like her.”

“Yeah, I trust her,” I assured him, stopping him before he could pick up steam on his anxious rambling. “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, though. I’d never force that on you just to protect my job. I know it’s a small town, but there are other jobs.”

“You love what you do, though,” he whispered and I could tell I’d surprised him.

“I love you more.”

He blinked, struggling to process that. “I can’t take that away from you. If you think it’s safe to tell her what I can, then I trust you.”

I gently squeezed his hand. “I think it’s safe, but more importantly, I really think this will be a good thing for you. You don’t have to be scared or stressed about hiding to protect yourself. You won’t have to deal with the worst parts of what you can do.”

He sagged forward, resting his head on the pillow beside mine. “I really freaking love you.”

“I really love you, too.”

Alex was close enough that I could brush a soft kiss across his forehead, the only part of him I could reach in this position.

“I don’t want to work for the police, though. I mean, I’ll help if someone is in danger or something, but I want to try to keep my life as normal as possible.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. I’m sorry if I ever I made you think any different.”

“Nope. That fight is done and we forgave each other, remember?”

“I remember.” Just like I remembered spreading him out across the bed and showing him just how much I adored him afterward.

“No thinking dirty thoughts in a stranger’s kitchen, Donovan Parker.”

“It’s that or talk about the chimera.”

“Okay then, sounds like we’re talking about our dirty fantasies in a stranger’s kitchen.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Come on, Alex. We have to talk about it eventually. I have questions.”

“So do I. I really don’t know much more than we knew when it attacked us, which was nothing.”

“You at least know what it is, though.”

“Ori made some calls and they thought it might be a manticore, at first, because of the scorpion tail, but I really think it’s a chimera.” He chuckled, low and humorless.

“Thankfully, I went through a massive ancient mythology phase as a kid.”

“I didn’t, so I’m going to need you to fill me in,” I said. I had to stay focused on the here and now, otherwise I’d spend hours just laying here wondering how my life had gone from solving petty crimes in a small town to dealing with ghosts and shapeshifters and monsters.

Alex leaned in and brushed his lips across mine, then sat back in the chair, letting go of my hand so he could pull his phone out of his pocket. “I couldn’t remember much, so I did some research while you were asleep. According to Greek myths, the chimera was a creature made up of different animals, like a lion and a goat. In some stories, it had wings like a dragon.”

He swallowed, tripping over that last word. I distinctly remembered the giant wings on the thing’s back, but those had to be bat wings. Dragons didn’t exist. I simply was not equipped to think otherwise at this moment.

“I remember the wings,” I nodded. “The rest didn’t look like any lion or goat I’ve ever seen. It looked more like a giant panther. I definitely remember the scorpion tail.”

“It almost makes me think this thing was created based on the legends of the manticore, but then other things were added to make it more dangerous.”

“Hold on a second,” I interrupted, lifting my head as much as I could. “You think someone created this thing?”

Alex hunched in on himself, ducking his head. “I know it sounds insane, but Ori kept insisting that nothing like it should exist and no one they talked to knew anything about it. If all these people that know about the paranormal keep swearing that it can’t exist naturally, then that means it came about unnaturally, right?”

“You’re not insane, Alex. It does sound strange, but you’re right. Unless it’s managed to stay hidden from everyone and everything it’s entire life, then it must be something new. Considering how aggressively it came after Landon and us, I’d say hiding isn’t a big priority for it.”

“How is this our lives?” he sighed. “I thought I was going crazy when I first started

seeing ghosts. For awhile, I thought my mom did the right thing by locking me up. Now we're sitting here talking about living, breathing chimeras."

My heart ached for him. The three days he'd spent held in that hospital clung to him even now. He always played it off as a joke or a throwaway comment, like it didn't bother him anymore, but I knew him better than that. Reassurances didn't help, so I fell back on distracting him.

"Honestly, I'm trying not to think too hard about it. Once things calm down, then we can have an existential crisis."

It worked, earning a quiet chuckle from Alex.

"Only you could make me laugh while we're talking about killer monsters."

"It's my specialty," I teased. "Tell me more about it, though. Did you find anything else?"

"Nothing super useful. 'Chimera' is kind of the catch-all for any creature made up of parts of other creatures. In the original myths, it could breathe fire, so I guess it's a good thing there aren't any real creatures that can do that, otherwise that fight would have gone a lot different."

The wings and tail were bad enough, not even taking into account the massive fangs and talons. I didn't want to imagine what could have happened if it could breathe fire on top of all that.

"I don't suppose there was a handy guide on how to kill it? We shot it three times and that barely even slowed it down."

"In the myths, it was killed by Bellerophon. He rode Pegasus up into the sky and shot

it from above, which apparently was enough to kill it.”

“I guess we’ll have to figure something else out, then, unless flying horses are real, too?”

Thinking about the flying horse, something suddenly clicked in the back of my mind. The day Landon went missing, something had spooked his sister’s horse and it’d thrown her, hurting her bad enough that she didn’t go with him. Could the chimera have been that close to their house and no one saw it? It made sense, though. Any sane creature would freak out if they encountered that thing.

“Honestly, at this point, I don’t think I’d be surprised if they were,” Alex laughed, shaking his head. “But until someone shows me one, I think we’re out of luck. Besides, it’s not our problem anymore.”

That gave me pause, and I frowned in confusion. “Come again?”

“Right, I forgot to tell you that part,” he said, wincing. “Ori made me promise we wouldn’t go looking for it. They said they’d deal with it and we were to back off unless it was an absolute last resort and they needed help to find it.”

“And you agreed to that?”

“That thing scratched you once and you almost died, Donovan. Like you said, guns aren’t enough to stop it and we’re just regular people. Yes, I agreed. Let the folks who can shapeshift and do magic or whatever else is out there deal with it. We’ll do what we can to protect the people in town, but we don’t need to go chasing after this thing. It absolutely, one hundred percent will kill us.”

As much as it pained me to admit it, he had a good point. It went against my instinctive drive to protect others and get rid of any threats, but in reality... what

could I really do against a monster like that?

“I don’t like it,” I grumbled. “But I get it.”

“Ori said they’d keep me up to date on whatever happened with it, and if they can’t find it, they’ll come to me, if that helps?”

“It kind of does, I guess.” It would have to do. “Anything else I need to know about?”

Alex leaned back in his chair, running through a mental tally before finally shaking his head. “I think that’s everything major.”

“Thank God. I honestly wasn’t sure I could handle anything else, but I had to ask.”

“There’s nothing going on right now that we can deal with, so just focus on recovering. We’ll be out of here and back home soon. Everything else can wait.”

A comfortable silence settled over us while we waited for the poultice to do its work. Alex settled back down on the pillow and after a few minutes, the events of the day caught up to him and he settled into an exhausted sleep. Much as I wanted to join him, though, I couldn’t quiet the thoughts racing through my mind. So much had happened in such a short time and it was going to take a while to really process it all, but in the end, it all came down to one solid fact: today, for better or for worse, our entire lives had changed.

Chapter 21

Alex

I never thought the day would come when I'd approach the Lowery's Crossing police department building and walk through the doors voluntarily and yet... here we were.

Donovan limped along beside me in support, which supported Will's lies about why Donovan hadn't been with the search party. He'd told the chief Donovan had slipped on some ice and messed up his knee. She hadn't questioned why Donovan hadn't called in himself about the injury, which had given Donovan a sleepless night spent thinking his boss was building a case to fire him.

Lelo's poultice had done its work, at least, and the venom was out of his system, but she couldn't do anything for the gash across the back of his thigh. With it positioned so high on his leg, it made walking nearly impossible, but he powered through it to be with me today.

"We don't have to tell her that you knew," I said as we made our way up the short path from the sidewalk. "I don't want to put your job at risk. I can say I just told you yesterday."

"Thanks, but like I said the last four times you offered, if we're telling her the truth, then we're telling her the full truth. If we try to convince her I didn't know after what happened at the McAvell farm, she'll probably fire me, anyway, for being the world's shittiest detective," he said wryly.

Donovan was far more confident about the outcome of this whole thing than I was. While he assumed the best, I was still more than halfway convinced I'd end the day in another psych hospital. I never would have believed I'd take the risk of telling someone again until I'd met Donovan. That had been scary enough, even knowing he cared about me. After him, telling my friends had been easier, but while Bev Cornell was a regular customer at A Likely Story, she and I weren't exactly friends. At the end of the day, she was still the chief of police and I was the hapless psychic who kept stumbling into her cases.

We'd timed our arrival carefully. I'd wanted to get it done and over with as early as possible, but Donovan suggested we wait until the morning chaos had passed and she'd had time to catch up on any emails or pressing business that had come up since she'd left the office. The snowstorm two days ago had turned the roads into slushy messes and caused more than a few accidents, not to mention the confusion and questions about Landon DeVor, all of which she had to deal with in one way or another, while also being down one of her two detectives.

So we'd waited until just after her lunch hour, when she'd hopefully be about as relaxed as she'd get.

The receptionist at the front desk, an older woman named Ruth who looked like she'd bake apple pies and knit doilies for fun but in reality was the reason I kept so many gory horror books on the shelf, greeted us with her usual cheerful smile when we walked in. She just waved us on in, then went back to her computer.

Last time I'd been here, I'd been escorted by two officers after being brought in for questioning. I knew at least one ghost haunted the place, but with any luck, he wouldn't wander past the file room he'd been in last time. Maybe that had been his old office before he'd died? Donovan had told me his name, or at least who he thought it was, but I'd promptly forgotten it. Either way, he was kind of a dick and the last thing I needed right now.

The door to Donovan and Will's office was open as we passed, and I caught a glimpse of Will inside at his computer. He glanced up but didn't greet us, obviously still mad. I'd have to talk to him soon, too. I owed him that.

Then we were at the chief's office, and I was officially out of excuses and distractions. The door stood open and Chief Cornell sat at her desk, flipping through some papers. She glanced up at our approach and raised one dark, perfectly shaped brow when she saw us standing there.

"Come in and close the door," she said, neatly stacking the papers and slipping them into a desk drawer. The only other thing on her desk was her computer, everything else organized and put away. Two chairs sat across from her, old wood and leather, smaller versions of the chair she sat in.

Donovan gave my hand a quick squeeze, closing the door behind us. I sat in one chair and he stood beside me, his hand in mine. With his injury, sitting was nearly impossible.

I expected her to start questioning us, but she just sat and waited, hands folded and resting on her desk.

Now that we were actually here, I had no idea where to start. I'd rehearsed what I wanted to say, revising and editing it in my head almost nonstop since I'd decided to come clean, but every single word of it disappeared, along with the English language itself, apparently. I floundered, opening then closing my mouth like a complete idiot.

What the hell was wrong with me? I'd agreed to this. Donovan's job could very well be on the line, along with my own freedom, and all I could do was sit and stare? I'd told Donovan. I'd told Raina and Camille and Will. What had I said to them? Why couldn't I remember what I'd planned?

The longer I sat there, the more my brain froze up and the more awkward the silence became. Donovan, bless him, caught on fairly quickly that I was struggling and gave the chief a small smile.

“We wanted to talk to y—”

“I’m a psychic!”

The words exploded out of me before I could stop them, fueled by pure panic, cutting Donovan off. I slapped a hand over my mouth, but it was far too late to take back the words. They landed like a bomb in the small office, blowing apart my decades-old web of lies in just four syllables.

Donovan and Cornell both turned to me. Donovan looked surprised and more sympathetic than I deserved, but her face remained completely blank, her thoughts carefully guarded.

“You’re psychic,” she repeated without inflection. I had no idea if she believed me, if she thought I was a lunatic, or if maybe she just thought she’d misheard me. If I hadn’t been in the early stages of a panic attack, I might have been impressed by her poker face. Instead, I was just terrified. The truth was out there now, though, and I had to follow through.

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

“Is there a particular reason you’re choosing to share this information?”

That... wasn’t the reaction I’d been expecting. Her complete calm smoothed the sharpest edges of my panic, allowing me to battle it back without slicing myself to ribbons.

“I should have told you before, but I didn’t want anyone to think I was crazy,” I admitted. “I... I’m telling you now because I helped find Landon DeVor. With the way he suddenly reappeared, I thought you might be a little suspicious and I didn’t want anyone getting into any kind of trouble because of me.”

Cornell was silent, her dark eyes flitting over to Donovan for a moment before coming back to me. “You found him, like you found Andre Marcel, Zofia Kostek, and Nina Martingale?”

Would hearing those names ever hurt any less? At least Mrs. Kostek’s death had been painless and her passing easy, with her hoping to be reunited with her husband. Andre and Nina had both passed on, but their memory would haunt me until my own dying day.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Well, kind of.”

“Explain.”

Maybe it was her complete lack of emotion, but now that I’d told her the hardest part, the rest came a little easier. Donovan’s hand in mine helped, too, and I kept my grip on it as I explained how the dead had come to me since I was a child. She had my background information thanks to Andre’s case, so I didn’t go into detail about my time in the psych hospital. I also avoided telling her about any of the other ghosts who’d come to me in my life that she didn’t know about. Just because I was telling her the truth didn’t mean I had to tell her literally everything.

Only twice did any sort of emotion break through her mask, the first when I told her a friend had suggested my power lay in finding lost things, not just speaking to the dead. I didn’t give any names, not wanting to incriminate Ori, but I thought I saw a hint of something in her eyes when I mentioned it. Recognition, maybe? Curiosity? It was there and gone before I could fully name it. She didn’t even blink when I told her

Donovan and I were the ones who'd found Jaime Smalls.

The second time came when I told her about the chimera in the woods. That got more of a reaction than anything else I'd said so far. Both brows went up and she leaned forward, only a bit, but noticeable. She glanced at Donovan when I admitted it had hurt him, again leaving out Lelo and Ori's names. I also skirted around Landon and his family, making it seem like they'd already been headed home when we were attacked and the gunshots alone had been enough to scare it off. I was here to tell my truth, after all, not to spill everyone's secrets.

Silence fell around us once I finished. Cornell stared into the middle distance, contemplating everything I'd told her. She surely saw the holes in the story, where I'd left out the mention of others with abilities, and I could only hope she wouldn't prod at them. Hell, my only hope at this point was that she believed me and didn't fire Donovan and have me locked up as a lunatic.

"What is your plan going forward?" she finally asked and again, that was not the reaction I'd been expecting.

"I'm sorry?"

Cornell tsked, all business now that she'd come to whatever decision she'd come to. "Your plans. Should I be expecting more anonymous phone calls whenever someone dies?"

"No? I mean, no." I shook my head. "I was thinking, if it happens again, Donovan could help me and he could maybe call you and tell you directly? I don't exactly want the whole town to know. And if there's ever anything that happens here I could help with, you could call me or Donovan could tell me? Like with Landon. I'm still learning how it all works, but I want to help."

“Using information obtained from a psychic won’t fly in a courtroom. It may make solving the case easier, but the paperwork will be a nightmare.”

“Does that mean you believe me, then?” She sounded like she did, but I needed to know. Some part of me, the part that felt suspiciously like a traumatized little boy, needed the reassurance that someone who didn’t love me believed me. I shouldn’t need that validation, but I desperately did.

“I’m a practical woman, Mr. Copeland. I’ve also lived in Lowery’s Crossing my entire life, as did my mother and her mother. There have always been rumors and whispers that there was more to this town than met the eye. Your story simply proves a lot of theories I’ve always held. This doesn’t grant you any special privileges, though. If you insist on helping, it will be done correctly.” Her attention shifted to Donovan, leaving me floundering in shock. “Detective Parker.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Donovan stood up straighter. He looked calm and unruffled, but his grip on my hand tightened, betraying his nerves.

“I’m not going to say I’m pleased with how things have been handled thus far. While I’m aware that you likely just wanted to keep Alex safe, you broke more law enforcement procedures than I can count in the process. Under most circumstances, you’d be placed on administrative leave at best, but more than likely, a competent chief would fire you.”

My heart dropped into my stomach and beside me, Donovan went very still, his worst fear becoming reality.

“Chief Cornell, please. He was only trying to help me. You know he’s a good detective,” I protested, trying not to shrink in on myself when she turned that penetrating gaze on me.

“While your support is noted, it is not needed. I am a competent chief, but as I said before, I’m also practical. Given the oddities of this town, I would be a fool not to see the possibilities of having an officer who has knowledge and connections to the more arcane side of our community.”

“May I ask what you’re suggesting?” An edge of cautious hope lightened Donovan, chasing away some of the darkness that had lingered over him for days now.

“You will continue to perform your duties as a detective with the LCPD. However, I will be placing you in charge of any incidents that come through here that are unusual . This will be an unofficial duty, of course, strictly off the record.”

“I accept.” Donovan didn’t hesitate, though I got the feeling this hadn’t exactly been a request from the chief, but an order.

“And Mr. Copeland, I’ll have to insist on at least one thing. If you are going to help, I expect to be notified of all incidents, not just the ones you want to share.”

Unlike Donovan, I did hesitate for a moment. Ori had trusted me with the secrets of the paranormal half of Lowery’s Crossing. Could I walk this line between the two? How could I truly help if I insisted on remaining apart from them? On the other hand, how could I keep pretending I was just a regular, normal person if I delved deeper into not only that community, but also the limits of my ability? Did I even want to pretend anymore? Could I handle the consequences of letting go of a lifetime of lies and hiding?

“Mr. Copeland?” Cornell prompted when I didn’t respond.

“I can notify you of as many incidents as I can,” I finally said. Her eyes narrowed slightly, but I pressed on. “There are some people who don’t want to reveal themselves, most out of fear. I made a promise to keep them safe, just like you made

a promise to the town. I can give you my word that I'll report the incidents I can to you, but I can't promise that I can give you every single detail. It's not my place to out them to the world."

I couldn't back down on this and I forced myself to maintain eye contact even as my grip on Donovan's hand threatened to crack his knuckles. Ori was already going to be pissed off at me for just this much, even more than they already were right now. If I bent anymore, I knew I'd lose their friendship for good.

"I don't like it," Cornell said, and it was all I could do not to flinch. "I can respect it, though. I suggest a compromise. I will agree to you not sharing personal details, so long as it doesn't present a danger to the rest of the town. Creatures such as this chimera you mentioned pose an active threat and I need to know how to keep people safe. Anyone, human or otherwise, who hurts others or is dangerous enough to do so, loses their right to privacy and anonymity. Do you agree?"

The line I walked narrowed to a razor's edge, but her words left me just enough space to keep my balance. "I agree."

"Then I believe we're done here."

"One more thing," Donovan cut in hurriedly as she started to rise.

"What else, Parker?"

"My partner, Will..."

That eyebrow rose again. "I'm aware of who your partner is, yes." She studied Donovan, then sighed. "Let me guess. You'd like to read him in on the situation."

"I know it's asking a lot, but I trust him."

Cornell glanced over at me, then back to Donovan. “I assume he already knows about Mr. Copeland? That would explain his willingness to lie for you.” She said the last part almost to herself. “Very well. It goes no further, though. Am I clear?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

I stayed quiet about that. She didn’t need to know that Raina and Camille were aware of everything, too, and I had no desire to put them on Chief Cornell’s radar.

“Get out of my office,” she ordered. Was that a hint of amusement I heard in her voice? “Go home and recover. I expect you back to work tomorrow morning, barring any side effects. You’ll be on desk duty until that wound heals, though.”

Donovan wisely didn’t protest, and we hurried out of her office together before she could change her mind. Will had either left or didn’t want to see us, because their shared office was empty as we passed by.

“I’ll talk to him in the morning,” Donovan said when he caught me peeking inside. I’d text Camille tonight and check in on Will just in case, but I hoped that Donovan pulling him in on this would go a long way toward repairing their friendship.

“That went a lot better than I expected.” Despite the snow on the ground and the icy bite in the air, I paused and took a deep breath of fresh air, letting the sun warm my face. Spring was near and with it, the promise of a new beginning.

“It really was the best-case scenario. She believed you, I kept my job, and now you don’t have to hide anymore.” Donovan wrapped his arm around me, hugging me tight.

We still had a long way to go to learn how all of this was going to work. Donovan and Will still needed to talk, and I had a long road ahead of me to repairing my

friendship with both Will and with Ori. The threat of the chimera still loomed and I had only just begun to scratch the surface of controlling my ability, but right now, none of that mattered.

Right now, standing in the sunlight in the arms of the man I loved, I had hope. For the first time in a lifetime, I could fully accept every aspect of who I was without flinching. The days ahead would be hard and dangerous as I delved into the arcane secrets of Lowery's Crossing, but I didn't have to face it alone anymore.

"Donovan? Let's go home."

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

“Wait!”

A voice.

Human.

Don't listen to that voice. Run.

Pain. Every movement is pain. Blood drips to the ground, leaving a trail. No time to hide. They're too close. Those skin-changers with their sharp teeth. Those humans with their weapons. Too close.

Shifters. I know them. Do I know them?

The voice is there, it's always there, but it's quieter than it used to be. Tired. Defeated.

Branches catch on a tattered wing and bring more pain. It's a struggle to be quiet, but necessary. The hunters are still too close.

There's only one direction to go, and that's away from them. Far away. But even far away, there isn't safety. Has there ever been?

Can't go to town .

The voice is right, but close could be safe. More blood falls from open wounds, gaping holes in two legs and a wing, the other wing broken, dragging across the

ground. If the hunters give chase, there will be no escape.

Have to hide.

Lights and noise of humans. It's close, but not too close. This way may be safe.

Slinking through the trees is easy. It's always easy. There is no one to see, no one to hide from, no houses. Until suddenly, there is.

A small human house, soft lights on in the window, and the smell of animals permeating the ground. Underneath it, though, is something different. Something softer, unique, unlike anything else in the world.

We have to hide. Don't stop here.

The voice is easy to subdue. This scent is more important than anything it has to say, anyway. Like spring rain, the open sky, like damp earth and growing things, it's completely new but familiar, all at once.

The voice isn't the other this time. As we slink into the trees, hiding, waiting, watching, needing to see what is casting the scent, the thought is mine, the first wholly free thought I've had since Before.

Mine.

To be continued...

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:57 am

“Are you sure this is such a good idea? I feel like maybe this is a bad decision.”

Donovan reached across the armrest and slid his hand into mine.

Meet the Parkers

Elliott and I carried the conversation on the drive to my mom's house, with a few comments from Alex. Every time I peeked back at him, he was smiling, and the anxiety I'd seen in him since we'd decided to make the trip together had eased. I love all my brothers, but Elliott being home now was the best possible timing I could hope for. Dane and Gray could be a little much sometimes, where Elliott's light teasing let Alex feel his way out without getting overwhelmed.