

Chapter One

I was having one of those rare unicorn type of gloriously easy days. I'd woken up before my alarm and felt remarkably rested. My mum had given me some sourdough pancake mix when I'd left my parents' house the night before, so I was able to make myself deliciously fluffy, American-style pancakes. Bertha, my truck, who could be a little temperamental once we hit the chilly November mornings of the Mancunian winter, had started without complaint.

Terry, the newsroom's cleaner, had switched on the heater in my basement office when he'd emptied my bin, so by the time I'd gotten in, the room was already toasty warm. Marcus, my editor, had taken a half day before he left on holiday for a week. He'd brought me lunch, discussed and then signed off on the edits to my latest article before he left. Which had given me the rest of the afternoon to leisurely sort through my email tips looking for a new story and do a little research on any that took my fancy. I'd planned on calling Jake, my teenage trainee-slash-partner when I'd found something I'd liked, but nothing had jumped out, grabbed me by the throat and demanded I investigate, so I figured I'd call him in tomorrow and let him pick something.

Which meant that, for the first time in a *long* time, I was minutes away from going home for the night at a decent hour. And without having a story rattling around my brain. I almost didn't know what I was going to do with myself. Maybe I'd get takeout and have a super long bath. I wasn't really a bath person. I'd tried to be, but I'd always thought it was weird to sit in a tub full of rapidly cooling water and try to read a book or drink wine or something similar. What was wrong with pyjamas, an electric blanket and a mug of hot chocolate?

I had already climbed into my snuggly warm flannel pyjamas, mentally speaking, when the door at the top of the stairwell creaked open.

The creaking door was my early warning sign that someone was approaching my office lair. It was one of the many, many, many benefits of using the basement of the newsroom as my office. The most *obvious* benefit being I didn't have to deal with other reporters. The second being that since my office was technically a filing room, it had a door. Which I could shut in the faces of annoying people. Not that anyone really came down to my office. Which was yet *another* benefit.

As the hushed, panicked whispers drifted down the concrete stairwell and through my cracked open office door, the unicorn of an early escape hopped onto a cloud and began drifting away. When no one started down the stairs, I began to hope that the whispering was simply from an informant who had ducked out of sight of the main newsroom to give himself or herself a stern talking to and bolster their nerve. Mentally, I reached out to my unicorn, trying to entice it back.

The whispering didn't have to ruin my night. There was absolutely *no* reason to believe it was anything to do with me. No reason whatsoever.

Yes, they *were* in my stairwell, but they might not know it was *my* stairwell. I briefly considered peeking out of my office, but if they saw me, they might decide I was the person to tell their whatever to. And I was definitely *not* the person to tell their whatever to.

My desk investigated a specific type of tip. Those pertaining to sewer monsters and Bigfoot. Not regular stories. I didn't care about the quality of school dinners unless the food was infected with a disease that turned children into vampires. Nor did I care about political corruption unless the politician in question was suspected of lycanthropy. But tipsters didn't always understand the nuances of that and just saw my office as a secluded place to unburden themselves.

I did briefly consider they might be here with a tip for me, but in the several years I'd worked this desk I could count on one hand the amount of in-person tip offs I'd received. People much preferred to report their werewolf neighbours through email. People liked to hide their crazy that way.

The mumbling continued for several more seconds until I finally heard a voice I recognised. And it said something that stabbed my imaginary magical unicorn of an early night in the face. Many times. To death.

"I'm telling you," Jake hissed. "She can help."

I debated keeping quiet. I really wanted to. Really, I did. I was already mentally in my pyjamas. I didn't want to take them off, but my evil curiosity had already dragged me to my feet, across the office, and perched me by the open door. I just hoped he wasn't bringing me another guy who claimed he could turn into a werewolf. Admittedly, that had made quite an interesting story in the end, but it had been an uphill climb. With no real werewolves to show for it.

I peeked out of the crack and into the barely lit stairwell. Three figures huddled around Jake at the top of the stairs. All wearing jeans, gloves, scarves and hoodies. Their hoods pulled low over their faces and the scarves pulled up high so all you could see were their eyes. It was cold, yes, but something about the way they were covering their faces implied it was less to do with the cold and more to do with covering their identities. Which, I could admit, was mildly interesting. They almost looked like an urban chorus line. Or a line up of bank robbers.

"We need to do something," said one of them. I didn't recognise his voice, not that I was very familiar with all of Jake's friends. Jake worked with me part-time while he was still at uni and he was very popular on campus. It was his boy band good looks and the fact that he was genuinely a

good person. I didn't think I'd seen him with the same people more than once, so really there was no reason to assume I would recognise his companions.

"What makes you think she can help?" Another unfamiliar voice asked.

"Cause she's the best." The confidence in Jake's words made a little knot of pride swell in my chest. He thought I was the best? I mean, I *was* the best, but how awesome that he recognised it. "If she can't help you, then you're done."

I crept back from the door and a few seconds later, descending footsteps echoed around the stairwell.

I tapped around on my computer, pretending to be busy and cover the fact that I'd been eavesdropping, though Jake likely knew. Which dimmed the shine on his comment about me being the best, and now it felt more like a setup. As though he'd been flattering me because he knew I wouldn't like whatever he was bringing me. It was like kicking my already very dead magical unicorn in the face.

Jake didn't even knock, he simply pushed the door open. "You busy?"

I shook my head. "Just sorting through tips."

"Without me?" Jake's dark eyebrows shot up to his slightly curly, neatly disheveled boy band hair as if I'd committed an unthinkable sin.

"I was seeing if there was anything time sensitive. There isn't, so I was going to call you later and see if you were free to work tomorrow. I thought you could pick our next story."

"Actually, I already *have* our next story." Jake beckoned to whoever was still out in the hall.

"You never said anything about us being a story," a disembodied voice spoke from the shadowed stairwell.

"We won't use your names. Right, Aurora?" Jake forced his eyes wide and gave me a subtle nod, as if he didn't expect me to agree. Which was weird, because he knew we always protected the identities of our sources. I assumed he was simply a little overexcited about whatever this was.

"We never reveal the identities of our sources," I agreed, even more curious about who or what was hovering just out of view. "Or the identities of the subjects of our articles."

"Come on, fellas," Jake called. "Trust me, she's seen worse."

My imagination was running wild with crazy possibilities after that declaration. Of all the creatures and situations my mind was flashing up before my eyes in a rapid slideshow of glorious supernatural craziness when the three boys shuffled into my office, nothing was even close. And not in a good way. Jake closed the door after them. I wasn't sure if it was because he knew I enjoyed being warm or to prevent them from escaping.

They pushed their hoods down and pulled the scarves from their faces. I swallowed my enormous disappointment. They were just regular boys. Regular boys with different coloured skin. And I didn't mean racially. The lanky six-foot something guy on the far left was a splotchy egg yolk yellow. The guy in the middle was roughly my height, which at five-foot-seven wasn't exactly short, but he looked tiny next to Big Bird. Oh, and he was also a patchy fuchsia. The guy on the far right, almost as tall as the guy on the other side, was a splendidly even forest green. The way they bracketed the middle guy, it was almost like some cartoonish gangster situation.

"So." I moved out from behind my desk and gestured at the brightly coloured faces in front of me. "What can I help you boys with?"

"I told you this was dumb," Mr Pink said and lunged for the door. Jake blocked his way.

"Just wait, I'm telling you, she's the best person." He motioned to me. "Can you be professional, please?"

"I didn't want to assume," I said with a shrug and focused on Mr Green's face. "And I know this probably isn't what you want to hear, but that is a *beautiful* shade of green. Not even the most expensive spray tans cover that evenly. It's impressive. Did you moisturise first or—"

"Professionalism?" Jake cut me off. "This is serious."

"Oh, I can see that." I nodded, then gestured along the line. "How long have you guys been like this?"

"This is day three." Big Bird pushed up his sleeve to show me the angry skin on his arm. It was like looking at a magic eye picture. My brain knew the skin was red, but all my eyes could see was a dark yellow of the dye. "I've been scrubbing and scrubbing but—"

"Okay, well let's stop that because it doesn't look like it's helping." I motioned for Mr Pink to give me his arm since he was the most patchy of all of my colourful new friends. He pushed up his sleeve and offered his arm for inspection. I pressed my thumb on the inside of his forearm. Kind of the same way you'd roll a glass over a rash to check if it was Meningitis. There was no white where I pressed my thumb. It was all pink. "The colour has really sunk into the skin. How did this happen? Do you know?" I glanced over at Jake. "Why haven't you called my mum? She'll probably know how to get this out."

Jake shook his head. "I don't think this is in your mum's wheelhouse."

"Getting dye out of skin?" I asked. "You know she worked in a hairdressers for a while, right?"

"I didn't." Jake looked genuinely surprised, as if he thought he knew everything about my mum. "But that's not what this is."

“What do you mean? That’s *obviously* what this is. It’s a prank. Food colouring in shower gel or something.” I glanced along the row of very deeply colourful faces. “Very *strong* food colouring. Maybe hair dye?” Though I wasn’t sure how the boys hadn’t noticed the bubbles turn pink, yellow or green.

“It’s not a prank.” Mr Pink pulled his arm out of my hands. “It’s a curse.”

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. “It’s a— it’s a what?”

“It’s a curse.” Jake repeated, and didn’t even try to hide the excitement in his voice. Talk about me not being professional.

“Could you try to sound less happy about that?” Mr Pink snapped at Jake.

“Sorry,” Jake said, looking anything but. “I’ve just never seen one up close before.”

“Pretty sure you’ve still not.” I pointed to the faces. “This is a prank, not a curse.”

“It is *absolutely* a curse,” Bid Bird insisted.

I hesitated. “You think a curse has turned you into human shaped Skittles? That’s what your logical, university student brain is telling you. A curse? That *a curse* is more likely than a prank?”

“Yes!” The not-so-Jolly Green Giant exclaimed. “It’s *obviously* a curse. Why else would the colour not come out when we’re scrubbing?”

“Curses are real.” Jake grinned at me. If he were anyone else, his glee at their misfortune might have been inappropriate, but his genuine belief in the curse moderated it somewhat. “I was reading about the Hope Diamond—”

“Let me stop you right there.” I held my hand up in his face. “The Hope Diamond is not cursed.”

“But—”

“It’s greed causing disaster. Not a curse.”

“Agree to disagree, but this is a curse for sure.” Jake gestured at his friends.

“Okay, how did this curse come to be?” I wasn’t about to debate it with Jake. Mainly because I was right, and he was crazy, so he would likely never concede.

Mr Green nodded at Mr Pink. “Kim’s ex-girlfriend cursed us.”

“Why?” I looked along the line of faces. “What did you do?”

Mr Green shook his head. “We didn’t do anything.”

“We didn’t,” Big Bird chipped in.

“Uh-huh. So, you’re telling me that someone cursed you for no reason?” I asked.

Big Bird jabbed a finger in my direction. “Exactly.”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded again. “And what do you have to say about this, Mr Pink?”

“We didn’t do anything.” He stated it with such a lack of conviction that both Big Bird and the Jolly Green Giant elbowed him.

“Okay.” I waved the two of them off. “The very fact that it’s an ex-girlfriend who you *think* cursed you tells me, very loudly, that something bad went down. So who’s going to be the first to spill the beans?”

After several seconds of foot shuffling and eye-contact avoiding, Mr Pink sighed.

“I ... cheated on her.”

“And she turned you pink?” I shrugged. “Seems like you got off easy. Also, her turning you pink isn’t a curse, it’s revenge. And pretty comprehensive. I mean, she even got your face and everything. Do you wash your face with shower gel? Because spiking the shower gel would be the easiest way to do it. Also, that’s not great skincare so maybe don’t do that anymore. And all of you with different colours. It’s just—it’s impressive,” I said with a nod. “I’m impressed.”

“It’s not just this,” Jake said. “They’re making Toby’s feet shrink. They can’t eat—all their food tastes like ash. She’s summoned spirits to do her bidding. She—”

“Ash?” I wasn’t touching the feet thing, and not just because I didn’t know which one Toby was. “What type of ash? Burnt wood? Smoked cheese? Coal?”

“Do they taste different?” Big Bird asked.

I stared at him for a long moment. “Does burnt wood taste different to smoked cheese? *Yeah*. How about the colour of the food? Does it look different?”

“Different how?” the Jolly Green Giant asked.

“Like not the colour it’s supposed to be.” Were these kids for real? This was what was wrong with the education system today. “Is the milk more grey than white? Does it taste like ash specifically? What type of ash? Does it taste smokey? Does it taste off? Is it curdled? Sour? Bitter? Salty? What?”

When no one spoke, Jake motioned for his colourful friends to answer. “Come on, fellas, these aren’t hard questions. She needs the info if she’s going to help.”

“Sour.” said Big Bird and looked at his friends, who nodded in agreement. “It tastes sour.”

“Do you have a photo of this girl? Your ex-girlfriend? On your phone? Can I see it?” I asked Mr Pink, whose eyes stretched wide as if I’d asked him to drop his pants in public and he wasn’t wearing underwear.

“Yeah,” he agreed, but his tone conveyed his reluctance. He unlocked his phone and handed it to me. The screen was filled with an image of a pretty brunette. “You’re not going to use that, right?”

“No, it’s so we can identify her. I’m just going to airdrop it to my computer,” I said as I moved behind my desk and started tapping around on my computer and his phone. I was sending the photo to myself, but I was also checking his bluetooth settings on the sly, because I was almost certain I knew what was happening.

“Do you live in halls same as Jake?” I asked when I handed his phone back.

“We’re third years. We live in a house off campus.” Kim examined his phone, as if checking for damage.

“Does she have a key?”

“Of course not.” The Jolly Green Giant screwed up his face in disgust. “Kim just met her.”

“Right,” I agreed easily, watching Kim as he looked everywhere but me. Pretty sure that meant she did have a key. “Well—” I was about to tell them nothing about this was a supernatural curse and they likely just needed to use a deadbolt on their doors to prevent any worsening of this “curse”, but Jake, in a preemptive move, handed me a slip of paper.

“Here. This is the curse they recited.”

“They? They who?” I scanned the writing. “I thought you said it was just your ex-girlfriend.”

Jake opened his mouth to speak, but caught himself. I watched as he reined his excitement back in and spoke in a moderated tone. “Her coven.”

“Her—” I nodded. “Of course. Where did all this happen? Did she catch you cheating while she was with her coven? I’m—” I swiped my hand at them before they could answer. “How about we take this from the top? Tell me everything that happened from the beginning.”

The door at the top of the stairs creaked, and someone called down the stairs. Jake held a finger up to me and opened the door.

“We’re down here,” he called and someone thudded down the stairs. An enormous blond guy, who was almost the same width as the door, stepped into the office. He appeared oddly out of proportion. He was maybe a little taller than my five-feet-seven, but he was a lot wider, which almost made him look as if he’d been over six feet tall at some point and someone had squished him down. He mistook my cataloging of his physique for romantic interest and winked at me.

“Hey, you’re pretty. I like your boots.”

“Of course you do. *Everyone* likes my boots.” They were slightly battered red cowboy boots that were great for kicking stupid people, or over-friendly guys, in the face. What’s not to love?

“This is Keith, Kim’s brother,” Jake explained. “He gave us a lift here. The guys didn’t want to walk around like this.”

“So you’re not connected to this mess?” I asked.

Keith shrugged. It seemed like a contrived movement to show off his muscular arms, more than a normal gesture. “I’m just the chauffeur service for today.” He strolled over to his brother, a much shorter, skinner, pinker version of himself, and ruffled his hair.

“Excellent, now everyone’s here, will someone lay this out, please? Start to finish.” I looked around and waited for someone to speak.

“Celeste—that’s Kim’s ex—found out Kim was cheating on her on Sunday. Not yesterday, last Sunday,” Jake explained. “Her coven cursed them. Then this stuff started happening. The food, the skin, the spirits.”

“You told me you’ve been like this for three days.” I pointed at their faces. “Today is Monday, so it took—what—five whole days for the curse to manifest? All of this stuff started happening at the same time? Since Friday? Over the weekend?”

“Does that matter?” Keith asked and followed the question up with a smile. Something about the expression struck me as aggressive. Almost as if he used it as a weapon. Which made me instantly suspicious. He was hiding something. Was he the one responsible? Was this him teaching his brother a lesson about how to treat girls? I remembered his greeting—that was unlikely.

“Maybe. Maybe not. What did you all do over the weekend?”

“Played video games. Ate pizza.” Kim said. “Why?”

“With you?” I asked Keith.

“Sure, I was there on Saturday for a bit.” He offered me another aggressive smile. “Why?”

I shrugged, shields powered up to maximum to deflect further smile attacks, and returned my attention to Kim. “How exactly did Celeste find out about you cheating?”

Once again, all three boys found the floor fascinating.

Jake spoke when the boys didn’t. “Kim was messing around with another girl in the forest when Celeste and her coven saw them. That’s when they cursed them.”

“Do Celeste and her coven meet in the woods regularly?” I asked, and Kim nodded. “Do they meet in the same place?” Kim shrugged, then nodded. I checked my calendar. “Sunday was the waxing moon. Did you know they’d be meeting?”

Kim shrugged again, looked at his brother, and then at me. “I didn’t *know* ...”

“Wait, I’m a little confused. You took a girl into the forest with you. On a night you thought Celeste *might* be there, near where she and her coven meet? And at no point it occurred to you that might not be the smartest thing to do?” I asked. Kim glanced at his brother again and suddenly I understood. “Ohhh, you *wanted* Celeste to see you together. That way *she* breaks up with *you*.”

“It’s the best way.” Keith added. “That way, she gets to be angry, she gets to view the breakup as a positive thing. She was lucky to find out and get rid of you, and so on. It’s much easier than the whole ‘it’s not me, it’s you,’ cliché.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve got that back to front,” I told him. And I meant both the cliché and in real life. It was *definitely* him. That said, as childish as the tactic was, I could see the faintest logic in that train of thought. That was, if you weren’t concerned about anyone’s feelings but your own. “Has the girl you were cheating with suffered any of these symptoms?”

“I don’t—I haven’t—” Kim waved his phone at me.

“You haven’t checked in with her, have you? You just used her to break up with Celeste.” I snapped my fingers and pointed to his phone. “Do it now.”

“I—” Kim started.

“There is nothing you can say that will change that instruction.” I informed him. “Check in with this girl and make sure she’s okay.”

“I love it when a woman takes charge,” Keith said.

I held my hand up in Keith’s face. “Please don’t speak.”

“What do you think of the curse?” Jake tapped the piece of paper he’d handed to me earlier.

I read it aloud, not to freak them out but because Jake had the least legible handwriting I’d seen in a while. “I curse you. Food will taste like ash. I curse you. The spirits will haunt you. I curse you. Your body will show your shame. I curse you. I curse you.”

“What are you doing?” Kim slapped his hands over his ears, and the other two human Skittles followed suit.

“Did she just throw this at you?” I asked. “In the moment? Completely spontaneous?”

“Why?” Kim nodded without taking his hands from his ears. If he could hear me, it made the action pointless, but I was too tired to explain that to them.

“Did all of her coven say it?” I asked. “Did they say it together the first time? Or was it the second time? Did she repeat it a few times? How did this happen?”

“What does it matter?” Mr Green tentatively released his hands from his ears.

“They all said it together.” Kim squinted at the paper as if he were staring into his memory. “I think she said it first and then they all repeated together.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“I think so,” Kim said. “Does that change something?”

I shrugged. “And you were alone with this girl? Big Bird and the Jolly Green Giant here weren’t with you?”

“It was just me and Piper.” Kim nodded. “And then Celeste and her coven.”

“Celeste who? What’s her surname?” I asked, and Kim shook his head. “Do you know the names of her coven?” I asked, and Kim shook his head again. “Right. Do you know what classes she takes? How we can find her on campus? She is a student at your uni?”

“I ... er ...” Kim jiggled his shoulders in and focused on the floor.

“You don’t know her last name? You don’t even know if she’s a student?” I pressed. “How long were you dating?”

“I met her at the student union and ...” Kim let the explanation trail off. “She’s really serious about her witch stuff though.”

“Wow. Okay.”

Keith edged closer and read the curse over my shoulder. “What are you thinking, Lois Lane?”

I offered Keith my widest smile, placed my hand in the centre of his chest, and eased him back. “That I like my personal space. *And* that I asked you not to speak.”

“So you’ll get her to lift the curse?” Kim asked. “You’ll take our case?”

“It’s not a case, and I can’t promise anything, but if we can find her, we’ll ask her.” I checked over my shoulder at the calendar. “Last Sunday when she caught you cheating in the woods was a waxing crescent moon. It’s a full moon tonight. I’d hazard a guess they’ll be following the cycles of the moon so it’s worth checking it out.”

“Kim’s already told me where they meet,” Jake said. “And drawn me a quick map of where this happened, so we can check out ground zero too. For scorched earth and blood sacrifice and such.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t touching the ground zero comment. Or the sacrifice comment. Or actually, any part of what he said.

“What are we supposed to do in the meantime?” Kim asked, pointing to his face.

I shrugged. “Go home.”

“What about this.” Big Bird pointed to his face, as if asking twice would get a different answer.

I shrugged again. “It’ll fade.”

“You said she’d help,” Kim accused Jake.

“Listen, kid. I *am* helping.” I gestured to their coloured faces. “But this is the very least you deserve. You treated not only your girlfriend, but this Piper person who you carelessly used and

discarded, very badly. I think you should all pray to whatever you believe in that Celeste is a reasonable person or you might starve to death.”

“What did Piper say?” Jake asked Kim when his phone buzzed.

“This is something else. She’s not texting me back.”

“What a shocker,” I muttered.

“It’s okay.” Jake opened the office door and gestured for the boys to leave. “We’re on the case.”

“It’s not a *case*,” I repeated, but I was sure no one was listening to me.

“Hey.” Keith stepped directly in front of me. “We should go out sometime.”

“No.” I shook my head for emphasis. “No, we shouldn’t.”

“Are you sure?” he pressed. “I really think we should.”

I gestured to the open door. “Please leave.”

Keith retreated, but turned to grin at me in the doorway. “Later.”

Jake waited until the door at the top of the staircase creaked closed before he spun to face me. “Am I the best or what?”

“I have a list of what you are. ‘The best’ is not currently on it.”

“Oh, come on.” Jake grabbed my arm and shook it. “A curse. A *curse*. A coven of wicked witches.” He stopped worrying my arm and held his out to the sides. “This is going to be the best story ever.”

Chapter Two

“What’s the plan of attack?” Jake asked as we climbed in to Bertha, my very slightly rusty truck. “What do you use on witches? How do you break curses? How are we going to approach this?”

“We’re going to explain to this group of inventive girls that Kim is an utter waste of their time and effort and though he behaved—no, *because* he behaved in such a ridiculous way, both she and this Piper girl are so much better off without him. And while it might be satisfying to exact revenge and torment him, they should really be using their powers for good.” I held up my finger when Jake tried to interrupt. I checked the way was clear and we pulled out of the car park and on to the road. “And not because girls should become accustomed to the bad behaviour of boys and let it slide, but because if they put their minds to it, they could affect real social change that will ultimately help educate the next generation on how to treat all human beings.”

“Cool.” Jake nodded. “So, will that require a wand? Potion? Some candles?”

I shrugged. “I mean, I suppose we *could* offer them wine. That’s kind of a potion.”

“You’re not taking this seriously,” Jake accused.

“I’m really not. I *am* a bit confused about why Celeste and company would target Kim’s two housemates as well, though. If they weren’t there like they claim. Unless she considered them guilty by association.” I glanced away from the road at Jake. “They *weren’t* there, right?”

Jake shook his head. “I don’t think so. They said they weren’t. I can’t see why they’d lie.”

“Hmmm.”

“Does it matter?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t know. There are just a couple of things about this that are nagging at me.” I tapped his knee and pointed through the windshield. “You know you’re directing me, right?”

“I know. Keep going straight.”

“For how long?”

“A while.”

“A while? You’re *so* good at this.”

“I know. Remember how awesome I was at—”

“I swear, if you’re about to reference how *you* directed us to the Maison de la Mort, I’m going to kick you out right now. I’m not even going to pull over. I’m just going to shove you out the door.”

“As if the doors on this truck open that easily,” Jake muttered.

“It’s a safety feature.” I patted Bertha’s dashboard so she wouldn’t be offended.

“It’s a fire hazard.”

“If you don’t feel safe, you can always walk.”

“Nah. Your dad’s a mechanic. There’s no way he’d let you drive a truly dodgy vehicle.” Jake stared out of the window at the passing cars. “What about this is nagging at you?”

“What do you think, trainee?” I turned it back on him. “What about this seems odd? And not witchy odd.”

“Well, there’s ...” Jake clicked his tongue several times as if deciding which of his many answers to supply first. “The fact Celeste included the housemates. If they weren’t there, she had no reason to assume they knew about Kim’s infidelity or were part of it.”

“You said that because *I* just said that. What else?” I asked. “And if you’re simply going to repeat what I’ve said, you might want to include something I already mentioned earlier, perhaps?”

“That ...”

“That,” I said when Jake showed no signs of finishing his sentence. “It was a very weirdly specific curse.”

“Right.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “You’re right. That *was* odd. I was *totally* going to say that.”

“You’ve no idea why, have you?”

“Of course. It’s because, well, you know, because ...” Jake shook his head. “No.”

“It’s *odd* because it lines up so perfectly with what’s happening to Kim and his friends.”

“But if you curse someone, surely you expect the effects of that curse to line up with what you cursed them with. Why is that odd?”

“To me? It implies premeditation. Are you sure that Celeste had no idea Kim was cheating on her?”

“I don’t know her, but not from what Kim said. You think she knew?”

“If it were me, and I’d randomly stumbled on him cheating on me, somewhere close to a special place like the coven’s meeting spot. A place that’s supposed to be safe and sacred. I’d have wished genital herpes on him. Or impotence. Or boils. Or to develop such atrocious B.O. that no girl would ever go near him again.”

“That’s a lot of anger you have pent up there.”

“They’re not even really all that bad, just knee-jerk reactions. My point is, when people are hurt or angry, they lash out. Say really mean stuff. But she’d have no real way of creating those

types of consequences. The curse you wrote down though, food tasting like ash? As curses go, it's pretty mild and easy to create."

"So you think she knew? And she staged finding them somehow?"

"Maybe. Maybe she overheard Kim discussing his plan with his housemates at some point, and that's why she included them in the effects. And how she knew where they'd be so she could *stumble* upon them."

"I suppose that makes sense. She set it all up." Jake nodded. "I mean, it's that, or she's a witch. For a moment, let's give them the benefit of the doubt and say this *is* a curse—"

"That's giving them the benefit of the doubt?"

"Yes, so if it *is* a curse, how would they break it?"

"You've listened to nothing I've said, have you?"

"The tinted skin." Jake held up his hand. "I can give you that one. But she summoned ghosts to haunt them. She's shrinking Toby's feet. How is that *not* a curse?"

"How long after she cursed them did they see—let's be generous and call them symptoms. Four days? Five days?"

Jake nodded. "About that."

"Nothing happened until five days after?"

Jake narrowed his eyes on the dark road ahead. "Yeah, nothing. Why? What does that mean? Maybe the curse was gearing up."

"There are numerous different ways to cast curses, but from my understanding of them, they are most effective when cast at emotional heights. So that would be the moment she saw Kim with another girl. Or later that night with her coven. I'd expected the results would've happened pretty quickly. Is five days later completely unfeasible? No, of course not, but five days later gives her and very likely her friends, a chance to get access to the house and implement some tricks. Like the shrinking feet. Like the skin staining. Like the spirits."

"You think summoning the spirits is a trick?"

"Of course it's a trick. Stop focusing on magic and think for a moment. If you wanted to do these things to someone, how would you do it?"

"I'd google." Jake shrugged. "Or ask you. Or ask your parents."

"Okay. The skin tint is food colouring or—"

"You said you'd never seen it that vibrant before," Jake reminded me.

“So they used extra strong colouring or mixed it with something else. Maybe it’s textile dye. Maybe it’s something that goes in clear and then develops, but my point is it’s not hard to do. The slippers? Have you seen Amélie?”

“No, does she work at the paper? On the food desk?”

I squinted at him in the darkness of the truck. “There are times I *truly* despair.”

“What? I’m terrible with names.”

“It’s a film. She plays a trick on—I forget who. But she keeps swapping this guy’s slippers out for a different size so he thinks his feet are shrinking. Or was it growing? I can’t remember, but she switches out his slippers for a different size every night.”

“That’s why you asked about the key,” Jake said with a nod. “You think they’re swapping the slippers out.”

“I do. And *that’s* why I think the housemates are somehow involved, because if it was just Kim she was mad at, why mess with a housemate’s slippers?”

“But she doesn’t have a key,” Jake reminded me.

“No, the green fella said that Kim wouldn’t give her a key. Kim didn’t say anything, and looked anywhere but me.”

Jake twisted in his seat, adjusting the seatbelt so it didn’t choke him. “You think Kim gave her a key?”

“I think Kim didn’t *deny* giving her a key.”

“Why wouldn’t he admit to it?”

“Why wouldn’t he want to admit giving a key to their home to a girl whose last name he didn’t know? I can’t even imagine,” I muttered.

“So, *why* wouldn’t he admit it?” Jake pressed.

“Obviously, he didn’t want them to know. Or maybe he misplaced it and thinks she might have taken it. Or maybe he left it at her house by accident and doesn’t want to admit it.”

“If they *do* have a key, how are they sneaking around the house at night and not waking anyone up?”

“Why would they do it at night when the house is likely empty in the day?” I tapped his temple with my finger without looking away from the road. “You’re thinking of complications when you need to be thinking of solutions. Really simple solutions.”

“Simple solutions?” Jake nodded. “Okay, so, a simple solution for the spirits? The girls are making spooky sounds in the garden.”

“Really?” I stole a glance at him.

“What? That’s a simple solution.”

“No, that’s an idiotic solution.”

“That’s harsh.”

“You just suggested a bunch of girls were making covert spooky noises in the boys’ garden that the boys could hear *in* the house and were convincing enough that the boys thought they were spirits?”

“Fine. How would you do it?”

I shrugged. “Bluetooth speakers.”

“What?”

“When I asked Kim for his phone, I wanted to check his Bluetooth connections. They have Bluetooth speakers.”

“So you had more information than me,” Jake accused. “Obviously you know the answer.”

“No, I *suspected* that was how they might be doing it and looked for evidence.”

“You always tell me that it’s supposed to be the other way around. We find evidence and it leads us to conclusions.”

“Oh, so you *do* occasionally listen. Good to know.”

“You think she’s standing in range of the connection, maybe hiding in the garden, like *I* suggested, and playing a series of spooky soundtracks through the speakers?”

“I do.”

Jake sank in on himself, almost as though all my logic had defeated him. Then he straightened up. “What about the food?”

“They’re sneaking in when the boys are out and putting lemon juice in stuff,” I said with a shrug. “Or a gross mixture of lemon juice and salt and other stuff.”

“But what if they don’t have a key?”

“How many times have you seen me pick a lock?”

“Yeah, but ...” Jake sank back down in his seat. “So this isn’t a curse?”

“It is *very* unlikely.” I didn’t have the heart to offer him a firm no. Even though I was *sure* it was a firm no.

Jake straightened again. “So you’re not absolutely sure.”

“There are the inconsistencies or curiosities in their story. I’d like those ironed out before we put it to bed. I figure we’ll likely find the answers tonight. It’ll be super quick to write this up and then we have a bit of a time buffer while we find another story.” I nodded ahead of us. “Are we still going straight?”

“Yep. I’ll tell you when to turn.”

Twenty minutes and a few wrong turns later, we pulled into the car park of the woodland area. I paid the charge and displayed the sticker on the inside of the windshield while Jake rooted through my rucksack.

“You’re not hungry, are you?”

“I am, actually,” he said, without lifting his head from my bag. “But I was looking for weapons.”

“Weapons?”

“Witch weapons.”

“*Witch* weapons? Of course you are,” I said with a nod. I pulled a heavy duty Maglite torch from the glove compartment and handed it to him. “Here.”

Jake narrowed his eyes at it. “Because witches are afraid of ... torchlight?”

“I don’t know if they’re afraid of torchlight, but I’m pretty sure they’re afraid of getting bludgeoned over the head with a heavy object.” I held my hand out. “Map?”

“I know where we’re going.” Jake closed the passenger door and stepped back from Bertha.

“The four wrong turns you directed us on would disagree.” I grabbed the spare torch, locked the doors, and took a photo of the truck.

“I don’t think you need to worry about people damaging your truck.”

“Photos have location tags. I’m sure I’ve told you this. We’re about to wander through a chunk of woodland I’m not familiar with. In the dark. We don’t really want to be trailing string behind us in case animals or people get caught in it. I want to make sure we can find our way back.”

“You’re with me. I know where I’m going.”

“Dude, you have to stop saying stuff like that. You have no sense of direction at all.”

“Whatever.” He waved me ahead of him and we started on the dirt track that led out of the car park and into the dark trees.

The word “foreboding” was the adjective that zipped through my mind as I looked up at them. I loved trees. And forests and woodland. But these were not happy looking trees. They seemed brittle and angry, or perhaps that was just the time of year.

I swept the torch across the ground ahead, and something glinted in the light. I crouched down, pulled my cuff over my hand, and nudged it. It wasn’t as if I thought it would bite, but it was best to be safe.

“What is it?” Jake asked, crouching next to me.

“It looks like—” I picked the tiny, glinting object up. It was a pendant, not bigger than a five pence coin, in the shape of a crescent moon.

“Seems apt,” Jake said. “What does it mean?”

I shrugged. “That it came off someone’s necklace or charm bracelet.”

I put it back on the ground, snapped a photo and then I pocketed it. It felt wrong to leave it in the dirt.

Jake took the lead and I followed him passed the tree line and into the darkness. It was damp inside the forest and still. It wasn’t particularly windy, but the trees were bunched so closely together on either side of the path they acted like a shield, keeping everything from the outside world at bay. They loomed up tall and blocked out the sky above us. It was as if we’d stepped into another world. Sounds of traffic had completely disappeared and been replaced by crickets and the occasional owl. I snuggled further into my jacket and swept my torch across the trees to the left. Jake’s face loomed up in the beam and I jerked back.

“Are you listening to me?”

“No. I was appreciating the trees.”

“I was asking how we can know for sure these girls are witches. I was reading up on them on the drive here—”

“So *that’s* why we made so many wrong turns.” I bumped his shoulder with my closed fist to turn him in the direction we were heading and he started walking again. Torch in one hand, phone held up to his face. He was headed for an accident that way.

“And my research says,” Jake continued as if I’d not spoken. “That witches have something called a devil’s mark or witch’s mark. Something like these, where the devil licked inside their skulls.” Jake held his arm out behind him while still walking forward and showed me his phone screen full of intricate symbols. “That’s how you know they’re witches.”

“There is *so* much wrong with what you just said.” I tapped his hand so he could remove his phone from my face. “If they had those marks where the devil had licked inside their skull, that mark would be *inside* the skull. So, apart from the grossness and lunacy of that, unless you plan on literally cracking some heads open to look inside their skulls, that’s really no help.”

“But—”

“Not done. What you showed me are witch’s marks or apotropaic marks. And that is not the same as the mark of a witch or devil’s mark. The mark of a witch, or devil’s mark, is something that identifies someone *as* a witch. A witch’s mark or apotropaic mark, is something carved into buildings to keep witches *out*. Two very different things.”

“So a witch’s *mark* protects you from witches, but *the mark* of a witch identifies you *as* a witch?”

“*Supposedly.*”

“Other than cracking their heads open and investigating their skulls, how can we tell if these girls are really witches?”

I squinted at his back in the darkness. “Is that a legitimate question?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I mean, that depends on how you *define* a witch. According to the folks involved in the Salem witch trials, birthmarks, extra nipples, drowning, if they don’t balance when you weigh them against a stack of bibles. That kind of thing.”

“How many bibles are in a stack?”

“As few or as many as you want.”

“That doesn’t seem very reliable.”

“Which is kind of the point. It’s all about religious persecution and the oppression of women.”

“It might have been back in the day, but gender equality has come a long way since then.”

“You mean because I’m *not* getting accused of witchcraft, stripped naked in the town square and examined for birthmarks and extra nipples on a random accusation of a jealous woman. Or because I *wouldn’t* sleep with a man. Or because I *did* sleep with a man?” I nodded. “You’re *so* right.”

“Witches have extra nipples?” he asked, completely missing my sarcasm. “Do they have to have the extra nipple *and* a birthmark or is it a one or the other type of deal? And is everyone who has a birthmark a witch? And are there—”

“You *can* hear yourself, right?” I asked. “You *can* hear the insanity coming out of your mouth?”

“What about fire?” Jake asked, pointing his torch at his phone, completely defeating the object of having a torch. “It says here they’re afraid of fire. We could set a small fire. See whether they run.”

“In a mass of woodland? Yep, that seems like a perfect idea. Because, I mean, only *witches* would run out of a burning forest. Us regular non-witch folk. We’re totally fine with it.”

“Oooh, what about a urine cake?” Jake asked, tripped and righted himself.

“Will you stop?” I slapped the back of his head. “Google does not *always* have the answer. You’re not looking where we’re going. If you break a leg, I’m not carrying you out.” I swept the torch behind me, looking for paths branching off the main one. “Are we even on the right path?”

“It doesn’t give instructions. Do you know how to make one?”

“Will you focus on the task at hand if I tell you?”

Jake slipped his phone in his pocket and pointed directly ahead of us. I assumed that was his indication of focusing.

I kept my voice low as we wandered deeper into the trees. With all the dry twigs underfoot, it wasn’t as if we were going to be able to sneak up on anyone, but we didn’t have to announce our presence from miles away either. Especially when talking about how to kill witches.

“You collect the urine of those you think are affected, so in this case, Kim and his friends, then make a cake with it and give to a dog to eat. That supposedly hurts the witch.”

“How would you make it into a cake?” Jake whispered without turning around.

“I mean, if it were me, I’d buy a plain one and then soak it in the urine.”

“What if the dog doesn’t eat it? What happens then?”

“You have a very gross and inedible cake?”

“I meant to the witch?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

Jake nodded. “Okay. After weighing all of our options, I think we should ask about birthmarks. It’s the least intrusive and weird.”

I inclined my head, even though he couldn’t see. “If you want, but you have to stab the mark to see if it bleeds. If it doesn’t, that’s *supposedly* how you know.”

“This is fascinating. Isn’t this fascinating?” Jake glanced over his shoulder at me. “Tell me again how this isn’t the best of all of our stories so far.”

“We’re talking about soaking a perfectly good cake in the urine of three boys and then feeding it to a dog to see if the girl he cheated on is hurt by it while walking through a dark forest at night on a witch hunt. This *isn’t* the best of all our stories so far.”

“Even when you’re being dismissive, it still sounds like our best story to date.”

“Super.” I pointed my torch at the diverting paths. “Which way?”

“This way.” Jake took the left path with an excess of confidence. Funny that I assumed the excess meant he didn’t really know.

“You know when we tell my parents about this they’re going to question your choice in friends.”

“What?”

“Your friend Kim being such a not-good-guy. My parents are going to have opinions on it so ___”

“No, I get that your parents would have opinions. I meant, they’re not my friends. Someone told them I work with you and what we investigate and they sought me out.”

“So you can’t vouch for these boys at all?” I grabbed the back of Jake’s hoodie and pulled him to a stop.

Jake swiped his torch to the left, the beam bobbing over the trees. “What do you mean?”

“They’re not people you know?”

“No.” Jake fixed his attention on me. “Why?”

“I just—I thought they were your friends.” The unease that had been growing in my stomach like mould since we first crossed the threshold of the trees spread all the way up my torso and tightened my chest.

“Does that matter?” Jake’s attention darted over the blackness surrounding us as if my unease was contagious, but he kept his torch still.

“No. My mistaken assumption.” I stepped past Jake. “I’m going to lead the way. You can steer from behind me.”

“Why?”

“If we get hit with a curse, it’s better I take the brunt of it.” That wasn’t why. I didn’t believe these girls were able to throw curses. The “why” was that I was not getting happy vibes from this forest and I had a stun gun in my pocket should things go awry.

“Because you’re older and you’ve had a good life?”

“Do not make me change my mind.”

We followed the path in silence for a few minutes, then Jake tapped me on the shoulder.

“It’s this way.” He pointed to a wall of conifers to the left of the path. “The meeting place is supposed to be on the other side.”

“Are you sure?” There were no footprints. The trees weren’t thinner to imply people were always ducking through them. The scrub looked undamaged.

“Yep.” Jake whispered over my shoulder. “That’s what the map said.”

“Says or said?”

“What?”

I held my hand out. “Let me see it.”

“I memorised it then put it in the glove compartment so we wouldn’t lose it.”

“Smart,” I said, meaning the opposite, but now was just not the time to deal with that insanity.

The conifers were dense enough that there was a good chance that whoever was on the other side—*if* someone was on the other side—wouldn’t have heard us. We might still manage the element of surprise after all. I held my breath, covered my face with my arm, and stepped into the branches. They were only a couple of feet deep, but the branches were dense and it was hard going. Still, I made it through to the other side unharmed.

I’d expected maybe a nice little clearing with a fire pit and logs for chairs. Maybe some candles or fairy lights. Possibly lanterns. Basically, I was expecting a boho chic type of outside area.

Instead, in the centre of the dark clearing stood three figures. They were clustered around what I thought was another figure who was lying on the ground.

The three who were standing turned at my intrusion. I shone my torch to light the image so I could see what was happening. The light illuminated their dresses. At first I’d thought they were some type of tie-dye. My gut recognised it before my brain could make sense of what my eyes were seeing. The dresses were white and red. White dresses soaked with blood. And hand prints. Bloody handprints.

Something glinted in the torchlight. The girl nearest to me had a knife in her hand. The blade dripped blood onto the grass. It was impossible, but I imagined I could hear the splat of the drop.

The girls and I stared at each other. They were teenagers. A blonde with a streak of blood on her cheek and a watermelon-sized patch on her abdomen. A girl with auburn hair whose entire lower half of her dress was soaked red. And a brunette holding the knife.

It was like a tableau from a theatre production. For the briefest moment, my mind convinced me that was what I was looking at. A dress rehearsal for something. Some sort of forest theatre. Sometimes universities would do things like that, right? Make it a whole type of Shakespeare-in-the-park type of deal.

Then Jake emerged from the conifers behind me, and the girls erupted into action.

“Is there—” the rest of his question died when he saw the scene.

It was as if his appearance had broken the spell. The girls fled. I stood blinking after them for a few seconds before I came back to myself.

I jogged over to the prone form. It wasn’t a teenager. It was a woman in her mid-thirties. Her white blouse was soaked with blood. It had pooled on the ground around her midsection and soaked into the dirt.

I crouched over her to check her pulse. Her empty eyes stared past me at the tree canopy above us. I prodded around the cold flesh of her neck, looking for any sign of life. There was nothing.

Behind me, Jake spoke into the phone. "Ambulance, please."

"Cancel the ambulance." I shook my head as I stared down at her. "She's long gone, dude."

"Are you sure?" Jake asked, pulling the phone away from his ear.

"I'm sure."

He stared off into the trees. "But they had a knife."

"Yep," I said, because I didn't know what else to say about it. They might have had a knife, but I was pretty sure we hadn't interrupted them stabbing her. Or if we had, they'd been stabbing a dead body. Which was a lot creepier. I was hardly an expert in dead bodies, but the way the blood had soaked into the ground around this woman, she'd been dead for a while.

In my periphery, I was vaguely aware of Jake cancelling the ambulance and trying to explain to the operator where we were, to send the police instead and how he was not in any danger from the person with the knife.

I scanned the woods for any sign of movement of the girls. It wasn't as though I expected them to come charging out at us, but it paid to be prudent. The trees were still. There was no movement. No sounds. Eerily, nothing at all.

"This was not how I saw my night going." I glanced down at the dead woman and sighed.

"Ditto, right?"

Chapter Three

“If I’d paid more attention, and we hadn’t taken so many wrong turns,” Jake said as we sat at the side of the clearing that was now swarming with police.

“This isn’t your fault,” I told him for the fifth time as I watched the constables busy themselves with a lot of wandering around doing stuff that didn’t look important.

Once Jake had finished on the phone with the emergency services, I’d called Trank, my godfather and homicide detective. I’d told him where we were and let him know about the possible group of girls stalking the forest with a bloody knife. More for his safety than ours. In return, he’d told us to stay where we were and stand back to back until he arrived, so we could watch out for each other. I’d agreed, hung up, and then examined the scene.

I’d photographed everything. Which was when I noticed that the woman was lying in the centre of a pentagram drawn in the dirt. A huge pentagram. With unlit candles at each point of the star. Once I’d photographed the whole thing, I’d checked the dead lady’s pockets for identification. There was nothing. No identification. No spare change. No car keys. No nothing.

“But if we’d gotten here sooner ...” Jake said, his voice heavy with guilt.

“Did you stab her?” I asked. “No. You didn’t. This isn’t your fault. The only person who’s responsible is the person who stabbed her. And yeah, maybe, if we’d gotten here earlier, we’d have been able to save her. Or maybe we’d be lying next to her with our guts hanging out.”

“We could’ve taken those girls. Easily.” Jake fisted his hands in the grass and set his jaw. “Easily.”

“*If* those girls killed her,” I said. “And what if they had a syringe full of some paralytic? Or were all black belts in karate? Or expert knife throwers? Or had a gun?”

It was logical. I knew it. It wasn’t our fault the lady had died. But despite what I was telling Jake, that was the main thought playing over and over in my head. If I’d insisted on checking the directions so we’d not taken any wrong turns. If we hadn’t chatted as we wandered through the trees. If I hadn’t wasted so much time questioning Kim and his friends. Maybe we’d have gotten here before they’d stabbed her. Maybe we’d have gotten here just *as* they stabbed her and when the woman was still alive. Maybe we’d have saved her.

And even though that whole story was rolling through my head, there was another story underneath it. The story of the three girls, covered in blood, holding a bloody knife, but the lady clearly having been dead a few hours and the unlit candles. None of it matched up. It seemed very unlikely to me they had been the ones to stab her. Despite the preponderance of evidence

implicating them. Unless they stabbed her and then stood around like that until we happened upon them. Which seemed even *less* likely.

“How’re you kids doing?” Trank crouched in front of us. Outside of my parents, Detective Trank was easily my favourite person.

He was only a little taller than me in inches, but his presence always made him seem enormous. He still wore his hair like he had in the army, short-back-and-sides, though now it was grey. And was always clean shaven. At a glance, you’d peg him for respectable, but there was something about the way he carried himself. It was very James Bond-ish.

“Brilliant,” Jake shot back. “Best day ever.”

“Hey.” I nudged his arm with mine. “Attitude.”

“It’s okay.” Trank waved me off. “It’s tough when you think there’s something you could’ve done. Those girls, you said there were three of them? And they were standing over the body?”

I nodded. “And then they saw us and ran. They were wearing white dresses. They had blood on them.” I tried to pull the image from my memory, but that harder I tried to focus, the more fuzzy it became. “Except for the girl holding the knife. I don’t think she had any blood on her. Or maybe she did. She was half turned away from me, so I couldn’t see the front of her dress. They saw me and ran. I know that’s not super helpful but—”

“That *is* helpful,” Trank softened his voice as if to emphasise the meaning of his words. “That’s more than we’d have without you.”

“That *is* true,” I said, feeling marginally better about my status as a terrible eye witness.

“Can you describe them?” Trank flipped open his notebook, pen poised.

“Embarrassingly, the best I can do is hair colour. A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead. It looked more auburn than red, but that might have just been because it was dark.” I shook my head at myself as the doubts crept around the edge of the memory, blurring it further. “Maybe it wasn’t even red at all. And I’m saying they were teenagers, but I thought the woman on the floor was a teenager until we were up close, so—I’m a terrible witness.”

Trank tapped me on the head with his biro. “Don’t overthink it. You’re freaking out about it because you think you’re the only link we have to finding these girls.”

“We’re not?” I asked.

“We’re the police.” Trank stressed. “We have a lot of resources.”

“I know that, but how are you—” I waved him off. There was a myriad of ways they could find the girls. Traffic cameras. Connection to the victim. Fingerprints. DNA evidence.

“Is your brain back in action now?” He tapped me on the head with his biro again. “Would you recognise them if you saw them again?”

“I’d like to say yes, but ...” I shrugged and shook my head.

“Was one of them Celeste?” Jake asked.

“No.” I tried to focus on my memory of the girls’ faces. “I don’t think so. I’d have recognised her. I’m *sure* I would have. But just because I didn’t see her doesn’t mean she wasn’t there. And that’s if Kim showed me a good photo of her.”

“Who’s Celeste?” Trank asked, so I gave him a quick summary of the events of the evening that had brought us here. “I’ll need the actual names of the boys. Big Bird and the Jolly Green Giant isn’t going to cut it.”

“You got their names, right?” I asked Jake, then snapped my fingers and pointed to Trank’s notepad. “There was a Toby. There was *definitely* a Toby. I think.”

“And would Toby be Big Bird or the Jolly Green Giant?” Trank asked with a straight face which was more than I’d have managed in his place.

“Er ...” Jake winced at Trank. “The yellow guy?”

“Wasn’t the green guy Toby?” I asked. “And how can *you* not know their names? Surely they told *you* their names. At least their first names.” It sounded like an accusation, but I quietened him before he could reply. “I didn’t ask them. I can’t blame you for not doing it either. *I’m* supposed to be the mentor. If I don’t do it, how can I blame you for not doing it?”

“I should’ve though.” Jake nodded solemnly. “I brought them to you. I should’ve gotten all the details first.”

“Wait.” Trank glanced between us. “*Neither* of you know their names? You came out into the middle of a forest in the dark to hunt witches because some boys told you they’d been cursed and you didn’t even get their names?”

“Don’t tell my parents.” I pleaded. “I brought my Taser and Jake had a Maglite.”

“Because everyone knows that torchlight repels witches and murderers,” Trank retorted. “Because I *know* that’s how you intended to use it and not as a weapon. And you know I have to tell your parents. If they find out that I knew and didn’t tell them, I’ll be in a lot more trouble than you. Especially when—”

“There’s a security camera in the newsroom’s lobby,” I interrupted. “To get to me they’d have had to walk past that so you’ll be able to get their faces from that if nothing else.” I inclined my head. “Except for the fact they had their hoods up and scarves pulled up over their faces.” I gestured to Jake. “Didn’t you say they were third years? Who said that? Someone said that.”

“Yeah.” Jake rooted through his pockets. “They live in a house off campus. I got their address because I thought we might need to check the house out.”

“You got their address?” I asked.

“Yeah, I got their address,” he said and I waited until he realised that meant we had a way to find them. His eyes stretched wide when he did. “I got their address!” He pulled out his phone and tapped around on the screen before showing it to Trank.

“Got their address.” I pointed to Jake as if his getting their address was my victory.

“You didn’t even get all their first names. I’d be quiet if I were you,” Trank scoffed at me while he copied the address into his notepad. “So they’re third-year students? At the local uni? Keith, Kim, Toby and someone else?”

“Keith is Kim’s brother. He’s not a university student. He’s not, right?” I asked Jake when he didn’t immediately back me up.

“No. I don’t—” Jake shook his head. “I mean, I don’t think so.”

“What’s going on with you two?” Trank frowned at me.

I rubbed my aching tired eyes. “My brain had already switched over to ‘home’ mode when Jake brought them in and honestly, I didn’t think it was going to be anything.”

“Still, it’s not like you.” Trank leaned in to stare into my face. “Are you sleeping properly?”

“Thanks. Because I actually don’t feel bad enough already so that’s really helpful.” I shoed him out of my face.

“Okay.” Trank flipped his notebook closed. “You’ve both already given statements to the constable, so I think you two should head home. And by ‘home’ I mean your parent’s house.” Trank stood and reached down to help me up. I placed my hand in his and let him pull me up. I put literally no effort into it and he pulled me to my feet as if I were a toddler.

Trank called a constable over to escort us back to the car park. He gave me an extra tight hug and placed a kiss in my hair.

“Get some sleep,” he whispered before he released me.

And then to my surprise he hugged Jake as well. I wasn’t sure why it surprised me, it shouldn’t have. Everyone considered Jake family. I hoped Trank had whispered a few words of comfort to Jake too before he released him. Trank gave Jake a slap on the back and a shoulder squeeze, the universal sign of manly support, before relinquishing us into the custody of the constable.

We walked back to the car park in silence, thanked the constable, and then climbed into my truck. I turned the engine over. She coughed, but wouldn't start. I tried a few more times but on the fifth time she told me she was done. I looked over at Jake.

He bobbed in his seat, giving me a full body nod. "Yep. That's about right."

We sat in silence in the truck for a stretch of time. Might have been seconds. Might have been minutes. A sharp tap on the driver's side window brought me out of the daze.

"Need a lift?" A smiling face asked from outside my driver's door. It took me a few seconds to recognise him. Not just because my brain had gone to sleep, but also because I hadn't expected to see him here.

"Charlie?" I squinted through the window at the tall, clean-shaven, broad-shouldered fraud detective Charlie Champonal, who occasionally let his very young niece practice her hairdressing skills on his short dark hair. Which wasn't adorable. At all.

I'd met him during my very first story with Jake, and now he kept sporadically popping up all over the place.

"What are you doing here?" I frowned at him through the window. "Is there some sort of fraud aspect to this?"

"Working with MIT for now." He pointed to the door handle, waited until I nodded, then opened the door. "Are you okay? You seem a little ..."

I seesawed my hand and made a noncommittal noise. I could've said I was fine, but it would've sounded unconvincing which would've led to more questions.

He leaned round me and nodded at Jake. "Hey. How about you? You okay?"

Jake shook his head. "We didn't get the Jolly Green Giant's name."

Charlie hesitated. "Right."

"He was Toby." I squinted at Jake in the dark of the truck. "Wasn't he Toby? It was Big Bird's name we didn't get."

"I thought Big Bird was Toby," Jake said.

"Okay." Charlie clapped his hands to get our attention. "You two. Out of the truck. I'm going to find you a ride home and you can get your dad to come back and pick this up." He offered me his hand to climb out of the truck. "And while he's here he can check there aren't any crazy-inducing fumes seeping into the cab."

"You're working for MIT? Which makes Trank your boss?" I asked and motioned for Jake to get out so I could lock the passenger door from the inside.

"Yep," he said as I took his offered hand.

“How’s that working out for you?” I asked.

“Good.” Charlie shrugged, grinned, and guided us to a police car without saying another word about it. He opened the back door of a police car and blocked the way before we could climb in. “Do I need to remind you both to not get involved in this investigation?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Uh-huh.” Charlie held my gaze for a moment before stepping out of our way.

We climbed in to the police car and Charlie directed the constable to take us home. Charlie waited as we drove away. Almost as if he thought we might try to escape from the police car.

“I know you agreed we wouldn’t investigate—” Jake started, but I cut him off.

“I never said we *wouldn’t* investigate. I agreed that Charlie didn’t need to *remind* us not to get involved.”

“Any chance you can wait until you’re out of the car before talking about that?” the constable asked over his shoulder, without taking his eyes from the road. “If you talk about it now, when the detective asks me, I’ll have to tell him. And I’m a fan. Of yours, I mean.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, I loved the piece about the fake vampire murders.”

“Don’t suppose you fancy being an unnamed source, do you?” I asked the constable because having the inside scoop of what the police knew would be super helpful.

The constable grinned at me in the mirror. “I’m not *that* big of a fan.”

I nodded and shrugged. “Had to ask.”

Chapter Four

“Lovely?” my mum whispered in my ear as she gently shook my shoulder. “It’s time to get up.”

“Hmmm?” I could hear her voice, but it sounded so distant, like it was coming from the other end of a football field. And tinny. Like she was talking to me through those phones I’d made from empty baked bean cans when I was little.

“I said it’s time to get up,” she whispered. “Your dad’s making pancakes.”

“I had pancakes yesterday,” I mumbled.

“I love pancakes,” Jake’s sleepy voice said from behind me.

Something about that struck me as wrong. I shuffled over and came face to face with him, both of us squinting at the other in confusion. I lifted my head to look around the room. Posters of vampires and other nightmare monsters, with the occasional unicorn, had been taped to the pastel pink walls with rainbow-patterned tape. Yep, this was definitely my room.

“Why are you in my bed?”

“This isn’t *my* bed?” Jake lifted his head from the pillow and looked around the room.

“Unicorns and vampires? Wow, yeah, this is *definitely* your bed.”

“It’s very important to encourage your children to dream and let them express who they are,” my mum informed Jake as she scanned the room happily, her attention lingering on the black-painted set of wooden drawers with rainbow knobs. My dad had let me paint it, but I was pretty sure he’d redone it when I’d gone to bed that night because eight-year-olds don’t really understand the concept of “proper coverage”. And my mum had helped me paint the rainbows on the knobs. It had been a very delicate job, if I remembered correctly. The project had taken an entire weekend and I couldn’t remember my parents being anything other than excited to help me.

“*This* is an expression of who you are?” Jake asked.

“Someone with a fascination for the supernatural? Yeah.” I rolled onto my back. I couldn’t remember how we’d gotten here. My thoughts felt like a sack of overcooked soggy rice. I was trying to swim up from the bottom to get to the surface. A surface where everything would make sense. I covered my eyes with my hand. The movement was sluggish. Heavy. Clumsy. There was something familiar about the grogginess.

“Mum?” I squinted at my mum’s smiling face.

“Yes, lovely?”

“Did you drug me?”

“Of course not.” She arranged a pile of clean clothes for me on the chair next to the bed. “You were overtired when you arrived last night, but you couldn’t settle so I gave you a sleeping aid.”

“Mum, that’s the very definition of drugging me.”

“Did you drug me too, Bea?” Jake asked my mum as he stretched out in the bed. “Because that was *the* best night’s sleep I’ve had in a while.”

“I would never drug someone else’s child.” My mum gasped, scandalised by the thought. “You could be allergic to anything. No, we gave you some warm milk, and you were out like a light.”

“But drugging your own child is perfectly acceptable?” I asked.

“Did you sleep?” My mum asked, then answered her own question before I could. “Yes, you did. Now you can face the day on a good night’s sleep, fully refreshed.” My mum pointed at the chair next to Jake’s side of the bed. “Jake, there are clean clothes for you. Get dressed and hurry downstairs before your dad burns the pancakes.”

My mum turned and sashayed out of the room, indicating the matter of drugging children was closed. Groggily, I pushed myself to a seated position and rubbed my eyes. They felt swollen in my face.

“*Did* you get a good night’s sleep?” Jake asked, his face wrinkled with scepticism as he looked at me. “You look like someone hit you with a truck.”

“You say the nicest things.”

“I *was* being nice. You look awful.”

“Those *sleep aids* always make me so groggy. It takes me ages to wake up.”

“You do look pretty out of it.” Jake sprang out of the bed with more enthusiasm than I had at any point in the day, let alone first thing in the morning. Or the morning after I’d been drugged. Once he was dressed he turned and grinned at me. “You know, technically, this means your mum slipped you a roofie and then put you into bed with me.” He wiggled his eyebrows salaciously. “That’s somewhat questionable parenting.”

“You see the chair you got your clothes off?” I asked, cradling my head in my hands, holding it still and waiting for the fuzziness to pass.

“Yeah.”

“See the chair on my side of the bed?”

“Yeah.”

“My parents stayed in here the whole night.”

“Oh.” Jake looked between the chairs. “The *whole* night?”

“After the couple of murders we’ve been involved in, they’re a bit ... overprotective.”

“I don’t know. I think that’s really nice. Especially since she roofied you.” Jake angled his head like a dog smelling food. “Oooh. Pancakes.” And then he jogged out of the room and down the stairs.

It took me about fifteen minutes to get myself out of bed and dressed. I knew my mum had meant well, and honestly, if she hadn’t intervened, there was a very good chance I’d have been up all night trying to work out who those girls were. I wasn’t going to admit she knew better, but once I was fully awake, I would definitely be grateful for the sleep.

“Ah, here she is,” my dad said as I wandered into the kitchen. “Timed it to perfection.” He placed a plate filled with four sourdough pancakes, jam-packed with chocolate chips in front of me.

“I can’t eat all this, dad,” I said, looking at the mountain of food.

“I’ll help.” Jake forked the top pancake off my plate before I even had a chance to fight him for it.

“Now, son, you’ve got plenty,” my dad chided. “If you want more, you just have to ask.”

Jake looked up at my dad in awe. “I’d like some more, please, sir.”

“Okay, Oliver.” My dad, in the striped pink and white apron I’d bought for him many birthdays ago, turned back to the hob.

“What?” Jake asked when he saw me watching him. “I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry. But I’m waiting for you to ask who Oliver is.”

“I know who Oliver is,” Jake said and I motioned for him to explain. “Oliver Twist. I read.”

“You had to read it for school, didn’t you?”

“That’s not the point.”

My mum placed a pot of tea on the table. Jake helped himself while she placed the cafetière in front of me. Just the smell of coffee was pushing away the fuzzy feeling.

“Trank filled us in on what happened last night.” The way my mum said it, you could tell she was aiming for casual and missed by miles. “What are you going to do?”

Jake’s eyes flicked up from his pancakes to look at me. As if I already had a fully formed plan. My parents were fine with me wandering around in forests in the middle of the night looking for Bigfoot, but they weren’t so keen on my wandering around in forests in the middle of the night looking for murderers.

“We’re going to find out who killed her and tell Trank so he can bring them to justice,” I said while cutting up my pancakes.

“Trank said those girls killed her,” my mum said as she hovered by my dad at the hob, both trying to look busy and like they weren’t overly interested.

“No, I *told* Trank we walked in on those girls standing over her body.” I tasted the pancakes. So much better than the ones I’d made for myself yesterday, which was weird because it was the same mixture. “These are really good, dad.”

“More?” he asked, flipping three onto Jake’s plate.

“No, I’m not hollow so the three is enough, thank you.”

“Hey, I’m not hollow,” Jake said and shoved almost half a pancake in his mouth, chewed three times, and swallowed.

“Son,” my dad watched him in equal parts horror and fascination. “You need to learn to chew. That can’t be healthy.”

“I chew.” Jake stuffed the rest of the pancake into his mouth and made an elaborate show of chewing. I was sure as soon as no one was watching he’d go back to his three chews and a swallow routine.

“You don’t think those girls killed that lady?” my mum asked. “Because that would be a relief. Not just because they’re teenagers and that’s awful, but because they saw you.”

“I was looking at the photos on my phone before I came down and—”

Jake waved his fork at me. “Let me see. Don’t tell me, let me see if I can figure it out.”

My dad gently caught Jake’s waving arm and lowered it from eye level. “Son, we don’t wave sharp, pronged instruments at the breakfast table.”

“It’s all fun and games until someone loses an eye,” my mum chimed in.

“You’re right. Sorry, sir.” Jake placed his forked down and waved his empty hand in my direction.

I handed him my phone, and he flipped through the photos while shovelling more food in his mouth, my dad looking over his shoulder.

“That looks ritualistic, lovely,” my dad said, grimacing at the screen. “With the pentagram and the candles.”

“I think I know her.” Jake squinted at the photo.

“Really?” I asked. “That would be helpful. I checked her pockets. She had no ID.”

“You checked that poor woman’s pockets?” my mum asked.

“How else would I know who she was? If we don’t know who she is, how can we find out who her enemies are? Who disliked her enough to kill her? And I used gloves,” I said before my dad could chip in about me not respecting Trank’s crime scene. “Actually, it was super weird

because she had nothing in her pockets whatsoever. No car keys. No change for the bus or return ticket. I checked around and there wasn't anything."

"Could you have missed it?" my mum asked. "Maybe she hid it for some reason. If she had nothing on her, it would make sense that all her belongings were in her bag."

"I checked around the clearing and a little further out, but found nothing. It doesn't make any sense for her to keep it further out of reach than that."

"So you think this was a secondary location?" my dad asked.

"What's that mean?" Jake stole a glance at my dad before refocusing on the photo.

"It means she was taken from somewhere else," I said. "Which would explain her lack of stuff."

Jake snapped his fingers and pointed at me. "She's a professor at my university."

"Really?" I reached in my pocket for my phone to search for faculty members before remembering Jake had it.

"Yeah, I can't see anything else though." Jake passed the phone to me. "What do you see?"

I stared at the photo while eating my pancakes. "Couple of things. First, the lack of a bag. It could mean she was brought there from somewhere else *or* that she went there of her own accord and whoever killed her took her stuff. Second, the candles aren't lit. If you were sacrificing this woman, if those girls were doing some sort of sacrifice ritual, wouldn't the candles be lit?"

"Maybe a draft blew them out," Jake suggested.

"No, the wicks are new." I enlarged the photo and showed my mum, who was leaning over my shoulder.

"You're right." My mum pointed to the candle tip in the photo. "Look, they're still flat against the top of the candle."

"Could they have accidentally killed her?" my dad asked. "Could they have been trying to incapacitate her so she wouldn't struggle during the ritual?"

I shrugged. "I mean, it's possible. But there has to be a whole host of better ways to do that than stabbing her. Tie her up, for example."

"She could still wriggle away," Jake said. "And I was googling on the way home last night and I saw that there are some rituals where the sacrifice has to be *willing*, so maybe they couldn't tie her up."

"Right." I nodded. "Because nothing says willing like several stab wounds to the gut."

"Maybe whoever they were sacrificing her to didn't care about stab wounds," my dad offered. "Maybe the demon was going to possess the body and could heal that stuff."

“See,” Jake said, jabbing his fork at my dad, who reached out and lowered Jake’s offending fork hand again.

“My point is that there are plenty of other ways they could have gotten her there. *Sleep aids* for example. Stabbing someone in the gut is a great way to kill someone, but not the best way to incapacitate them. Also, there looked like there were a lot of wounds in a small area. It reminded me of—what was that thing we watched where that guy got shanked in prison?” I asked my parents. “Do you remember? They were in the yard and the bad guy had that sharpened toothbrush?”

“You think someone did this with a toothbrush?” Jake beckoned for me to pass him back the phone. I did.

“Yeah,” my dad said with a nod. “Where he held him still with one hand so he could stab him repeatedly. And it was all in the same place.”

“The wounds remind me of that,” I said. “Which means that it likely has to be someone she knows and is massively angry at her. I mean, you don’t stab someone ten times in the gut because they used the last first class stamp in the booklet, do you?”

My mum sat straighter in her chair and purposely avoided looking at my dad. “I guess that would depend on how many times they’ve done it.” My mum held her hand out for the phone and Jake quickly handed it over while my dad topped up my mum’s tea with apologetic subservience.

“You noticed her hair?” my mum asked.

I swiped through the photos to find an aerial shot of the body. “I actually saw it from the blood pattern first, but the hair confirmed it.”

“What?” Jake asked.

“The body was moved.” I showed him the photo. “See how the blood has pooled on the right side of her abdomen?”

“Yeah,”

“So she was lying face down on the ground. Then someone rolled her onto her back. And see how her hair is loose, but neatly pulled over one shoulder. That doesn’t happen when you roll over. Someone did that.”

“You think the girls stabbed her, rolled her over, then did her hair?” Jake asked.

“No, you idiot.” I threw a chunk of my pancake at Jake, who deftly caught it in his mouth. “I think she was stabbed. The murderer left her to bleed onto the ground. Those girls found her, rolled her over and—” I cut myself off as a version of possible events played out in my head. “What if they *found* her? The blonde, the one whose lower dress was covered in blood? What if she knelt down by the woman? The one with the handprints on her dress. Maybe she tried to stop the

bleeding, realised the woman was dead and freaking out at the blood on her hands, wiped it on her dress. And the other—”

“Picked up the bloody knife?” Jake asked in disbelief.

“It’s possible,” my dad agreed.

“And preferable,” my mum added.

“She was holding the knife.” Jake said, waving his fork around at me again. He caught himself doing it and placed the utensil back on his plate. “If they had found it like you said, tried to save her and everything you just described, why was she still holding the knife?”

“Maybe she picked it up off the ground after,” my dad offered. “She saw the poor woman first, they tried to help and then she saw the knife.”

“And picked it up?” Jake asked. “Who would pick up a knife at a crime scene?”

“Someone seeing a dead woman and wanting to protect themselves,” I suggested.

“Maybe it wasn’t at the crime scene,” my mum offered. “Maybe the actual killer had discarded it and they found it on their way to the scene.”

“Okay. Then who would pick up a bloody knife from the floor of the forest?” Jake asked.

“Dude, you’re looking at this from the perspective of someone who has been to several crime scenes,” I reminded him.

“I watch TV,” Jake said. “And I have common sense. Why would you pick up a bloody knife?”

“You’re also using hindsight to justify actions,” my dad added. “It seems ridiculous now because you know a woman was stabbed. Imagine that your were just walking through the forest—”

“And I find a bloody knife in the grass, so naturally I pick it up?” Jake finished.

“Honestly,” I said. “She could have found it right by the body and still picked it up. How many people think clearly when faced with a dead body for the first time?”

My dad looked at me. “I’m trying to help, but even without hindsight it does seem a bit foolish to pick up a bloody knife from the ground in the middle of a forest.”

“Maybe they don’t watch police shows,” my mum offered, trying to help. “Maybe they didn’t know.”

“*Not* to pick up a bloody knife?” Jake stressed.

“She took the knife with her.” I squinted as I tried to focus on her as I ran the whole altercation back through my memory. “Yeah, she took the knife with her when she ran.”

“Because it was hers.” Jake stabbed a pancake as he spoke, as if punctuating his victory.

“Did you see blood on her hands?” I asked Jake. “I don’t think she had any blood on her hands. I saw it on the blade, but not on her hands. If she stabbed someone, surely she would’ve gotten some blood on her hands. Or at least on her dress.”

“You said last night she wasn’t facing you,” Jake reminded me.

“She was half twisted towards me. I couldn’t see the full front of her dress, no, but it didn’t look like it was covered in blood from what I could see.”

“The part of the dress you couldn’t see didn’t look like it was covered in blood?” my dad asked, doing his best to keep his tone neutral.

“You know what I mean. She didn’t move like it was covered in blood.” The more I tried to focus on her dress, the blurrier the image became in my memory. “And if she *did* stab that woman, they’d have had to stay in that tableau for a while judging by the amount of blood on the ground. And the way it had soaked into the dirt.”

“Devil’s advocate.” My dad held up his hands in a “don’t shoot me” gesture. “Let’s just say for a minute that they found the knife, they picked it up, and they got blood on their clothes from trying to help her. Just like you said. Why would they run and why would they take the knife with them? If they were innocent, surely wouldn’t they just say that? Like you both did. You found her and called the police. Why wouldn’t they do that?”

“Because, Harry, they *looked* guilty,” my mum said. “Aurora had just walked in on them, holding a knife, covered in blood, standing over a dead person. What would you have done?”

“Wouldn’t have run,” my dad said. “Why would I? If I had just found this lady and tried to help her, why would I run?”

“Because you knew her.” I guessed. “You *knew* her and you didn’t like her. Maybe you publicly threatened her. And then someone finds you standing over the body. You panic. The knife. Maybe it was theirs. *That’s* why you’d pick up a random bloody knife on the floor of a forest. Because you thought it was yours. Or looked like one you owned. And that’s why you’d take it with you when you ran.”

“All the brain power it took to work that out?” My mum tapped her temple. “That’s because you slept through the night.”

“Okay, thank you for drugging me, mum. Happy now?”

My mum shrugged. “I’d have been happier with more gratitude and less attitude, but I can work with it.”

“Guilty or not, if the dead lady was a professor, do you think these girls were her students?” my dad asked.

“Makes sense to me,” I agreed. “They were about the right age.”

“So our working theory is that the professor was killed, and it was staged to look like a ritual?” Jake asked. “Not an *actual* ritual?”

“I hear a but,” my dad said.

“*But*,” Jake stressed. “If the girls didn’t kill her, someone else did. And why would that someone else stage her out in the forest where only the girls they were framing would find her? What good does that do? Maybe they would’ve moved her if we hadn’t come along.”

I pushed back from the table. “But *we* did. *We* found her. *Kim* sent us there.”

“You think Kim killed her? And timed it so we’d find the girls finding her?” Jake asked. “That would be some amazing timing.”

“All that stuff about the curse? What if they did it to themselves because they killed the professor and all this other witch stuff is dressing and a convenient scapegoat?”

“You think they’re faking everything?”

“Jake.” I leaned both elbows on the table and my mum tapped my arms. I took them off. “They tinted their skin. People will notice. People will ask what happened. They say Celeste did it. A body turns up in the woods in a pentagram? They’ve already laid the groundwork for Celeste being a witch and for them as victims.”

“Makes sense to me,” my dad agreed.

“You said she wasn’t there,” Jake reminded me.

“I said I didn’t see the girl in the photo Kim showed me. If that is where her coven meets, the girls we saw will be from that coven, right? We find Celeste. We find those girls.”

“Are you going to fill Detective Trank in on all this?” my mum asked.

“On our suppositions?” I shook my head. “No. Or at least not before we talk to Celeste.”

“And then you tell Trank,” my dad added.

“Yes.” I gave him a firm nod. “Then we’ll tell Trank.”

Chapter Five

“You two be careful,” my dad reminded us as he dropped us off at the university campus.

“And call me later when you want to pick up Bertha.”

“I will do, dad.” I kissed his cheek and got out of the truck. “Thanks for dropping us off.”

“Please be smart and responsible,” he said for the millionth time. “If you get murdered, you mother will kill me.”

“I like how he puts it all on your mum,” Jake said as we waved to my dad as he drove off.

“They have this weird balancing act where they each blame the other and I pretend I don’t know.” I waved until he turned the corner and disappeared into traffic.

“How come you said you let the police drive us home because you were tired.”

“Because I *did* let the police drive us home because I was tired.”

“No, you let them drive us home because Bertha didn’t start.”

I made a noncommittal noise and scanned the open campus. Teenagers were strolling around as if they had nothing to do. But at least the campus wasn’t swarming with students yet. That many people just made me nauseous. It was so difficult to overhear several conversations at once. It wasn’t like I was agoraphobic, but the sheer volume of teenagers was simply overwhelming.

“I don’t know if you know this, but your dad’s a mechanic,” Jake continued. “He is probably the best person you could tell. He’d fix it for free.”

“She was just cold.” I shook my head. “That’s all. We’ll head back in the middle of the afternoon and try her then. She’ll be fine.”

“And if she’s not?”

“*Then* I’ll tell my dad. Why are you so focused on this?”

“Why are you so averse to asking your dad for help?”

“Because if I tell my dad Bertha’s having a few problems, yeah, he’ll fix it, but he will tell my mum. And then that will be another conversation about how I need a better car.”

“You *do* need a better car,” Jake said.

“But getting a better car is like smoking marijuana.”

Jake paused in surveying the campus to stare at me. “Am I supposed to understand that?”

“Understand what?” I asked. “Where should we start? We need to hunt down those girls from the forest. If this Celeste was part of that group, that’s probably a good place to start. And if we make the assumption that they knew the professor, we could *also* assume they might have taken

one of her classes. I suppose we could ask Butts for an attendance list and student profiles and whatnot, but I hate bothering her on the little things.”

Butts was Jake’s computer genius hacking friend with huge beautiful brown eyes like chocolate buttons. Her friends had managed to find the least complimentary version of that and award it to her as a nickname. Teenagers. Who understood them?

“Kim has a lecture about some chemistry thing this morning. He was complaining about it yesterday on the way to the newsroom. How he didn’t want to go as his pink self but had to because there was a test of something.” Jake pointed in the direction I assumed the science building was in. “Let’s start there and see what he can tell us. Why is a new car like smoking marijuana?”

“It’s a gateway drug. Supposedly.” I shrugged. “I’m not really a drug person so I don’t know, but that’s what folks say.”

“Yeah, I know what marijuana is and how it’s supposedly a gateway drug, but how does that relate to you getting a new car?”

“Getting a new car is the equivalent of smoking a joint.”

“Right.” Jake nodded, and we walked a few steps in silence. “You’re just saying the same thing and I still don’t get it.”

“It’s a gateway,” I said, as if he were missing the most obvious assumption. “To disaster.”

“Let’s put aside the assumption that smoking a joint is a gateway to disaster. How is getting *a new car* a gateway to anything?”

“It’s the gateway to a deadly dull road of becoming respectable. You get the car, then you get the job, then you get the guy, then you get the wedding, then you get the kids, then you get the safer car, then you get the promotion, then you get the even safer car, then the kids leave, then you grow old and die.”

“That’s—” Jake blew out a breath and shook his head. “Is that why you’re so resistant to going out with Charlie? You think you’ll get married, have kids and die?”

“We’re talking about cars.” I squinted at him. “Why would you bring Charlie into this?”

Jake smirked at me. “I’ve no idea, Peter Pan.”

“I’d really like to say something offensive to you, but that was actually a pretty good reference, so I’ll let it go.”

Teenagers were wandering with no real purpose that I could tell, but also no one looked upset. Classes seemed to be continuing as normal. Maybe no one knew. Or no one cared.

“You’re sure the dead lady was the professor?” After breakfast we’d left my parents’ house and my dad had dropped us off at the campus. He had a no-phone-while-conversing policy, so I

couldn't research on the way to investigate the professor's identity. "Don't you think there should be something going on if one of their professors was murdered?"

"Maybe Trank hasn't worked it out yet," Jake suggested as I pulled my phone from my pocket to do a faculty search while we walked now my dad wasn't around to complain. "I knew who she was because I'd seen her on campus. You said she had no identification, so unless someone had reported her missing or someone on the force recognised her, it might take them a minute to identify her."

"Good point," I said, scrolling through the list of professors. "We should probably tell Trank about it."

In all honesty, I felt a niggling doubt about not telling Trank immediately that we knew the identity of the dead lady. But then, maybe her fingerprints would be in the system, and he would already know. And telling him in an hour wasn't going to make that much difference.

"You mean after we talked to everyone we need to talk to, right?"

"Obviously. If we tell him before, he might beat us to the punch. Or tell us to stay away." It was one thing to delay telling him, it was quite another to tell him and completely disregard his instructions. I mean, we'd still do it, but it was bad for my karma. "You were right. She does—*did* teach here. Her name is Gloria Rutherford. Professor of—that's interesting."

"What? What does she teach?"

"Women's and Gender Studies."

"Women's studies?" Jake squinted at me. "What's that about? Periods and pregnancy and stuff."

"Yes, because women are nothing more than baby making machines," I said. "Sounds like you could do with a crash course in what she taught."

"I can do without learning about periods, thanks."

"First, I'm pretty sure *everyone* could do with learning about periods. Second, it's *not* about periods. It's about gender inequalities, feminist theory, female oppression by the patriarchy."

Jake shook his head. "I'm still not taking the class."

"Obviously. Because if you were, you'd likely have already made the connection."

"What connection?"

"Really?" I arched an eyebrow at him. "Come on, now."

Jake winced and shook his head. "I'm going to need a hint."

"Fine. Remember when you asked about witches, and I told you it was about the oppression of women? Something that a professor of Women's and Gender Studies is very likely to talk about."

Jake snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “Kim came to us with a witch problem and then we found a professor who teaches witchy stuff dead. In a witchy way. That *does* seem like a weird coincidence.”

“Okay, gender studies isn’t witchy stuff. But it *is* curious,” I agreed. “Maybe Kim blamed professor Rutherford for turning Celeste toward witchy stuff and killed her.”

“You think?”

“He knew where they met. Maybe he bumped into her by accident, they got into an argument and he killed her.”

“And then asked us to investigate? That doesn’t seem like a smart plan.”

I shrugged. “Maybe he thinks he’s smarter. Can you call Butts and see if she can find out when the professor’s next class is supposed to be? We can hang about outside and see who shows up.”

“You think those girls will be in the class. *If* they’re in her class. Even though they know she’s dead?”

“Don’t know. Maybe they’ll think it would be obvious if they didn’t show up. Either way, we can describe them to the classmates and see who knows what.” I inclined my head. “Or the simplest thing is to ask Butts to create a list of student’s, including photos, who are taking one of Rutherford’s classes. But let’s hold off on asking her to do that in case we have more stuff. That way we can bundle it all up together. ”

“So, we just want the professor’s schedule?”

“Yes, please.”

With my hand on his shoulder so he didn’t walk into anything, I guided Jake along the path to the science building while he sent a text to Butts. He assured me that he could walk and text at the same time, but it seemed like an accident waiting to happen if you asked me.

“You’re sure this is the only way in?” We hovered outside the stubby two level building that looked as if had been built in the 1970s and not touched since, and scanned our empty part of the campus. Science wasn’t that popular, it seemed.

“No, there are a couple of entrances, but Kim lives over there.” Jake pointed ahead of us and slightly off to the left. “This will probably be the entrance he uses.”

“Probably?” I asked. “I think we should split up.”

“No need.” Jake nodded at a figure scurrying across the open campus with the hood of his jumper pulled low over his face and bent over so his face was parallel to the ground.

“Hey, Kim?” Jake called. When Kim looked up and saw us, Jake beckoned him over.

Kim stumbled mid-scurry and glanced at the open door of the campus building and then back to us.

“Is he going to dodge us?” Jake whispered to me.

“Guilty conscience,” I whispered back and strode toward him to intercept so he would literally have to weave around us to get past. I wasn’t sure that I believed he’d killed the professor and sent us to find her body, but his shiftiness was suspicious.

“Is it true?” Kim kept his scurrying pace, but instead of charging past me he veered to the right, where Jake and I had been waiting, out of the main thoroughfare.

“Is what true?” I asked, following him.

“That the professor is dead?” he hissed, as if somehow his knowledge implicated him.

“You know about Professor Rutherford?” I asked, shooting Jake an “I told you so” eyebrow raise.

“Yeah, Toby has a friend who works at the admin office and the police showed up first thing to talk to the dean,” Kim explained, which alleviated my guilt about not telling Trank immediately.

“We’re next, right?” Kim looked from Jake to me. “I’m next?”

“Next?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, her next victim,” Kim hissed. “Celeste’s next victim. She killed her professor and—and—now she’ll be gunning for me.”

“Why do you think she killed the professor?” I asked.

“Toby’s friend said the police said the killing was ritualistic. Devil stuff. Celeste *obviously* killed her first to—you know—stop the professor from stopping her. And now she’ll be after me. Working her way down that list.”

“What list?” Jake asked before I could tackle anything else.

“The professor, me.” Anxiety dripped off Kim as he bobbed in place. “Her *list*.”

“Does she have an actual list?” I asked. “Something written down or are you just naming people you don’t think she likes. Because two people are not a list. What about Piper? The girl you cheated on her with. Surely she’d be on that list.”

“What?” Kim wrapped his arms around his torso like he was hugging himself. “No. Yes. I don’t know. What does that matter? No, I never saw a list, but that doesn’t mean she didn’t have one.” Kim’s eye stretched wide. “Is it worse if it’s written down?”

“Have you managed to get in touch with Piper?”

“I—no.” Kim dropped his gaze to the floor, and shuffled his feet. If a neon sign had been flashing over his head saying he’d done something, it wouldn’t have been more obvious.

“You *did* send her that text last night, right? When I asked you to?”

“Yes, but I didn’t—I don’t—I can’t—” Kim rubbed his face with his jumper clad arm.

“Do you know how we can get hold of her?”

He shook his head without looking up. “Not really.”

“Okay, well, let me take her number from you. Maybe she’ll answer our calls.” I motioned for Kim to hand over his phone, but instead he read the number out, which was a shame because I really wanted to have a snoop around his texts and calls. I typed it into my phone and saved it with a few notes about who the number belonged to.

“Celeste’s in Rutherford’s class?” Jake asked while I was typing. “Anything happen between them? Any issues? Any reason why Celeste might kill her? Other than to stop the professor from stopping Celeste and her death curses.”

“Death curses?” Kim hissed.

“Did they argue?” I interrupted, trying to keep him focused, because talk of death curses was going to help no one.

“She gave her a bad grade,” Kim said. “A bad grade on an essay. And she killed her for it. I cheated on her.” Kim screeched and pulled his hood lower over his face. “What do you think she’s going to do to me?”

“Well, hopefully if you survive, this will be a lesson to treat girls with a little more respect,” I offered.

“I thought you were going to break this curse.” Kim pointed an accusatory finger at me. “You need to get on it before I end up stabbed to death in the woods too.”

“Did she curse her professor?” I asked.

“What?” Kim snapped at me. “How am I supposed to know? Probably. Maybe the professor was a sacrifice to get enough power to do really bad things to me.”

“How about the other members of her coven? Do you know their names?”

“Her friends? No, why would I care about her friends?”

I exhaled a breath. At this point, not that I would ever wish anyone dead, but I didn’t feel Kim would have been a massive loss to humanity.

“Can you describe them?” Jake took over because, I assumed, he could feel my frustration.

“Blonde.”

“All of them?” Jake asked, and Kim nodded. “Can you give me anything more?”

“One was fat. The other had spots. I think Celeste only hung out with them to make herself feel prettier.” Kim stepped closer. “I need you to break this curse. I don’t want to die.”

“Do you know of anyone else who might’ve had a problem with the professor?” I asked, ignoring his plea.

“Probably a lot of people,” Kim scoffed. “She was always women this and women that. As if everyone was out to get them.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “Were you in her class?”

“Celeste was always quoting her. She idolised her. I think that’s why she got so mad about the assignments. I tried to tell her that no one cared about it. ”

“About her grade?” Jake asked, with a tone that implied it was crazy not to care about your grade.

“About *feminism*.” Kim rolled his eyes. “Everyone knows it’s just a bunch of men-hating angry lesbians.”

“Wow,” I said with a nod and releasing the last shred of desire I had to save the boy. “That’s so true.”

“So Celeste was upset about her grade,” Jake jumped in. I assumed because he recognised the surrender in my tone. “Was it grade or grades? Was it more than one assignment?”

“Yeah. No. I don’t know. She went on about it a lot. I kind of tuned out.” Kim scanned our surroundings as if expecting to be splattered by a meteor or something. “What does it matter? What are you going to do about this curse?”

“You know, Kim.” I placed my hand on his shoulder and dipped my head to make sure I got full eye contact. “I was skeptical at first, but this is presenting like a real curse. You should probably take some precautions.”

“Like what?”

“The strongest curse breaking ritual I know is the power of six.” I pointed to his backpack. “You might want to write this down. First, you need to find a piece of grass that has six sides. I think there’s one in the centre of the campus. Then you need to find manure, specifically horse, and for six days, at midday, you need to stand on that grass, strip naked and cover yourself in the manure. Once you’re fully covered and I mean *fully*, in your hair and everything, you have to wait for six minutes. While you’re doing that you need to eat six whole heads of garlic. Not a clove, the whole thing. You should peel them, but eat them raw. And while you’re doing that you need to spin, counter-clockwise six times. Now, it’s integral to the ritual that each spin takes a whole minute and that eating each head of garlic takes a minute. It’s the power of six.” I pointed to his phone. He’d stopped typing somewhere in the middle of my explanation. “You got that?”

“I’m not doing that.”

“That’s up to you.” I shrugged. “But this is how you break the curse. This ritual will break any curse. Even the strongest curses. Even *death* curses. Oh. And you can’t wash the manure off. You have to wipe it off with a towel. Specifically, a *white* towel. A clean one each time. That’s very important. You can’t shower for that whole time. The smell draws out the curse. Okay?” I slapped him on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

I strode away, and Jake jogged to catch up with me.

“Was that a real remedy?”

“Sure.” I shrugged while dialling Piper’s number.

“Are we going to include that in our story?” Jake asked. “That you fed the victim of a curse bad information?”

“One, I’m not exactly sure I’d call him a victim. Two, it’s not a curse. And three, yes. I will write up that I did that and I’ll add something about feminism which Marcus will undoubtedly take out so not to offend our sensitive readership and my journalistic integrity.” The phone rang out, and I ended the call. “This Piper girl isn’t answering. And there’s no voicemail option.”

Jake pulled out his phone and checked the screen. “Oh, Butts says that the professor’s class this morning is going ahead.” Jake veered to the left. “The building is just over here. Something about the uni wanting to talk to the students.”

“I love that girl. That’s a stroke of luck about the class.”

We rounded the corner into a mass of students huddled in groups outside the building chatting noisily. Nothing like the death of a professor to get the gossip mill going. “This seems like a *lot* of people.”

It reminded me of the time, not so long ago, when Jake and I had found the dead theatre professor. Thinking about it, this didn’t seem the safest place for people to teach. Admittedly, we’d found *this* professor off-campus, but still I had to wonder about the topic of conversation in the staff room. I frowned into the crowd. Did university have staff rooms?

“Yeah. Maybe this is all of her students?” Jake suggested. “From all her classes. Not just this morning’s class.”

“Maybe. Let’s see if we can find those girls from last night.”

“Where are you standing on them having murdered the professor?”

I seesawed my hand and sighed. “About seventy-thirty. I don’t *think* they did it, but it’s a *lot* of circumstantial evidence to discard.”

“Where does that leave us?” Jake asked.

“So far, the only person we *know* who’s into witchy stuff and had a problem with the professor is Celeste. Although we only know that because that’s what Kim told us. So we don’t *actually* know anything for ourselves.”

“Are we for ritual sacrifice or against it?”

“Right now?” I searched the crowd for familiar faces as I spoke. “We’re for finding more answers. Which means finding Celeste and those girls.”

Chapter Six

“Do you see them?” Jake’s head was spinning as if it were a plate on a stick.

I elbowed him in the ribs. “Do you think it’s possible for you to be a tiny bit less obvious that you’re searching the crowd?”

“What?” Jake frowned at me. “It’s not like I’m shouting about it.”

“Not verbally, no. But your head is spinning around like something from the exorcist. You’re quite clearly looking for someone and attracting attention our way. Remember, we didn’t just see them, *they* saw us. So if they see us here first they’re likely to do a runner.”

“I don’t—” Jake gripped my arm and shook it like a dog worrying a bone. Then he lifted it up and used it to point to a group of girls huddled together, away from the dominant group, hiding in the shadows of the building. “That’s them! Is that them?”

“I have literally just told you to be subtle, and this is your response?” I snatched my hand out of his grip and peered through the crowd at the girls. “I can’t see their faces. How can you tell it’s them?”

“There’s three of them.” Jake stated it as if it were all the evidence we’d need.

“That’s all you have?” I’d actually seen their faces and *I* couldn’t tell if it was them. “How about we weave through the crowd, eavesdrop some conversations while covertly moving toward them?” They were standing quite a way apart from the main crowd so there was no actual way we were going to get to them without them seeing us. They *did* have the right makeup of hair colour—a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead for what that was worth. And if I’d murdered my professor—or even just found her dead—I might not feel like mingling with other students while we waited for the announcement of her untimely demise either. I scanned the building in front of us. “Actually, I’m going to loop around the back of the building and come up behind them. You stay here and very casually question the crowd.”

Jake pouted like a five-year-old who’d just had his favourite toy taken away. “Why do you get to speak to the suspects and I have to talk to everyone else?”

“Because you’re their age so it will look less conspicuous if you join in with their conversations and if the girls run when I come up behind them, they’ll likely run this way.”

“That’s actually a decent plan,” Jake agreed.

“I know, right? It’s almost like I do this for a living.”

I left Jake to eavesdrop and question the crowd while I headed along the side of the building. I scurried toward the back, rounded the corner, and saw two familiar figures. Charlie and Trank.

I jerked back behind the wall and listened. They were too far away for me to hear anything, and from the quick glance, I couldn't tell which direction they were heading in. It wasn't as if it would be a big deal if they saw me there, but then I'd have to tell them about the girls and they'd get to them before me. I pulled my phone from my pocket, edged the camera lens around the corner, and snapped a photo. They were halfway into the building. I waited several seconds and peered around the corner. The coast was clear.

I jogged along the back of the building in a crouch so I wasn't a blatantly visible figure jogging past the windows, turned the corner and kept low as I scurried up the last side. With a quick check over my shoulder to make sure no one was following, I straightened up and strolled around the final corner. The group of girls were several feet ahead of me, huddled against the front of the building.

The brunette must have caught motion in her peripheral vision. She turned. Confusion reigned over her face for a whole second, before being quickly replaced by recognition.

I held up my hands and said the most comforting thing I could think of. "I don't think you did it." It wasn't *necessarily* true, but I thought it would be the thing least likely to provoke them, whether they had killed the professor or not.

The other two girls turned when I spoke. It was definitely them. All three of them. Their eyes stretched wide and their bodies tensed as if they were about to run.

"Please don't run. Please. I can help, if you'll let me." Yes, I knew that wasn't the smartest thing to be saying to a group of possible murderers, but they looked so scared. If they had killed the professor, by their tear-swollen eyes and hand wringing, it had obviously been some sort of accident. Or they felt really bad about sacrificing her to invoke some demon.

"How?" asked the brunette while the other the girls shushed her.

"I know the police detective investigating." I edged closer as I spoke. "I can talk to him. I can help you explain. You just have to tell me what happened."

The girls exchanged several glances, which I assumed was silent communication about what to do. Finally, the brunette faced me.

"We found her like that." She held up her hands in surrender. "I swear we did."

"Okay. I believe you. I'm Aurora. What's your name?"

"I'm Tallie, this is Katie and Wilma." Tallie pointed to the blonde and then the girl with auburn hair.

"Don't suppose you guys know a Celeste, do you?"

"Celeste Gregory?" Katie groaned. "Yeah, we know her. Why?"

“She’s not part of your—” I didn’t want to say coven even though that was my brain’s first suggestion. “Friend group?”

“She’s far too cool for us,” Wilma scoffed.

“She wasn’t with you last night?” I asked.

“Why would she be with us?” Katie asked, twisting a strand of her long, thick blonde hair around her finger. “We’ve already said we’re not friends.”

“You’re right,” I said with a nod. “I heard she was there last night, and I assumed it was with you.”

Tallie narrowed her eyes at me. “Heard from whom?”

“Oh. It was—” I made a point of scanning the crowd of students growing larger by the minute. “I can’t see him now.” I faced them. “So she wasn’t there?”

“No.” Tallie enunciated the word so clearly that it had the odd effect of making it sound like the opposite.

“Okay.” I shrugged like it didn’t matter. “How did you guys happen to be there last night?”

“Who are you again?” Wilma asked.

“Aurora.” I extended my hand and waited for her to shake it. “Aurora North.”

“You’re that reporter.” Katie said it like it was an accusation.

“Yes, I’m a reporter. One who has solved a couple of murders, so if you really didn’t murder the professor, I’m a fabulous person to have on your side.” I rarely blew my own horn, but sometimes it was necessary. “You were explaining why you were there last night.”

“It was a full moon last night, so we were—” Wilma cut herself off.

“We were going to have a moon bath and cleanse ourselves,” Tallie finished. “But then we heard a noise, and we thought—”

“That stupid reporter was back.” Katie picked up the conversation. “We didn’t want him taking pictures of, well, us. So we went looking for him—”

“But found the professor instead,” Wilma finished.

“Did you touch her?” I asked, hoping only one of them would answer. It was dizzying when they finished each other’s sentences.

Katie nodded. “We thought she’d fallen and hit her head or something.”

“But when we got closer, I touched her shoulder, and she rolled on to her back.” Wilma covered her mouth with her hand as if to staunch any emotion.

“We thought we might be able to save her,” Tallie said. “We tried. But then I found the knife.”

“Did the professor have a reason to be out in the woods?” I asked. “Anything you know of?”

“The professor holds meditation sessions in the woods,” Tara explained. “Every new moon, waxing crescent, full moon and waning crescent. There’s an open invitation to join her. It’s usually only us.”

“She sets up the circle. We do the meditation, then we go our own way and do our own thing,” Katie said.

“But last night you weren’t going to the meditation?” I asked.

“What?” Wilma stared at me blankly.

“You said that you were going to have a moon bath, you heard a noise and thought it was some reporter,” I recounted. “You found the professor while looking for the reporter.”

Tallie nodded. “Right.”

“So you weren’t going to the meditation,” I clarified. “What made you stop going?”

“We still go.” Katie glanced around at the other two, who both nodded.

“But just not last night?” I asked.

“Right.” Wilma nodded. “Not last night.”

“Tell me more about this reporter. Do you know what paper he was from?”

“The uni paper. The guy in a tweed waistcoat,” Katie said. “He’s been snooping around the professor for a few weeks now.”

“I know the guy.” It sounded like the editor of the paper. I’d met him not long after I’d met Jake for the first time. But what was the editor of the paper doing watching a meditation? “Why was he so focused on the professor? Did he write an article on her?”

“I know he wanted to. He asked us some questions about her, but the professor asked him not to,” Tallie said.

“And I think he’d spied on us at the meditation practices a few times,” Wilma added.

“Why would he spy on you?” I asked. “You sit on the ground with your legs folded and breathe, in silence, right? What’s there to spy on?”

The girls shook their heads.

“Right.” Not suspicious at all. “Can you tell me about the arguments Celeste had with the professor? About her grades?”

“Why?” Wilma frowned at me. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Hopefully nothing.” I shrugged. “But when you only volunteer part of what you know, it makes the police suspicious about why you didn’t volunteer the rest.”

“It wasn’t a big deal.” Tallie shook her head. “Celeste got a couple of bad grades and questioned them with the professor.”

“In front of everyone?” I asked.

“In private,” Wilma clarified.

“If she did it in private, how do you know about it?”

The girls exchanged another glance before Tallie spoke. “I was waiting outside the office and overheard.”

“But you should definitely talk to the reporter guy.” Wilma waved her arm in the direction of the campus. Possibly the newspaper office, I couldn’t tell. “I saw them arguing in her office a couple of days ago. I didn’t hear what it was about but he was doing a lot of finger pointing.”

“You saw but couldn’t hear?” I asked.

“We were doing yoga on the green behind the building,” Tallie said. “It’s beautiful first thing in the morning. Her office is on the ground floor so we could see in.”

“Her TA saw it, too,” Katie agreed. “We saw him come into the room while they’re arguing.”

Wilma grimaced. “He was always hovering around.”

“He so totally had a crush on her,” Tallie agreed.

“You don’t like him?” I asked Wilma.

She grimaced again. “I get a weird vibe from him. He makes me feel uncomfortable. He’s never done anything, but you know what I mean?”

“I do. Do you know his name?”

“Xander something.” Katie shrugged. “But we saw him go into the building earlier so he should be inside.”

“Okay. Anyone else?”

“The blond guy,” Wilma said. “We saw her talking to this blond guy in the car park last week. She was trying to get in and he was leaning against her door.”

“Yeah, really slimy.” Katie nodded. “You know the type who thinks he’s really cool?”

“I know the type.” I nodded, thinking of Kim’s brother, Keith. “Can you give me a description?”

Wilma waved her phone at me. “I took pictures because we were about to call the security guy, but he left almost immediately after we took the photo.”

She showed me the screen. I had to squint at it to make sure I was seeing what I was actually seeing and not just making it up. It was very clearly Keith leaning against the car door. Funny how Kim hadn't mentioned his brother knew the professor. "Can you send me that?"

"Sure." She tapped around on the screen and sent me the photo.

"Anyone else you guys can think of that might have disliked the professor or knew she'd be out there?" I asked, and the group shook their heads. "Okay. You guys come with me. We're going to talk to a super nice police detective—he'll believe you." I rushed on as they all tried to back away. "I wouldn't send you to him if I didn't think that something you know would be helpful to him finding the killer. Which is what you want, right?" They all nodded.

I scanned the crowd of teenagers. It took me a moment to locate Jake, which made sense really, because he was well camouflaged amongst his own kind. He was deep in conversation with a group of girls who were giggling, and I could only hope he was using his boyish good looks to pump them for information and not to get a date.

Seeing he was occupied and not wanting to interrupt, I led the girls into the building and came face to face with Trank.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, then shook his head. "Don't answer. I already know. Who are your friends?"

"These are the girls I saw in the clearing last night. Tallie, Katie and Wilma." I gestured to the brunette, the blonde, and the redhead in turn.

Trank's eyebrows inched up as far as they could go. "Really?"

"Yep, they found the professor just before Jake and I did. They tried to help her, too. Oh." I turned to Tallie. "Do you still have the knife? I forgot to ask."

Tallie looked at me blankly, then her attention turned inward. "I think I must have dropped it."

"Where did you find it?" I couldn't believe I'd forgotten to ask.

"She was lying on it." Tallie frowned down at her hands. "I didn't realise what it was at first. The handle was weirdly shaped. Like a woman's torso and the knife was the legs. I don't think it was the professors. It was a switchblade."

"You guys didn't take her bag or anything, did you?" I suddenly realised I had a lot more questions.

"Thanks so much for your help," Trank said to me, then made a sweeping gesture into the building. "How about you girls come with me and tell me what happened? This constable is going to get you settled and I'll be with you in just a moment." He motioned for one of the constables

hovering nearby and directed them to a room to the left. Once they were out of sight, he faced me. “Couldn’t pick them out of a lineup, eh?”

“Honestly, I didn’t think I could have. But when I saw them—” I shrugged. “Did you find her bag? Or how she got out there?”

“Thank you for your help, *Detective North*,” he said pointedly. “I’ll take it from here. He headed into the room after the girls.

“Hey, excuse me?” A guy in his early twenties with thick, black-framed glasses and hair the colour of a ginger biscuit stepped into my path. His face was littered with so many freckles it gave the appearance that they were the dominant colour on his face. “Detective North, was it?”

I hesitated. What to do? What to do?

“How can I help?” It was neither an admittance nor denial. Morally ambiguous, yes, but not illegal. At least I didn’t think so.

“I’m Xander Wart. I am—I *was* Professor’s Rutherford teaching assistant.”

“Yes, hi.” I shook his hand. “I’m glad I ran into you. Some of her students mentioned you. I wasn’t aware that UK universities had teaching assistants. I thought that was more of an American thing. What are your duties?”

Xander winced. “I’m not technically a teaching assistant as such. I just help her out—helped her out sometimes.”

“In what capacity?”

“My PhD is in gender studies so it’s great for me, for my research to help the—to *have* helped the professor from time to time.”

“What did you help her with?”

“That’s not really important.” Xander glanced over his shoulder and beckoned me to the side of the hallway. “The girls you were just talking to. Are they involved in what happened to the professor?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“They had a bit of a hero worship thing going on.”

“Wouldn’t that technically be ‘heroine worship’? Gender studies, right?”

“Ah, yes. Yes.” He nodded, but continued as if the distinction wasn’t really important. “But my point is, they seemed a little fixated on her.”

“Fixated how?”

He opened his mouth to speak and closed it with a frustrated grimace. “There’s nothing specific, it was more that they were around her all the time.”

“It’s funny, because they said the same thing about you.”

“But I was her TA.”

“I thought you were a PhD student that occasionally helped her because it benefitted your research.”

“You’re splitting hairs.”

“These are your words,” I said with a shrug. “Did you have a crush on the professor?”

“Of course not,” he snapped. “As colleagues, that would be unprofessional. The university has policies.”

“But you *weren’t* her colleague. You were a student.” And I was pretty sure the university had stricter policies about that.

“I was her *colleague*,” he repeated with an air of confidence. Almost as if he said it enough times, that would make it true. Interesting, *that* was his nerve. He didn’t seem to like the idea that the professor was above him. And it was interesting that he’d approached me and not Trank when Trank was clearly the most senior detective. Or maybe I was reading too much into and it had nothing to do with gender, just that I wasn’t occupied.

“As her colleague, was there anyone else that caused the professor concern?”

“A student who wasn’t happy with the very fair grades the professor awarded her. Celeste, something or other. I can find out.”

“Did she ever directly threaten the professor?”

“Nothing direct, but her behaviour in general was aggressive.”

“How so?”

“Interrupting lectures with irrelevant questions and then arguing with the professor about her answers. The professor had to ask her to leave class once. She was back in the next class though, so I don’t know if she apologised. She wasn’t that aggressive again, but she still challenged the professor. I’m not sure why the professor permitted her to stay.”

Funny how the girls had neglected to mention that. “Do you know what brought it on?”

“I don’t. I noticed she started asking questions about witchcraft a few months ago, but they were mostly benign. It really began to escalate a few weeks ago.”

“Okay. Is there anyone else?”

“There was this blonde muscle-bound idiot who was harassing her. I saw them out by her car one day last week and he was hanging around before that. I think she must have been interviewing him for research or something, because there was no way she’d be interested in *that* kind of guy. ”

“What kind of guy?”

“Possessive, domineering. The professor taught Gender Studies. She was fascinated by the inequalities between genders that have become invisible in our society, simply because they’ve been present for so long.”

“Did she tell you it was for research?”

“That type of guy?” Xander screwed up his face in disgust. “She didn’t have to. I saw a bouquet of red roses in her office. I assumed they were from him. I mean, red roses? How generic can you be?”

“Did she say they were from him or did you see a note?”

Xander hesitated. “The note was on display. I didn’t go rooting for it. He’d obviously gotten the wrong end of the stick.”

“What did it say?” I asked, pretty sure that he *had* gone rooting for it.

“Beautiful flowers for a beautiful woman.” Xander waved a hand in the air. “Again. Generic. And he has a knife. I heard the detective’s say she was stabbed.”

“What kind of knife?”

“A trashy flip knife.” Xander’s lip curled. “With the handle shaped like a woman’s torso. I saw him out in the car park one time. I assumed he was waiting for the professor and he was using that to slice an apple. What kind of pompous idiot does that? Why not eat it like a normal person?”

“Huh, okay.” I nodded, trying not to show too great a reaction because that just put Keith squarely in the frame for murder. “So, the student and this other guy. Anyone else?”

“Actually, there was the set-to with the editor of the newspaper. They got into some sort of argument about it in her office.”

“Do you know what that was about?”

“Not really, but I think it had something to do with her meditation sessions in the forest a little way from campus..”

“Have you attended them?”

He shook his head. “The sessions are specifically for women. A way to harness their feminine energy and align with the phases of the moon. It was all about healing the witch wound and stepping into their feminine power.”

“So, you never went?” I asked, and he shook his head. “Not even to help set it up?”

“No, she was very adamant about it being a feminine space which, like I said, I think was what they were arguing about.”

“Aurora?” Charlie sauntered over to us. “What are you doing here?” He looked over at Xander as he spoke. It was almost as though he knew I was interviewing a witness.

“Xander, this is Detective Champonal. Charlie, this is Xander Wart. He is a PhD student who worked closely with the professor.” I stepped back and pointed to Charlie while talking to Xander. “You should probably tell him everything you just told me.”

“Why would I repeat myself?” he asked, eyeing Charlie with distaste. “I thought you were a detective.”

“You told him you were a detective?” Charlie asked in his oh-so-serious tone. The one that said he was going to tell Trank on me.

I held up my hands, backing away from them. “I did not. *Trank* mockingly called me Detective North. Xander overheard, and I merely didn’t correct his assumption. So if this is anyone’s fault.” I gestured between the three of us. “It’s Trank’s.”

Charlie grinned at me. “I’ll pass that along.”

Chapter Seven

“Did you get anything good?” I asked Jake as he slowed his jog and fell into step beside me. He seesawed his hand. “Mostly gossip. Did find out a couple of things though. You?”

“So very, *very* much.” I nodded to Celeste. “Can you remember everything she said or should we chat to her together?”

“You can talk to her if you want, but it won’t do you much good.”

“Why not?” I peered around him at Celeste. She was laughing at something one of her friends said. “She seems friendly enough. Surely we could get her to spill at least *some* beans. What excuse did you use? Did you say you were a reporter or were you more covert?”

“Just pretended I was a curious student. But it doesn’t matter what excuse you use.”

I narrowed my eyes at the girl. She didn’t look like a master criminal. “Why?”

“She’s not Celeste.”

“What?” I squinted at the girl and then pulled my phone from my pocket to find the photo Kim had shown me. “She is *definitely* Celeste.” I held the photo up for Jake to see.

“Yeah, she might be the girl in that photo, but she’s not Celeste.”

“What?” It was the most intelligent thing I could manage. “Hang on, is that Piper? The girl he was cheating with? You think Kim mixed up who is who?”

“Nope, *her* name is Louise.”

“What?” I asked again. “Kim gave us a photo of a *random* girl? Does she at least know Kim?”

Jake shook his head. “Never heard of him.”

“What?”

“You have to stop saying that,” Jake said.

“I’ve got nothing else.” I frowned into the crowd as something occurred to me. “Do you think he showed us the wrong photo on purpose?”

“Why?” Jake asked. “What good would that do him? Especially since he asked us to look into this in the first place.”

“Maybe he didn’t really want us to talk to her. Maybe *he’s* the one playing tricks on his housemates.”

“And he *accidentally* dyed his own skin?” Jake shook his head. “He seemed pretty freaked out about being next on her death list earlier. If he *did* give us the wrong photo on purpose yesterday, I can’t see him forgetting to correct us today.”

“So then she introduced herself as Celeste to him? And they dated while she pretended to be someone else?” I asked. “And now she’s pretending she doesn’t know him? What would she gain from that?”

“I think she’s lying. Why would Kim lie about it?”

“Why would *she* lie about it?” I asked, then inclined my head. “Actually, I could list ten reasons off the top of my head for either. And that’s just the stuff we know about. There could be at least twice that for stuff that we don’t know about. We need to work on your lack of suspicion.”

“I think you’re suspicious enough for both of us,” he mumbled, then frowned at Celeste. “Okay, give me an example.”

“Dude, if you can’t make up your own suspicions, I’m not sharing mine with you.”

“Don’t feel comfortable sharing your crazy with me?”

“She’s in this class, though.” I blew out a breath as I looked out over the mass of students, ignoring Jake’s comment. “*Celeste* is in this class. That faux-TA said she was. So your Louise must know Celeste. Didn’t she point her out?”

Jake shook his head. “There are several classes here. Maybe she doesn’t know her.”

“If she’s not Celeste, how did Kim get her photo?”

“From her social media pages?” Jake suggested.

“And then we circle back to why. *Why* would he give us the photo of a random girl who’s not Celeste if he wanted us to talk to Celeste? And if she *is* Celeste, why randomly say your someone else when it’s super easy to check? You know, let’s talk to her again, then go back and speak to Kim.”

Before we took a step in her direction, a man on the steps of the building clapped to get everyone’s attention and then started ushering them inside. I debated wading into the crowd and trying to pull her out, but there were a couple of police constables hovering by the doors of the building. If she made a scene, it could get awkward. Especially if Charlie was around and wanted to quiz me on my status as a “detective”.

“Never mind. We can social media snoop when we get back to the office.” I checked my watch. “How long do you think this will last for?”

Jake shrugged. “I don’t even know what they’re going to say. Maybe Trank will want to question them all.”

“That doesn’t seem like the best use of police time, but maybe,” I conceded. “Kim will be in his lecture for at least another hour, right?”

“Would’ve thought so.”

“Okay, do you have any other gossip you want to share?”

Jake shook his head. “A couple of kids said there was a creepy PhD student who fawns over the professor.”

“Xander. Met him. Did *the kids* say anything about Celeste interrupting lectures?” I stressed his descriptor since “the kids” were his peers.

“Not really, to be honest. They weren’t all that much help. What did you get?”

“How do you get to the student newspaper from here?”

“Why?” Jake asked as he lead the way.

I quickly filled Jake in on everything I’d learned in the very short space of time.

“Let me just ...” Jake slowed his pace, almost as if he couldn’t walk at a normal speed and order his thoughts at the same time. “Both Xander and the three girls saw Kim’s brother with the professor?”

“Yep, which Kim failed to mention.”

“Maybe he didn’t know,” Jake offered.

“Maybe.”

“And the professor held a meditation type thing to do with the moon regularly which the three girls regularly attended, except for last night.”

“Yep.”

“That seems fortuitously timed.”

“I thought so too. And I got the feeling that they weren’t telling me the whole truth.”

“About what?”

I shrugged. “Pretty much everything.”

“That’s disappointing. They also said that Keith was harassing her and Xander was over interested?”

“Yep.”

“Right. And then Xander said Celeste, and the professor had words in class, but the professor let her back in. He saw the professor with Keith as well and assumed he sent her roses. And he saw her arguing with Jonas about an article.”

“He saw them arguing and *assumed* it was about an article.” I corrected. “We don’t know that was what it was about.”

“Your friend Xander pointed his finger at a lot of people, didn’t he?”

I nodded. “Didn’t he? Oh, and he also mentioned that Keith has a switchblade type of knife with a woman’s torso as the handle.”

Jake shrugged. "So?"

"The knife the girls found? It was a switchblade type of knife with a woman's torso as the handle."

"What?" Jake stumbled to a stop. "*Keith* killed the professor?"

I nodded. "That's what it looks like."

"You don't sound like you think that's what happened."

"That's a pretty distinctive kind of knife," I said. "Xander saw him cutting an apple with it. That's at least *one* person who knows he had it. Maybe other people saw him use it too. How hard would it be to pick his pocket? It all seems a little *too* easy. I'm not ready to hang this on Keith without talking to him first. For the moment, let's remove the knife from the equation."

"Okay. Which means our suspects are Keith, Celeste, and Jonas?" Jake asked. "I don't really think Jonas is capable of killing someone."

"You never know until someone's pushed," I said. "And I think we need to add Kim and Katie, Wilma and Tallie to that list as well. I get the feeling that none of them is telling us everything."

"Really?" Jake asked.

"If the girls found out the professor was dating Keith—*if* she was dating Keith—or mistook her meeting with him for her research as dating him, maybe they felt like she'd somehow betrayed the sisterhood and killed her. And Kim. Maybe he accused her of teaching Celeste curses and killed her."

"What you're saying is that, despite this damning evidence of the knife, we haven't narrowed down this list whatsoever."

I nodded and sighed. "That's what I'm saying. They—" I squinted at a short boy in a tweed waistcoat scurrying across the grass some distance in front of us. I pointed to him. "Is that Jonas?"

Jake sucked down a breath as if he were about to yell across the distance, but I slapped my hand across his mouth before he could. He arched an eyebrow at me, then peeled my hand from his face.

"I thought you wanted to speak to him."

"He looks like he's up to something. I'd rather follow him."

"He could be going to class."

"With a camera slung over his shoulder? While he's messing with a tape recorder? Who still uses a tape recorder?"

"He likes to be old school. He's got a couple of them."

I watched as he depressed a couple of buttons on the super old recorder, tucked it in his pocket and veered to the left. “Did he just ...”

“What?” Jake looked from me to Jonas, then back the way we came. “Is he going to the assembly? For the professor’s students. Why’s he going that way?”

“He’s going around the back of the building.”

“Why would he go in the back way? All the students if—there are any late comers—will be going in the front.”

“Yeah, if he was doing something aboveboard, like getting quotes or taking photos of the students gathering outside, he’d have come around the front and been on time. But he’s not.” I inclined my head. “Unless he’s just that inept. Which is a possibility, I suppose.”

“You think he’s doing something shifty?”

I shrugged. “Pretty sure he just set that recorder to record and slipped it in his pocket, so yeah.”

“He does that all the time.”

“Record people without their permission?”

“He says he hates writing notes.”

“Not entirely sure that’s legal. It’s definitely not ethical.”

“Unlike you pretending to be a police detective,” Jake quipped. “Because that’s *totally* ethical.”

“I didn’t pretend. I simply didn’t correct Xander’s assumption. I am blame free. Let’s follow him and find out what he’s up to. Do you still write for the student paper?” I asked as we hung back and gave Jonas enough space. Not that he was paying attention to anything but his camera. He was completely oblivious. Watching his lack of spatial awareness, I scanned our surroundings.

“No. I don’t have the time with—what are you doing?” Seeing me check our surroundings, Jake did the same thing.

I rolled my shoulders to ease the tension from imagined eyes. “Following people always makes me paranoid.”

“Being alive makes you paranoid.”

“Shut up.”

We trailed Jonas all the way back to the building we’d just come from. I didn’t know if he wasn’t sure where he was going or if he felt our pursuit, but he took the longest route possible to get there. We rounded the back of the building and instead of finding him trying to sneak into the

assembly, which was what I'd expected, he was trying to scramble through an open sash window on the ground floor.

"Er?" Jake pointed at Jonas. "Should we help him?"

I faced Jake and enunciated as clearly as I could. "No."

"It's not like we've never broken in anywhere."

"Jake, *we're* not suspects in this murder."

Jonas managed to heave his torso through the window, leaving his little legs kicking in midair as if he were swimming. Finally he shuffled himself forward enough to tip the balance, and he disappeared through the window.

"The girls said the Professor's office is on the ground floor," I whispered.

"You think that's her office?" Jake whispered back as we crept along the back of the building, ducking low under the windows we passed to stay out of sight.

"Yes. Yes, I do. I wonder what he's hoping to find."

We crouched underneath the window Jonas had disappeared through as sounds of rifling filled the room beyond. Clearly, stealth was not Jonas' forte.

I edged up above the windowsill and peered inside. With his back to me, Jonas was opening desk drawers and rifling through papers stacked on the desk. I'd thought that he was going to take some photos of the office, maybe get some soundbites from the students or eavesdrop. Something for his newspaper, but the way he was searching it looked as though he were after something specific.

Jake threw me a perplexed expression as we watched, and I shrugged back. I had no idea what he was doing. I pulled my phone from my pocket and filmed him rooting around.

Abruptly, he stopped searching. His back still to us, he paused and then waved a piece of paper in the air.

"Bingo!"

He folded up the paper and tucked it somewhere on his front. I couldn't make out where because his back was still to us, but my guess would've been a front pocket of his waistcoat. I stopped filming, pressed my finger to my lips and ushered Jake back the way we'd come. He frowned and gestured into the window, but did as I bid. We scurried as quickly as possible back around the building.

"I thought you wanted to question him?" Jake asked once we were safely back around the side and out of Jonas' sight. "We could've caught him red-handed."

“Red-handed doing what exactly? Searching an office? It’s hardly compelling evidence,” I said while checking I had a few seconds of video of him searching. I’d even captured the melodramatic “bingo” moment, which I was overly pleased about. “We have evidence that he was doing it so we can always use this at a future moment if he chooses not to cooperate.”

“Like blackmail?”

“I prefer to think of it as incentive, but sure,” I shrugged. “You could call it that.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to have caught him in the act? Wouldn’t that be more effective?” Jake pressed as I edged the top of my phone around the corner of the building and took a photo. I checked the image. Jonas was creeping back towards us.

“And how forthcoming would you be if someone caught you mid-burglary?”

“Not very,” Jake conceded.

“Exactly. We need to get as much info from him as we can and the easiest way to do that is to make him think we’re on the same side.” I pulled a piece of paper from my notepad and folded it into what I hoped was roughly the right size. “And there’s no way he’s going to volunteer whatever he was looking for.”

“What are you doing *now*?” Jake watched me, confusion all over his face.

“Being a reporter.” I angled my head, listening for any sounds that Jonas was approaching. I had to time this right.

Just as he appeared around the corner of the building, I strode out as if I were about to turn the corner and body checked him. We stumbled, and he caught me before I fell.

“I’m so sorry. Are you—” Jonas cut himself off. “Oh. It’s *you*.” The amount of disgust Jonas levelled at me with that one word was quite impressive.

“What a coincidence,” I exclaimed, and stepped back. “I was hoping to run into you.”

“Why?” Jonas absentmindedly patted his waistcoat pocket and pursed his lips at me. “Do you want to accuse me of murder again?”

He was referring to the first story Jake and I had worked on where a uni student had been murdered and he’d been a suspect.

“No, of course not.” I smiled at him. “And really, you were just there to bump up the numbers last time. We never *really* suspected you.” I placed a hand on Jake’s shoulder. “Jake spoke so highly of you, we simply wanted to invite you so you would be able to write the story up as well. You’re not as constrained as we are, so you can be a lot more forthcoming with the truth.” That wasn’t true. He had absolutely been a suspect, and the story he’d later published in the student newspaper about the incident had bent artistic license so far, it had dipped into fiction.

“That’s true,” he agreed.

“So, what’s happening here?” I gestured at the building. “We saw all the students gathered around out front. We heard them talking about murder. Do you know what’s happening?” I was working really hard on appearing earnest. It wasn’t my natural state, so I always found it hard to find the right balance.

Jonas hesitated, but his desire to show off what he knew won out. He’d *never* make it in the real world as a reporter. It almost made me feel a little bad about manipulating him. But not bad enough to stop.

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “A professor was murdered by her pagan students.” Jonas checked around us as if concerned we might be overheard. “And sacrificed.”

“Shut the front door.” I gasped. “Sacrificed?”

“As a *human* sacrifice,” he added for effect.

Never mind his inability to keep a secret, he wouldn’t make it as a reporter with his limited grasp of the English language. I bit the inside of my cheek to prevent myself from explaining that if a human was sacrificed it was obviously a human sacrifice.

“How do you know?” Jake whispered, checking over his shoulder.

Jonas shrugged. “I have sources.”

I stepped back and pointed at the building as if recognising where we were for the first time. “Wait, you’re not talking about Professor Rutherford, are you? We just heard there had been an accident.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Jonas asked.

“Yeah, the owner’s son is a student here, just like Jake, so we always get drafted to investigate stories here.” I gestured to him. “I don’t know why. You do such a great job. All the students think it was an accident. When we were getting sympathy quotes for the article, one of the guys we spoke to said you interviewed professor a week or so ago. That will be such a poignant article now. Are you going to run a series of articles about her or just dedicate one whole issue to her?”

The expression on Jonas’ face froze. “What—who—who told you that?”

“What?” I blinked innocently at him.

“About—that I’d—about the interview?”

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. “One of the kids. They said you were at her meditation practice. I thought that was solely for women. How did that happen?”

“I—it—it wasn’t—I never—” Jonas spoke like he was choking on the words. “She invited me. Privately. While we were—er—interviewing—while I was conducting the interview.”

“Wow, that must have been quite the coup for you.” I nodded, as if I was going to take that as an answer. “So, you think it’s absolutely a sacrifice?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Jonas nodded, as if happy to be back on safer ground.

“Wouldn’t care to share you source, would you?” I asked. “Like I said, all the kids thought it was some sort of accident.”

“No, no.” Jonas shook his head. “Definitely murder.”

“Did she say anything to you about feeling threatened?” Jake asked. “Anyone she mentioned while you chatted?”

Jonas shook his head again. And then it morphed into a nod. “Yes, there was that dreadful PhD student who was far too interested in her, if you ask my opinion. And, naturally, she was concerned about the girls in her class. There was a lot of talk about the witch wound—” he gestured to us. “For the laymen, that’s a generalised term for curses. She was worried about that. In general.”

“She was worried about the witch wound?” I asked. “Like, *actively* worried about it?”

Jonas nodded. “Yes.”

“And you’re sure that’s what she called it?”

“Positive.” Jonas adjusted the camera slung over his shoulder. “I’m something of an expert in it.”

“I bet you are. Did she mention Celeste? Or a big, blond guy?”

Jonas hesitated and then nodded. “Both. Definitely both.” He lied worse than Jake. He had no idea what was going on. “They were both contributing to her wound. Both actively ... you know ... *enlarging* it.”

“Well, it was good to see you.” I offered him my hand, and he shook it.

“And you.” He released my hand and stepped away.

“Oh, Jonas?” I called before he was more than a step away. He turned. “I have to ask. You and the professor. Did you argue about anything?”

“No. No. Of course not,” he stammered out. “Of course not. We were great friends. She invited me to the meditations, remember? *Trusted* friends.”

I held my arms out. “I have to ask. My editor would lose his mind if I didn’t check.”

“I completely understand. No, the professor and I saw eye to eye on everything. *Everything*. There was no animosity. At all. *Ever*.”

“Cool, and last night? You were...” I let the sentence trail off.

A slow smile spread across Jonas' face. "Are you asking for my alibi?"

"Yes. Because my editor's going to ask if I asked." I shrugged helplessly. "I think he'd quite like to get you tied up with the police so you don't scoop us."

"You better be quick." He laughed. "I was writing this story up last night."

"This story?" I asked, pointing to the building. "The murder?"

"I have great sources."

"You've already published?" I asked. "My editor will lose his mind."

"Not yet." Jonas backed up and pointed around the front of the building. "I didn't want to publish without the reaction from the students. Excuse me." He backed away. "Jake, if you ever feel like returning to the winning team, I'll take you back."

"Thanks, Jonas," Jake said as Jonas gave him a backward wave. He lowered his voice as he spoke to me. "What was—"

"We have to go." I nudged Jake into motion. "Go. Go. Go."

"What? Where?" he asked, but my urgency had infected him and we scurried across the open space and darted around the back of another building. "What's going on?"

I pulled a folded up piece of paper from my pocket, smoothed it flat on my thigh, then held it up to eye level to read.

"What's that?" Jake asked, even though he was reading over my shoulder.

"It's what Jonas stole from that office." I inclined my head as I scanned the content. "And motive."

Chapter Eight

“This is what Jonas stole from the office?” Jake took the letter from my hands and read it. His lips moved as he read. It was kind of adorable.

“When I bumped into him I switched it with my folded up piece of paper.” I peered back around the corner to see if Jonas had realised I’d stolen it and was following. He wasn’t. “This is why we didn’t show our hand and let him know we’d seen him rooting around the office. He could have said it was anything and maybe tried to cover his tracks somehow, but now we can dig into this and see—”

“This is motive.” Jake waved the paper at me as if I hadn’t already stated that. “This is massive, *massive* motive.”

“Well, it’s motive,” I agreed. “I’m not sure I’d say it was *massive* motive. It’s just a letter of complaint from the professor to the dean about Jonas’ conduct. He’ll get a slap on the wrists and a warning. It’s not worth killing her so she can’t send it.” I paused. “Is it weird that it’s a letter and not an email? I think that’s weird.”

“No. Jonas is on academic probation.” Jake waved the letter at me. “This is him being removed from the uni.”

“Oh. Then you’re right. That *is* massive motive,” I said. “Do you know why he’s on probation?”

“I’m not sure. One of the guys on the newspaper told me about it ages ago. Maybe it’s not that big of a deal,” Jake backtracked. “Maybe he’s off it now. I can find out, though.” Jake took his phone from his pocket and began texting, his thumbs a blur as they flew over the keys. I took a few photos of the letter, folded up the piece of paper and put it in my pocket.

“What was that stuff about wounding witches?” Jake asked as we took the long way around and hovered out of sight of Kim’s building.

“Hmm?” I wasn’t sure if he would be eager to see us again since we hadn’t exactly parted on the most favourable of terms, so I figured it was best to catch him off guard.

“Jonas mentioned something about wounding witches with curses. I could tell he’d gotten something wrong from your reaction.”

“Oh. The witch wound is supposedly a type of soul-based trauma that all women feel from being persecuted for eternity.”

Jake whistled. “*That’s* intense. What kind of soul-based trauma?”

“I think it’s supposed to work a bit like genetic memory. Like the memory of persecution has been fused with our DNA.”

Jake’s frowned deepened. “Like, medically?”

“No, it’s more of a spiritual thing.”

“But there are no physical symptoms?”

“It’s not a *flesh* wound. It’s a *soul* wound. Sufferers aren’t afflicted with boils or leprosy or huge gashes across their abdomen or anything like that. It’s more to do with—it supposed to affect how you face the world.”

“Oh.” Jake’s forehead smoothed out and then wrinkled up again almost immediately. “Do you have a witch wound?”

“Supposedly, but like I said, it’s more to do with persecution and female oppression. Which makes sense why the professor was talking about it in her class. However, Jonas said she was *actively* worried about it. It’s not really something that I’d have thought anyone would be actively worried about. It was just an interesting comment.”

“Maybe someone was persecuting or oppressing her?” Jake suggested.

I shrugged. “Or maybe Jonas completely misunderstood. He *did* think it was slang for being cursed.”

“Yeah, it’s possible. What’s the plan from here?” Jake paced as if he thought he needed to be ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice.

“We need to find out if Kim knew his brother was seeing the professor and in what capacity. It would be helpful if we could ask him about the knife too. And how he got Celeste’s photo. *And* how he knows her as Celeste. We need to talk to his brother and find out what was going on with the professor and ask him about the knife. We need to talk to Celeste. We need to talk to this Piper girl. And we need to go back and get my truck.” I was tired just thinking about the list of things we had to get done.

Jake stopped pacing and faced me. “Do you think Jonas was involved in this?”

I shrugged. “I’m not willing to rule anyone out at this point. And if you’re right about him being expelled from uni, that’s a pretty good motive. We need to find out why the professor wrote it out as a letter and not an email. *And* how Jonas knew. In today’s world, my assumption would’ve been that she’d emailed, not handwritten a letter. It’s not like you guys have paper files and it had to be slotted into it. It’s all digital. Even if that was the case, if she’d emailed it the dean’s office could’ve printed it out on their end.”

“Why are you hung up on that?”

“Because it’s out of the norm. And Jonas knew about it. And if it’s the only copy, he can literally shred his motive.” I frowned at Jake as something occurred to me. “You said Jonas was old school?”

“You think that’s why he assumed the professor had written the letter?”

“No, I was thinking—you said he records people all the time because he hates making notes, right?” I asked, and Jake nodded. I waited for him to make the leap. He didn’t. “So, if he uses that all the time, he probably used it when he interviewed or argued with the professor.”

“Why would he record an argument?”

“He switched it on when he was running across campus when there was no one around to talk to. Maybe he did it automatically. Maybe he thought he could get her to admit something? Who knows?”

“You think there might be something on those tapes?”

“Don’t you? If he—” I cut myself off as something else occurred to me.

“You know you’ve stopped talking?”

“You said he has a couple of them?”

“Yeah. All different models. He prefers the ones with the little tapes but he has a couple of digital ones as well.”

“What if he wasn’t just looking for that letter in the professor’s office?”

Jake’s eyes widened as he realised what I was implying. “You think he *bugged* the professor’s office?”

“He has no problem recording people without them knowing. I can’t see him having an issue with setting a recorder in the professor’s office. Although a bug would make more sense. Still, you can get voice activated recorders with batteries that last for weeks.”

“If he was taping the professor’s office, he has private conversations that could very well lead us to her murderer.”

“Exactly.”

“You want to steal Jonas’ tapes?”

I hesitated. “I was trying to think of a more socially responsible word than ‘steal’, but I can’t. So, yes. I want to steal his tapes.”

“Isn’t that a bit ...” Jake winced. “It’s like we’re sabotaging his story.”

“If he’s doing this, he’s recording people without their permission. And not just when they speak to him, but when they think they’re alone. In possibly intimate conversations. This guy is *not* a good reporter.”

“Right, so he’s doing something unethical and then we’re going to steal the fruits of his unethical labour and use them for our own purpose?” Jake asked.

“Try not to think about it like that,” I suggested. “Also, I genuinely think those tapes will be safer in our hands than his.”

“Still, I feel weird about stealing from him.” Jake winced. “He gave me my first shot at reporting.”

“With no guidance on how to do this job whatsoever. Do you remember your first story? But I can see why you feel conflicted. I can steal—*borrow* them. You wait here and talk to Kim.” I backed up. “You know what you’re asking Kim?”

Jake nodded. “Do you remember where you’re going?”

“Er?”

Jake refreshed my memory and then I trotted off in the direction of the university newsroom, leaving Jake to question Kim. I did feel a niggle of doubt about stealing tapes and recorders from Jonas. Stealing was never really a good option, even if I called it borrowing. But then I also felt that whatever was on those tapes—if they existed—would be safer in my hands than his.

I weaved through the students milling around the building and darted up the stairs to their newsroom. I knocked. When there was no answer, I tried the door handle. It was locked. The corridor behind me was completely empty. It really couldn’t have been a better opportunity. It was as though the universe *wanted* me to have those tapes.

Blocking what I was doing in case the odd student happened by, I picked the lock and stepped into the office. It was excessively neat. My office was tidy, but this was so neat, it almost unsettling.

There was a window directly opposite the door, a wooden desk in the centre, six four-drawer filing cabinets to the left, and a set of bookshelves to the right. Apart from the window and excessive tidiness, it reminded me of my office. The layout, at least.

“If I were a secret cache of tapes and tape recorders, where would I be?” I strolled around to the desk. It was an old-fashioned wooden type that had three drawers on either side and a shallow secret drawer in the middle disguised as a support. *Everybody* knew about the secret draw. I frowned at it. “Surely not.”

Pulling my cuff over my hand, I reached and tugged on the support. It gave and a drawer slid out. It contained roughly twenty mini cassette tapes and three digital recorders.

“This is just too easy,” I said, shaking my head at Jonas’ lack of imagination. I scooped the contents of the drawer into my rucksack before I could think too much about the morality of what I was doing.

I fastened my rucksack up and pushed the drawer shut. The movement slid something else to the front of the drawer. A black notebook. Notes about what was on the tapes? I flicked through the pages. The pages were filled with squiggles, but a quick examination proved it to be Teeline shorthand. That was the most common type of shorthand for journalists, at least among the ones I knew. Maybe Jonas took this reporting thing more seriously than I thought. I closed the drawer and left it where it was. I was already taking his tapes. It would be excessively mean to take his notes as well. Although maybe he had learned something good elsewhere. Perhaps I should borrow it. I reached for the drawer when I felt eyes on me. I looked up. Charlie was standing in the open doorway, watching me.

“Lose something?”

There was no way I’d be able to open the drawer, take the notebook and pretend like it was mine now. I grabbed a pen from the desk and held it up. “Needed a pen.”

“So you thought you’d break in to the university newspaper office and steal one?”

“I was going to give it back,” I said, skating over the other comments. “And newsrooms are my comfort zone.”

“Is that all you took?” Charlie’s eyes fell on my rucksack.

“You think I’m a thief? What on earth in here is worth stealing?”

“Then you won’t mind if I search your bag.”

“You don’t have reason to search me.”

“I suspect you have stolen property on your person.”

“Has something been stolen?” I asked. “How about you tell me what’s been stolen and then I’ll let you search me.”

“You’ll *let* me search you? I’m pretty sure it’s the law.”

“You believe I have stolen property, but unless you specify what that property is before you search me, you could claim that entire contents of my rucksack is stolen. And as I don’t walk around carrying the receipts for everything I’ve purchased, I wouldn’t be able to refute it. You see where I’m going with this?”

Charlie nodded to the pen in my hand. “Pretty sure you’re stealing that pen.”

I held up the pen, wrote something on my hand, placed it back in the penholder and then showed him my empty hands. “And now I’ve finished *borrowing* the pen, I’m going to leave. Unless you want to arrest me for stealing the ink?”

I crossed the office and stood in front of him, waiting for him to move. He didn’t.

Charlie scanned the office behind me. “Where’s your sidekick?”

“Waiting for me outside, so if you’ll excuse me?” I gestured for him to move.

He reached for the hand I’d written on and read the reminder. “Call mum and dad.”

“Pretty sure you’re invading my privacy by doing that.”

“You need a reminder to call your parents?”

“They say I don’t call enough. Why don’t you call my dad and ask him if that’s true?” I offered Charlie my phone. “You can even use my phone.”

“What’s going on here?” Jonas asked from behind Charlie.

Charlie dropped my hand and stepped to the side so he could watch me and the newcomer at the same time.

“Jonas Ivy?” Charlie asked.

Jonas looked from me to Charlie. “Yes.”

“Okay, I can see you boys have business, so I’ll be on my way.”

“What were you doing in my office?” Jonas asked.

I showed him the note on my hand. “Borrowing a pen.”

Jonas squinted at my hand. “You need a reminder to call your parents?”

“They say she doesn’t call enough,” Charlie answered for me.

“How did you get in?” Jonas turned his attention the office door. “The door was locked.”

“Not when I tried it.” I pulled the letter the professor had written from my pocket. I already had a photo of it and giving him back his letter made me feel a little better about stealing his tapes. “You dropped this when I bumped into you earlier. I wanted to return it.”

Jonas’ mouth snapped shut as he patted his waistcoat pocket. He frowned because no doubt he could still feel the paper. Then his eyes widened, and I assumed that was the point he realised I’d picked his pocket. He opened his mouth, but I gave a subtle shake of my head and flicked my eyes in Charlie’s direction.

Jonas closed his mouth for a second time.

“What is that?” Charlie asked, and held his hand out for the paper.

“Shopping list.” I handed it to Jonas, who took it and tucked it away in his pocket. Then I hugged him.

A startled Jonas was rigid in my embrace.

“Your secret is safe with us,” I whispered and turned Jonas to put him between Charlie and me as I released him. I used the movement to check his trouser pockets for a tape recorder and found one in each pocket. I managed to grab them both and tuck them away in my pockets before Jonas noticed.

I waved at Charlie. “Always a pleasure detective.”

“Hey!” Jonas called after me, patting his pockets, proving he was learning. “Give those back.”

“What?” I stopped walking and turned to face them.

“She stole my recorders.” Jonas directed his comment to Charlie as he pointed after me.

“Did you?” Charlie asked, eyebrow raised, as if asking if I’d been stupid enough to do it right in front of him.

“This?” I held up one of the recorders. “Of course not. I can play it for you if you need me to. We can hear *everything* that’s on here, detective.” I directed the comment at Jonas rather than Charlie.

“I think we should.” Charlie held his hand out for the recorder.

“No!” Jonas shrieked and then regained his composure. “No. I was mistaken. That’s not mine.”

Charlie glanced between us, a bemused expression on his face. “So that’s *not* yours?”

“No.” Jonas shook his head innocently at Charlie and then threw a scowl my way. “But I would very much like to borrow it.”

“Absolutely. I’ll bring it by tomorrow. See you boys later.” I waved and strolled along the corridor until I was out of sight. And then I ran flat out to get to Jake before Charlie or Jonas could change their minds.

Chapter Nine

“This is going to take forever to get through all these tapes,” Jake said after I’d emptied my rucksack of ill-gotten gains on my desk.

“I thought we’d start with the ones he had on him.” I pulled the extra two recorders out of my jacket pocket and placed them on the desk in a separate pile.

“What’s that?” Jake leaned over the desk and nudged one of the tape recorders to the side as I shrugged out of my jacket.

I glanced at the desk over my shoulder. “Oh. It’s the charm-pendant thing I found in the car park last night. I’d forgotten about that. Why?”

“You know the girl who’s not Celeste?” Jake asked, and I nodded. “She had an earring that looked like that.”

“One earring or two?”

Jake opened his mouth, closed it, and squinted at the desk. “One.”

“What was the other earring?”

“I don’t remember her having another earring.”

“You don’t *remember* or you didn’t *see*?”

Jake shook his head. “But that earring proves she was at the car park.”

“It really doesn’t.” I dropped the jacket on the back of my chair and crouched down in front of the heater behind the desk to turn it on. “Maybe it is hers. *Maybe*. Or perhaps her earrings were a moon and a star or a moon and a sun. But these aren’t studs, so I doubt she’d sleep in them, which means she’d have taken them out last night and realised one was gone. If you’d been wearing them when you killed someone and realised you’d lost it at some point, would you use that earring to mix and match the next day? ’Cause I wouldn’t. That said, it was a good catch and worth checking with her,” I added because Jake always worked better when he’d been praised.

Jake responded to my compliment with a grin. “What do you think is on the rest of these recorders? Maybe the argument that teaching assistant said Jonas had with the professor is on here.”

“I suppose there’s a good chance if he was recording everything.” I dropped into my chair and surveyed the next several hours of our day. “Okay. Choose your weapon.”

“First, I think we should set up the board with what we know and then listen afterwards.” Jake got to his feet as he spoke.

I gestured for Jake to take the lead. “What or who do you want to start with?”

“Professor Rutherford was the victim.” Jake scrawled her name in the centre of the whiteboard with his barely legible handwriting. “We found the group of girls standing over her with a knife.” He drew an arrow from the professor’s name and listed the names of the three girls. “They said they found her. Do we think they are still suspects?”

“You know,” I hesitated while I tried to pull a clear memory of finding the professor. The more I focused on it, the blurrier it became. “I think the bloodstains on their dresses *appear* consistent with finding her and trying to help. And their explanation *seems* plausible to a point. Still, it feels wrong not to list them as suspects. I mean, we did find them literally red-handed. And they have as good of a motive as anyone else so far. They might have found out about the Professor and Keith—”

“If there was something to find out about,” Jake interrupted.

“Right. Or maybe they saw them together and leaped to conclusions and felt betrayed somehow.” I gestured to the board. “And Xander mentioned them. He said they had some heroine worship going on. So, yes. Suspects. We lose nothing by adding them.”

“We definitely need to add Keith.” Jake scrawled his name on the board. “Do you think Kim knew? About him and the professor?”

“We need to find out what was between them first before we can make any reasonable assumptions. Research, relationship, stalking. Whatever. But why would that matter to Kim?”

“Because he thought the professor was turning Celeste against him, and he might feel like his brother betrayed him by having a relationship with her,” Jake suggested.

“Except Kim broke up with Celeste. Or what passes for him breaking up with her. Maybe Kim thought the professor was treating his brother badly? And Keith’s motive might be that the professor turned down his advances, or that she was using him as a research subject and he found out. We still need to find out why Kim gave us that photo of not-Celeste.”

“Yes.” Jake drew an arrow from Kim’s name and added that note. “We’re adding Jonas to this too. Because of the letter she wrote, accusing him of poor conduct?”

“Definitely. I think that’s worth recognising.”

“What do you think she meant by that?” Jake asked. “I can’t see Jonas flirting with her or something like that.”

“I think he was showing up at the meditation sessions,” I said. “Maybe he was trying to expose what he thought was the professor behaving in a less than professorly way.”

“That *does* sound like something Jonas would be interested in.”

“Also, Xander, the guy who called himself a TA. I have literally no reason to suspect him other than I don’t like him and I think he had a crush on the professor.”

“Maybe he saw Keith and got if-I-can’t-have-her-no-one-can type of jealous.” Jake shrugged and stepped back from the board. “Are we missing anyone?”

“I don’t think so. But we do need to add the knife.” I pointed to the board. “Add it to the side.”

“We’re not just adding it to Keith?”

“No.” I frowned at the board as Jake wrote. “Something about it *feels* wrong.”

“Why? Because if it’s his and he killed the prof we’ve solved a murder in under twelve hours?”

“If you had such a distinctive knife, would you stab someone with it and then leave it at the crime scene?”

“Maybe he wasn’t thinking it through that far.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Let’s plough through these tapes and see what we get.”

Hours and hours and *hours* of tape listening later, Jake stretched in the visitor’s chair and yawned so loudly I heard him over the last few minutes of conversation I was listening to.

Jake mimed eating and held out his hand.

I paused my tape. “For real?”

“I’m on the job. You’re supposed to feed me.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m not.” I pulled a five-pound note from my pocket and shooed him out.

He returned a few minutes later with a cornucopia of junk food. I had no idea how he’d managed to buy all of it with only five pounds, but I also wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“Are you ready to share?” I asked, as he arranged the piles of food on the floor in front of him. Jake waved his hand at me. “I assume that means you want me to go first.”

I’d marked the time on different points of the digital tapes where there were interesting conversations I wanted Jake to listen to. It’d been a bit trickier with the actual cassette tapes, but I’d gotten it roughly right. I’d told Jake to mark his pile the same way.

“Interesting conversation number one,” I announced, and played the first tape.

Jonas’ whispered voice came through the speaker. “It’s October thirty-first. A full moon. This month is the time when the barrier with the spirit realm is at its thinnest. When—” I scrubbed the tape forward because Jonas rambled on for a while about spooky stuff that was neither accurate nor relevant. “And now Professor Rutherford is leading her students—girls only, no men allowed here—in some sort of ritual. I can see ... candles. Yes. Candles. And chanting. There’s chanting. I

can't make out what they're saying. It sounds ominous. And—is that—there's blood! They're passing around a chalice filled with *blood*. Wait until the dean hears about this. Telling me I have to stop—photos. I need photos.” Sounds of rustling clothing filled the room, then the clicking sounds of a camera shutter followed by someone female shouting something that I couldn't make out. There were a couple more seconds where the recorder caught what sounded to me like someone running and swearing before the recording cut off.

Jake paused in stuffing his face to speak. “The end of October? It's the end of November.”

“It's actually the first of December today. But if Jonas was working on this story back then and he *still* hasn't published it—”

“You think he's still working on it?”

“I do. And if he was interrupted getting something good, photos or film of the event last month—”

“Maybe he went back last night?”

“It was a full moon.”

“But if he'd seen something he'd have published by now,” Jake said. “He'd *definitely* have published.”

“So maybe he got something on camera but he doesn't realise.”

“He might not be the most thorough reporter, but he definitely would've checked all his footage after the professor was found.”

“Unless ...” I waited for Jake to make the leap.

“Unless the professor caught him and ... he killed her?”

I shrugged. “I know this tape doesn't place him there last night but—”

“You think he's been spying on them? For a whole month?” Jake shook his head. “I don't think he has that kind of commitment to a story.”

“Did you catch what he started to say about the dean?”

“He cuts himself off.”

“Yes, but he cuts himself off to say he needs photos. He says ‘Wait until the dean hears about this. Telling me I have to stop—’. Stop what?”

“That could mean anything.”

“Yeah, it *could*. But he cuts himself to say he needs photos. My interpretation is that either the dean had told him to stop writing unsubstantiated stories or to stop bothering the professor because she wasn't doing anything unprofessional. That's why he needs the photos. To prove what he saw. To prove he was right.”

“So you think the professor was doing something dodgy?”

“No, I think *Jonas* thinks she was doing something dodgy. She catches him spying, or he confronts her, they argue, and that’s the end of the professor. At least that’s one option.” I grabbed the next recorder and pressed play. “And then there’s this.”

“I simply can’t help you any further.” A smooth female voice floated through the recorder. She had the type of voice you heard on meditation tapes. Full-bodied. Relaxing.

“Is that the professor?” Jake whispered, and I nodded. “Can you rewind it back to the beginning of the conversation?”

I paused the tape and shook my head. “I think this is the tape recorder *Jonas* hid in her office. And there’s surprisingly little on it. It’s voice activated so we only hear the end of the conversation. I think they must have been talking outside the office and the recorder only clicked on when the office door opened.” I pressed play.

“But we’re working toward the same thing, *Gloria*.”

“That’s *Xander* speaking,” I whispered to Jake. I had no idea why I whispered, but it felt a lot like we were eavesdropping and eavesdropping necessitated whispering.

“It’s Professor *Rutherford*, Mr *Wart*. And no, I don’t believe we are. I suggest that you begin looking for a replacement advisor immediately.”

“But—”

The click of the door shutting on the tape was a definitive end to the conversation, and I stopped the tape.

“The professor was ditching her student?” Jake asked.

“I think so.”

“But what motive would that give him? Whether the professor was dead or alive, he’d still be without an advisor.” Jake held up his hand before I could speak. “You’re right. Having your advisor murdered is so much better than having them quit on you. What do you think they’re talking about?”

“Well, I didn’t get a particularly feminist vibe from old *Xander* in the three seconds I spent with him. If the professor was with him a lot more, maybe she felt it too. I assume his PhD must be something to do with Feminism or why would he have chosen her as an advisor and how would she have signed off on his work.”

“Anything else?”

“This on the same day.” I scrubbed the tape forward and pressed play. I caught the last ring of the phone just before the Professor answered it.

“Professor Rutherford.” The professor paused for the other person to speak. When she responded, her tone had morphed from the soft meditation type of voice to one that I imagined she used with unruly students. Kind but firm. “Yes, the flowers were lovely, and it was a kind gesture. However, I would appreciate it if you would stop.” A little more silence. “I know.” More silence. “Absolutely. Thank you again for the flowers. Goodbye.”

“Do we know who that was?” Jake asked.

“Xander mentioned roses dumped in her bin. He thought they were from Keith. If we can find out who sent her the flowers ...”

“We’ll find out who was on the phone.”

“Bingo.” I pointed to the Twix by Jake’s left hand and motioned for him to throw it to me. He did. “What did you get?”

“Nothing.” Jake scanned his notes. “It turns out that putting a recorder in your pocket is not optimal for recording conversations.”

“Really? From all those tapes you got nothing,” I asked, unwrapping the Twix and shoving most of one bar in my mouth. I hadn’t realised how hungry I was.

“I think I’ve got the possible argument between Jonas and the professor, but all you hear is Jonas shout her name and then nothing.” Jake played the tape. He was right. You could hear there was a conversation going on, but not what was being said. And it wasn’t a digital tape, so I couldn’t upload it to my computer and mess around with the sound. Not that I really knew what I was doing.

“Well, that’s disappointing,” I said.

“Almost as disappointing as listening to hours and hours of tapes to only come out with that.” Jake collected up all the evidence of his picnic and dumped it in the bin. “What now?”

I checked my watch. It was past five, and I was exhausted. Who knew eavesdropping could be so tiring?

“Now, we go home and get a good night’s sleep. We can deal with all this tomorrow. Do you need a lift?”

“You have to go back and get your truck, remember?”

“I’d forgotten.” I sighed and felt myself deflate. “I’ll call my dad. He can give you a lift on the way.”

“Thanks but I’m fine.” Jake didn’t look at me as he spoke.

“Since when do you turn down a free ride?”

“I’m meeting some friends.”

“You got the phone number of one of those girls you were talking to this morning, didn’t you?”

Jake shrugged, his arms out wide. “I’m irresistible. What can I say?”

“I’d *like* you to say that you’ll be careful. Maybe the killer is someone else in that class who we don’t know about yet and they know you’re investigating, so they lured you out on a date to murder you.”

“You sure know how to kill a mood.”

I pointed at him. “Stay in public places.”

“You’re overly suspicious. Do you know that?”

“I’m also right. Promise me you’ll stay in public places.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No.” I straightened up in my chair and tried to project an authoritative parental vibe.

“Promise me or I’m not going to give you permission to go.”

“And you say *your* parents are overbearing.”

“I do. Now promise.”

“You’re unbelievable.” Jake threw his hands in the air. “Fine. I’ll stay in public places. Okay?”

“No. That was a declaration, not a promise.”

Jake sighed and crossed his heart. “I promise I’ll stay in public places.”

“Okay. You may go. Have a good time. Pump them for information.”

“Of course. You’re not dealing with an amateur.” Jake waved and darted out of the room before I could say anything else.

I checked my watch. My dad didn’t finish until after six, so I figured I’d add the teeny bit we’d learned to the board before I called him. And probably rewrite Jake’s notes so they were legible. I could make some excuse about needing to spread things out more so I didn’t hurt his feelings.

I was so busy focusing on rewriting Jake’s work that I was unaware I had company until they spoke.

“Who’s your money on?”

I whirled around to find Charlie standing less than a foot from me, ogling our suspect board.

“Did you sneak down here to try to scare me on purpose?” I reached out, placed my hands on his shoulders, and turned him to face my desk.

“Nope.” He pointed to a litany of tape recorders strewn all over the desk. “What are those?”

I reached out and turned him again, so now he was facing the wall.

“You know I can move freely around, right?” he asked, still facing the wall. “That I’m not locked in the position you face me?”

“You have no right to be in here, anyway.” I grabbed the tapes and recorders and shoved them in a desk drawer. “I didn’t invite you.”

“I’m not a vampire.”

“Clearly not. *They* have better manners.”

“I was—” he glanced my way. “Have you finished hiding stuff you don’t want me to see? Can I turn around now?”

“Sure. As long as you keep your eyes closed.”

He faced me, his eyes open.

“I was going to ask if you needed a lift back to your truck. Since I’m heading up that way, anyway I thought I’d help you out.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Seemed like a nice thing to do.”

“Did you come here to pump me for info under the guise of being helpful?”

“Me?” Charlie gasped and grinned at me. “That’s really more something you would do, isn’t it?”

“No.” It was, but I didn’t have to admit it. “Why are you heading back up there?”

“Can I look at your board?” The way he asked implied he’d tell me if I let him look.

“No. Because you won’t tell me, anyway.”

“Then why ask?”

I pointed to the open door. “Get out.”

“Come on.” He jerked his head in the direction of the door. “Let me give you a lift. We’re both going the same way. Just think of the environment. And if your truck still won’t start, you might need my help.”

“You know my dad’s a mechanic, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m here and he’s not.” Charlie retrieved my jacket from the back of my chair and held it up for me to shrug into.

“Yeah, but you’re here uninvited and my dad’s there every time I call.”

Charlie frowned, but humour danced in his eyes. “So, what you’re saying is you want me to make myself more available to you.”

“Give me that.” I snatched my jacket out of his hands and put it on without his help. “This is not endearing me to you.”

“Come on.” He grabbed my rucksack and backed out of the office. “I’ll even let you put the heater on in the car.”

“Wow, you’re so kind.”

I was hoping there was a chance, minimal as it was, that Charlie might let slip something about the case. It was unlikely, but worth a shot. Maybe I could sneakily get him to confirm Keith sent the flowers. That would be something, at least. And it would save my dad a journey. *And* I could really do with getting another look around the murder scene.

Chapter Ten

“What happened to your motorcycle?” I asked, climbing into the black car. It looked fancy, but despite my dad being a mechanic and a car lover, any car that was clean looked fancy to me.

“It’s not really police issue.” Charlie glanced in my direction while turning the engine over. “Why? Do you want to go for a ride?”

“That’s a joke, right? They’re accidents waiting to happen.”

“I thought your dad had one.”

“That’s nice,” I said as he pulled out of the car park and into traffic because I didn’t want to get into a conversation about my family. Mainly because it would drag me off topic. “What can you tell me about the professor?”

“Nothing. What can *you* tell me about the professor?”

I shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Come on,” he cajoled. “I *know* you must know something good by now. Why not share it with me?”

“I know *you* must know something good by now,” I parried. “Why don’t you share that with me?”

“Because you have ways of finding things out,” he said. “And it’s your duty as a responsible citizen to share your knowledge with the police.”

“I already shared the identities of the three girls I saw standing over the body.” I twisted in my seat to face him. “In fact, I not only shared the identities, I hand-delivered them to Trank.”

“After you talked to them.”

“You remember I’m a reporter, right?”

“What were those tapes about? The ones you stole from the uni newspaper guy.”

“Okay.” I tapped the dashboard. “Pull over.”

“What?” Charlie stole a glance at me. “Why?”

“If you’re just going to attempt to pump me for information the whole way, I’d rather get my dad to take me.”

“And have you tell him that I let you get out of the car in the middle of nowhere?” Charlie shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“It’s not the middle of nowhere. We’re two minutes away from the city centre and you’re going the wrong way, anyway.”

“This is the quickest route.” Charlie checked the GPS while he spoke.

“Right. Because computers are never wrong.”

Jake and I had taken several wrong turns, so maybe Charlie’s way was quicker. I looked out of the window at the passing scenery. The buildings and streets morphed into narrow lanes bracketed by greenery. It wasn’t as though we were miles out of the city centre, but you’d definitely need to get a bus here. It wasn’t walkable. Or you’d need a car. But there had been no cars in the car park when Jake and I had arrived. So the professor and the three girls had taken the bus? Or gotten a taxi? A taxi? That was unlikely.

Or the professor and the girls had come in the same car and the girls had driven it home, maybe? But if that was the case, why wasn’t their car in the car park when we’d arrived. And if they came together, why did they *happen* upon the professor. Even if they’d forgotten something in the car, surely all three wouldn’t have gone back to get it. And if it needed three of them to carry it, what could they have forgotten and where was that thing when they found the professor? So they drove separately to the professor?

Which meant there would’ve been at least two cars in the car park when we got there. But there wasn’t. Which meant they’d all been dropped off there, or there was another car park. The latter being the most obvious choice.

And Kim. What if the map Kim had drawn had directed us to that place and we’d stumbled on this car park by pure accident? The directions from the car park to the meeting place hadn’t been exactly clear. We’d had to walk through the line of conifers that definitely wasn’t a worn path.

And, now we were thinking about it, how did Kim know to draw a map? How did he know exactly where Celeste’s coven met? Unless she’d brought him out here at some point? And even then, this was a large patch of woodland, how had he remembered clearly enough to draw a map?

“Hey.” Charlie tapped my knee. “You okay? What’s going on in your head?”

“Hmmm?” I blinked and looked out of the window. I recognised the road. We were nearly there. Charlie had been right. This was a shortcut, unless I’d zoned out for quite a while.

“You were making all these facial expressions as if you were having an argument.”

“I was. With the voices in my head. Did you find the professor’s car?”

Charlie stared at me for longer than I thought was truly safe since he was driving. “No.”

“You assumed she was dropped off at the forest and whoever dropped her off was the killer?”

“You know I can’t say.”

“Did you ask the girls how they got there? They drove, right?” I asked.

He hesitated which I took for a yes. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m working some stuff out.”

Charlie narrowed his eyes at me. “Like what?”

I pointed at the road ahead. “Please keep your eyes on the road. Isn’t this our turn off?”

“You know if you know something important that pertains to the investigation, you have to share it.”

“I kinda don’t.”

“Yeah, you kinda do.” Charlie turned into the car park and pulled up next to my truck. “Or I could arrest you for withholding evidence.”

“Ah, we’re back to that old chestnut, are we?”

“It’s a legitimate thing.”

“I know. Thanks for the lift.” I opened the car door and climbed out. I opened Bertha’s door and hopped into the driver’s seat before Charlie could ask me anything else. Saying a silent prayer to the automotive gods that she would start, I crossed my fingers and started her up. She coughed a couple of times and then roared to life. I had never heard a sweeter sound.

“Looks like I didn’t need you after all.” I shouted to Charlie, who was leaning against his car, watching me.

He gave me a closed lipped smile and nodded. “I can see that. Are you heading home now?”

“Yep. Thank you very much for the lift.” And I *was* heading home. I was just heading home *after* I’d checked something out.

“Say hello to your mum for me,” he called as I pulled away.

“I’ll tell my dad you were asking after him,” I yelled back and turned out of the car park and headed back the way we’d come. When I was sure I was out of sight, I pulled over and rooted through the glove box for the map. Jake said he’d shoved it here when we’d been wandering through the forest last night. I was hoping he hadn’t taken it with him when we’d had to abandon Bertha for the night.

Amongst a load of junk food wrappers that were *not* mine, I found the screwed up piece of paper. It even had the road numbers on it. How had Jake gotten us so lost? I looped back around to get on the right road and headed along the far side of the forest. I briefly considered going back for Jake, but I was already at the forest and he was on a date. *And* it partially seemed a waste of time. *And* I was too eager to see if I was right.

I followed the directions and found myself on a narrow country lane on the opposite side of the forest. There was a red car parked in one of the small lay-bys ahead. I parked in the next lay-by up from it. I wouldn’t have called it a car park exactly, but from all the tire treads they were

obviously used that way. Maglite in hand, staying on the grass verge, I wandered back toward the red car. I snapped a photo of it, ensuring I got the license plate, and noticed a path into the trees right next to it.

The trees were different on this side of the forest. I didn't know if they were actually a different type or it was how they'd grown, but they felt welcoming. Open. I could see why someone might want to do some nature communing or spiritual stuff here. The very vibe of the trees felt peaceful.

I followed Kim's instructions, took the left through the conifers. I didn't really need his directions since there was almost an archway through them, and the path in the dirt was well worn.

It opened up into a clearing. Twigs were laid out on the ground in the shape of a pentagram. Unlit candles were positioned at all five points. The inhabitants of the red car? Maybe this would be Celeste. It was eerily similar to the way the professor had laid her clearing out. Except that pentagram had been drawn in the dirt. And considerably larger. The professor's pentagram was big enough for her to lie inside of. This one was about the diameter of an armchair.

Checking around for signs of anyone approaching, I backed away. I couldn't hear chattering or movement of any kind. Which was weird. I should be at least able to hear one person. Someone had to have laid this out, after all. They weren't going to set it up and walk away. I found a shrub that covered me as well as could be expected, hunkered down and waited. And waited. And waited. There was nothing. No sounds at all. No movement. I adjusted my position and checked my watch. It had only been ten minutes. Maybe they had some weird stream bathing thing they had to do before starting whatever was going to happen here. I didn't even know if there was a stream in the forest. Maybe someone had set it up earlier with the intention of coming back at midnight. Though why wouldn't they just have set it up then?

The minutes ticked by. My calf cramped. I pulled my phone from my pocket and snapped a few shots of the view to take my mind off it. After forty-five minutes of waiting later, I decided maybe it was time to look around. After all, I had no reason to assume *anyone* was coming. I mean, other than someone had set up this lovely pentagram.

After a couple of minutes of stretching out my legs to ease the stiffness, I explored deeper into the trees. Surely *someone* had to be around somewhere. *Someone* had to have set up the pentagram in the first place.

As if on cue, a shout rang out and bounced off the surrounding trees. I ran in the direction I thought it came from. I charged through the trees, not thinking about what I was going to find. It

had sounded like a cry for help to me. At least that was all my brain would recognise. And I had my Maglite to bludgeon someone if it came to it.

I burst onto the scene much like the night before, rushing through a wall of trees and emerging into a clearing. One girl stood over another who was lying on the ground. It was eerily similar to the night before.

I couldn't see the face of the girl on the floor because she was turned away from me, but the one holding the bloody rock, the bloody rock the size of a cantaloup, I recognised. It was Celeste. Or not-Celeste.

"Okay. Hi. Hey. Everything's fine," I rushed out as I edged closer. "Everything's just fine. Why don't you put that rock down and we can talk about it."

"Talk about what?" Tears left mascara stains down not-Celeste's face.

"Whatever you want." I wasn't going to win any awards for hostage negotiation, but maybe, if not-Celeste hadn't hit the girl too hard with that rock, tonight might end differently than last night. That said, there looked like there was a lot of blood on the rock in her hands. "Hey, how about you let me call an ambulance?"

"Don't move!" she shrieked at me, lifting the rock above her as if she were going to throw it at me. "Stay back."

Something about the fear in her voice, in her expression, reminded me of the girls from last night.

"I didn't kill this girl." The words were out before I could really think them through. "I just got here. You saw me at the university this morning. I'm a reporter. I was there with Jake. My trainee. You told him your name was Louise. You remember, right? We're investigating Professor Rutherford's death." I purposely didn't use the word "murder". She lowered the rock a little, so I figured that was progress. "I know you remember him. *All* the girls remember him. He looks like he belongs in a boy band."

"I—I—I think ..."

"Okay." I motioned to the person on the floor. "I'm going to check on your friend, okay? How about you step back? I don't want you to accidentally drop that rock on my head."

She shuffled back, still not letting go of the rock.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" I asked, crouching over the figure on the floor and prodding her neck for a pulse. The back of her skull was caved in and she was far, far too cold. Not I'm-outside-and-it's-chilly cold. Like, dead for a while, cold. Like the professor.

"I was—and then—is she going to be okay?"

“I’m not sure.” This girl was *absolutely* not going to be okay, but I wasn’t sure explaining that was going to help the situation. “Did you see anyone? Anything?”

“No. I—I—I—”

“Your name’s not Louise, is it?” I asked when she made no attempt to finish her sentence.

She shook her head. “It’s Celeste. I’m sorry I lied to your friend but—I—” she stopped speaking again and simply stared at the girl on the ground.

“Do you know who this is?”

“Her name’s Piper.”

Well, that explained why she wasn’t calling Kim back. Or me. “Okay. How about we put this rock down and you come over here with me?”

Celeste looked down at the rock in her hands and seemed surprised to find she was holding it. She dropped it and darted back.

“Come on, this way.” I beckoned her over to me and was partially surprised when she came. “Are you alright? You’re not injured?” I asked and she shook her head. “I’m going to need you to sit down over here for a second. Can you do that?”

When she nodded, I guided her away from the girl. I took a few photos and gave Piper the briefest examination. She’d taken a rock to the back of the head. That was pretty much all I could get from the scene, so I called Charlie.

He answered with something akin to a chuckle. “Did you break down?”

“No,” I whispered. “I’m actually still in the forest—”

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? Why are you whispering?” His questions came out too quickly for me to answer. “Are you in trouble?”

“No. But I’ve found another body.”

“Are you safe?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Where are you? Can you direct me?”

“Not really, but what if I yell?”

“Do it.”

“Two seconds.” I jogged back over to a quietly sobbing Celeste while Charlie mumbled complaints about me asking him to wait. “Hey, so I’m going to yell really loudly now to call a detective over, okay? He’s in another part of the forest so—”

“He won’t hear you,” Celeste choked out. “Is he where they found the professor?”

“Are you by—” I asked Charlie.

“The crime scene? Yep,” he cut me off, obviously having heard Celeste. “Who are you talking to?”

“Celeste, who found the body,” I told him.

Celeste motioned for the phone. And she gave him a few simple instructions and handed it back to me.

“I’m coming. Stay on the phone with me,” he instructed.

Less than two minutes later, I heard someone charging around. I called out and he burst through the trees. It was very dramatic.

“You okay?” he asked, pocketing his phone.

“We’re good.” I pointed to the body across the clearings as if he’d missed it.

Charlie’s expression twisted into a grimace when he saw the girl.

“You stay here okay?” I said to Celeste and joined Charlie by the body.

When he saw me, he turned sideways so he could watch me, the body, and Celeste.

“You told me you were going home,” Charlie whispered.

I shrugged. “I’m at the scene of a murder. I am home.”

Chapter Eleven

“And that’s what happened,” I told Freddie as I fed him his last bloodworm in the newsroom the next morning. “And obviously, since Charlie was there, I couldn’t ask Celeste any more questions. There are so many things about the story that just feel . . . off. Do you know what I mean?” Freddie, my magnificent blue fighting fish, bobbed up and down in his tank. I took that for agreement, not him begging for more bloodworms. “Do you have any thoughts you would like to add?” Freddy whirled around in his tank. It reminded me of a full moon. “You’re right. We still have this crescent moon pendant. Or earring. I wonder if this—wait. This was in the *main* car park. The car park Jake and I went to. It seems odd to find it there when everyone we know is coming from the other direction. Perhaps it’s nothing. Perhaps it’s just chance. Maybe it’s nothing.” Freddie bobbed about in his tank. “You’re right. Freddy. You are absolutely right. We don’t believe in coincidences.”

“What coincidence?” Jake asked as he strolled into the office, stuffing his face with some enormous sandwich type thing. He reminded me of the way the Cookie Monster ate. I had never known anyone to eat as much as he did.

“The pendent or earring we found in the car park. I was telling Freddy—” Freddy flapped his fins at me to get my attention. “Sorry. *Freddy* was telling *me* it was unlikely to be a coincidence.”

“Freddy’s right.” Jake dropped into the visitor’s chair, still stuffing his face. “What’s the plan for today?”

“Before we get to that I need to fill you in on what happened last night.”

Jake paused, the remains of his food halfway to his mouth. “What happened last night?”

I quickly filled him and was subjected to immediate sulking.

“I can’t *believe* you went to investigate without me.”

“Okay, I was already there picking up my truck and, I wasn’t really investigating.”

“You hid in a shrub for forty-five minutes surveilling a scene, but you weren’t investigating?”

I shrugged. “It happened by accident. And anyway, there wasn’t much point in coming all the way back to get you just to walk through the forest.”

“It’s all well and good for you to say that now. *After* you found another body.”

“Would you have wanted to find the body?”

Jake hesitated. “Well, no, but—”

“There we go then.” I swiped a hand through the air which was the universal sign for “subject closed”.

“And Celeste was standing over the body. Over Piper. Just like the other girls were standing over the professor?”

“In the *exact* same way. She’d even picked up the murder weapon.” I frowned into Freddy’s tank. He did a side-to-side zigzag type move which I interpreted as him agreeing after he’d read my mind.

“What?” Jake gestured between us. “I’m still not fluent in Freddy speak.”

“We were just thinking that everyone knows not to pick up a murder weapon, right? You see someone dead on the floor. Your first instinct has to be either to check if they’re still alive or run. Surely. Even if you freeze initially, when you realise there’s no one around who’s about to kill you, you either try to help them or run. Right?”

Jake opened his mouth to speak and closed it again for a few seconds. “Weren’t you arguing the opposite side of that yesterday morning when we were talking about the girls finding the knife?”

“I was. But that was when it was just them who had done it. Now it’s them *and* Celeste? One person I could possibly, *possibly* see. But two people? Consecutive nights? Same forest? Same story? Seems iffy to me.”

“Are we switching to thinking these girls are the murderers? And are you sure this girl Louise is Celeste?”

“It makes the most sense that she would be. Kim had her photo and name. It would be weirder if she wasn’t at this point.”

“Then why did she tell me her name was Louise?”

I inclined my head, not sure whether to go in with the hard truth or a softened version. I went with the hard truth. “She thought you were hitting on her so she gave you a fake name.”

Jake frowned at me. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” I pointed at him. “So that’s helpful feedback for you. A little less flirtation when questioning suspects and-slash-or witnesses.”

“A lot of girls at uni seem to have low self-esteem.” Jake shrugged. “So, she was in the forest, holding a bloody rock over this girl, Piper? The girl that Kim cheated on her with.”

“Exactly.” I gestured that I wanted to rewind. “What was the low self-esteem comment?”

“They think the only reason you want to talk to them is to try to have sex with them. It’s sad really. It’s almost like they feel as if they have no other value to the world.”

“I wonder where they get that impression,” I muttered. “Anyway. Yes, she was standing over Piper. She seemed pretty upset about it, though. Before I could really question her properly, Charlie showed up so we’re going to nip round to her house and see her today. I also want to check in with Keith and see what he has to say about dating the professor and possibly his knife being the murder weapon and then head to the uni to talk to Jonas, Kim and Xander.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Something else about Piper. She was *very* dead. Not minutes dead. Very, very dead. I’ve no scale for this stuff but my gut says she was killed the same night the professor was killed.”

“I thought you said you thought Celeste killed her because she was holding the bloody rock?”

“Did I say that? I don’t think I said that. I just think it’s weird that in both cases the people who supposedly found the victims were holding the murder weapons.”

“Maybe Celeste killed her the night before. Maybe a few nights before. Maybe she killed the same night she caught Kim cheating,” Jake suggested.

“Then she heard me coming and picked up the rock?” I said. “Really?”

“Yeah, maybe she was going to kill you too. Or making sure there was a reason to have her fingerprints on the rock.” Jake shrugged. “Or maybe she felt guilty about killing Piper and was going to bury her.”

“There was no hole in the ground.”

“Maybe she was going to make a monument to her. Cover her up with rocks.”

“And the first stone she decides to use to cover her up with is the one she smashed her head in with?”

“Yeah, like an apology.”

“Like, ‘I’m sorry I killed you, let me use the murder weapon to help hide your body’?”

“You’re very cynical.”

“Yeah, *that’s* what I’m being right now.”

“I’m just saying, maybe Celeste killed her when she caught them cheating, had a whole week to feel guilty and went back to cover her up.”

“If you’re trying to hide a body, you don’t make a monument out of it. And Piper had *not* been dead a week.”

“I thought you said you weren’t an expert on times of death.”

“I can’t tell the difference between 3 hours and probably forty-eight hours. But the difference between a day and a week? Pretty sure most people would be able to tell the difference then. Decomposition aside, surely someone would’ve missed her by then. Or even found her.”

“That’s true,” Jake admitted. “A dog walker or someone.”

“Celeste said she found her when she was setting up the space, but I saw the space. It was set up. It looked finished to me. And I was waiting there for three quarters of an hour. So either she was setting up a different space—which means there are three different witchy meeting places, or she was lying. But why lie about it? What could she possibly gain? And if she wasn’t setting things up, then she was doing what for forty-five minutes? She was there before me because—what if the car I passed on the road wasn’t hers? What if that car was Piper’s? But if that car was Piper’s, how did Celeste get there? And if it was Celeste’s car, then how did Piper get there?”

“Are you expecting me to answer any of those questions because ...” Jake shook his head at me.

“Okay. Before we go anywhere and question anyone, what do we know?”

“You’re asking me?”

“I’m asking you.”

Jake straightened up in his chair. “Okay. We know that both the professor and this girl Piper are dead. Are we sure she’s Piper?”

“Celeste said she was, and I’ve been checking social media this morning and there’s a profile with her name and photos. What’s interesting is that there are several photos of Piper with Celeste and the other three girls.”

“Really?” Jake sat back in his seat and drummed his fingers on the armrest. “That’s interesting. How many photos? And why are you only just mentioning this now?”

“I forgot I’d checked.” I waved him off. “Anyway, there’s enough that they look like they’re pretty good friends. Which makes Kim cheating on Celeste with her extra weird. Unless there’s something else going on here that we don’t know about yet.” I motioned for Jake to continue speaking. “Carry on.”

“Okay. Motives and suspects for the professor’s death. Keith, because of their possible relationship or the professor turning him down.”

“Which we’re asking him about when we visit him in a bit.”

“The girls because of her relationship with Keith. Jonas because she could have gotten him kicked out of uni. Xander because she was going to resign as his advisor. And Kim because—” Jake shook his head. “Is Kim a suspect?”

I seesawed my hand. “The only motive I can see is that he blamed her for filling Celeste’s head with stuff or for not being interested in his brother. But I don’t see how he would really get involved with it. Do you know what I mean? It’s not as though he witnessed either of those things happening.”

“Unless he did,” Jake added. “Maybe he overheard or just happened to be around when the prof gave Keith his marching orders.”

“Yeah. Maybe. I mean, it’s possible. I just don’t feel like it’s the *best* motive, but I’m hesitant to cross him off because he was the one who sent us out there in the first place. Although, his directions shouldn’t have led us to the professor. They were *supposed* to lead us to the other side.”

Jake shook his head. “No, I—”

I held up my hand to stop his protests. “I checked them several times. That’s where they lead.”

“Does that make him more or less of a suspect?” Jake asked.

I shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. What about Piper? Motives? Suspects?”

“Are we saying she died first or that the professor did?”

“Without an official time of death, I’m going to say the professor because Piper was in the middle of the woods and the prof looked as if she’d been attacked where she was.”

“The implication being that Piper saw whatever happened to the professor and ran and the killer chased her down?”

I nodded. “That makes the most sense.”

“And she was nearer to the other car park?”

“They’re more lay-bys than car parks, but she wasn’t really near anything. She was sort of in the middle of nowhere, which makes me think she was running blindly into the woods to escape someone. The obvious conclusion being the same someone who killed the professor.”

“If the prof was killed first, then logic follows that Piper was killed because she saw that. Kim possibly had a motive. Same for Celeste. But if it was them—they have stronger motives for killing Piper than the professor. So surely, in their cases, Piper would’ve been the first victim and the prof would’ve been the second victim because she might have seen something. But if she had, then I doubt she’d have been sitting down meditating over it.”

“Okay.” I checked my watch, then pushed back from my desk. “We’re not going to get any further without more information. So let’s go and get us some more information.”

Chapter Twelve

Since it was a little past nine as we strolled through the city centre, we'd missed the mad panic of people racing to get to work. The streets were still busy, but since it was a chilly November morning, there weren't many people hanging around. Only those who had to be out, were out. And students with nothing to do.

"I thought Keith was a fitness instructor," Jake said when I directed him to the left and pointed to Vimto Park a short distance ahead.

"He is. But he does his own classes. Bootcamp and stuff like that."

"In a public park in the middle of the city?"

I shrugged. "I bet he doesn't have a permit for it either. Actually, I have no idea if you need a permit."

"You're sure he's going to be here?"

I nodded. "Said on his website that the first class starts here at half nine. He does a couple of different classes in different locations around the city. To be honest, I think it's quite enterprising of him."

We rounded the corner and immediately saw Keith setting up cones on the open grass space. He was dressed head-to-toe in camo. His khaki T-shirt was at least one size too small, judging by the way it strained across his barrel chest.

I glanced around us. I hadn't realised it was going to be quite so open. "I never understand why people would want to work out in such a public place. Everyone can see."

"Some people use it as motivation," Jake suggested. "Some people like to show off."

"Are you here for the class," Keith called across the grass when he saw us.

"Sadly, no, but do you have a couple of minutes to talk?" I asked.

"As long as you don't mind me setting up at the same time?" he continued laying out cones as he spoke.

"Sure. I wanted to—"

"Did you solve the whole curse issue yet?" he interrupted.

"Yep." Because as far as I was concerned, it was Celeste. And then a thought struck me like a slap to the face. Kim had said Celeste and her friends had cursed him. Her *friends*. In all the not-Celeste stuff, I'd completely forgotten Kim had mentioned she had three other people with her. We were missing three other people on our suspect list. Unless we'd already met the three other people. The three people who'd found the professor. It made the most sense for it to be them. But hadn't

they been dismissive of Celeste when I'd asked if they knew her? And if Celeste *was* part of their coven, where was she when they'd found the professor? Off killing Piper?

"You've stopped speaking," Jake whispered.

"Hmm?" I blinked at him, coming back to the present.

"Don't be embarrassed." Keith placed his hands on his hips and faced me. "A lot of women get that way."

"I'm sure they do," I said with a nod. "Did Professor Rutherford?"

"Not as much as I'd have liked." He grinned at me and returned to his cones. "But I'd have won her over in the end."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "From everything we've learned about her, I'm not so sure."

"Of course I would have." He jerked his chin in my direction, then winked. "Persistence is the key."

"That's true." I nodded. "Except when persistence is stalking."

"What? Is that what she said?" Keith straightened and shook his head. "Nah, she didn't say that. Me and the prof, we're on good terms."

"You're *on* good terms?" I stressed the present tense and Jake arched an eyebrow at me. Maybe Keith didn't know. Or he was pretending not to know. Or he had no concept of tenses.

"Yeah. Good terms. Unless you talk to her assistant, that humourless four-eyed clinger. No one likes a clinger." Keith shook his head as if that was the worst possible crime. "What does this have to do with my brother's curse?"

"The culprits are in her class." It was an answer without really answering. "What was your relationship with the professor?"

"She was interested in studying alpha male behaviour." Keith puffed up his chest and rested his hands on his hips. "And I'm the most alpha male around."

"How did she do that?" I asked. The way he talked about himself, it was almost as if he were a caricature. No wonder she'd chosen him as a research subject.

"Watched me pick up chicks at clubs and stuff. At coffee shops. Sometimes she'd hang out with me and my boys and watch us."

"Did they know?"

"Course." He frowned at me as if only just recognising that this was a weird line of questioning regarding his brother's curse. "What's with all the questions about the prof?"

“It helps with background.” I waved the explanation off as if it weren’t important. “Was there anyone else who didn’t like the professor? Angry ex-girlfriends of yours? Angry ex-boyfriends of hers? Anything like that?”

He shook his head. “She didn’t share that much about herself. We talked about me.”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

Keith narrowed his eyes at me. “These are weird background questions.”

“How about you tell me when you saw her and we’ll tell you why we’re asking?”

“Sometime last week. Sent her some flowers..”

“Red roses?”

Keith nodded. “Yeah.”

“You argued about her not calling to say thank you?”

“No. It’s a persistence game. There’s always some resistance to persistence.” He said it like it was a great slogan, or maybe a motto to live by and I was about to explain the many ways his attitude needing adjusting, but movement on the far side of the park caught my attention. Charlie. There was no point beating around the bush anymore. I debated whether I wanted to be the one who broke the news or not. I didn’t, but I did want to see his reaction firsthand.

“The professor was murdered two nights ago,” Jake announced while I’d been debating.

I watched Keith’s face carefully. Confusion, sadness, disbelief, surprise. All the regular emotions that a person—a not guilty person—experiences when they learn of the demise of someone they know.

“How?” He picked up a plastic packet of what I thought were beach balls and fumbled with the packaging. Almost like he had to be doing something.

“She was stabbed,” Jake explained. “Where were you?”

“I was—” Keith shook his head and turn the package over in his hands like it was a puzzle he couldn’t solve. “When?”

“Night before last?” I asked.

“I—er—” Keith shook his head, dazed. “On a date.”

“This date have a name?” I checked over my shoulder as casually as possible to see how much time we had before Charlie made it to us. I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined it, but I thought he’d slowed his pace when he saw us.

“Jane. Jan. Julie.” Keith shook his head, then tried to bite the corner of the plastic wrap open. “I can’t remember.”

“And your brother didn’t know about your arrangement with the professor?”

“No. He—no.” Keith stared at the ground and shook his head. “Murdered. I don’t believe it. I can’t—” his head jerked up, and he stared at me. “It’s her assistant. He’s the one. He did it. Check him out.”

“We absolutely will,” I said with a nod, checking over my shoulder again. I wanted to ask about the knife before Charlie got to us.

“I told her he was bad news.” Keith pulled something from his pocket and pointed it in my face. “I told her.” He flipped up the blade and sliced the packet open in one clean movement.

“Er?” Jake pointed to the knife, but looked at me.

I nodded. “Yep. That’s an interesting looking knife. Where did you get it?”

Keith offered it to me. “It was a gift from the prof. See? The top half is a woman’s torso, and the blade flips out from—well, you can see.”

“The *professor* gave you this?” I asked, as I handed the knife to Jake and he turned an exact replica of the murder weapon over in his hands.

“Yeah, something about that’s where women get their power from.” He shook his head.

“You know, feminist stuff? Actually, that’s *her* knife. I lost mine and she gave me hers.”

“Wait, you *both* had one?” I asked.

“Yeah. She used hers for something one time we were together—I can’t remember what—and I told her I liked it so she got me one. I still don’t know how I managed to lose mine. I was careful with it. It was a gift.”

“When did you lose yours?”

He shrugged. “A couple of weeks ago and she gave me that last week.”

I took the knife from Jake’s hand and examined it. “This is about three inches, right?”

Keith grinned at me. “If that’s too small to meet your needs—”

“Stop.” I held my hand up in his face and he laughed. Clearly, he’d bounced back from the news about the professor pretty quickly.

“And what are we chatting about?” Charlie called as he approached.

“This, for one thing.” I showed Charlie the knife.

“Hey, that’s mine.” Keith reached for it.

“I’m just *showing* the detective,” I explained. “The blade is foldable and under three inches so it’s legal to carry. He can’t take it from you because you’re using it in a manner that’s legal.” I added that for Charlie’s benefit. “He just might have some questions obliquely related to the design.”

Charlie took the knife from me and examined it. “I *do* have some questions.”

“You’re a detective?” Keith asked.

“We’re really sorry for your loss,” I said, placing a hand on his arm. Yes, it was trite, but Keith struck me as the type of guy that found comfort in platitudes and cliches. I waved at Charlie. “Detective. Remember to give him the knife back or we’ll file a complaint.”

Charlie arched an eyebrow at me, but nodded. I nudged Jake and we walked away. Not fast enough to look like we were running away, but quickly enough that Charlie would have to actively chase us if he wanted to talk. And I didn’t think he was going to do that after we’d shared the knife discovery with him.

“I can’t *believe* you showed Charlie the knife,” Jake said, as he glanced back over his shoulder.

“Dude, that knife is *exactly* the same kind of one they found with the Professor’s body.”

“You think she was stabbed with her own knife?”

“Weren’t you listening? According to Keith she gave him *her* knife.”

Jake checked behind us again as we rounded the corner and left the park behind. “So there’s a third knife?”

“Or he didn’t *lose* his knife.”

“Someone stole it and framed him?” Jake guessed. “But to make that work it would have to be someone who didn’t know the professor that well because according to Keith, she had one too. It’s not a great frame up if she gets stabbed with her own knife.”

“Or maybe he didn’t lose it. And just *said* he did to make it look like someone stole it to frame him.”

“You think he’s *that* smart?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know. I was hoping for more answers and less questions.” I shook my head and checked behind us again. “Now it looks like someone tried to frame him, or he’s made it look like someone tried to frame him, or the professor went out and bought a third knife and that was what she was stabbed with.” I grabbed Jake’s arm. “What if she bought them in bulk to give to people? Like, maybe if she was writing her research into a book and it was a promo thing or if she was giving them to students on her courses or—”

“You think she’s giving away switchblades?” Jake asked.

“No. You’re right. That’s ridiculous.” I released Jake’s arm. “But now Charlie knows about the knife, he can wade through purchase orders and stuff and find out who really ordered them while we continue our interviews.”

“Helpful, yet devious.” Jake nodded. “I like it.”

“Stick with me, kid. I’ll teach you all the ways to skirt the law.” I nudged him. “So? Thoughts?”

“I can’t see him killing her.”

“Really? Did you miss the whole ‘there’s always resistance to persistence’?”

“You think he killed her because she turned him down?”

I grimaced. “I think he saw her the night she died.”

“What?” Jake glanced over his shoulder, even though they were long out of sight. “Why?”

“Because he stumbled when I asked him where he was.”

“That’s it?” Jake asked. “That’s why? He had just found out someone he knew had been murdered.”

I shook my head. “A guy like that? He has timeframes. A certain amount of time before you respond to a text, before you call after a date, that kind of thing. He’ll know exactly when he last saw her and he didn’t want to tell us. Why would he not want to tell us unless their last interaction wasn’t all that friendly?”

“That’s *really* tenuous.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“What about Xander? He seems to think he could be the murderer.”

“No one seems all that fond of Xander, do they?”

“Now you’re about to tell me that makes him a murderer too, right?”

“No, but I *do* believe that we recognise certain types of behaviour like that in people. Like they might be capable of dangerous things or hurting us but because society is so polite we brush it off as paranoia.”

“You mean everyone but you?” Jake asked. “You’re happy to let your paranoia flag fly.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. Anyway, we’re going to try to talk to him later so we can ask him about Keith then and you can practice picking up those danger-danger vibes.”

Jake rolled his eyes at me. “Oh, what connection did you make when you went quiet?”

“Connection?”

“Yeah, sometimes you stop speaking when you’re mentally working something through.”

“Yes!” I snapped my fingers. “Remember how Kim said that Celeste and her coven cursed him?”

“Yeah.”

“We got so lost in Celeste not being Celeste, we forgot about her coven. What if her coven was the three girls who found the professor? That makes a certain sort of sense, right? They’re in the same class. And it means there’s only one coven in the woods. Theirs.”

“But you said they didn’t like Celeste,” Jake reminded me.

“Maybe they’re trying to keep it quiet. Or maybe they really don’t like her and are actively trying to get her out of the coven.”

“And what about Piper?”

“I don’t know. I can’t—” I grabbed Jake’s arm and stopped dead in the middle of the street as another thought struck me.

“What?” Jake dragged me to the side of the pavement while muttering pedestrians passed us by throwing dirty looks my way. “Are you okay?”

“What if they’re *all* in the same coven?”

“You just said that.”

“No. What if the three girls who found the professor, Celeste, *and* Piper were all in the same coven?”

“But Piper—”

I patted Jake’s arm to quieten him. “There are photos of Celeste and Piper together on Celeste’s social media. What if it wasn’t Kim cheating with Celeste’s friend? What if Celeste knew that Kim was cheating—or suspected—and then she asked Piper to honeytrap him?”

“That seems like a lot of effort. Why would they bother?”

“Because how much scarier is it to be cursed versus just having an ex-girlfriend add some dye to your body-wash?”

“So you think all five are in the coven?”

I held my arms out wide in a shrug. “That explains how Piper came to be there on the night the professor died. Because they were having a coven meeting. But where were Celeste and Piper when the other three girls found the professor?”

“Celeste was off murdering Piper?” Jake suggested.

“Because maybe Piper decided that she actually liked Kim?” I added.

“Okay.” Jake nodded. “Okay. How are we going to prove any of this?”

“Ask Celeste.”

“Ask Celeste?” Jake parroted.

I nodded. “Ask Celeste. Why? Do you have a better plan?”

“No. No.” Jake shook his head. “It’s just—that’s a little disappointing. I thought we were going to do some undercover stuff.”

“Sometimes the best way is the easiest way.” I patted his shoulder. “If it doesn’t work out, we can concoct some convoluted undercover plan for you if that will make you feel better.”

“Really?”

I sighed. “Yes, but let’s try the direct route first.”

Chapter Thirteen

We pulled up outside a typical terrace house not too far from the university. Realistically it had been within walking distance from the city centre, but after Bertha's not starting hiccup a few nights ago, I wanted to drive to make sure I kept her battery charged. I had no actual idea if that made any difference, but I vaguely remembered my dad talking about that kind of thing more than once, and it made me feel like it was at least a little under my control.

"Which one is it?" Jake asked, as I locked Bertha's doors.

I gestured to the end of the road. "It's one street over."

"Then why did we park here?"

"I'm sure I've told you this."

"Yeah, don't park outside the house if you're planning to do something less than legal. But we're not, right?" he asked. "We're knocking on the door."

"That's the plan," I agreed with a nod. "But sometimes things don't always go according to plan. Sometimes you plan for totally legal and less than legal presents a better opportunity."

"It's such a good thing you're teaching me all the right ways to be a reporter," Jake said. "I'd hate to think where I'd be if you'd left me with Jonas."

"I hear the sarcasm and I don't appreciate it."

We rounded the corner, and I gestured to the house three doors down. It had a small paved front garden with a dead tree in the centre. It looked like it had been some ornamental type thing with drooping branches. Admittedly, it was getting chilly in the mornings, but this tree was several years old. It should've been able to withstand a little frost.

"What's up?" Jake asked. "Something wrong with the tree?"

I shook my head and motioned for him to knock on the door. "I heard somewhere that if you're taking good care of your plants and they still die, it's because they absorbed curses thrown at you by your enemies."

"What?" Hand raised to knock, Jake's eyes stretched so wide I could see white all around the pupil.

"I don't think it's true. Necessarily. I just thought it was weird that the tree was dead. There are really a myriad of reasons for that, though. Maybe there's something wrong with the soil. It could have a disease—"

"You think someone is cursing Celeste?" Jake asked while I was still listing explanations.

“No.” I grabbed the wrist of his hovering hand and used it to knock on the door. “I just thought it was interesting. Maybe Kim poisoned it. For revenge.”

“She dyed his skin so he poisoned her tree?” Jake arched an eyebrow at me. “That doesn’t seem balanced.”

“It’s probably completely unrelated. This is why it’s important to follow the evidence and not make suppositions. *Because* we’re investigating witch stuff, everything looks like witch stuff.”

Before Jake could point out my earlier supposition about the ghost noises and the bluetooth speakers, which I just *knew* he was going to do, someone opened the front door. The brunette who’d been holding the knife over the professor.

“Tallie?”

“What are you doing here?” Her tone wasn’t rude exactly, but it bordered on it.

“We’re here to see Celeste,” I said.

“Now’s not a good time.” She tried to close the door, but Jake reached out to stop her.

“Members of your coven are getting picked off one by one,” Jake said. “You need our help.”

After a brief hesitation, she opened the door and beckoned us inside. I gave Jake a quick thumbs up, and he grinned back at me.

We followed her past the room on the left, past the stairs and all the way to the back of the house, into the kitchen. Wilma, the redhead, and Katie, the blonde, were sitting around the kitchen table with Celeste.

“What do you want?” The way Celeste loaded the question seemed unnecessarily accusatory to me. After I’d helped her out last night and everything.

“We just need to ask you a few questions,” Jake said. And since she was actively hostile toward me, I let him lead.

“About what?”

“Piper. And the professor.” Jake sat at the table and gesture to the kettle. “Aurora can make some tea.”

I nodded in agreement, but Jake and I were so going to talk about that later.

“She can help.” Tallie eyed me with open suspicion. “We’re particular.”

“Let’s get a couple of things ironed out first.” Jake gestured around the room. “You’re all part of the same coven.” He stated it like a fact, like we already knew for sure, so I was giving him a point for that. Maybe he listened more than I gave him credit for.

“Not the professor,” Celeste said. “She was the leader for a while but decided to leave.”

“A couple of weeks ago,” I guessed. “About the time you started playing up in class?”

“I wasn’t playing up,” Celeste snapped. “And I was angry that she would abandon us like that. Without explanation. She made this whole big deal about women supporting women and then just dumped us to meditate alone. What was that about? Who *does* that?”

“That does seem unfair,” Jake agreed and threw a “stop antagonising them” look my way. “Did she give any reason why she wanted to stop?”

“No,” Katie said. “One day she was all women first and the next she just abandoned us.”

“If she wasn’t meditating with you guys anymore, what was she doing in the forest that night you found her?” I asked. I just couldn’t help it.

“The way the circle was set out she was meditating.” Katie pressed her lips together. “Alone. Without us.”

“But it was a lot bigger than yours,” I pointed out. “Did you think that was unusual? Or was that always how she set it out?”

The girls exchanged confused looks.

“I wasn’t really paying that much attention to the setup once I saw the professor,” Tallie said. “But yeah. Now you mention it. It was far too big. Even if she was going to sit inside it.”

“What does that mean?” Katie asked me.

“Honestly. I was hoping you’d be able to tell us,” I said. “Are there any rituals you did that require the pentagram to be that large?”

Wilma shook her head. “All we did was meditate and talk. And always outside the circle. One of us at each of the points.”

“When the professor left, was that when you inducted Piper?” Jake asked before I could continue along that line of questioning.

Katie nodded. “She’s in our class. She was interested.”

“And whose idea was it to honeytrap Kim?” Jake scanned the group, looking for a response.

Wilma waved at Jake. “He hit on me at a party, even though he was dating Celeste. And I wasn’t even the first one. We wanted to teach him a lesson and—” she stopped speaking and an emotion flashed across her face too fast for me to recognise. “Did *he* kill Piper? And the professor?”

“We’re not sure.” Jake glanced at me and I nodded, implying he was on the right path and no, we weren’t sure. “You put dye in his shower gel though, right? Sent spooky noises through his bluetooth speakers?”

They nodded as a group.

“On the night the professor died, what were you all doing there?” Jake asked.

“It was a full moon,” Celeste explained. “It’s like a celestial check-in for how you’re doing. If you’re on track with your intentions, what things you still need to release.”

“Did you see anyone else there?” I asked, since Tallie wasn’t letting me anywhere near the tea. I didn’t understand their suspicion of me. I thought we’d connected. Well, not connected, but I felt like I’d been supportive of them all at some point. But now Celeste was more open to talking to Jake, someone she’d given a false name to? Something was definitely up.

“See anyone?” Wilma shook her head.

“But you heard someone?” I pressed.

“Not really.” Katie smoothed a hand over the wooden tabletop. “But there were a lot more cars there than normal. It used to be just us and the professor. But when she stopped doing the group, it was just us.”

“Was her car there?” I asked. “You’d recognise her car, right?”

Celeste’s tone was curt. “Not that I noticed.”

“What cars did you notice?” Jake asked

“That guy,” Wilma said. “The blonde guy. His car was there. There was a battered bubble type car and Kim’s car.”

“The bubble car, was it a frosty turquoise type of colour with a bumper sticker of a ninja?” Jake asked.

“Yeah.” Celeste frowned at him. “How did you know?”

“I’m a magnificent guesser.” He grinned at her, and I could almost see that she regretted not giving him her real name the first time they met.

“And was Piper supposed to be there?” I asked when she’d stared at Jake for a little too long for me to still be comfortable in the room.

“She had a late lecture, so the professor gave her a lift.” Wilma shrugged. “At least that’s what was supposed to happen.”

“So she arrived *with* the professor?” I clarified. “But I thought the professor wasn’t leading the meditations anymore.”

“She wasn’t,” Wilma said. “I think the professor lived along the route somewhere. But that’s how we found the professor. We’d set up our space on the far side of the woods, but when Piper didn’t show up, we thought maybe the professor had changed her mind. That maybe she was with the professor and they were setting up the old space, so we went to find her.”

“All together?”

They exchanged a glance, but Celeste spoke. “We were *really* hoping the professor had changed her mind about not doing the meditation sessions.”

“Wouldn’t that mean that you’d have to boot Piper out?” Jake asked. “There are only five points on that star.”

Katie hesitated. “We’d have made it work.”

“Where were you when they were looking for the professor?” I asked Celeste.

“I was there. You just didn’t see me.”

“What about Kim? You said his car was there.” Jake asked. “Did you see him?”

They all shook their heads, but Celeste answered. “No. And when we got back to the lay-by, his car was gone.”

“So you *all* found the professor and ran?” I asked, and they nodded. “And not one of you thought about Piper? Who was supposed to be coming *with* the professor, but was nowhere to be found? Not one of you saw the professor and thought, ‘gee, I hope Piper is okay. Maybe we should go and find her’? Or, I don’t know, tell someone about it?”

“We were scared,” Wilma cried at me. “We were *really* scared, okay?”

“We didn’t even think about Piper until we were home.” Katie spoke to the tabletop. “We went back when we remembered, but the place was crawling with police so we figured that they’d found her and were questioning her or she was hiding.”

“We figured she’d call us to pick her up.” Tallie said. “And when she didn’t, we assumed the police had her.”

“Even after you talked to Detective Trank?” I pressed.

“He said he couldn’t tell us anything,” Wilma wiped a tear from her cheek. “It’s not our fault.”

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” Jake patted her hand. “We know it’s not your fault.”

“Who do you think killed the professor and your friend?” I asked. “Any problems with anyone? Rival covens or anything like that?”

“I think it’s that awful teaching assistant,” Celeste said. “He was always contradicting her.”

“I think it was that newspaper guy,” Katie offered. “He snooped on our meditation sessions when he wasn’t supposed to. Took photos as some sort of exposé about how the professor was teaching paganism and witchcraft.”

I glanced at Jake, asking if he had anything else he wanted to ask, and he shook his head.

“We found a crescent moon pendant or earring in the car park. Are any of you missing anything like that? Did the professor wear anything like that?”

They all shook their heads.

“The professor used to wear something like that,” Celeste said. “All the time. I’m sure she said it had been a gift from someone.”

“You don’t remember who?” I asked, and they all shook their heads again. “Okay. Well, thanks for your time. If you think of anything that might be helpful, please give us a call.” I placed one of my cards on the table. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

“Are you going to find out who did this?” Celeste called after us.

“You can count on it.” Jake winked at her, and I was pretty sure she blushed.

I closed the door behind us and followed Jake out of the front garden.

“You can count on it,” I mimicked behind him.

“Well, they can,” he said with a grin. “We’re *obviously* going to solve this.”

“Uh-huh.” I nudged him with my shoulder. “So, what do you think?”

“Kim never mentioned he was there the night the prof was found.”

“I can’t see a reason for him being there,” I said. “Unless it had something to do with trying to win Celeste back. But why would he try that in front of her coven? Maybe he was there with his brother? No, they came in different cars.”

“Maybe they were planning on getting some payback on Celeste.” Jake suggested.

“Maybe. But then was it Kim or Kim and his housemates as well? And Celeste was *not* there when we found the professor.”

“She was in the trees.”

“She was *not* in the trees,” I corrected, following Jake across the road. “I scanned the clearing when I saw them with the knife to make sure they were alone. She was *not* there.”

“Maybe you simply didn’t see her.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “Very unlikely, but maybe. You just don’t want her to be the murderer because you like her. She could easily have been off murdering Piper while the other three were murdering the professor.”

“You think they did it?”

“Didn’t you hear them? The professor betrayed them.”

“So that’s a yes to them being murderers?”

I seesawed my hand and pulled my phone from my pocket to check something. Jake grabbed me and helped me up the kerb before I tripped.

“What are you looking at?”

“They said the professor wore a crescent necklace.”

“You think the pendant we found was hers?” I handed Jake the keys so he could unlock the truck while I examined the photos.

“I think it would be a mighty coincidence if it wasn’t.” I looked up and found Jake sitting in the driver’s seat. “What are you doing?”

“You gave me the keys. I assume you wanted me to drive.”

“No, you didn’t. You’re pressing your luck.” I motioned for him to get out of my seat.

“Well, you know what they said, there’s always some resistance—”

“If you value having your tongue attached to your body, don’t finish that sentence,” I warned and climbed into the truck while a laughing Jake jogged around the bonnet and hopped up into the passenger seat. I handed him the phone with an enlarged photo of the professor’s face and neck. “Look at this.”

“What am I looking at?”

“Can you see? Around the sides of her neck? There’s a very thin red line and no sign of a chain.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning, *possibly*, someone pulled a chain from around her neck and then discarded it in the car park. Or they dropped it.”

“How come you didn’t see this before?” Jake squinted at the photo.

“I wasn’t looking for it and it is very faint.” I shrugged. “It might not be that. She might have caught the chain when she was changing her top or something completely innocuous and the pendant we found is nothing to do with it. But it was a gift, remember? One of the girls said it was a gift.”

“You think whoever gave it to her took it back? Who?”

“Whoever gave it to her. Someone who was offended that she was wearing it. Someone unhappy that she stopped leading their coven and felt she didn’t have a right to wear it.” I shrugged. “But I feel like whoever was angry enough to snap it from her neck was very likely who stabbed her. I mean, you don’t find a dead woman, then take her necklace. Right? Though I suppose someone could take the necklace and someone else stabbed her later. But that would mean there were two people very unhappy with the professor.”

“Who do you think gave it to her?”

“Keith.”

“What?”

“Out of all of our suspects, I think he’s the most likely.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I think he really liked her. You’ve seen how he talks about women. I think she was the first time he had anything close to a friendship with a woman.”

“You’re making some big leaps.”

“Maybe. But if we believe him that *she* gave him a knife, him getting her something in return doesn’t seem crazy. Or maybe he just bought it for her as part of his strategy to get into her knickers. Either way, I think he’s the most likely.”

“Also, if the professor wasn’t doing any of that meditation stuff, why was the clearing setup like that,” Jake asked. “Oh, and that bubble car. It’s Jonas’ car.”

“I figured as much. So now we have Jonas, Keith and Kim there on the night of—” I frowned at Jake. “Did the girls say it was Keith’s car? Did they use his name?”

“Er,” Jake’s attention darted around the cab of the truck looking for an answer. “I think so.”

“No, they said it was the blond guy’s car.”

“So?” Jake shrugged.

“How do they know what car he drives?”

“They had a photo of him. Remember? You said they showed you a photo of him leaning against a car.”

“Leaning against the *professor’s* car.” I inclined my head. “Though I suppose they could have seen him drive away. But seeing him in a car once, would that be enough for them to recognise it at the forest? And if they recognised it, why didn’t they say anything until now?”

“I feel like you keep deciding someone’s the murderer and then leaping to a new suspect who you then decide is the murderer before leaping to a new suspect.”

“Yeah. That’s what’s happening.”

“Okay, as long as I know, I’m good.” He tapped the dashboard. “Are we heading to the uni? To talk to Jonas and that Xander guy?”

I nodded. “I don’t like this story.”

“Why not?” Jake inclined his head. “I *am* a little disappointed by the lack of witchery, but otherwise it’s been interesting.”

“I feel like we have a lot of information, but we know very little.”

“You always say that. Usually just before you work it all out.”

“And why does everyone always lie?” I shook my head. “How can they not know the truth always comes out in the end? *Always*.”

“Not always.” Jake wiggled his eyebrows at me. “Just when the dream team is around.”

“Please don’t refer to us as the dream team.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No.”

Jake grinned at me. “But teamwork makes the dream work.”

“Stop.” I turned the engine over and my beautiful Bertha started on the first try. “Or I’ll gag you.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Who do you want to start with?” Jake asked as we strolled around the campus.

“Are classes cancelled or something?” It didn’t seem to matter what time we were there, I always felt that there were far too many students doing nothing. They all seemed to have a listless air to them. When I’d been at uni, it was all lectures and study. With the occasional mystery solving diversion thrown in. But I’d never had time to wander around like these guys seemed to.

Jake checked his phone while he spoke. “I don’t think so.”

“I think we should—”

“Hey!” Kim yelled as he raced across the campus toward us, waving to ensure we’d seen him. “Hey!”

“I think that answers your question,” I mumbled to Jake, then raised my voice to speak to Kim. “How’s the cure going?”

“I haven’t tried it yet but look.” Kim pointed to his decidedly less pink face. “I don’t think I’ll need it.”

I inclined my head. “Well, that’s one direction you could go in.”

“What?” Kim looked between me and Jake. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I waved off his question. “Did you know your brother and the professor were a thing?”

Kim’s mouth turned down at the corners. “They weren’t a *thing*.”

“Oh?” I arched an eyebrow at him. “So you *did* know?”

“He was just trying to win a bet,” Kim explained. “When she approached him about interviewing him, his buddies bet him he couldn’t get her into bed. That’s all.”

“Which buddies?”

“Just some guys at his gym. His friends.” Kim shook his head. “It was just a bet.”

“Is that why you went to the forest after coming to the newsroom a couple of days ago?” I asked. “To tell the professor about the bet? Or was there another reason you were there? Like, maybe you and your brother were going to play a trick on Celeste? You *were* there together, right?”

Kim blinked and shook his head. “Keith wasn’t there.”

“But you were?” I pressed.

“What are you talking about?” He delivered the line with far too much emotion and wildly overshot on the attempt at casual. “I wasn’t there that night.”

“First, Kim, never play poker,” I said. “Second, you *were* in the forest the night the professor was murdered. We know you were. Why?”

“I wasn’t there.” Kim backed up as if he were about to run away from us. It always struck me as funny how bad people could be at lying and yet they stuck to it.

“Okay.” I held my hands up in the hope that would stop him shuffling backward. “We already *know* you were there. We just want to know what you saw. It could be really helpful in leading us to the professor’s killer.”

Kim shook his head. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Nothing?” I pressed. “You saw nothing the whole time you were there?”

“Yes. No. Nothing.”

“Why did you go in the first place?” Jake asked. “Was it to see Celeste? I imagine after talking to us, recounting the whole thing, it made you mad? Is that why you asked your brother for help in playing a trick on them? And then you saw Piper with them? Is that why you killed her?”

“I didn’t—” Kim stepped back and swiped his hand through the air. “I didn’t kill Piper. I didn’t kill anyone. It was Celeste. Celeste and her curse.”

“So, Celeste killed Piper with her curse?” I clarified. “How exactly did she kill her?”

“She bashed her skull in.” Kim mimed the action while he spoke.

I gestured to the show Kim was putting on. “That would *technically* be using her hands, not her cursing skills. And you don’t seem all that surprised Piper is dead. We only found her last night. How fast does gossip spread around here?”

“Look. Okay. Look.” Kim huffed out three heavy breaths while checking around us to ensure no one was eavesdropping. “I ... I *might* have seen her that night.”

“Piper?” I asked.

Kim briefly met my gaze, nodded and then resumed looking everywhere but me.

“You saw Piper in the forest?” I repeated for clarification purposes.

Kim sucked down another few breaths like he was in the middle of a Lamaze class. “I gave her a lift to the forest.”

“What? When did you see her? Why would you do that? Did you know about her and Celeste?” The questions just came tumbling out.

“When you told me to send that text to her to check she was okay. She replied and told me we needed to meet and not to tell anyone.”

“That’s why when I asked if it was Piper you told me it wasn’t,” Jake guessed.

“Yeah. When I left you, I made an excuse to get away from my brother and my housemates and went to see her. She said she felt bad about what was happening—what Celeste was doing and

maybe if I spoke to her—to Celeste—and apologised she'd stop." The explanation flowed out of him. Almost like he'd been uncorked. "So I drove her to the forest and—"

"Hang on, if you have your own car, why was your brother chauffeuring you around when you came to visit us?" I asked.

"He was already by the uni. It was easier for him to pick us up than for us to go home and get the car. And you know what parking is like."

"But you still had to go back and get your car to take Piper, right?" I glanced at Jake. I couldn't be the only one who found that a bit weird.

Kim shrugged. "Yeah. So?"

"Nothing." I pressed my lips together and shook my head. "So, your brother picked you up from the uni and brought you here. Then he took your friends home while you went to meet Piper. Then you both went back to your house to get your car so you could drive to the forest?"

Kim shrugged again. "Yeah. Why?"

"Just wanted to make sure I had it right." Any time something felt as if the person had overcomplicated the situation, I always suspected it was to give them an alibi for something. "What happened when you got to the forest?"

"Piper took me to meet Celeste. She was so mad at Piper. So mad." Kim shook his head. "I thought it was going to turn in to a cat fight at one point, but then Piper ran off while Celeste shouted after her. She said some *really* mean things." Kim leaned in closer. "About how Piper was going to *die*. Then Celeste tried to curse me again, and I told her it was over and I didn't believe her. And then I left."

"You can't omit stuff," Jake said. "You can't ask us for help and then omit the majority of the story."

"I didn't omit anything. At least, not when I first asked for your help."

"You said she ran away, and you left. Which means unless you saw Celeste kill her, she was alive when you left. So how did you know she was dead?"

Kim sighed and slouched in on himself. "Celeste started throwing things at me. Big heavy rocks. I ran and got turned around in the forest. I must have been wandering around for twenty minutes in the darkness. Then I found Piper's bod—Piper. And somehow I made it back on to the path and I ran."

"You found her and you didn't think to call the police?" Now I could see why he'd been reluctant to mention it.

“Piper lured me in. She admitted it.” Kim whined. “She lured me. Seduced me, so Celeste would have a reason to curse me. And then Celeste killed Piper for telling me. Who would believe that? Who would believe it wasn’t me?”

Jake looked at me. “That’s fair. I wouldn’t have believed him.”

I sighed. “I’m not sure I believe him *now*.”

“I heard someone.” Kim glanced between us as if that nugget of information was his lifeline. “People arguing. There was someone else in the forest.”

“There were a lot of someone elses in the forest,” I said. “Do you think you’d recognise their voices?”

“I couldn’t—I wasn’t—I heard a woman,” Kim said. “There was definitely a woman. She was saying something about her research.”

“The professor?” Jake asked me, and I shrugged.

“And you didn’t recognise the voices?” I asked, and Kim shook his head. “Would you recognise the voices?” Kim shook his head again and I sighed. “If you were lost, and you heard voices, why didn’t you follow them and ask them for directions?”

“I don’t know. I was scared, I guess.”

“Celeste had just thrown rocks at him,” Jake offered.

“Hmmm,” I wasn’t convinced that was a good enough answer. “And you were there alone?”

“Yes. Keith wasn’t there.”

“Are you sure?” Jake narrowed his eyes at Kim. “We have a witness that puts him there.”

“I’m sure. They’ve made a mistake. He wasn’t there.”

“Is there anything else that you can tell us about that night? Anything we should know?” I figured if I cast a wide enough net, there might be something else he’d volunteer, but he simply shook his head. “How are your two friends doing?”

Kim shrugged. “Fine. Anxious. Avoiding stepping on cracks in the pavement. So you’re saying this is over? There really is no curse?”

“You heard it from Piper. Why are you asking me?”

“I feel like maybe you know a bit more about this than Piper did.” Kim gestured to me. “You’re old. You’ve *seen* stuff.”

I gave him a flat stare while Jake choked back a laugh. “Yes, there is no curse. But you are going to have to talk to the police about what you heard that night.”

Kim backed up a step, panic lacing his voice. “They’ll think it was me, they’ll think I did it.”

I nodded. "Maybe. But if you don't tell them, I'll have to and it will look much better if you volunteer it. And what you heard could help catch the person or persons who murdered the professor and Piper. That's what you want, right?"

Kim sighed. "I just want this all to be over."

"I feel that," I muttered and jerked my head toward the building where the professor had taught. I was sure there'd be some sort of police presence there. Even if it was just a constable. "Come on. We'll walk you over and you can tell the police."

"You'll prove I didn't do it, right?" Kim asked. "You'll prove that I'm innocent. You won't let them lock me up."

Jake patted his shoulder. "Sure, we will kid."

I wasn't going to comment on the fact that Kim was actually older than Jake. And Kim seemed to accept the reassurance without question. On the front steps of the professor's building, Charlie was talking to a gaggle of girls. He even had his notebook out, looking as if he were taking their input seriously.

I whistled to get his attention. When I had it, I beckoned him to us, much to the chagrin of his harem. He excused himself and jogged down the steps to us.

"What's up?"

"This is Kim." I gestured to our pink friend. "He was in the forest the night the professor and Piper were killed."

"Was he?" Charlie eyed him, but spoke to me. "And what makes you think that the professor and the girl were killed on the same night?"

"Because Kim, here, found Piper that night."

Charlie arched an eyebrow at the boy. "You found her and didn't call the police?"

"Go easy on the kid, Charlie," Jake said. "He's had a rough few days."

Charlie's already arched eyebrow inched higher at me. I assumed in relation to Jake's comment. I shook my head at him. No, we were not going to talk about it. We were just going to let it go unchallenged.

"Okay. Let's find somewhere we can talk." Charlie nodded his thanks at us and steered Kim into the building.

"What do you make of that?" Jake asked me. "Do you believe he didn't kill Piper? Or the professor?"

"I don't know." I watched them walk into the building. "I think it's interesting he claimed he heard an argument, but said he only heard a woman's voice. I think it's interesting he got lost in the

woods yet was familiar enough with them to draw you a map. I think it's interesting he claims to have both taken Piper *to* the forest *and* found her body. I think it's interesting he didn't call the police when he *did* find the body. I think all the car switching is interesting. I think it's interesting that he was sure his brother wasn't there. I think it's interesting that if he's telling the truth and he took Piper, the professor had some other way and some other reason for being there."

"So, what you're saying is you don't know what to make of it either?" Jake asked. "Other than it's interesting?"

"Basically."

"You think it was ..." Jake hesitated. "You think the professor was arguing with Jonas?"

"No, I think Kim heard the professor arguing with his brother. Or someone he assumed was his brother."

"How did you get there?"

"He heard an argument but then claimed he only heard the woman."

"She could've been on the phone."

"Nice try, but a phone argument and an in person argument have different ... tones. And the volume and the way we argue is different. If it was a phone argument, he'd have recognised that, without really knowing how he knew. No, he assumed she was arguing with his brother and that's why he didn't approach them to ask for directions. Though I did feel like he was telling the truth when he said his brother wasn't there. So that punches a whole in that. And if it *was* his brother, why mention the argument at all? You got anything?"

Jake held his hands up in a don't-shoot-the-messenger move. "What if he heard Celeste and Jonas? Kim said he didn't recognise the voice, but maybe that was to cover for Celeste so she didn't curse him again."

"That's possible, I suppose," I said with a nod. "And some good out-of-the-box thinking. Except he already said he didn't believe the curse."

"Yeah, he *said* it. Doesn't mean he believed it," Jake reminded me.

"Another good point."

"So, what now?"

"Why don't we snoop around the professor's office?" I gestured to the building. "We're already here."

"It would be foolish not to try," Jake agreed. "What are we looking for?"

"I'd like to find some of her research. If it was damaging to Keith—"

"Gives him a motive."

“And explains his car being at the forest that night. Sort of.” I jogged up the steps with Jake in tow, dodging the cluster of girls who were scowling in our direction. Or more specifically, *my* direction.

“Because he was there to kill her?”

“I was thinking more that he gave her a lift and things went pear-shaped, but yours works too.”

The building was much warmer than the outside. And desolate. Surely they hadn't closed off the whole building. I didn't want to be the cliché of the show must go on, but *surely* there were other lessons to be taught.

I strode straight to the back of the building so if anyone happened upon us, it would look like we knew where we were going and that we had a right to be there. We found the professor's office without too much trouble. I pulled my cuff over my hand and tried the door. It swung open.

“It's like they want us to look around,” I whispered to Jake.

“What are we looking for?” Jake whispered back, closing the door behind us.

“Something. Nothing. Anything.”

“I love it when you're so specific,” Jake muttered, searching the bookshelves.

I rooted through the desk drawers. There was paper and pens and files and a huge ball of elastic bands, but nothing that set my reporter senses tingling.

In the back corner of the room there was an empty plastic tub. I peered inside. There were a couple of flakes of wax and a broken stick of incense. I straightened and scanned the room. There were no candles or incense burners. Maybe this was her meditation supply box. I couldn't remember seeing any incense at the crime scene, but maybe I had just missed it. But if this *was* her supply box, what was it doing here?

“Aurora?”

I turned to see Jake holding up a copy of “The Feminist Mystique”.

“Read it. I can buy you a copy if you like.”

“My mum has this. In hardback.” Jake was still holding the book up for me to see. “Like this.”

“Okay, so you *don't* need me to buy you a copy?” I shook my head. I didn't know what he was getting at.

“It's not *this* thick.” Jake tilted the book so I could see the width. “And it's not in these dimensions.”

“Books come in numerous dimensions, depending on the reprint, but I’m assuming you’ve already looked inside and found something, so shall we move on to that part or do you want to drag it out a little longer?”

Jake shrugged. “I feel like I could ...”

“You remember we’re illegally searching the office of a murder victim?”

“Right.” Jake offered me the book.

Even by handling it I could tell it wasn’t a book, but a box made to look like one. Inside, there were three small notebooks and several trinkets. I placed it on the desk, took several photos of the contents. Before we could do anything else, the door opened and Xander shuffled backward into the room and eased the door closed.

I snaked the notebooks from the box and closed the lid. “Can we help you?”

Xander whirled around, a guilty expression as if his mum had caught him eating biscuits before tea. He caught himself and straightened. “What are you two doing in here? You’re not allowed to be in here.”

“And you are?” Jake asked. “You just backed into the room so you could make sure no one saw you.”

“At least I didn’t impersonate a police officer,” he retorted.

“I didn’t impersonate a police officer. You eavesdropped on a conversation and misunderstood a comment. That’s on you, not me.” I gestured around the office. “What can we help you with?”

“I ... was looking for my feedback. From the professor.”

“Would she still be giving you feedback when she’d decided not to be your advisor anymore?” Jake asked.

Xander stilled. “She was too busy with her own research and, if you must know, the feedback I came into find was a letter from her to another professor, recommending me.”

“Did she write letters a lot?” I had no idea if that was how PhD programmes worked, so I needed to do a little more research before I could challenge his recommendation comment. But the letter thing? That I wanted to know about.

Xander shook his head. “Compared to who?”

I gestured around the room. “Everyone. She wrote letters instead of emails?”

“Oh, yeah. She hated email. She had one because this is a university and she had to, but she never used it. She made it clear that if people wanted to connect with her, they had to do it face to face.”

“So she never checked her email?” Jake asked with the same type of horror, as if that was the same thing as never eating. “What about if students emailed her?”

“I used to monitor it and I would email them back explaining they had to come and make an appointment to see her.”

“You *monitored* her email?” I asked because that just seemed ripe for abuse. “Anything weird? Any threats? Any anything?”

“If there had been, I would have told the *real* police officer.” Xander opened the office door. “Who I’m about to call.”

“Just one more thing,” I said, as I motioned for Jake to head to the door. “What did you argue with her about the night she was murdered?”

“We never argued.”

“Well, this is academia so maybe you want to call it a healthy discussion, but you were still in the forest on the night she was murdered.”

“I was nowhere near the forest.”

“You were seen.” I kept it vague just in case he *was* the killer and tried to eradicate any witnesses.

“Then they were mistaken. They probably heard her arguing with the muscle bound idiot. *He’s* the killer. You mark my words.” Xander shooed us out of the door. “Now leave.”

“Why would she be arguing with the muscle bound idiot?” I didn’t respond to his shooing.

“Because he was stalking her. He was here on campus the night she died. I saw him pick her up.”

“You *saw* the professor get into his car?” I pressed.

“Yes. It’s this ostentatious black thing.” He grimaced at the thought. “It’s very recognisable.”

“What time was this?” I asked.

“I don’t remember. Whenever she finished. Maybe six.” He showed me toward the door again. “Now leave or I’ll summon that detective.”

“How could Keith be here?” Jake asked as we descended the stairs in front of the building. Charlie’s harem was still hovering around the front doors, waiting for him to come back out no doubt.

“I mean, it would be a tight timeline. Maybe he was here to pick her up that night and Kim saw him. He was here to pick up the professor and then got roped into helping his brother. He

brought them to us. Took them home. And *then* picked up the professor? It's tight but doable, I think."

"But why is he giving the professor a lift? He made it clear they weren't dating."

I nodded. "You're right. Just one more little mystery."

"You think he was there?"

"Keith?"

"No." Jake jerked his head in the direction of the building behind us. "That Xander guy."

"Why not?" I shrugged. "Everyone else was there."

"You got the notebooks, right?"

"What am I? An amateur? I just don't want to look at them until we're away from here."

"Good plan. Are we going to see Jonas now?"

"Won't he be in lectures or something?"

"He only has a few classes. He's nearly always at the newspaper."

"And if he's not, we can wait and snoop." I frowned at the milling university students going about their day. "Honestly, I could do with a few minutes to sit down and just group together what we've found out."

"I know what you mean. I noted it all down, but I feel like we need to sort through what we know, what people have told us and what people have lied about."

"Yeah, me too, 'cause everybody's lied about everything. Let's hope Jonas is in then we can hightail back to the newsroom and lay it all out."

"And get food on the way?"

"Yes, you black hole of an excuse for a human, we'll get food."

Chapter Fifteen

Jonas hadn't been in the newspaper office, so we'd grabbed food and returned to the newsroom. I scribbled down everything I remembered from all of our conversations and instructed Jake to do the same. Then I went back over my notes and annotated what I'd already written. I felt as if we had so much information and I wanted to get everything down before we snooped through the professor's notebooks. And I was *desperate* to snoop through her notebooks.

It almost felt like looking through someone's diary. Normally I wouldn't have had enough self-control to wait until I'd written out all my notes, but I felt like all the answers would be inside those three little books and the more notes I made now, the easier the story would be to write.

As I was adding the last annotations I felt eyes on me. I looked up to find Jake gnawing on the edge of his sandwich and staring at me.

"You done already?" I asked, looking at his closed notebook on the chair next to him.

"Do you think it's weird?" He continued to worry the crust of his sandwich while he spoke.

"That food has survived ten minutes in your presence? Yes."

"No." Jake lowered the sandwich to the wrapper and placed it on the other visitor's chair, on top of the closed notebook. That's how I knew something serious was up. I had never seen him set food aside. Ever.

"Then what?"

"That Jonas wasn't at the newspaper office."

"He is a university student," I pointed out. "I'm pretty sure he has to go to class at some point. We just missed him, that's all. Or he saw us coming and scarpered."

"But he thought we were taking him the tapes. He'd have waited for those."

"Not all day, surely." I shrugged. "Or maybe he figured we were going to try and dupe him again."

"I think it was weird he wasn't there," Jake said, as if I hadn't spoken. "It was *definitely* weird."

"You said yourself he has classes." I pushed back from my desk. "That he's *nearly* always there, but nearly always isn't always. Which means sometimes he *isn't* there. It's not as if he sleeps there. Or like he's agoraphobic. Maybe he went to get food. Maybe he met a pretty girl. Maybe someone spilled coffee on him and he went home to change. Maybe—"

"The killer got him?" Jake finished. "Maybe the killer got him. They found out he was there that night and thought he had photos, so they had to take care of him. Maybe they saw him there on

the night and have been waiting to get to him. Maybe they lured him to the forest to take care of him for good.”

“It’s as good as any theory, I suppose.” Though I thought he was overreacting just a tad.

“Should we call Trank?”

“And say what? A student newspaper editor wasn’t in the newsroom during the middle of the day, so naturally we assume he’s been murdered. Send help.”

Jake nodded. “Maybe not with that much sarcasm, but yeah.”

“Okay. And where would you direct Trank to?”

“The forest.”

“The massive swarth of greenery? You’d have him comb the whole thing?”

“It wasn’t *that* big.”

“It’s big enough.”

“The professor and Piper were murdered in the forest.”

“The professor and Piper were murdered in the forest because that’s where they *were* when the killer murdered them.”

Jake frowned at me. “Obviously, the killer murdered them where they were.”

“No, I *mean*, they were already there. The professor and Piper were in the forest for their own reasons. The forest doesn’t hold specific meaning for the killer. At least I don’t think it does. That was simply where the victims were. So this killer isn’t going to drag Jonas all the way to the forest to murder him and chance being seen multiple times when they could so much more easily kill him in the newsroom.”

“So you don’t think Jonas is in any danger?”

“From the killer?” I shrugged. “I mean, if he’s *not* the killer, then yeah, he might be in danger. Just like everyone else who was in the forest that night. Including us.”

“Okay, but you don’t think the killer has dragged him into the forest to murder him?”

“Didn’t we just go through this? It’s highly unlikely the killer would drag Jonas all the way out to the forest to murder him. The only reason Jonas would be murdered *in* the forest was if he was in the forest when the murderer caught up with him.”

“What if he’s not in the newsroom because he’s in the forest now?”

“What? What’s wrong with you? Why on earth would he be in the forest now?” I asked. “If it makes you feel better, just call him.”

“And tell him to stay out of the forest.” Jake nodded and reached for his phone. It beeped in his hand. He scanned the screen, then read the message aloud. “I’m in the forest. Meet me here at six. Jonas.”

I threw my hands up and sighed. “Well, of course.”

“Do you think this is from Jonas or his killer?” Jake showed me the phone screen.

“Jonas. Why would the killer be inviting us to the forest? Actually, forget I just said that, it’s super obvious why the killer would be inviting us. And by the way, I *love* how specific he is. ‘The forest’. Like it isn’t some huge area.”

Jake’s phone beeped and he read the message aloud again. “Where the professor was murdered.”

I inclined my head. “Better.”

“Do you think this is from Jonas’ murderer?”

“No, I don’t. I think it’s from Jonas.”

“Why?”

“Because if it was the killer they’d have likely added for you to come alone.”

Jake’s phone beeped, and I held up my hand before he could read it out. “Don’t tell me, it’s says, ‘come alone’.”

“So *now* you think it’s from the killer!” Jake showed me the screen, and I squinted at it.

“No. I still don’t. I *am* concerned that Jonas has bugged our office though.”

“Why aren’t you taking this seriously?”

“Fine. Do you have Kim’s number?” I asked, and Jake nodded. “Text him and ask—”

Jake’s phone beeped again. “It’s from Kim. He says he just got a message from some guy called Jonas asking him to meet them in the forest at six.” Jake glanced up from his phone, eyes wide. “Jonas knows who the killer is. He’s going to do a big reveal.”

“Jonas doesn’t know who the killer is.”

“How do you know?”

“Because *we* don’t know who the killer is,” I said. “And there is no way that he could *possibly* have figured this out before us. We’ve been—” I cut myself off as a horrible thought occurred to me. “You don’t think he’s baiting out the killer? Do you? Telling everyone he’s in the forest and waiting to see who comes to kill him?”

“But if he’s doing a big reveal, he’ll have sent that to everyone. So everyone will show up.”

I pointed to the sandwich on the seat next to him. “I suggest you eat that sandwich because your brain isn’t working at full capacity.”

“What?”

“If he sent that text to Kim, then we can assume he sent that text to everyone involved, so everyone knows where he is right this second. And if you’re the killer and you get a text from someone saying ‘meet me in the forest’ where you murdered two people, are you going to assume that he wants to swap pasta bake recipes or that he knows you did it? You’re *not* going to assume he sent the same text to all the suspects. Why would you? And you’re not going to wait until six when he’s just told you he’s in the forest now.”

“I’m glad I work with you and not him.”

“*Yeah.*” I nodded. “I am too. Call him. Tell him to find a police officer if there are any around. If not, to leave the forest now and come back at six.”

Jake tapped around on his phone, then held it to his ear while I called Trank.

“I hesitate to ask,” Trank’s voice came clearly through the speaker.

“The idiot university newspaper editor sent out a text to—well, just to Jake and Kim that we know of, but I assume he sent it to all the murder suspects asking them to meet him in the forest at six.”

Trank sighed. “That was dumb.”

“Gets dumber. He mentioned in the text that he was already *in* the forest and that we should come alone.”

“And you called me instead of staking out the forest? I’m truly touched. You’re growing into a fine, responsible upstanding young woman.”

I stared at the stolen notebooks sitting on my desk, begging to be read. “Yep, yep I am.”

Jake waved to get my attention, pointed to his phone, and shook his head. “He’s not answering.”

“Hide your call ID and try again. He might not answer *because* it’s you calling.”

“He’s not answering his phone?” Trank asked. “Where did he say he was?”

“Near where the professor died.”

“Alright. I’m sending someone. Do *not* go and meet him. Let me hear you say it.”

“I won’t go and meet him.”

Trank paused. “Does he know who the murderer is?”

“Honestly, I couldn’t tell you. He was there the night they were murdered and the week before he was there taking photos. He might have evidence. He might not. I think he’s trying to bait the killer.”

“Okay. I’ll handle this. Stay out of the forest.” Trank hung up.

“Is he sending someone?” Jake asked.

“Yep.”

“Are we really not going?”

“To meet Jonas? Of course not. That would be irresponsible and I promised Trank we wouldn’t.”

“Really?”

“Really. But we might happen to stroll through the forest later and see what’s happening.”

“But if the police are going to pick Jonas up, what’s the point in going?”

“Because no one will *know* they’ve picked Jonas up.” I checked my watch. “It’s only two now. They have an hour or so to pick him up so we should be all clear by six.”

Jake narrowed his eyes at me. “So we just scuppered Jonas’ story? Again.”

“Ah,” I winced. “Not intentionally. We were trying to keep him alive.”

“And, not that I’m complaining, but what’s the difference between us being there and him being there?”

“*We* didn’t send out that text so no one knows that we know absolutely nothing about anything. And I’m better in a fight.” I tapped the professor’s notebook that I had been dying to flip through. “You ready to see what she wrote about?”

Jake checked his watch. “You don’t think we should go to the forest and check on Jonas?”

“The police will likely get there faster than we could anyway and what good does it do getting there without any real idea of who the culprit is.”

“You think that notebook holds the answers?”

“I do. I very much do.” I got up from my desk, Jake moved his sandwich so I could sit on the visitor’s seat, and I flipped the cover open.

“Is that—” Jake took it from my hands and flipped through it while I grabbed the second one. “Does she have really poor handwriting or—this is code. She’s written in code.”

“What?” I took the notebook from Jake’s hand and flicked through the contents. “This isn’t code. At first glance anyway.”

“At *first glance* this isn’t code?” Jake repeated and pointed to the squiggly lines that covered the pages.

“You don’t recognise it?” I asked. “Oh, that’s right. You’re not doing a journalism degree, are you?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

I held up the book and pointed to the writing. “This is shorthand.”

“What?”

“Shorthand. A version of it anyway.” I grabbed my notebook and showed him the pages.

“This—you write like this all the time?” Jake’s attention jumped from the page to my face as if I’d told him I was an alien and were showing him proof.

“Not all the time but mostly, yeah.” I shrugged. “It’s handy.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t know this. Can you show me how?”

“It can take a while to master. It’s the same as learning a new language.”

“But you can read this?” Jake repeated as if he couldn’t quite believe it, waving the book in my face.

“Read might be an overstatement. Some people change the shapes to suit themselves, but I’m pretty sure I can decode a fair bit of it.”

Jake stared at me, mouth ajar. “That is amazing.”

“Yeah. Okay. All that awe is making me uncomfortable.” I took the notebook from him and stacked the three of them together on my desk. “I’m going to read through it, you’re going to note anything of interest.”

I opened the first notebook, then closed the cover again. “Can Jonas write in shorthand?”

“I’ve no idea. Is it a requirement?”

“It was when I took my course, but that was a while ago and things change. You can get dictation apps on your phone now so I don’t know if they teach it anymore.”

“What does that matter?”

I turned the notebook over in my hands. “Jonas had a notebook in his drawer with all his tapes. It was filled with shorthand. It was the same type of notebook as this.”

“You think the professor stole Jonas’ notes?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I opened the notebook. It was labelled inside the cover with a number two. I checked the others and found one was labelled with a number one and the other with a number four that had an asterisk next it. Number three was missing. So Jonas had that one?

“Let’s start and see who these belong to and what’s what.”

They turned out to be the professor’s notebooks. And after two hours of translating very dry academic observations of Kieth and his interactions with his friends, woman and the professor herself, my brain was hurting.

“Wow.” Jake rubbed his eyes with his fists, as if he’d been the one reading. “That was some really boring research. You’d think with her following Keith around and talking to him about all his opinions on women, it would’ve been a lot more interesting.”

“This looks like it’s just the basic material.” I yawned, stretched and rubbed my own eyes. “I imagine—or hope at least, that if she turned it into a book, she’d planned to add a little more flair to it. I’m a bit disappointed we’ve not found anything to point to a killer. I was *sure* the answers would be in here.”

“Do you think we can take a chocolate break before we start the next one?” Jake rolled his shoulders back and twisted his head from side to side. “I need fortification.”

“There’s only ten or so pages in this one,” I said, flicking through it. “Let’s get the last of it down and then we’ll stop.” I spread the notebook open in front of me. If I stopped now, there was a very good chance I wouldn’t pick this book back up. In the beginning I’d been curious about her notes, but curiosity only gets you so far.

“Okay.” Jake sighed and resumed his position as note taker.

“Oh.”

“What?”

“This one starts with a note about how she misplaced her previous journal. She alludes to the possibility of it being stolen.”

“Does she say who she suspects?”

“Let me read a little further. But if she kept in the same place as these, then surely the thief would’ve stolen all of them.”

“Maybe she had it on her and she dropped it somewhere,” Jake suggested.

“Losing it and suspected it had been stolen are two very different things. She must have had a reason to think it’s been stolen.” I scanned ahead in the text. “Oh.”

“What now?”

“This—I don’t think this is about Keith.”

“She had more than one study going on? Is that unusual?”

I shook my head. “I’ve no idea. Okay, she says—oh.”

“What *now*?”

“She keeps using ‘they’ not ‘he’ anymore.”

“‘They’ could be he and his friends,” Jake suggested. “What else does she say?”

I flipped through the previous notebook and then again through the current one. “She’s changed her shorthand. I can’t read all of this.”

“Is that normal to do that?” Jake asked. “Do you do that on different stories? Change the shorthand?”

“No, you learn the universal and then maybe adapt it in the beginning if you’re worried that someone else might read your notes. But the only reason I can think that you *might* change an established style would be that—”

“What?” Jake asked. “You *have* to start finishing sentences. It’s very annoying.”

“The only reason to change your shorthand, which if she’s been writing this way for a while, must have been pretty hard to do, would be if you thought someone who’d stolen your book could read it.”

“That makes sense, I guess.” Jake agreed. I waited for him to make the connection. He didn’t.

“Someone like Jonas, perhaps. Who you might report to the dean for theft. To get your research back before he reads it. And publishes it.”

“But what would Jonas care about Keith?” Jake asked. “He was more interested in the whole moon meditation thing.”

I flipped through the pages. The words for moon and meditation were still written in her original shorthand. “What if the second experiment-slash-research thing she was doing was on the participants of her meditation sessions? What if—maybe she didn’t mean to—but what if by starting that up she noticed the forging of bonds between Celeste and her friends—or girls that weren’t friends in the beginning—and decided to study it? She *was* a professor of women’s studies after all. Maybe she wanted to study the dynamics of the group. So she leaves it on purpose to see what that will do to the group dynamics? What if she was in the forest that night to observe them?”

“I feel like that would *definitely* be unethical,” Jake said. “Doing research on your students without their knowledge or consent.”

“*If* that’s what this notebook talks about, that ups the motive for Celeste and her friends.”

“Can you read any more of it?” Jake asked.

I scanned through the pages. “A lot of the common symbols are the same but there are symbols here I don’t recognise. I could guess what they were, but I would *literally* be guessing.”

“You can’t guesstimate the words?”

I held up a finger and read a sentence from the notebook. “When blank, blank and blank arrived at blank the blank proceeded as usual until blank blank by blank blank.”

“Okay, that could be when Celeste, Piper and Kim arrived at forest the argument proceeded as usual until Piper murdered by Celeste Kim.”

“By Celeste Kim? They morphed into one being?”

Jake shrugged. “Maybe she didn’t want to use ‘and’.”

“Yeah, or it could be when Frodo, Samwise and Smaug arrived at Shire the feast proceeded as usual until Smaug died by Gandalf’s staff.”

“I’ve no idea what that means.”

“My point is, it could *literally* be anything. So we *can* guess, but guessing doesn’t help us.”

“So what you’re saying is that the third notebook which, out of the three, actually might contain useful info is unreadable?”

“It’s not unreadable, per se. If I had a lot more time and a larger sample of text to work with, I could probably work it out. But in this moment, yes.”

“Okay.” Jake checked his watch. “We’ve got a little time before we have to leave. Let’s list out what we know, get some food and head to the forest.”

“Yes, boss.” I gestured for him to go first.

“Let’s start with Kim. He knew his brother was trying to get the professor into bed. He said that Keith told him it was a bet. And that mass of research actually told us very little about the situation.”

“More importantly, he was there the night both the professor and Piper died,” I added. “He said that Piper told him everything, he and Celeste argued, he got turned around in the woods and heard an argument, but only the woman’s side of it.”

“Right. And he got lost on his way out of the forest, and found Piper dead,” Jake finished. “Depending on how long he was wandering that’s a really small window.”

“Yeah, to kill one person. But to kill two people? That seems unbelievably small with all the other people running around the forest that night. And where were the other girls?” I asked. “They didn’t hear Celeste and Piper arguing. Or Celeste and Kim arguing? Or maybe they did and are covering for her. And if *he* was close enough to hear the woman’s side of the argument—if the woman was the professor, how come he didn’t hear her getting stabbed to death and Piper running away?”

“Kim said he got turned around when he was leaving, so maybe he walked away from Piper?”

“No, that can’t be right. If Piper was killed because she saw or heard the Professor getting murdered, then she had to be going in the same direction as Kim if he heard the professor arguing.”

“Maybe he somehow looped around.”

“And didn’t hear the professor screaming?”

“Maybe she didn’t scream,” Jake suggested.

“You just got stabbed in the gut. I’m pretty sure screaming would’ve been on the agenda.”

Jake shook his head. “Maybe not. Maybe the shock was too much. And Piper’s just seen her professor stabbed, so she’s running through the forest trying to escape a murderer. Maybe she doesn’t scream so the murderer can’t find her.”

“But she knows Kim is somewhere in the forest. Or Celeste, at the very least. And the other girls. They’re all meeting there, so why wouldn’t she call out to them for help? Actually, when we found Piper, I heard Celeste scream, but Charlie didn’t. So maybe she *did* scream and no one on the other side of the forest heard it. Or maybe Charlie was already back to his car by then.”

“Or, *maybe* the other girls are in on the professor’s murder and that’s who she was running from. There’s no point screaming for help when you think the only people around are trying to murder you.”

“That’s a fair point, Jake.”

“What if Kim and Celeste are in it together and just laying a false trail,” Jake suggested. “They’re the only two who sort of alibi each other out.”

“I could buy that,” I said. “If you can give me a motive.”

Jake opened his mouth and closed it several times. “What if it wasn’t just the professor Kim heard, but two women?”

“What if he completely made that up to cover himself and throw suspicion on someone else?” I asked. “The only hint of a motive I can see is that he was mad at the professor for turning down his brother, but that’s really thin. According to Kim, it was a bet. According to Keith it was a bet.”

“Are we ruling him out?”

“Hell, no. He has opportunity and possibly a motive we can’t see. But for a moment, let’s pretend everything he said was true.”

“That means we have a woman arguing about something Kim didn’t hear.”

“Logically, if she were arguing with someone, it would be Jonas because we *know* he was in the forest that night *and* she was going to send that letter to the dean. And I’m pretty sure he knows about her studying the girls. We can’t place Xander at the forest, but she was resigning as his advisor. I don’t know how that works out, but maybe it means that he gets kicked out of the uni. Maybe it was more than her just resigning as his advisor.”

“And Piper saw him kill her and then he chases her down,” Jake finished. “It would work for Jonas or Xander.”

“But, again, if it’s not her friends hunting her down, then she knows her friends are there, so why not call for help?” I shook my head. “That’s what I just can’t get my head around. And why would Jonas invite everyone to the forest if he did it?”

“Maybe to frame someone else? And he only invited us and Kim that we know of for sure.”

“Good point.”

“Thanks.” Jake tapped Keith’s name on the board. “What if the professor was arguing with Keith? Maybe he was going to report her for something.”

“And Kim doesn’t recognise his own brother’s voice?”

“Maybe he does, but just said he couldn’t.”

“If he knew his brother argued with her, surely he’d just keep it to himself? And we still need to find out who gave the professor that necklace.”

“The one that was possibly pulled from her neck.”

“My money’s on Keith.”

I nodded. “Mine too.”

“You think Keith killed her?” Jake asked.

“He was in the forest. At least his car was there. He told us he was on a date. Maybe getting the professor into bed wasn’t really a bet. Maybe he liked her or he was really unhappy about losing.”

“He would be my preference, too,” Jake said with a nod. “He’s the only one who doesn’t really have a reason to be there. Jonas was snooping. The girls were doing their meditation. Kim was sort of invited by Piper to talk to Celeste. He—”

“Stop. Stop.” I waved a hand at him. “We don’t even know for *sure* Keith was there. The girls told us they saw his car. That’s just *their* word. They knew what his car looked like because they’d seen him with the professor. Maybe they killed her and made it all up. And killed Piper because she wasn’t going to go along with it. After all, according to Kim, she was the one to fess up about the whole curse thing. She could be the weakest link.”

“This is making my tummy hurt. What do you say? Get food and then we’ll head to the forest?”

“You literally have a sandwich—” I scanned the office for his sandwich, but found nothing.

“When did you eat that?”

“Few minutes ago.”

“You have a problem, do you know that?” I asked. “A very real, likely very medical problem.”

“I’m a growing boy.”

“You know, in the professor’s office, there was a box with bits of wax and a broken incense stick.”

“So?”

“So, if she was going to the forest that night to observe, why take her supplies? And, if she stored them in the box, why not take the box? And if she did, how did it get back into her office?”

“Maybe she put them in a bag.”

“Then where’s her bag?” I tapped the desk top. “In fact, where are all of her possessions?”

Jake frowned at me. “You know, I feel like we have so much information now, but we’re no further along in the development of our suspects motives.”

I nodded. “It’s very frustrating, isn’t it?”

Chapter Sixteen

“Where are we?” Jake asked, twisting around in his seat to check out of all the windows, as if expecting one to give him a different view. “This isn’t the way we came last time.”

“You mean when you directed us the wrong way, and we found the forest entrance by luck?” I asked. “No, you’re right. This is a different way.”

“I did *not* direct us the wrong way.” Jake twisted in his seat again, looking at the trees surrounding us. “Is this the way you came? When you found Piper?”

“Yep. I thought that since we already directed Trank to check out Jonas, we’d not exactly sneak up on them but—”

“Not park in plain sight where they could either detain us or send us away,” Jake finished. “And since we don’t know if it was Jonas or the killer who invited us, it’s better to have the element of surprise.”

“I’m pretty sure it *was* Jonas,” I said. “If Trank had picked up Jonas and the killer he’d have told us, right? He’d tell us that he had the killer.” I glanced at Jake. “Right?”

Jake frowned at me. “I’d have thought so. But he’s *your* godfather.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Yeah, He’d have definitely told us.”

“Looks like everyone else made it.” Jake gestured to the several cars parked in the lay-bys. “There’s a lot of people here.”

“I think that red one is Celeste’s. It was here when I saw her standing over Piper.”

“Well, that blue one belongs to Jonas. So whether Trank has him or not, he *was* here.”

“I guess Jonas did send that text to everyone involved.” I did a three-point-turn and parked up in a lay-by, ahead of all the other cars and facing the opposite direction. “Unless they all just happened to be here. Which seems unlikely.”

“Why did you turn around?” Jake asked, looking for an explanation out of the window.

“I don’t *expect* a car chase, but it’s best to be prepared.” I gestured behind us. “By parking at the end, no one can block us in because we can reverse over the grassy verge, and by facing the opposite direction, we can, if need be, shunt the other cars into each other before making a speedy getaway. Either way, to follow us they’d have to turn around and that might only take a few seconds, but it will be a few seconds in our favour.”

Jake grabbed my wrist, his eyes wide with excitement. “You think there’s going to be a car chase?”

“No.” I shook off his grip. “No. Not at all. I just want to be prepared.” I switched the engine off and jumped out of the truck. “It’s this way.” After locking the truck, I lead Jake into the trees.

“I love this part.” Jake rubbed his hands together with evident glee as he followed me into the trees.

“The part where we possibly walk blindly into a trap and are brutally murdered?”

“No, the big reveal. Who do you think it is? My money is on Keith.”

I made a noncommittal noise.

“You don’t think it’s Keith?” Jake asked.

I seesawed my hand. “I mean, I could see it being him for all the reasons we’ve been through a million times, but I don’t feel like it’s him.”

“You don’t feel it?”

I shook my head. “I don’t *feel* it.”

“Who do you think it is?”

“I think it’s Xander. But since we have no way to place him in the forest, it’s purely because I don’t like him.” I checked the trees around us for movement, lowered my voice and inclined my head. “I also think it could be the girls. Or Kim. I even think there’s a possibility it could be Jonas. I mean, I don’t think it’s him. But if it turned out it was, I wouldn’t be all that surprised.”

Jake lowered his voice, too. “So, basically you think it’s everybody *but* Keith?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “And even then, Keith’s got a decent motive.”

“You know you’re supposed to pick *one* suspect.”

I stopped walking and scanned the surrounding trees. I could feel eyes on us. Maybe it was Jonas. Maybe the killer. Maybe wood spirits. “You know, I just don’t know. I feel like we have lots of pieces and they just don’t fit together properly. The logical explanation is that Piper was killed by whoever killed the professor.”

“Yeah, she saw the killer and ran. They caught up with her and killed her.” Jake lowered his voice further and scanned the trees, too. I didn’t know if it was because he had the same feeling of being watched or it as just because I was doing it.

“But what if Piper was murdered first and ...?”

“The professor meditated on it?” Jake asked, no longer whispering.

“What if the professor didn’t know?”

“So there are *two* killers running around the forest killing people on the same day, at pretty much the exact same time?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty unlikely.” I jerked my head in the direction of the clearing. “Let’s go and see what Jonas has. If he’s still here. If he worked this out before us, we’re never going to hear the end of it.”

“What are you whispering about?” Charlie asked, stepping out of the trees to my right. “How detective Trank told you to stay away, and you completely ignored him?”

“The weather,” I said, relieved to find it was Charlie who’d been spying on us and not a crazed killer. “I said I thought there was a sixty percent chance of frost tonight and—”

“I said it was more like eighty percent,” Jake finished.

“You didn’t think to check the forecast? You know there are people—*qualified* people—who study the weather to give you accurate forecasts.”

I shook my head. “You can’t trust a weatherman. Remember Michael Fish?”

Charlie laughed. “Really?”

“Who’s Michael Fish?” Jake asked.

“A weather man who said it was going to be sunny and then hours later there was a hurricane.” I looked Jake over. “How do you not know who Michael Fish is?”

“When did this happen?” Jake asked. “At the start of the year when we had those storms? How did I miss that?”

“Because it happened back in the *eighties*,” Charlie said. “You weren’t even alive. In fact, I don’t even think Aurora was alive.”

“This happened in the *eighties*?” Jake stressed it like the eighties were the middle ages. “*Before* you were born? And you’re still holding on to it?”

“He said it was going to be nice and then there was a hurricane. Of course I’m holding on to it.”

Jake shook his head at me. “Man, you need to get a hobby.”

“I’m English, complaining about the weather *is* my hobby.”

“Anyway,” Charlie intervened before Jake could respond. “You’re both not supposed to be here.”

“In this public forest?” I asked. “Have you found Jonas?”

“He’s fine. He’s with a couple of people. He did tell me to stay close by so I could arrest the killer when he’d unmasked them. He also said he was waiting on you so he could prove he was the better reporter once and for all. He said some other stuff about rubbing your faces in it and how you stole his evidence. Which he retracted when I pressed him on it. Still, I assume that evidence will find its way into my hands by the end of the evening. ”

“Did he say who it was?” Jake asked, leaving me to ignore the evidence comment.

Charlie looked between us. “Don’t you know?”

“Don’t *we* know? Don’t *you* know?” I retorted. “Isn’t identifying killers kind of *your* job?”

“Yes, but we use things like evidence. You use ...” Charlie gestured to me and stopped speaking.

“Yes?” I asked. “We use what?”

“Your wit and charm,” Charlie said. I heard the words, but I was pretty sure he meant “illegal methods”.

“Uh-huh.” I glanced around us and realised what was happening. “Wait, are you hanging around here so we can solve this case for you?”

“Trank told me about the time you did that whole murder mystery style reveal at the vamp club. He said it was very effective. Hopefully Jonas will be as good at it.”

“Yeah, but that was *me* and this is Jonas.”

“Sounds like jealousy to me,” Charlie said to Jake. “Maybe because he figured it out first?”

“You mean before you?” I shot back and turned on my fancy cowboy boot heels and strode into the trees. “Come on, Jake. Let’s show these amateurs how it’s done.”

“You know who the killer is?” Jake whispered.

“Would you stop with that question?” I hissed back.

“Aurora?” Charlie called.

I turned. “What?”

“You wouldn’t happen to have the evidence that *wasn’t* stolen on you by any chance?”

“No. I would not.” Which wasn’t true. The tapes were in my rucksack. Along with the notebooks. But Charlie didn’t need to know that.

“Are we going to give them the tapes?” Jake whispered as we stumbled through the trees to get away from Charlie.

“Of course. But when *we* decide to do it. Not when we’re told to do it.”

“You know he didn’t actually tell you, right?”

“Whatever,” I mumbled, and continued stomping through the woods. We couldn’t actually go back into the clearing where the professor had been murdered because it was still cordoned off, but Jonas had helpfully posted signs to where he was.

I flicked the laminated sheet pinned to a tree as I passed.

Jake paused in front of the sign. “He’s calling it a big reveal party.”

“Yeah, I read it,” I muttered. I was *not* happy about not being the first to figure this out. I consider myself a much better reporter than Jonas, so getting beaten to the scoop by him was not how I wanted to spend my evening.

“Do you think he knows?” Jake asked.

I shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

We followed the sounds of chatter and the laminated signs and found ourselves in a small clearing. Kim was there with his brother, but without his two housemates. The brothers hovered on one side of the clearing. Celeste, Wilma, Tallie and Katie faced them on the opposite side of the clearing. I was pretty sure Keith kept throwing them salacious winks or similar facial expressions. I assumed it was to rile them up, but honestly I wasn’t all that sure. They did their best to ignore him. Xander was talking to Jonas and checking his watch. When he saw us, he nudged Jonas.

“Finally,” Jonas called, throwing his arms wide. “Finally. You made it. I was worried that you wouldn’t come. No one likes to be upstaged.”

“Can we get on with this now?” Xander asked. “You said you knew who killed the professor and the other girl.”

“Her name was Piper,” Celeste snapped. “She wasn’t *some other girl*.”

“Yes, I’m sorry.” Xander nodded in her direction while looking anything but sorry to me.

“Shall we sit?” Jonas motioned to the pentagram he’d drawn on the floor with twigs.

“You want us to sit on the grass?” Xander asked. “Around that witch’s thing?”

“It’s not a *witch* thing,” Katie said. “Since you worked with the professor, I’d have thought you’d have known that.”

“It’s perfectly safe,” Jonas said, pulling some thick pillar candles from his bag and setting one at each point of the star.

“Yeah, I’m not doing this.” Keith backed away from the pentagram.

“Worried what it will reveal?” Jonas asked.

“No, you idiot.” Keith point to the candles. “I just don’t want to be responsible for burning the forest down.”

“Is that all?” Jonas asked, his tone leading.

“*He* killed the professor?” Celeste asked Jonas. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Hey, I didn’t kill anyone.” Keith held up a hand in Celeste’s direction as if he could halt her accusations. “I just don’t want to cause an environmental disaster. How does that make me a murderer?”

“Seems reasonable to me,” I said. “How about we forego the candles?”

“No. There will be candles.” Jonas said. “Here.” He shoved one into my hands. “If Mr Environmental is so scared, we’ll hold them instead.”

Jonas passed them around. Keith held one, so did Kim, Xander and Celeste. He went around with matches and lit everyone’s candle. He did ours last. As he struck the match it was as if he’d shone a light on why the pieces of our jigsaw puzzle didn’t fit together. Suddenly, I knew what had happened.

“No.” Jonas looked at my expression and shook his head. “*I’m* doing it. *I’m* telling it. *I* worked it out first.”

“Okay.” I motioned for him to go ahead, just relived that it all finally made sense. “You do it.”

“You know what happened?” Jake whispered.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I know what happened.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Let’s take this one at a time.” Jonas paced around the circle while the rest of us watched him from our position on the ground. “Kim here was upset at the professor for teaching his girlfriend her witchy ways—”

“The professor wasn’t a witch,” Celeste interrupted. “And she didn’t teach—”

“Shush,” Jonas hissed. He rolled his shoulders, cleared his throat, and started again. “Kim was upset at the professor for teaching his girlfriend her witchy ways, but not as upset as his girlfriend Celeste. Celeste who the professor booted out of her coven for—”

“Do you know who the killer is at all, or are you just going to make stuff up?” Tallie asked.

“Don’t you know how these things work?” Jonas snapped at her. “I’m getting to it.”

“Well, get to it faster,” Keith said.

“Will you please be quiet and let me finish? You people have no appreciation for showmanship.” He rolled his shoulders back again, and tilted his head from side to side, stretching out his neck. “Xander had a motive for causing the professor’s demise, but what could he possibly have against the lovely Piper. Maybe they were having a secret affair—”

“I would *never* cross the line with a student,” Xander cried, full of unwarranted indignation since he was also a student. “That would be highly improper.”

“But Keith also had motive,” Jonas continued over Xander’s protests. “The professor spurned his advances, just like Piper spurned his brother’s—”

“That’s not what happened,” Keith muttered, shaking his head.

“But the real killer,” Jonas continued, “The *real* killer was incensed with the unfairness of life.” He threw a fist to the sky.

“This is like watching an amateur dramatics production,” Jake whispered to me. “But worse.”

“You know, I think he’s filming it.” I peered into the trees where his attention kept darting back to.

“Really?”

“Yeah. See how he keeps checking his posture and projecting his voice?”

“You don’t think he’d put this on the uni news website?”

I arched an eyebrow at Jake. “Oh, I think he’d *totally* put this on the uni news website.”

“And the real killer is—” Jonas brought his hand down, clutched it to his chest, then flung it in Celeste’s direction. “*Celeste!*”

“What?” Celeste jerked back as if struck by his accusation. “You think *I* killed my mentor and my friend.”

“The professor was ready to exclude you from her class *and* the university,” Jonas continued melodramatically. “Your friend was carrying on an illicit affair with your boyfriend. The love of your life.” Jonas held up three fingers and counted off each point with exaggerated movement. “You have motive. You have opportunity. You have—”

“Except she was with us when we found the professor,” Tallie said.

“Then you’re all in it together,” Jonas cried. “All of you!”

“She wasn’t with you when you found the professor,” I said. Plainly. With no drama whatsoever. No showmanship. Just fact.

“I was,” Celeste insisted.

I shook my head. “You weren’t.”

“I was in the trees.” Celeste pointed to them for dramatic effect. “It’s not *my* fault you couldn’t see me.”

“Was she in the trees?” Jonas whispered to me, and I shook my head again. “See. Even our witness says you weren’t there.”

“I was.”

“You *weren’t*.” Jonas stressed. “After killing the professor, you chased down your friend, mad with rage and bashed her skull in.” Jonas jabbed a finger in Celeste’s direction. “Behold. *The murderess!*” He held the pose for a few seconds, then looked around the group. “Why is no one applauding?”

“Probably because you just accused me of murder,” Celeste retorted. “I can’t *believe* we came out here for this. I can’t *believe* you think I’d be capable of it.”

“Tell them.” Jonas motioned for me to address the group. “Tell them that’s what happened.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, that’s not what happened.”

Celeste waved an open palm in my direction. “Thank you.”

“Look. This is *my* reveal and *I’m* revealing the killer,” Jonas hissed. “Would it be too much for you to back me up?”

“If you got it right, I would totally have your back.” I shrugged. “But that’s not what happened.”

“Look, I’m—” Jonas started.

“What happened to the professor?” Celeste asked me. “And Piper.”

“No.” Jonas swiped a hand at me. “I *forbid* you from speaking.”

“You just told me I could.”

“To back me up, not do your own show,” Jonas hissed.

“I want to know too,” said Jake. Followed by murmured agreements from the rest of the group.

“But this is *my* reveal,” Jonas whined.

“You got everyone here, so this is still partly your reveal.” I couldn’t give him more credit than that because he had literally just made stuff up for sensationalism.

“You’re right, this *is* still my reveal.” Jonas straightened up and gestured around the space, projecting his voice again. “I give you permission to speak.”

I knew we were going to have to race back to the newsroom and get this written up super fast before he could take credit for it, but that would be okay. Maybe I could even get Charlie to hold him. Though I’d stepped on his story twice so far, maybe he could write this one up first. It would likely be eighty percent fiction by the time he was done anyway.

“Okay.” I handed Jake our candle and got up to pace. I always thought better when pacing. “This is what we know. All of you have lied or hidden the truth from us at some point, and normally, I’m not about sharing other people’s secrets, but I think it’s relevant here. Here’s what we know—”

“Exactly what secrets will you be sharing?” Jonas asked, his attention darting to the camera that I was now positive he had hidden in the trees.

“Let’s start with you, Jonas. We know the professor intended to report you to the dean for questionable methods of reporting. At first we thought it was because you spied on her meditation sessions. And then we found the notebook you stole from her. One of her *research* notebooks. And since it was all written in shorthand you could read it. Did you approach her about what you found in that book?” I asked Jonas. “Try to use that as blackmail to stop her from reporting you? Or maybe you just wanted to use that as your story.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jonas said, tugging on his waistcoat again. “*You’re* the thief. You stole my—”

“The recorder you hid in the professor’s office so you could listen in on her?” I asked.

“It was—I dropped it in there by accident.” Jonas shook his head at me. “But it’s *still* mine.”

“You bugged her office?” Xander scowled at Jonas in disgust. “I’m reporting you to the dean as soon as we get back.”

“Are you sure you want to do that, Xander?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” He looked around at the faces staring at him.

“Well, you’re on the tapes too.”

“He is?” Jonas asked.

“Yeah. When the professor tells him she doesn’t want to be his advisor anymore.”

Xander forced a laugh. “That’s hardly a reason to kill someone.”

“Logically, that’s true,” I agreed. “But what’s logical about murder?”

“And what about the girl? What about Piper?” Jonas asked, his tone more chat show host than murder suspect now I wasn’t focused on him. “What was his motive for killing her?”

I shrugged. “She witnessed the murder of the professor.”

“So?” Keith asked. “Which one of them was it?”

“It wasn’t me.” Jonas tugged on the edge of his waistcoat. “*Obviously.*”

“Or me,” Xander insisted.

“It was *one* of you,” Celeste said. “You heard her. You both had a motive.”

“Actually, I was just explaining their motives for why they could *possibly* have done it.” I gestured around the clearing. “Everyone here, bar me and Jake, have motives. You, for example. We could argue that when you found out she was using you as research subjects, you all lost your tempers. Collectively, you felt betrayed by the professor and then by Piper. So you could’ve murdered the professor for her betrayal, then Piper because you felt like she was the weakest link and would break under questioning. I mean, she’d already told Kim about the curse, right?”

“Well, yes, she did, but that’s not what happened.” Celeste shook her head and her friends mirrored the action. It was weird how in sync they were.

“Celeste was with *us* when we found the professor,” Tallie insisted.

“Okay. First, she *wasn’t*. I *know* she wasn’t. Second, I notice no one is surprised that she was using the girls as research subjects.” I pointed at Jonas. “I know he knows because he has the book, right? Detailing her research?”

“I found it on the floor.” Jonas shrugged. “No illegality in picking up a book from the floor.”

“Uh-huh.” I wasn’t going to challenge him on the legalities of how he obtained it. I wasn’t exactly a paragon of virtue in that arena either. “And I assume that Xander knew because he found out when he came here to bring the professor her supplies on the night she died.”

All heads turned in Xander’s direction. I could see the indecision on his face, whether to lie or tell the truth.

“Wait, *he* was here?” Jake asked. “How did he get here?”

“He drove. Parked in the same place we did. That’s why no one else saw his car. I assume he was snooping through the professor’s office and realised she’d left her meditation supplies, so he

brought them out to her, only to find out that she wasn't actually doing meditations anymore. That had been the instigating incident. Accidental or not. Now she was studying the interpersonal relationships between the girls. Girls who publicly disliked each other, but found a connection here. And how they functioned without her. Obviously when Xander turned up with her supplies, the professor realised Xander had been snooping and they argued."

"She was alive when I left." Xander held up both hands. "She was *alive* when I left. Yes, we argued. But she was *alive*."

"How did they know?" Jonas pointed to the girls.

"Keith told Celeste and Celeste told the rest of them," I explained.

"I dropped the prof off here—I'm sure you already know that," Keith said to me and I nodded. "And when I was leaving, I ran into Celeste."

"You mentioned it by accident, right?" I asked. "An off-the-cuff remark. One study subject to another. And when she reacted, you realised she hadn't known."

Keith nodded. "I went back to tell the prof, to apologise, but I got halfway there and changed my mind. I figured it wasn't my fault. If her research was so secret, she shouldn't have mentioned it to me. Or at least she should have told me it was a secret. So I left. If I'd gone back, maybe I could've saved her."

"Are you buying this?" Xander asked. "He *clearly* killed her. He told her, she yelled at him so he killed her."

"He would never do that," Kim spat at Xander. I was pretty sure it was the first thing he'd said the whole time he'd been here.

"Of course then there was the argument you overheard," I gestured to Kim. "After you saw your brother's car in the lay-by and after you found the professor dead."

"*He* found her dead?" Jake asked.

"Honestly, I think he was the first person to find the professor dead. After Piper." I inclined my head. "Although Piper witnessed the murder, so she didn't exactly find the body."

"If he found the body, why would he make up an argument?" Jonas asked. "Why didn't he call the police?"

"Because he knew his brother was working with the professor and he saw his brother's car in a lay-by. He knew he was here," I explained. "So he made up an argument. A very vague argument about research. Where he only heard the woman's side. He figured his brother was pretty open about being her subject, so they had no reason to argue about it. But you know who might have a problem?"

“Celeste?” Jake guessed. “He tried to pin it on Celeste?”

I nodded. “That’s why he was in the forest so long. He argued with Celeste. Went the wrong way. Found the professor. Managed to orient himself. Then he found Piper. Then overheard Celeste telling her friends what Keith had let slip, got back to his car and drove home. Is that about right, Kim?”

“You thought *I* did that?” Keith twisted in the dirt to face his brother. “You thought *I* could kill her?”

Kim shook his head. “No, no. I didn’t. Honest. But I didn’t want anyone else putting it on you either.”

Jonas faced the hidden camera. “Aww, isn’t that touching?”

“So you tried to pin it on *me*?” Celeste screeched.

“*You turned me pink!*” Kim yelled back. Keith reached out in front of Kim to stop him from charging Celeste.

“I can’t *believe* you!” Celeste cried, and threw a pebble at Kim. Then a bigger rock. Both of which Kim dodged.

“Hey!” I clapped to get their attention. “Let’s not have any more murders here, okay?”

“So if they didn’t find out they were research subjects until after the professor was dead, they couldn’t have done it.” Jonas said. “So that leaves Keith and Xander.”

“And you.” I pointed out. “But just because they didn’t find out *until* after doesn’t mean they didn’t kill her before. The only person free and clear is Kim.”

“So, you don’t know who did it, after all?” Jonas asked, a mixture of disappointment and satisfaction in his voice.

“Oh, I do.” I pointed at Jonas. “You did.”

Jonas gasped. “Me? What? No.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “You had motive. You had opportunity. You gained from her death. You knew where she’d be. You were sneaking around here the night she and Piper were murdered. No one can alibi you because no one saw you. The downside of being so stealthy.”

“No!” Jonas clutched his hands to his chest. “I didn’t. I *didn’t* murder her. I *didn’t*.”

“Xander dropped off the supplies. You heard them argue. You came to talk to her. Didn’t go like you expected, so you stabbed her. Piper saw you. You chased her down and smashed her head in. Then left.”

“*No!*” Jonas shrieked. “No! That’s not what happened.”

“It was you all along? It was *you!*” Celeste leapt to her feet to charge him, but Keith was faster. He gave the candle to Kim and swung one of his meaty arms around her waist, holding her back.

“It was him?” Keith asked, voice filled with disbelief. “*This* guy.”

“It wasn’t. I *swear* it wasn’t.” Jonas clutched his hands to his head. “I swear.”

“They found the murder weapon, your letter opener, at the scene.” I stressed. “It’s the only thing that links you. Otherwise all the evidence pointed to Keith.”

“But she wasn’t stabbed with a letter opener. She was stabbed with *Keith’s* knife,” Xander said. “So that makes *him* the killer.”

I sighed happily and patted Jonas’ shoulder. “You know, Jonas? When you told me this was your plan to catch the killer, when you laid it out for me, I *really* didn’t think that it would work out. I *really* didn’t think the killer would be that stupid. But you were right.”

“I—I—I was?” Jonas hesitated, glancing around the clearing as if he wasn’t sure what was happening. He straightened up, and tugged the edge of his waistcoat. “I *was*.”

“And you really sold it.” I patted his shoulder again. “Good job.”

He inclined his head with a smug smile. “I did some theatre in high school.”

“What’s happening?” Keith released Celeste, and she stumbled as she backed away from him.

“I’ll let my colleague explain.” Jonas made a sweeping gesture in my direction. “Aurora?”

“The knife she was killed with was your knife.” I pointed to Keith.

“I didn’t kill the prof.” Keith shook his head. “I loved that woman. Not romantically,” he rushed. “But she was a really good person. I would never have killed her.”

“But she *was* killed with your knife. That *he* stole.” I pointed to Xander.

“*He* did it?” Jake asked, while the rest of the clearing silently stared at Xander.

Xander sighed. “Really? Are you just going to keep pointing fingers?”

I glanced around the clearing. “You *literally* just admitted it.”

“What?”

“No one knew what she was stabbed with except the girls who found her and the police. *We* were there and *we* didn’t know until the girls told us.”

Xander shook his head. “So I heard them talking about it.”

“*They* didn’t know it was Keith’s knife,” I pointed out. “So they’d have had to describe it. And why would they describe it to each other?”

“We never spoke about it outside our house,” Wilma said. “Not to anyone.”

“You obviously did and you just don’t remember.” Xander shook his head. “Or maybe I heard the police talking about it. Or maybe I just assumed. I don’t know. Maybe someone else mentioned it.”

I glanced around the clearing, waiting for Charlie to jump out and arrest him. “Come on.” I said to the trees. “He knew what the murder weapon was. What more do you want?”

“Who’s she talking to?” Wilma whispered to Tallie, and they all checked over their shoulders.

“Okay.” I shrugged. I didn’t really know what else Charlie was waiting for, but fine. “I have your fingerprints on the crescent moon necklace you pulled from her neck after you killed her.”

Xander shook his head. “She caught it on her jumper and asked me to hold on to it.”

“And I have the epithelial cells wedged in the hinge of the switchblade,” I said. “*Your* epithelial cells. How do you want to explain them away?”

Xander held his hand up and scanned the group. “I don’t even know what they are.”

“Oh, okay.” I nodded. “They’re skin cells. Our skin is constantly shedding cells. So when you stabbed her, some of *your* cells were on the blade, in the hinge, underneath the blood. The only way for then to get there would be for you to have been in contact with the blade *before* it was used to stab the professor.”

“This is just ridiculous.” Xander blew out his candle and stood. “This is getting silly. You’ve accused everyone. You’re clearly just trying to pin this on me. You can’t get cells from *underneath* blood. And if you could, they likely came from the professor’s clothing. We were together a lot. I probably *shed* on her.”

“Then those cells would have trace elements of her clothing and they don’t. Also, there’s a process called fractrolighting which pulls DNA from skin cells regardless of whether they’ve been in contact with liquids,” I explained. “It’s fairly new, but the police class it as indisputable evidence.”

“*If* that were true, the police would’ve arrested me already,” Xander said. “But it’s not, because I didn’t kill anyone.”

“It takes roughly twenty-four hours for the results to come through. I got a heads up from my guy in the police lab. They know you’re here. They’re coming for you any—” As if on cue, sirens sounded in the night. The piercing sound cut through the dense trees and split the air. They sounded close. Like, in the car park close. I glanced around us. “They have to be close because these trees really keep out the sound.”

“Look.” Xander smiled and walked toward me. “I know you think you have this right and I’m the bad guy, but—”

Xander lunged. He grabbed my arm and pulled me to him so my back was pressed against his chest. He wrapped an arm around the front of my shoulders to keep me pressed to him and pointed something that could’ve been the tip of a gun into my lower back.

“Stay back. Or I’ll shoot her,” Xander declared.

“Oh, dude.” Jake shook his head. “That was *such* a mistake.”

Jonas beckoned us toward him. “I don’t mean to be a bother, but could you possibly come a little further forward so you’re still in frame?”

“You parked in the lay-bys?” Xander asked, jabbing the gun deeper into my back.

“Can I assume this is a confession?” I reached into my pockets and fished out my car keys.

“You can assume what you like.” Xander snatched the keys from my hand and pinned his arm back across my shoulders.

“I know, but I’d really like to hear you say it.”

“Not yet.” Jonas ran off into the trees. I assumed to get the camera.

“That I killed her?” Xander asked edging us backward out of the clearing, while all the others followed. “Fine. I killed her.”

“Because she was going to resign as your advisor?” I continued.

“Because I couldn’t take any more of her stupid talk about female oppression,” he snapped. “Do you have *any* idea how hard it is for me? For me, as a man. It’s hard for *everyone*. Why should women get to complain about it more?”

“Gee, I don’t know you crazy psycho killer,” Celeste shouted at him. “Maybe because you oppress us. Killing a woman because you don’t like what she’s saying?” Celeste threw her hands up. “That’s the *definition* of oppression!”

Jonas was back with his camera and moving around, trying to keep everyone in shot.

“And you stole Keith’s knife?” I asked, trying to keep us on the confession track as he continued to back us out of the clearing.

“When he was shaking his arse at one of his stupid fitness sessions. The ones he uses to pick up women.”

“Hey!” Keith shouted. “I keep people fit and healthy.”

“You prey on women too stupid to know what you are,” Xander shot back.

“You stole his knife and you stabbed the professor?” I asked, ignoring their exchange.

“Yes! *Yes!* I stabbed her. Okay. I stabbed her,” Xander sneered. “You should’ve seen her face. I, for one, thought it was poetic to stab her with *that* knife. Talking about women’s power coming from their—”

Figuring that was enough of a confession, I brought the heel of my boot down on his instep as hard as I could, then threw an elbow back into his abdomen. He screeched and doubled over as he scrambled into the trees. With my car keys.

Jonas pointed after him. “Are you going to—”

“Don’t need to.” I stared into the trees, waiting.

Sounds of a scuffle drifted through the trees, then Xander came stumbling back into the clearing, handcuffed and swearing. Charlie followed. Several constables descended on us. A couple headed straight for Jonas and his camera while two others walked Xander away through the trees and back to the main car park.

“That was dumb.” Charlie pointed a finger in my face.

I knocked it to the side. “He didn’t have a gun. He was using his fingers. If he’d had a gun he’d have grabbed my keys and run. He used me to shield the fact that he didn’t.”

Charlie held up a clear evidence bag with a gun inside.

I stared at it. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” he said with a nod.

I winced at him. “Please don’t tell my parents.”

Chapter Seventeen

“It’s nice to finally have you over,” my mum said to Charlie as we all sat around the kitchen table. “Isn’t it nice?” My mum gave my dad a pointed look.

“It’s fantastic,” he said in a tone that implied it was anything but that and my mum elbowed him in the ribs as my dad doled out yet more pancakes.

“Did you get too much flour?” I asked, as Jake shoved down his fifth pancake.

“No, why?” my dad asked.

I shook my head. “We’ve just had these a lot lately.”

“Do you want me to make you something else?” My dad put the pan back on the hob and faced me while my mum stood to attention, ready to help.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Charlie and Jake exchange a glance.

“No, dad. These are amazing. Is there any chance I could get a few to take home?”

“Absolutely.” My dad flipped the empty pan and resumed cooking duty. “Yes, son,” he said, without turning around. “I’ll make some for you to take with you as well.”

“So, you caught the killer, then?” my mum asked Charlie while whisking the batter.

“You should’ve seen him, Bea,” Jake said. “He launched out of the trees like a tiger and pounced.”

My dad threw a dark look Jake’s way, then another in Charlie’s direction before rolling his eyes at me.

“Oooh, that sounds *very* dramatic.” My mum nudged my dad. “Doesn’t that sound dramatic?”

“Suppose. Though the only reason he had anyone to *pounce* on was because Aurora figured it out.”

“And he didn’t actually pounce. At least we didn’t *see* it. He arrested Xander out of our line of sight.” I gave Jake a pointed stare. “You’re not to spend anymore time with Jonas. Only the facts.”

“So he *didn’t* pounce,” my dad whispered to my mum and, smiling, she bumped him with hip.

Charlie’s phone buzzed, and he frowned at the screen.

“I’m so sorry, I have to go.” Charlie pushed away from the table.

“Oh, that’s a shame.” My dad put on a sad face, and Jake nearly choked on his food.

Charlie didn't rise to the bait, but smiled and nodded at my dad. "Thank you for inviting me in."

"Anytime." My mum gave him a beautiful smile and elbowed my dad again. I wasn't sure if it was for the previous comment or any future comments.

"Anytime," my dad repeated. Only his version sounded much less inviting.

"I'll walk you out." I got up from the table before the awkwardness in the room could suffocate me and led Charlie to the door.

"I know it doesn't look like it," Charlie said as I accompanied him along the front garden path. "But your dad *definitely* likes me."

"What gave it away? The fact he nearly decapitated you with a spatula?"

Charlie nodded. "That was my first clue."

I handed Charlie the tapes, recorders, and the professor's notebooks. "I found these on the floor of the forest. Thought they might be important."

"You found *all* of this out in the forest?" Charlie peered into the bag. "Just discarded. Randomly?"

"Yep. It's funny what you find when you keep your eyes open."

"Okay." He jerked his head in the direction of his car. "You need a lift to the newsroom since Bertha is out of action again?"

"No, we're going to write it up tomorrow. Give Jonas a chance to get his version out. But thank you."

"That's nice of you. And how you let him take credit during the big reveal."

"Yeah, well, we might have accidentally impeded his investigation a couple of times, my editor is on holiday *and* have you read what Jonas writes?" I shook my head. "I'm not worried about getting scooped on the truth."

Charlie laughed. "I have to go. I'll see you on Sunday."

"What? Why? What's happening on Sunday?"

"Your mum invited me over."

"Oh. Really?" I grimaced at him. "And you're ... coming?"

"Wouldn't want to let your dad down." Charlie nodded behind me. I turned and saw my dad standing stoney faced in the doorway, arms folded, spatula in hand. Charlie lifted a hand and waved. "Night."

My dad gave him a stoic nod in return.

Charlie winked at me, climbed into his car, and drove away.

“I don’t like him.” My dad squinted in the darkness at Charlie’s receding lights as I walked back up the path.

“You know there’s no one in the world who could possibly replace you?”

“I know that, lovely.” He put an arm around my shoulders and placed a kiss in my hair, then stared after the car. “But I still don’t like him.”

“Okay. Come and make me more pancakes.” I closed the front door and ushered him into the kitchen.

“Can you explain to your mum how fractrolighting works?” Jake asked. “I was telling her that’s what the police use to get DNA from cells submerged in liquids.”

“There’s no such thing as fractrolighting.” I sat at the table and started on my pancakes. “I just made some stuff up to make it look like we had evidence.”

Jake nodded. “I did wonder why you’d not told me about it.”

“So it was the teaching assistant?” my mum asked. “Because she was going to resign as his advisor?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“What I don’t understand is if that boy was so hell bent against feminism, why was he doing a PhD on it,” my dad said.

“Ah, I have a theory about that.” I shoved some pancake in my mouth, chewed quickly and swallowed. “I think he was doing research on how damaging feminism is. Or something along those lines. Something that would depict it in a negative light. And the professor suspected.”

“We didn’t find anything like that,” Jake said.

“I know, but I think he was undercover somehow. Covert.” I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just think he was doing something underhand, and the professor suspected. Remember, on the tape when he said they were working to the same goal, and she said she didn’t think they were?”

“Oh, yeah.” Jake nodded.

“Then why would he take the supplies to the forest,” my mum said. “Why not just kill her?”

“I think he was trying to be clever. Or spiteful. Putting the professor in a pentagram.” I shrugged. “I don’t really know. Maybe that was his excuse to look innocent when he caught her spying on the girls. Like, he was trying to keep his cover intact. I don’t know. People are weird.”

“And the second girl saw him and he chased her down?” my mum asked and I nodded.

“Where is her stuff?” Jake asked, tossing a chunk of pancake in the air and catching it in his mouth.

“I’m hoping Xander took it. No, I don’t know why,” I said before anyone could ask. “See my previous comment about people being weird.”

“I don’t like it when there isn’t a nice neat bow on it.” Jake sulked and daubed syrup over his remaining two pancakes. It was like watching someone develop diabetes. My mum must have thought the same thing because she ever so casually removed the syrup from the table when he was done.

“But where was Celeste?” Jake said as he rolled his two pancakes up together. “You never explained where she was.”

“Ah. I think that—”

“I’m getting confused with all these people.” My dad said from the hob where he was making still more pancakes. “Who was she again?”

“Okay.” I pushed my plate away. “From the very beginning. The professor starts the meditation sessions and then leaves. The girls induct Piper to the coven. Celeste finds out Kim is cheating, so Piper lures him to the woods where Celeste can catch them and curse him. Over the next week Celeste and her coven play a heap of tricks on Kim and his housemates. Then Kim comes to us and tells us that he’s been cursed.”

“So that all happened *before* you met him?” my dad asked, and I nodded.

“Then that night Keith drops the professor at the forest. He walks her to the clearing. I don’t know why. Being polite. Whatever. In the mean time Celeste, Kim and Piper arrive. They argue. Celeste throws rocks at Piper. Piper runs away. Kim and Celeste argue. Kim runs away. At this point Keith has left the professor and is heading back through the trees to his car and somehow doesn’t run into either Piper or Kim, but manages to bump into Celeste and makes his comment about them both being research subjects.”

“That’s a lot of people running around the forest,” my mum said. “It’s amazing how they all missed each other.”

“*And* Jonas, the uni newspaper guy, he was there as well,” I reminded them. “And yet somehow missed everything. Anyway, Piper happens upon the professor and Xander. Xander’s just finished killing the professor and arranging the pentagram, so he goes off chasing Piper. That’s when Kim finds the professor. Somehow, Xander loops back to the car park without seeing anyone or being seen. Kim *accidentally* finds his way to Piper while the rest of the coven arrive and Celeste tells them what she learned from Keith. As Kim is running back to the road after finding Piper, he hears what Celeste is saying. Then, Katie, Wilma and Tallie go to confront the professor, who they know is there because Keith told Celeste, while Celeste goes looking for Piper to fill her in.”

“So, both Kim *and* Celeste found the poor Piper girl’s body?” my mum asked. “And they didn’t tell anyone?”

“Well, I think Kim was worried they might pin it on him or his brother,” I explained. “And when Celeste found her, she thought *she’d* done it. She’d been throwing rocks at her. The back of Piper’s head was smashed in, so I guess she must’ve assumed *she’d* killed her.”

“But she came back the next night to—what? Pretend to find her? And call the police?” Jake said. “Hang on, she screamed. You said she screamed when she found her.”

“Ah, I think—you know she was holding that big rock?” I asked. “I think she realised she hadn’t killed her, but that someone else had. And that’s why she screamed. In shock, sort of.”

“When you lay it out like that, I’m amazed they all didn’t run into each other.” My dad pointed to my plate, implying I should continue eating.

“I know.” I pulled my plate toward me and began cutting a pancake into bite-sized chunks. “We’re talking mere minutes. Probably as little as a minute’s difference in when people arrived in different places. Imagine, thirty seconds here or there and it would’ve been a *completely* different situation.”

“How did you know it was Xander?” Jake asked. “Or were you just framing Jonas up to see what shook loose?”

“It was the knife.” I reached over and dipped the corner of my pancake in the excess syrup on Jake’s plate. “It was how casually he mentioned it when I first met him.”

“That was *it*?” Jake screwed up his face in disbelief.

“That was the trigger. Something about Jonas lighting the candle triggered that random memory.” I shook my head. “I know. It’s not a great answer, but something about that action made it all slot into place.”

“And it was nice of you to let that university boy write it up first.” My mum squeezed my hand.

“Well, we did kind of mess with his story.”

“I think the police took his footage,” Jake said.

“He filmed it?” my dad asked, and looked at my mum. “If the police have it, maybe we can get a copy. See our little girl in action.”

“Oooh, that would make such a great addition to the family archives,” my mum agreed.

“We don’t—we don’t need to do that.” I shook my head and focused on my pancakes. I was pretty sure no one had mentioned the gun yet and I was too tired to face that onslaught right now.

“I’ll ask him tomorrow.” My dad grabbed a plastic bag and offered it to Jake. “We bought you some pyjamas, son.”

“Oh, we’re not staying over,” I said, feeling my eyelids starting to get heavy.

“Well, with Bertha out of action again, it looks like we are.” Jake peered inside the bag and pulled out a jumper and jogging pants with dinosaurs printed all over them. “These are *awesome*. Thanks, guys.” Jake got up and hugged my dad and then my mum.

I squinted at them as they became fuzzy. “Mum, did you drug me again?”

“No, lovely.” She stroked my hair out of my face as I pushed my plate away and rested my head on the table. “You’re just exhausted.”

I fell asleep with the sounds of my family laughing and talking about which dinosaur they each thought the other would be. I was fairly sure, before I was completely out for the count, that Jake had called me a velociraptor. I was good with that.