

Chapter One

Friday 10:23am

“Why not?” Marcus asked, stretching his long legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles as he leant back in my visitor’s chair. He interlaced his fingers and secured them behind his head as if he were reclining on a sun lounger.

“Are you comfortable?” I asked, more sarcastic than genuine concern. Not that he cared. He was the boss, after all. He could lounge wherever he wanted to. “Can I get you anything? Piña Colada? Foot massage? The TV remote?”

“The foot massage sounds good, but I’ll settle for a reporter who does what I ask?”

“Sure.” I gestured behind him to the door of my tiny basement filing-room-turned-office. “Swing a right out of the door, up the stairs, then another right when you exit the stairwell. Go through a set of double doors and you’ll find yourself in a huge open space filled with a plethora of reporters ready to jump at your every whim.”

“It’s one tiny little article. One tiny, teeny, little article.”

He was tall and athletically built in a slim way. And, despite his self-imposed work uniform of smart, well-ironed grey trousers and tucked-in white shirt, his dark hair was just a touch too long to be considered neat, giving him a permanent slightly dishevelled air.

“No.”

Marcus narrowed his grass-green eyes at me. “I don’t think you can say no to me.”

“Pretty sure I can.”

“You can write it in a day. It will take you *minutes*,” he stressed. “Literally, *minutes* to write up.”

“And yet my answer is still no.” I returned my attention to my email inbox and the mass of unread emails containing a myriad of possible fantastical stories. I’d already found a tip about werewolves I wanted to investigate. It sounded a lot more rational than the usual fare.

“Give me a reason.”

“It’s not my job. How about that?” I held up my finger before he could respond. “I swear, if you say anything along the lines of ‘your job is what I say it is’, you and I are going to have a falling out.”

The door at the top of the stairwell that led down to my office creaked open. The only other person that came down here was Jake, my teenage trainee-slash-partner, and I'd been hoping to get rid of Marcus before he turned up.

"Okay." The way Marcus raised his voice made me think he'd been waiting for Jake all along. "But your job kinda is what I say it is."

Marcus was my editor and occasionally my nemesis, so the former role sort of *did* mean he had the power to assign me stories regardless of whether or not I wanted to do them. But the latter meant it was perfectly okay for me to argue with him about it. At least that was how I saw it.

"What are you saying it is?" Jake asked as he burst through the door of my office with his usual excess of energy.

"It's—" I narrowed my eyes at Jake. "Why do you look so ... clean?"

Jake glanced down at his dark skinny fit jeans and grey hoodie, running a hand through his slightly curly boyband hairdo. "I'm always clean."

"Yeah, but this morning you have a sort of freshly washed vibe." I angled my head as I looked at him, as if the change in perspective would help me narrow down what it was. "Like someone threw some Vanish in the washing machine with you."

Marcus twisted in his chair and looked Jake over. "He looks normal to me."

"I worked out this morning. Maybe that's it." Jake flexed his biceps at me. At least that's what I assumed he was doing. I couldn't see anything through his baggy hoodie.

"You worked out?" Marcus arched an eyebrow out at him.

"Yeah." Jake dropped to the floor, did three pushups, and sprang back to his feet. "I worked out."

Jake's burst of movement wafted a familiar scent across the small office space to me. It was something my mum used. She mixed up her own washing powder because, since my dad was a mechanic and always covered in grease, she needed extra potent stuff to get his clothes clean.

"Has my mum been doing your washing again?" I asked, part disbelief, part resignation.

"She offered." Jake shrugged. "I left some clothes there from the last time I stayed over and —"

"The *last* time you stayed over? You were at my parents' house?" I asked. "*Without* me?"

"You know your dad's helping me fix up my bike," Jake said. "Sometimes it gets late and your mum insists I stay over." Jake dropped into the visitor's chair next to Marcus, sending another waft of my mum's washing powder in my direction. "They need at least *one* child who visits regularly."

“One child who—” I waved my hand to disperse the insanity suddenly clouding the air. “You’re *not* their child. And *I* visit regularly. I visit several times a week. I visit more than it’s probably socially acceptable for a grown woman to visit her parents.”

Jake pressed his lips together and shrugged. “Sure, I mean, if that’s how you want to see it.”

“Are you trying to steal my parents?”

“No.” Jake grinned as he jumped up from his seat and wandered over to Freddie’s tank. “I’m happy to share them with you.”

Freddie was my beautiful blue fighting fish, whose tank sat on top of the waist high filing cabinets that lined the left wall of my basement office. Jake stuck his face in front of Freddie’s tank and Freddie rippled his fins in what looked like recognition.

“I feel like this is an episode of invasion of the body snatchers.” I watched Freddie dance for Jake. “First my parents, then my fish. What’s next? My job?”

“Well, it *is* me who does most of the work,” Jake directed his comment to Marcus.

“It’s funny you should say that.” Marcus sat up straighter in his chair.

I pointed at Marcus, eyes wide in warning. “No.”

“No, what?” Jake looked between us.

“You *heard* me say I’m not doing it.” I told Marcus. “I *know* you heard me. *I’m* not doing it. *We’re* not doing it. Don’t try to sucker him in.”

“What aren’t we doing?” Jake asked.

“I’m glad you asked, young sir.” Marcus patted the seat next to him. “Sit down right here and let me regale you with tales of murder, mystery,” Marcus paused for dramatic effect, “*and mummies.*”

“Mummies? Like, Egyptian mummies?” Jake abandoned Freddie and dropped into the seat next to Marcus. He leant forward, excitement dancing in his eyes, eager to buy what Marcus was selling. “You’ve got me.”

“Don’t do that.” I waved my hand at Jake, but spoke to Marcus. “That’s not cool. Don’t lead him on like that.”

“I’m not leading him on,” Marcus said. “I’m explaining the situation.”

“No, you’re brainwashing him. It’s *massively* uncool to dupe him into doing this article.”

“I want to hear about the mummies.” Jake shushed me while focusing on Marcus. “Tell me about the mummies.”

Marcus dropped his voice an octave lower than usual. I guessed he was going for the whole movie voice over type of effect. “It’s two thousand B.C.. Sandstorms are whipping the desert into a

frenzy, but the great pyramids stand strong against the elements. The pharaoh takes shelter in his palace. Wanting to use the time to discuss affairs of state, he seeks out his high priest, his most trusted advisor. The one person he relies on above all others. He finds the high priest in his chambers, but the priest is not alone.”

“Who’s with him?” Jake whispered, completely enthralled by Marcus’s tale.

Marcus paused for yet more dramatic effect. “The pharaoh’s mistress.”

Jake gasped. “No.”

“They’re desperately in love,” Marcus rushed on, “but it’s forbidden for anyone to touch the pharaoh’s mistress. Caught and trapped by the pharaoh’s guards, the mistress stabs herself to death so the high priest can escape, trusting that he will bring her back. Back ... from the underworld.”

Marcus dropped his voice to a whisper. “Back ... from the dead.”

“Are you listening to this?” I asked Freddie. Freddie rippled his fins at me, which I interpreted as a fishy eye roll.

“What happened then?” Jake asked, completely ignoring me.

“The high priest retreats to a secret temple in the desert where he attempts to bring his love back from the dead, but the pharaoh finds him,” Marcus rushed on in a hushed voice. “The pharaoh and his guards interrupt the ritual and, for his treachery, the pharaoh buries the priest alive in a ritual known as the Hom-Dai. A ritual so heinous it had never before been performed.”

“No!” I yelled and slapped the desk. “*You must not read from the book!*”

“What?” Jake jerked in surprised and scanned the desk. “What book?”

“The book of the dead.” I gestured to Marcus, who was pursing his lips at me. “The one Evelyn reads from which brings Imhotep back from the dead where he sucks the life from all the people who opened this mini chest thing, so he’s strong enough to raise his true love, Anck-Su-Namun, from the depths of the underworld.” I paused. “Coincidentally, I never understood why he sucked dry the people who opened that chest. What was so special about the trunk *that* it would awaken him? Was it full of Anck-Su-Namun’s organs? Or his organs? But he was alive when they buried him, so he had to have had all *his* organs. And why would opening the chest bring *him* back to life, but not opening his sarcophagus? I mean, I understand from a story perspective and killing off side characters, but not from a logical perspective. Or perhaps they both had to be opened. That would make sense, since they buried him alive. But if he was alive, whose organs were in those jars?” I frowned to myself. “Maybe I missed something. I’ll have to rewatch it.”

“Someone’s been sucked to death by a mummy?” Jake whispered, his eyes so wide I feared they might fall out of his head.

“Not just one person.” I slowly flipped up every finger on my right hand. “*Five* people.”

“*Five* people?” Jake’s eyes were now so wide, it made me uncomfortable to look at them.

“Yes. In the film. Called *The Mummy*. From a million years ago,” I said. “The plot of which Marcus just recounted in the hope of getting you interested in the very dull article he wants to dump on us.”

“Honestly?” Jake shook his head at Marcus. “You didn’t need to do that. You had me at mummies. We’ll do it.”

“Excellent.” Marcus rubbed his hands together in what looked like glee. “This is excellent.” I shook my head. “No, it’s not excellent. Because we’re *not* doing this. We are *not* doing this.”

“Jake thinks you should.” Marcus jerked a thumb at Jake. “I had Jake at ‘mummies’.”

“Well, *Jake’s* not in charge in here.”

“No,” Marcus conceded. “But *I* am and *I* think you should do it.”

Jake twisted to face me, bouncing in his seat, eyes brimming with excitement. “Please? *Please*, can we?”

“No. Because despite what Marcus said, he wants us to write an article about the museum exhibit because Kaley’s on maternity leave and no one else will do it.”

“It sounds fun, though,” Jake argued. “The love triangle? The Hom—what did you call it?”

“Hom-Dai,” Marcus clarified, lowering his voice to a hushed whisper again. “The worst of all ancient curses.”

“The Hom-Dai is not a real thing,” I said to Jake, then turned to Marcus. “Would you stop leading him on?”

“How do you know?” Jake asked me. “It could *totally* be a real thing. Maybe that movie was based on historical events. ”

I picked up the receiver of my desk phone and offered it to Jake. “Hello. Reality is calling. It would like to talk to you.”

Jake faced me, deadly serious. “Tell Reality I’m busy with a mummy. I’ll call back later.” He leant toward me and lowered his voice as if we were having a private conversation, despite Marcus being less than a metre away. “I really think this will be great. I think we should do it.”

Marcus leant forward and joined our whispered conversation. “He really thinks it will be great. He thinks you should do it.”

I sighed. “This is like trying to reason with a parrot who only knows a select few words and doesn’t really understand what any of them mean.”

“Mummies and curses?” Jake repeated. “This is *right* up our alley. I *really* think we should do it. Can we do it? I think we should do it.”

“This is *not* up our alley. Don’t side with him.” I whined, feeling fairly certain the battle was already lost. I jabbed a finger in Marcus’ direction. “*He’s* the enemy. He has literally spun you a crazy, purely fictional tale to get you onside.”

“The enemy?” Marcus straightened his tie. “Actually, I’m the boss.”

“From where I’m sitting, they’re currently the same thing,” I muttered.

“Since that’s how you already feel ...” Marcus cleared his throat. “Now seems like a good time to mention that head office wants you to start maintaining a social media presence.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“Oh, *yes!*” Jake fist-pumped the air. “*Finally.*”

I glanced at Jake, then turned back to Marcus. “What?”

“Over the past few months, views on your articles have spiked. The guy from the web development team was talking about backlinks and site maps and hot spots and other techno jargon I pretended to understand because I’m the boss and I’m supposed to understand,” Marcus explained. “The main thing I got from it was that your articles about the faux vampire murders piqued the public’s interest ... in you. Over ninety percent of online visitors who read that article read at least one more of your articles. The average is more like six. As a direct response, online subscriptions have soared. Apparently, the techno people can tell which pages people have subscribed through and people read your articles and then subscribe for notifications for your new articles. And they pin them or share them or tweet them. Which generates more backlinks and a wider reach.”

“But I’m exempt,” I stressed. “That was our agreement. You promised me after that ... incident. You *promised* me I wouldn’t have to do it anymore.”

Marcus shrugged. “You’re a victim of your own success.”

“I don’t see what the problem is,” Jake said. “Our twitter feed will be *off the chain.*”

“Off the chain?” I mocked. “Speak like a normal person or you’re fired. And no. It will not be ‘off the chain’ because I’m not doing it.” I shook my head at Marcus and shrugged. “No. Tell them no. I’m not doing it. I’ll quit first.”

“I’ll do it,” Jake volunteered.

“Sold!” Marcus clapped and leapt up from his chair. “I’m *so* glad you were here for this meeting, Jake. I’ll make a point to schedule future meetings around your availability.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I cried at Jake. “Do you not hear me saying ‘no’? Do you suffer from selective deafness? Stop agreeing to things I’m vehemently saying no to or I’ll fire you.”

“You can’t fire him,” Marcus said. “Only I can fire him and I think he’s doing a wonderful job.”

“Thanks, Marcus.” Jake reached a fist in Marcus’ direction and Marcus bumped it with his own.

“He’s only saying that because you’re doing what he wants.” I could hear the edge of a screech in my voice. It happened sometimes when I was surrounded by idiocy. “What is happening here?”

“Are you alright?” Jake frowned at me as if he genuinely couldn’t see the problem. “You seem a little uptight this morning.”

“You should get her a coffee on the way to the museum.” Marcus placed a five-pound note on the desk. “On me.”

Jake waved the note at Marcus. “Just her? If you want me at my best, I’ll need a coffee as well. And a pastry. You’ll need to at least double this.”

“Okay.” Marcus plucked the five-pound note from Jake’s hand and replaced it with a twenty-pound note. “Bring me a gripping article and an off the chain social media presence.”

Jake pocketed the money with a wink in my direction as if he’d won us something. “Done.”

“I’m sorry.” I waved off Jake’s excitement over the twenty-pound note. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but can we get back to the part where I’m saying no? To everything?”

Marcus shook his head and practically skipped out of my office. “Nope. Deal’s been struck. Money’s changed hands.”

“With my *trainee*,” I stressed in the hope that might somehow invalidate the whole thing once Marcus came to his senses.

“Partner,” Jake corrected.

“Not the time,” I said to Jake and followed Marcus out of my office into the stairwell. “I’m not doing this, Marcus. I’m not.”

“Your *partner* already agreed. To the mummies and the social media presence,” Marcus called as he jogged up the stairs. “No take backs.”

“He’s not my partner,” I shouted after him.

“Have fun at the museum.” Marcus exited the stairwell. The door eased closed behind him.

“Marcus? Marcus!” I waited for him to come back and change his mind, but he didn’t. I stood in the stairwell, staring at the door, almost like if I wished hard enough, the whole social media thing would simply disappear. I could accept the museum story. I didn’t want to do it, but I could accept it. But social media? That was a step too far.

“What’s the problem?” Jake asked when I slouched back into the office. “Everyone tweets. I don’t know why it took Marcus so long to get around to you. Everyone else at the paper has to do it.”

“We had an agreement. There was an incident and—”

“What type of incident?”

I grimaced at the memory. “The type I’d rather not talk about. The important thing to know is that I despise social media unless I’m using it to stalk someone.”

“Everyone else here does it,” Jake repeated, as if that would somehow make me realise it was a fantastic opportunity.

“Yes, but everyone else here has more topical news. It makes sense for those guys to post stuff.” And they were all too dumb to refuse to do it.

“We hunt *monsters*,” Jake stressed. “How much cooler is our social media going to be?”

I could list all the ways it would not be cooler, but then Jake might change his mind about wanting to do it and I’d have to do it. And I did *not* want to do it.

“You know what, Jake?” I placed my hand on his shoulder in a fatherly manner. “You’re absolutely right. This is a great idea. We *should* do it. *You* should do it. You have at it.”

Jake narrowed his eyes at me. “I don’t like it when you do a one-eighty and agree with me. It creeps me out. It makes me feel like you’re teaching me a lesson.”

“Well, to live is to learn.” I pointed to his phone. “And I’d get Butts to set up the accounts. She’s great with extra layers of security and stuff, right? You’ll need the extra layers.”

Butts was Jake’s computer genius friend from uni. She was a teenage girl with huge, beautiful brown eyes like chocolate buttons. Teenagers being teenagers, they turned a beautiful feature into a less flattering nickname, hence Butts.

Jake stared at me for a long moment, then grinned and shook his head. “You’re messing with me.”

I shrugged. “Okay.”

“This is going to be awesome!”

I shrugged again. “Okay.”

“And did you hear what Marcus was saying? About how we’re singlehandedly upping the paper’s subscription?” Jake blew on his nails and then polished them on his hoodie. “Because we’re *that* good.”

“I don’t think that was *exactly* what he said.”

“It was what I heard.” Jake dropped back into the chair as I rounded the desk and sat at my computer. “I didn’t even know we had a subscription.”

“How did you think we stayed afloat?”

Jake shrugged. “I didn’t really think about it.”

“You don’t know how the company who pays your wages makes their money to pay your wages?” I asked. “You’re like a super villain’s ideal employee.”

“Thanks.” Jake grinned at me. “That’s probably the best compliment you’ve ever paid me.”

“It was an *insult*.”

“So, people pay to read our stories?”

I stared at him. “*No*. The stories are posted on the website for free. The paper sells advertising space online like they do in the paper version. When he’s talking about subscribers, he means how many people have signed up to get notified when we post a story.”

“Cool. Cool.” Jake nodded. “So, if something happened to the newspaper and we had to go solo, we could do the same? Sell advertising? Or maybe we could do our own subscription based thing.”

I stilled as alarm bells clanged in my head. “What do you mean ‘if something happened to the newspaper’?”

Jake’s face was temporarily expressionless. “You know, like, in general.”

“No, I don’t know, ‘like, in general’. I would prefer for it to be, ‘like, in specifics’.”

“I was—” Jake cut himself off and shrugged. “I meant, you can’t do this forever. Things change. People leave. People, y’know, grow.”

“What do you know?” I frowned at him over the desk. “And don’t say nothing, because if you knew nothing you wouldn’t have made that comment.”

“Nothing. Not really.”

“Not really is not nothing. Spill it.”

Jake checked over his shoulder at the closed office door. “You know Gary? Joey’s dad?”

“The guy who *owns* the newspaper?” A heavy weight settled in the pit of my stomach. “Yeah.”

“He was upset the other week because his parents are getting divorced.”

“Joey or his dad? His *dad* was upset because *his* parents are getting divorced?”

“No. *Joey* is upset because *his* parents are getting divorced.”

“That makes more sense. We need to work on your grammar, though.” I waited for Jake to elaborate on the divorce revelation. When he didn’t, I motion my hand in a circle for him to continue. “*And?*”

“And he was upset about it.”

“*And?*”

“And nothing.”

“No, Jake. No.” I shook my head. “He said something that made you think his dad was selling the newspaper because if he hadn’t, you wouldn’t think he was selling the newspaper.”

“He didn’t say anything about that.” Jake shrugged. “I don’t know. I was thinking it would be good for us to have an escape route. Just in case.” He waved the phone at me. “And social media is the way we’re going to build our audience.”

Jake tapped around on his phone as if he had no clue of the immensity of the fallout from the bomb he’d dropped.

“Jake?” I clicked my fingers at him to get his attention. “Hey?”

“What?”

I spoke slowly and enunciated as clearly as physically possible. “Is he selling the paper?”

“I don’t know. Honestly. I only know Joey said they’re getting divorced and splitting assets and stuff.”

“Assets in general? They discussed *assets*? Not specific things? Ownership of the paper was not mentioned *specifically*?” I stressed. “Even in passing?”

“Not that Joey told me.” Jake hesitated. “But I remember that his dad bought the paper for his mum. Like, as a gift or something. I think she did journalism at uni a million years ago.”

I sat back in my chair and mulled that over. “Is it amicable?”

“Is what amicable?”

“Relations between the Britain and Europe after Brexit.”

“What?”

“The *divorce*, you simpleton. Is *the divorce* amicable?”

“Oh. I don’t know.” Jake shrugged. “I think so. I don’t know. Why does that matter?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “How do you *still* know nothing about people? Because if it’s amicable and Gary bought the paper for his wife, he might give it to her in the divorce—that’s if it’s not already in her name. Which is *likely* good for us. If she has an interest in journalism, we might be okay. If it’s not amicable, he might close the paper down out of spite.”

Jake waved his phone at me. “Which is exactly why we need to get moving on our social media stuff.”

“If I was the type of person who swore, this would be the perfect moment for a colourful string of expletives.” I exhaled a long breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. It felt like a tornado warning had just gone off and now we were waiting for the storm to hit with no actual idea of when or how powerful it would be. “Don’t tell anyone about that, okay?”

Jake nodded. “Okay. Now, tell me about this mummy.”

“Hey.” I snapped my fingers at him and motioned for him to look at my face, so I could see him recognising I was serious. “Tell me you understand. We’re talking about people’s lives. Their jobs. Their livelihoods. The way they put food on their tables. We can’t say anything about anything until we know *something* for sure. And maybe not even then. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

He nodded again. “Yeah, it’s serious. I hear you. Can we talk about the mummy now?”

I sighed. “Sure. Let’s talk about the mummies.”

He tapped around on his phone for a few more seconds and then leant forward to imply I now had his full attention. “What are we investigating? An ancient murder mystery? I love a good murder mystery.”

I barely heard his question. My brain was swirling with the horror of possibly having to find a new job and whether anyone else knew. Whether Marcus had an inkling. And the awful, *awful* possibility that Jake might be right about building a social media presence so we could pivot if necessary.

“Hey?” Jake snapped his fingers in front of my face, just like I did to him all the time. “Earth to Aurora?”

“What?” I blinked at him. “What was the question?”

“I said, are we investigating an ancient Egyptian murder mystery?”

“We’re not investigating anything. We’re writing a piece about the new exhibit at the museum.”

Jake nodded. “Okay, what’s our angle?”

“That there’s a new exhibit at the museum.”

“And the mummy has brought a curse to life and everyone who opened the casket died in horrific ways?”

“No, that it’s a new exhibit at the museum.”

“So,” he drew the word out as the excitement in his eyes dimmed to confusion. “How is that a story for this desk? This is the paranormal investigations desk.”

“It’s *not* a story for this desk. Which was what I was telling Marcus before you jumped in and said you thought we should do it.”

“Oh. I’ve changed my mind.” Jake squinted at his phone as it buzzed in his hand. “A new museum exhibit is hardly going to set the internet on fire.”

“Exactly, and you brought *both* of those problems into our lives.”

“Whoa.” Jake leant back in his seat. “That’s unfair.”

“Maybe. But then so is life.”

Jake gave me his sad puppy dog eyes. “This is really just an article on a museum exhibit opening?”

“This is really just an article on a museum exhibit opening.” I sighed as he pouted at me and pushed back from my desk. “But let’s see if we can shape it into some sort of monster mystery that will titillate our readers and the internet alike.”

“What are you doing?” Jake asked as I shrugged into my leather jacket. It was a little snug over my maroon hoodie, T-shirt and vest combo but I found that comforting. Like being wrapped in a weighted blanket.

“I’m putting my coat on. It’s a fairly common occurrence when one is preparing to venture outside into the cold.”

“But—” Jake glanced around the office. “You’re not leaving me to do this?”

“You mean because you agreed to do the story despite hearing my numerous protests?” I asked. “No. Although I should to teach you a lesson.” I switched my computer off and grabbed my rucksack. “Kaley already set up a meeting with the museum this morning. I know it might not be our usual fare, let’s do our best.”

“So this is really nothing more than a story about a super old dead guy wrapped in bandages?” Jake asked.

“Yep,” I agreed. “It’s nothing more than that.”

Chapter Two

Friday 11:32am

“I can’t believe Marcus tricked us like that,” Jake said for the millionth time as we strolled along the street toward the museum.

“As I keep telling you, he didn’t trick us, dude. He tricked *you*.”

One of the best things about Manchester was that most things were in walking distance of the newsroom. Which was just as well because the whole traffic situation was a nightmare.

It was chilly, early November, with that delicious winter crispness to the air. I snuggled further into my woolly turquoise scarf and scrunched my feet in my beautiful, slightly battered, red cowboy boots. My mum had bought me some hiking socks that made my feet feel as if they were wrapped in hot-water bottles.

“I didn’t see you calling him out,” Jake muttered as he sipped some of his coffee. I’d noticed caffeine never had the standard energising effect on him. It simply exaggerated whatever his mood was. And now it was grumpy.

“Really? Because I very clearly remember telling you, several times, this wasn’t our type of story and you shushing me.”

“Whatever,” he muttered. “And shouldn’t we have done some sort of research before just showing up?”

“This *is* the background research,” I explained. “We’re going to run it like a normal story rather than a fluff piece on an exhibit opening.”

“Cool.” Jake nodded. “So what exactly does that mean?”

“We’re going to get a vibe for the museum, talk to the folks that are involved in the exhibit, and see what they say about mummies. Then we’re going to go back to the office and do some research to corroborate what they did or didn’t say. And *then* we’re going to come back tonight and, if we’ve found something good in our research, ask some more questions.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight. When we attend the soft opening.”

“What opening?”

“Don’t you listen when I speak?” I asked. “Tonight, the museum is having a soft opening of the exhibit. A small preview for the people involved. People who worked on the dig, who worked on prepping the exhibit, who funded it, special museum patrons. That sort of thing.”

“I can’t tonight. I have a date.”

I inclined my head. “You *had* a date. Now you have to work.”

“Oh, come on.” Jake stopped in the middle of the pavement. “That’s not fair.”

“You’re *kidding*, right?” I asked, pulling him out of the way of the passing pedestrians so his temper tantrum didn’t inconvenience anyone else but me. “You agreed to do this story. I didn’t want to. I *told* you I didn’t want to, but you agreed anyway. And now you think it’s unfair for me to request that you actually *do* the story you agreed to do after ignoring my protests? If it was a normal story, I would *possibly* let it slide. But I *actively* didn’t want to do this. You heard my protests and agreed, anyway. Time to be a grownup, kid, and deal with the consequences of your actions.”

“Fine.” He pouted at me. “But I’m bringing a date.”

“To a work event?”

“Like you’re not going to bring your parents,” he scoffed.

“Yeah, I’m going to see if it’s okay to bring my parents. My parents, who actually have an interest in this stuff and won’t affect me doing my job. Just rearrange the date for tomorrow.”

“I don’t see why I have to come. I said I’d manage our social media accounts. That’s a lot of work.” Jake threw his hands in the air, nearly spilling his coffee over himself. “What more do you want?”

A mature lady paused in passing and rested her hand on my arm. “It gets better. One day they leave home.” She squeezed my arm, gave me a pitying look and carried on her way.

I gestured to the retreating figure. “Even random strangers think you’re being childish.”

“Random strangers think you’re old enough to be my mum.”

“Random strangers are going to watch me dump that coffee over you if you don’t quit it,” I warned. “Why are you suddenly so grumpy? I thought you were excited about this.”

“I don’t want to do this story,” he whined at me like a toddler. “Marcus made it sound fun, but it’s going to be like a school trip to a museum, all dry information and old things. And then we have to write it up in an interesting way.”

I sighed. “Okay. For this story, how about you deal with the whole social media side and I’ll do everything else? I’ll do the research, the interviews, write it all up and you just focus on finding fun things to post about? And let this be a lesson that when I say no to something, you agree with me. *Me*. Not Marcus, because he turned your head with fancy tales of mummies, murder, mystery, and mayhem. With me.”

“Okay,” he muttered. “I’m sorry for not listening. Can I still bring my date?”

“Suppose.” I nudged him with my shoulder, and we started walking again. I directed him across the road to the museum. “And you never know, there might be something spooky about this mummy. They *did* have an ancient Egyptian statue that rotated in its cabinet and cursed those who dared lay eyes upon it. There was talk that, because those statues were created as a home for spirits, it was the spirit that was making it move.”

“What?” Jake tripped over his feet as we stopped at the curb and I had to grab his hoodie to jerk him backward before he fell into the road. “There’s a haunted statue?”

“It was an offering to Osiris, I think,” I said, checking both ways, waiting for a gap in traffic while still holding onto his hoodie, as if it were reins on a toddler. “But I can’t remember the name of the actual person they made it for.”

“Are you serious?” Jake had his phone out and was tapping without even looking at the screen. “How do you spell Osiris? Who is Osiris?”

“Really? Not even the most basic knowledge?” I checked the road was clear and guided Jake across. “He’s mostly known as the god of death or the underworld, but he was also the god of fertility, life, resurrection—”

“Resurrection?” Jake stopped in the middle of the road. “Like, mummy resurrection?”

I tightened my grip on the hoodie and dragged him forward before we were run over. “Sure. Why not?”

“I *knew* this was going to be a great story.”

“Uh-huh.”

I released Jake once we were safely on the pavement in front of the museum. He dumped his empty coffee take-out cup in the nearby bin without taking his eyes from his phone. This was going to be a long few days. And it would *only* be a few days. I figured the whole social media thing couldn’t possibly last longer than that. Surely. Marcus would see sense. He had to.

The gothic building stood tall in the morning sun, yet the daylight did nothing to diminish the creepy vibe with its mini turrets and spires and utterly haunted house vibe. It wasn’t as though the potential hauntiness of a building intimidated me. I was in and out of supposedly haunted houses all the time. It was more that museums were full of dead things and that unsettled me. At least in cemeteries, the dead things were confined to boxes and buried six feet deep, so if the zombie apocalypse happened, a cemetery was probably one of the safest places to be.

Inside the foyer a skeletal T-Rex greeted us, boney mouth open in a silent roar and one foot in the air as if he’d been frozen mid-chase.

“I always forget how small they were,” I said as I stood in front of him.

“You think he’s small?” Jake tilted his head back to look up at the T-Rex’s skeletal face.

“When I think about dinosaurs, I always imagine them to be huge. Like, twelve-stories-high huge. It’s like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.”

Jake paused in taking a photo to look at me. “Are you going to tell me you don’t think it leans?”

I wandered around the side of the skeleton. “No, it leans. I just expected it to be bigger.”

“Isn’t it, like, ten floors?” Jake asked.

“Eight. But the Eiffel Tower is only three floors so—”

Jake paused in taking his photo to look at me. “Are you trying to tell me the Leaning Tower of Pisa is nearly *three times* as tall as the Eiffel Tower?”

“No, I’m saying that judging something by how many floors it has isn’t a great way to estimate height.”

Jake frowned at the T-Rex and looked back at me. “Even though that’s how *you* just judged the dinosaur?”

“*Now* is when you choose to listen to me? *Now*?”

Jake laughed and returned to his photo taking.

“Hi there,” a girl in her early twenties and rocking a whole 1950s vibe, right down to the black and white polka dot skirt, blonde victory hair rolls and bright red lipstick trotted up to us. She reminded me of an old-fashioned pin-up model.

I gestured to her victory rolls. “I love your hair. It looks like it takes a lot of effort.”

“Not once you get the hang of it.” She mimed pushing up her hair with one hand. She didn’t actually touch it, yet still somehow got a few loose strands caught in the rainbow-patterned plaster on her thumb. “Paper cut,” she said when she saw me watching as she pulled the strands free and folded her thumb into her fist. “Can I help direct you? I’m Marie. I’m the assistant exhibit coordinator.”

“Actually, my name is Aurora North and this—”

“I’m Jake. Jake Cutter.” He practically pushed me out of the way as he offered the girl his hand. She shook it, keeping her plaster wrapped thumb away from his skin.

“Hi.” She smiled at him with what looked like a practice response to that type of male fawning.

“We’re reporters. We’re actually doing a story on the Egyptian exhibit that opens tonight. We were hoping to—”

She leant forward and lowered her voice. “You want the behind-the-scenes scoop on the curse?”

“We would *love* the behind-the-scenes scoop on the curse,” Jake parroted before I could respond.

“Well,” she looked over her shoulder, then leant toward us and lowered her voice, “it’s said that anyone who looks on the face of the mummy shall be cursed with a terrible fate.”

“It’s said by whom?” I asked.

She blinked at me as if startled I’d questioned her. “It’s by—it’s on—it’s in the sarcophagus,” she stammered.

“On it or inside it? Like, actually *inside* it?” I asked, and she nodded. “Huh. That seems like a dumb place to put a warning. If you don’t want the sarcophagus opened, why put the warning on the *inside*.”

“Spite?” Jake asked.

“Pretty sure that says more about *you* than anything else, but maybe.” I turned back to the girl. “What did the warning actually say?”

A frown briefly marred her features. “That anyone who looked on the face on the mummy would be cursed.”

“Cursed? Or cursed with a terrible fate?” I asked. “Because the first time you mentioned a terrible fate and ‘cursed’ and ‘cursed with a terrible fate’ are two very different things. Also, the warning didn’t say ‘the face of the mummy’, did it?”

“Why?” Jake asked.

“Because I’m pretty sure the term ‘mummy’ only came into use in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. So how could the ancient Egyptians write a word unknown to them inside of a sarcophagus?”

“Huh.” Jake faced the girl. “She does make a good point.”

“I didn’t—” the girl shook her head. “I’m just telling you what I heard.”

I nodded. “Cool. Is there anyone around who is directly involved in the exhibit?”

“Erm.” She stepped back and glanced around. I had the feeling she was looking for an escape rather than someone to foist us off on.

“Did you already do some research on this?” Jake whispered while Marie’s attention was elsewhere.

“Curse and tombs and terrible fates?” I shrugged. “I find this stuff fascinating.”

“I thought you didn’t want to write this article,” Jake whispered.

“A fluff piece? I don’t. That doesn’t mean I’m not fascinated by the topic.”

“Everything okay, Marie?” A short, rotund man who reminded me of the Fat Controller in Thomas the Tank Engine strode out from behind the T-Rex. He even wore the same pinstripe suit.

“Bart, these two say they’re reporters.” Marie beckoned him over.

“Oh! Miss ... Watts?” Bart gave me the once over as he approached. His attention lingering on my boots for slightly longer than was polite, before giving Jake the same treatment.

“Actually, Kaley—Miss Watts—is away on maternity leave,” I explained. “I’m Aurora North and this is Jake Cutter.”

“I’m Bartholomew Collins. The exhibit coordinator.” He forced a smile and offered his hand. “We’re so pleased you could make it,” he said in a tone that implied the opposite. “So pleased.”

“Not as pleased as we are,” I said. “We had to fight tooth and nail to get this assignment. After Kaley had to take her leave a week earlier than planned, there was almost a brawl to be the ones fortunate enough to be able to write up this article.”

“Really.” He arched an eyebrow at me. Almost like he wanted to believe me, but needed a little more. “It’s a shame Miss Watts couldn’t make it. She was very knowledgeable about this area when we spoke. I do hope she’s alright.”

“She’s fine. It was just a precaution and I’ll pass on your well wishes. And Jake and I might not be quite as well informed, but we are *equally* passionate.” I gave him my best reassuring smile. It always helped to sell a lie. I might not be interested in writing a fluff piece about a museum exhibit, but if I was going to put my name to it, I was going to do it as well as I could, and it would help if he was onside. And I really did find Egyptian history interesting. “On our way here, I was telling Jake about the *Caveman versus Neanderthal* exhibit from a few years ago. And *After The Sun Dies*. I’ve also heard great things about the *Futures Pasts Futures* exhibit, but to be honest, my heart really lies with ancient Egypt. I find the entire culture so fascinating. The Sphinx, for example. Tell me, do you think it was originally a monument to Amenemhet the second or to Anubis with his jackal head and then later reshaped?”

Bart clucked his tongue. “What do you think?”

“I think it was Anubis. The pharaoh’s head is out of proportion with the body. It’s very obvious in real life. Sometimes photos can distort perspective. And I think when you consider the pyramids were built as tombs, in context, it makes sense that it would be Anubis.”

He leant forward and lowered his voice, his face stretching into a smile. “I think you’ll make a fine replacement for Miss Watts.”

“Thank you. I know Kaley was attending the exhibit tonight—”

“The invitation obviously extends to both of you.” He gestured to Jake as well.

“Thank you. Since we’re playing catch up, I was hoping we might be able to snoop around a little. Get a little more background for the story. Would that be okay?”

“Of course.” He gestured for us to walk ahead of him, but since we didn’t know where we were going, he had to dart around us to lead the way while Marie brought up the rear. “Do you know much about the exhibit?”

“Not really. We only found out about it this morning,” I said. “And Kaley was one of those lucky people who managed to keep a lot of information in her head. She didn’t have any notes for us.”

“Well, we can give you a very quick peek behind the scenes.” He spoke as he waddled past the skeleton of a T-Rex without even giving it a second glance and around a corner, away from the display. “We don’t want to give too much away and ruin the surprise tonight.”

“There will be other reporters there tonight?” I asked.

“No. You are the only member of the press we invited.” Bart lowered his voice as if he were about to share a secret. “I have only recently taken over this role and my predecessor extolled the virtues of Miss Watts and her well-researched and vibrant articles on previous exhibits. When we were preparing this exhibit, she seemed like a fine choice. Normally we’d go a lot wider on press coverage, but since we’re displaying a mummy ...” he trailed off.

“Ah, yes.” I spoke a little louder than necessary because I could hear Jake whispering something that definitely sounded like he was hitting on Marie. I threw a closed mouth frown over my shoulder at him. “The controversy over displaying mummies.”

Bart nodded with a wince. “Exactly and we wanted—not media coverage we could control exactly, but—”

“Someone friendly,” I finished for him.

“Why’s that?” Jake asked from behind me.

“Intrigue versus respect,” Marie explained while Bart swiped an access card over the keypad on a “staff only” door. The door beeped and the keypad flash green. Bart depressed the handle to stop it from locking again, but didn’t move forward.

“Exactly,” Bart said. “The truth is, people are fascinated by ancient Egypt and the mummification process and, in fact, the whole burial process. Just look at how many people visit the Valley of the Kings. There’s a mystery and beauty and richness to this history and because of that, because of the—I don’t want to say novelty, but the fanfare they were buried with, it’s easy to

forget that you're looking at a person. A person who died and was buried by their loved ones. The concern is that they're being displayed as an attraction or spectacle rather than with the respect that the remains of human beings deserve."

"I've visited the Valley of the Kings," I said. "And I have to agree. Even with the tour guide and his knowledge in that area, it was very easy to forget that we were basically gawping at a cemetery." I flipped my hand over. "On the other hand, it was truly amazing to see and be able to experience that aspect of history, so I think being able to see these things and understand the workings of their society is incredibly important."

Bart beamed at me. "No wonder they sent you to replace Miss Watts. Admittedly, I was initially concerned by the footwear. But I should have known better than to judge a book by its cover. That is the *exact* type of article I was hoping for. One that doesn't simply extoll the virtues of our exhibit—of which there are many—but can provide a balanced view of the pros and cons of such an exhibition. Something that delves into the reasons we both should and possibly should not display these types of historical objects."

Bart pushed the door open, and we followed him along a short clinical white hallway until we were faced with another keypad locked door. He swiped the keycard and led us into a workshop type of area.

"This is where the exhibits are examined and readied for display. Just a quick peek now." Bart gestured around the room which was cluttered with a weird mix of space age technology and old-fashioned archeological tools. The walls and countertops were lined with a variety of tools and equipment that looked like they belonged in different eras of history. Sturdy wooden shelving lined the room and pointed to the centre, like spokes on a bicycle wheel. In that centre, several tables of different widths were lined up next to each other, almost like a barcode. Randomly, hanging on one of the shelves was a tuxedo covered with a clear plastic bag. Anywhere else it would've seemed out of place, but it was just one more oddity in a room filled with oddities.

On the very middle table lay a sarcophagus. Several people were milling around it as we approached. It looked like an enormous slab of stone, shaped like a person. A very tall and broad person. It was so weird to look at up close it reminded me of a Double Decker chocolate bar. The two halves fit together perfectly, but were still somehow drastically different.

The lower half, beneath the horizontal seal, was covered with inscriptions and drawings, while the top half was chiselled to look like a person.

"Takes your breath away, doesn't it?" Bart whispered.

I nodded. "It really does."

“Is the mummy still in there?” Jake shuffled forward, then back, then forward again. Almost as if he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to get closer or keep his distance.

“No, we’ve already placed him in a sealed display cabinet for this evening so—ah. Theo? Bev?” Bart cut himself off and gestured to a tall, slim, physically fit looking gentleman in his early fifties with a smattering of grey stubble. “This is Dr Theodore Tomlinson, the archaeologist who made this discovery.”

Theo lifted a tanned hand and waved at us as he approached. He wore sandals, beige cargo shorts and a short-sleeved white linen shirt that looked far too flimsy for a Mancunian winter. The shirt was unbuttoned to the middle of his chest, which revealed what looked like a shark tooth necklace on a piece of leather. He reminded me of a grey haired Indiana Jones.

In fact, he so embodied the stereotypical image of an archaeologist, he could’ve been hired from a catalogue.

“And Dr Beverly Sato.” Bart gestured to the side. An Asian woman, mid-thirties, with her long, shiny dark hair twisted up into a bun, and wearing beige shorts, hiking boots and a loose white T-shirt smiled as she followed Theo toward us.

It was as if they were both still dressed for their dig. It struck me as weird, but then I realised that wherever I went, I always dressed with the idea of chasing monsters in mind. Not on purpose, just because it was habit. So maybe it wasn’t that weird after all.

“It’s lovely to meet you both.” I offered them my hand, and they shook it in turn.

“And you Miss Watts,” Dr Tomlinson said.

“Actually, this is Aurora North and Jake Cutter,” Bart explained. “Miss Watts was unable to make it.”

“Nothing too serious, I hope,” Dr Sato spoke with a hybrid English-American accent.

“No, just precaution,” I explained.

“I’ll leave you in their very capable hands,” Bart said as some sort of official-looking maintenance man beckoned Bart toward him on the far side of the room.

“You’re both coming this evening?” Dr Sato asked.

I nodded. “Yes, and we’re very much looking forward to it, but we were hoping you might be able to tell us a little about the dig or just some interesting things about the discovery.”

“Like the curse,” Jake jumped in.

Dr Tomlinson and Dr Sato exchanged a glance and laughed.

“Ah, yes, the curse.” Dr Sato said with a heap of indulgence. “Everyone wants to know about the curse.”

“Could you tell us anything about it?” I asked. “My editor made *such* a big deal about it, and then Marie mentioned it earlier—”

Marie held her hands up and smiled ruefully when everyone turned to look at her. “I didn’t realise they were reporters. I thought they were curious customers and I was trying to create a little intrigue to hopefully entice them to come back when the exhibit opens.”

“And we appreciate you doing that.” Dr Tomlinson winked at Marie before turning his attention back to me and Jake. “There were a few deaths during the dig. They were unfortunate and deeply saddening, but nothing to do with a curse.”

“This might seem a little inappropriate, Dr Tomlinson, but can I ask how they died?” I started speaking before Dr Tomlinson had finished. It was a little rude but I had to beat Jake to the punch. I had no idea what what come out of his mouth if I gave him a chance.

“I’ll just be over here if you need me,” Marie whispered to me and headed across the room to join Bart who was now arguing with the official-looking maintenance man.

“Please, call me Theo. And Bev.” He gestured to himself and then Dr Sato. She smiled, but it looked forced to me. As though she wasn’t all that pleased with Theo brushing off the title her credentials afforded her as though they weren’t important.

“Thank you. And obviously, we’ll use your proper titles in the article,” I said. “I can imagine you worked immensely hard to achieve them.”

“Yes, I appreciate that.” Bev’s smiled turned genuine and she gave me a small nod.

Theo laughed, almost as if he realised he’d misstepped, but didn’t quite understand what he’d done. “Excellent. So—”

“You were about to explain how those deaths occurred,” I interrupted before Theo could knock us off topic.

“Is it really that important?” he asked.

“We’ll have to mention it in our article. Even just in passing. If we don’t, people will write in and—honestly, it’s much less effort to mention them in a contained way, than deal with the fallout of *not* mentioning them.”

“It was truly unfortunate,” Bev said. “But we actually can’t talk about it for legal reasons.”

I nodded. “I completely understand. If we could just get back to this curse for a moment. Marie said something interesting about how the warning was carved inside the sarcophagus?”

Bev shook her head. “There was no mention of a curse anywhere. But as with—”

“There are rumours,” Theo cut her off, much to Bev’s obvious chagrin. “There are *always* rumours. Most curses are implied. Don’t disturbed the tomb or a terrible fate will befall you. Don’t

look on the face of the mummy or you'll be cursed for eternity." He gestured to me. "You have some knowledge in this area, yes? So you know these curses are purely to deter grave robbers. To allow the dead to rest in peace. Even the curse of Tutankhamen was proved to come to nothing."

"People died though, didn't they?" Jake asked.

Theo waved him off. "Lord Carnarvon died from a mosquito bite turned septic."

I sucked some air through my teeth. "I don't know. The curse supposedly causes ill fortune. That sounds a lot like ill fortune to me."

Theo laughed loudly, as if I'd said something silly. "Well, *I've* disturbed the tomb and *I've* looked on the mummy's face and I'm perfectly healthy."

I tried not to wince at his statement. It was the equivalent of saying "I'll be right back" in a horror film or "I think we'll cover more ground if we split up" in some slasher film. It wasn't as if I believed in this curse that I hadn't even investigated yet, but it was never smart to tempt fate that way. If this curse was any kind of real, he was *absolutely* the next victim.

"How about you?" Jake asked Bev.

"I'm not one to tempt fate," Bev hedged. She was definitely my kind of woman.

"We're all fine. We're all *going* to be fine." Theo laughed and gestured to the four other people who were hovering nearby. "Our assistants, Jerry, Rafe, Micki and Kendall. They've all worked on the exhibit so they're tomb-disturbers too. They've looked on the mummy's face and they're fine."

Jerry was a thirty-something balding redhead in rumpled khaki coloured clothing and wearing a pair of thick rimmed black glasses with lenses the size of a fifty pence piece. It made me dizzy just looking at him looking out through them. Surely the size made them ineffectual.

Rafe was a six-foot-something, lanky guy in his early twenties with middle eastern heritage, perfectly straight white teeth and a goofy smile.

Micki was a diminutive black girl with a mesmerising shimmery purple afro that seemed to glitter every time she moved. And Kendall was about the same size as Micki, but with pale blonde hair tied back in boxer braids.

"So you've all looked on the face of the mummy?" Jake asked.

"And we're all still here." Theo grinned. "As I said, mostly, the idea of curses is to protect the burial site from grave robbers. There's really no such thing as the curse of the mummy."

I nodded again, thinking that was the part in every horror film when someone declares "we'll be safe here" and then the serial killer stabs them in the back. I glanced at the sarcophagus,

and then around the room to make sure a bandaged figure wasn't stumbling toward us with murderous intent.

Bart came bustling back up and interrupted me. "I'm so sorry to cut this short, but apparently we need to do another full fire drill before tonight."

"It was lovely to have met you both," Theo said as he backed up.

"And we can talk more about the curse tonight," Bev said, and gave me a wink.

"The curse?" Bart asked as he guided us back the way we'd come.

"You have to at least reference a curse when writing about mummies," I explained. "It's part of the course. Even if you ultimately dismiss it, readers will feel cheated if you don't mention it."

"I can certainly understand managing expectations," he said. "And I'm so sorry to have cut this short, but you'll have full access to Dr Tomlinson and Dr Sato this evening, as well as their assistants—"

"I was hoping to be able to bring my parents along," I said. "Would that be okay?"

"Absolutely." Bart opened the door at the end of the corridor and held it as we walked through. "We look forward to seeing you then."

"Excellent. And thank you again so much for giving us a quick peek behind the scenes," I said.

"I'm only sorry we had to cut it short, but you can't argue with health and safety regulations." Bart waved and turned back along the corridor, leaving the door to close after him.

"What do you think?" I asked, leading Jake across the foyer toward the exit.

"About what?" Jake admired the T-Rex skeleton as we passed. "Hey, how did you know all that stuff about ancient Egypt?"

"Oh, I got it from these things. I don't know what you kids call them nowadays, but when I was a lass, we called them ... *books*."

"Your parents took you on educational holidays, didn't they?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Jake glanced my way and grinned. "They *still* take you on educational holidays, don't they?"

"You're the one who's trying to steal them away from me, so let's have a little less judgement in the tone, okay?"

Jake checked over his shoulder. "Did you hear them talk about the dead workers on the dig? Do you think this is our kind of story?"

“I don’t know.” I braced myself as we stepped out of the museum and into the cold air. “I did get a bit of a weird vibe between Theo and Bev, but I’m not sure if that was anything other than workplace tensions, or it had something to do with all the horror-film-idiot things Theo kept saying.”

“Yeah. ‘*I’ve* looked on the face of the mummy and *I’m* okay’?” Jake shook his head. “If anyone dies from this curse, it’s totally going to be him.”

Chapter Three

Friday 7:23pm

“Give me the lowdown again,” my dad said as he yanked the edges of his tuxedo jacket down, tilting his head from one side to the other as he did, as if that would ease his sense of restriction. “Now I can put names to faces.”

My mum tutted at him. “Weren’t you listening in the car?”

“So *you* know who’s who?” he asked.

“Of course, I do.” My mum scanned the crowd in the museum foyer, who were mingling around the skeletal T-Rex. “I *could* do with a gentle refresher, though.”

“I still don’t understand what you want us to do,” Lizza said, adjusting the straps of her long black satin dress that looked a lot more like a negligee than actual outerwear to me.

Lizza was pronounced “Lisa”, but with two ‘z’s instead of one ‘s’. She’d repeatedly reminded us of this until we were tripping over her name. Now we were all drawing it out for more than was probably accurate in an attempt to get it right so we didn’t get told off again.

“Just listen,” I said for the fourth time. “Listen for anything unusual.”

“How will I know if it’s unusual?” she asked.

“How will you know if something’s unusual?” I repeated and gave Jake a sideways glance, which I very much hope he interpreted as my displeasure over his choice of date. I mean, each to their own, but Butts would’ve been a lot more helpful.

Lizza nodded. “Yes. How will I know if something’s unusual?”

“If someone was quacking like a duck instead of talking, would you find that unusual?” I asked.

She glanced around the foyer of the museum. “People are going to be quacking?”

Instead of answering, I turned and stared at Jake. I didn’t want to be rude, but nor did I have a lot of patience for people with no common sense.

“Let’s go and get a drink,” he suggested and led her off into the crowd.

My dad watched them disappear. “What was he thinking?”

“I’m sure she’s lovely.” My mum frowned after them. “She’s simply not very suited to Jake. I doubt she’ll be much use tonight.”

“Neither will we if you don’t finish refreshing my memory of all the players,” my dad said.

“Right.” I scanned the crowd. I couldn’t see Bev or Theo anywhere. “That’s weird.”

“What?” my mum asked.

“Neither of the archaeologists are here.”

“Maybe they’re waiting to make a big entrance.” My dad tugged at his collar again and my mum smacked his hands away and readjusted his bowtie.

“Oh, there’s Bart. He’s the museum exhibit coordinator.” I watched Bart, now dressed in a tuxedo, stride across the foyer with a man in a more expensive version of the pinstriped suit Bart had worn earlier. The other man’s slicked back dark hair, modest handlebar moustache and silver wolf handled black walking cane gave him an air of villainy.

Bart had to scurry to keep up with the other man’s strides, their heads bowed in a whispered conversation as they went.

“Who’s the cartoon villain with him?” my mum asked. “Or is that Bart?”

“Bart is the one in the tuxedo. I don’t know that other guy.” I watched them until they’d crossed the foyer and stepped over a red rope blocking the entrance to an archway on the right.

“Wonder what that was about.”

“Maybe the mummy is missing,” my dad said. “They’ve been known to attack.”

“Not in real life they haven’t.” I said and scanned the rest of the foyer. “Oh. I can see a couple of their assistants. Micki is the black girl in the far corner with the—”

“Gorgeous hair,” my mum gushed. “Will you look at that? It shimmers when she moves.”

“It’s purple.” My dad’s mouth twisted on the word as if he were sucking a lemon. “You youngsters. Always have to mess with things.”

My mum nudged him with her shoulder. “You’re just old and out of step with the newer fashion trends.”

“Don’t dye your hair purple, lovely,” he said to me.

“Don’t impinge on her creativity,” my mum chastised him. “If Aurora wants purple hair, she can have purple hair.”

“Do you want purple hair?” my dad asked.

“What I *want* is for you to both pay attention.” My dad opened his mouth, but I continued on before they led the conversation astray once more. Sometimes you had to put your foot down and parent the parents. “The blonde girl next to her with the bun the size of her head is Kendall.”

“She looks like she swallowed a beehive,” my mum said. “Look at her. She can’t keep still.”

“Maybe her dress is as uncomfortable as my tuxedo,” my dad suggested. “Though I don’t really think that could be possible.”

“So many of these young girls now seem to suffer from anxiety.” My mum watched Kendall with a sympathetic expression. “It’s just heartbreaking to see. They should teach confidence in schools. Or resilience. Or something. Maybe boxing. It’s hard to be anxious if you know your left jab can knock someone out.”

“Mum.”

“It’s a valid point,” she said.

“It is and I agree, but can we focus, please?”

“Who’s that guy with them?” My dad nodded in their direction. “Is that this Theo person. He doesn’t look old enough.”

“Oh, no. The middle eastern guy with the perfect teeth and goofy smile is Rafe. And there is a fourth. A balding redhead guy with—”

“How on earth can he see out of those tiny lenses?” My dad squinted across the room at Jerry, who was scurrying toward the others.

“Yeah, the balding redhead guy with the weirdly small glasses is Jerry,” I continued. “The weren’t on the dig with Theo and Bev. I think they must be students or something. I didn’t get chance to talk to them earlier. They had to do a fire drill rehearsal so we had to leave.”

“They asked you to leave before you talked to them?” my dad asked. “That feels suspect.”

“No, I think it was genuine. There was a maintenance guy and the way Bart was panicking—it looked like a genuine thing.”

“Hmmm.” My dad frowned at the assistants. I loved that he was so suspicious. It made me feel less self-conscious about how suspicious I was.

“How many people did you say died on the dig?” my mum asked. “Three?”

I nodded. “That’s what *they* said, but I couldn’t actually find any information on the excavation.”

My parents both stared at me.

“You found *nothing* about the dig?” my mum asked.

“No, but I spoke to a professor at one of the local unis and he said that’s not all that unusual,” I explained. “Especially when dealing with mummies and such.”

My dad sucked some air through his teeth. “So they mentioned the deaths, but you can’t confirm whether three people did or didn’t die?”

“Exactly.” I frowned at Jerry, who scurried away from the other assistants and across the room to Marie. It was the worst attempt at furtive I’d ever seen. “Neither Theo or Bev have any social media that I can find which seems weird. I’d have thought they’d be posting stuff all over the

place to get people interested and to raise funding and keep their investors updated, but maybe they're not allowed to. Maybe it's a safety thing. And I only have first names for the assistants, so I couldn't snoop on them."

"Wasn't Jake's computer friend able to help," my mum asked and I shook my head.

"Jake said she's away on some sort of technological detox retreat with her parents."

"But isn't technology her thing?" My dad grinned at me. "You're lucky you have parents who understand and appreciate your special gifts."

"I know." I slapped my dad's shoulder. "And that's why it's up to you and mum to pump the assistants and pretty much everyone else for info."

"Info on what, lovely? The curse?" My dad's gaze followed Jerry, who was now scurrying back over to the other three assistants. "And why aren't you doing it?"

"I will, but they might tell *you* something they might not tell me. I'm a reporter, you know? It doesn't always entice people to open up to me."

"Oh, Miss North." Marie appeared in front of us, dressed much as she had been earlier, but with a petticoat under her dress and a lot more eyeliner. And a stiff smile. "I'm so glad you could make it. I'm so sorry about having to cut your tour short earlier, but fire regulations are so important to museums. And these must be your parents."

I introduced them, and they exchanged polite greetings.

"You look absolutely stunning," my mum said, admiring Marie's hair.

"Thank you so much. As do you both."

My mum had kept her trim physique from lots of housework, gardening, and, more recently, taking care of Jake. Her long-sleeved mint green jumpsuit showed off her figure, and the wide legs gave it movement as she walked around. To me, she looked like the embodiment of glamour.

My dad spent his days lugging heavy car part things around his garage, so he was physically fit. And that was still evident, despite the way he kept wriggling in his tuxedo. But it was his eyes that made him handsome. They held a permanent glint of mischief.

"This is a really great turn out," I said and gestured to the fifty or so people mingling around in the foyer.

"Yes, for this type of event, we hit our maximum capacity." Marie's smile was forced, as if she thought showing all her teeth would make her look happy. It made her look manic. And the way she was clasping her hands together in front of her looked like she was white-knuckling a rollercoaster. Maybe she was nervous. "We even had to turn a few people away."

"Then we consider ourselves extra lucky," my mum said with a smile.

“I just wanted to give you a quick who’s who.” Marie subtly gestured across the foyer to a smartly dressed lady in a monochrome fitted dress, puffed up Marilyn Monroe hairdo and red lipstick. “That is Mrs Winterbourne. Mr Winterbourne is around here somewhere. They bore a lot of the financing for this exhibition. Not that I’m telling you how to do your job, but it might be worth having a quick chat with them.”

“I will do, thank you. Is there anyone else you’d recommend me talking to?” I scanned the room. “Are Bev and Theo around. I’d love to get some quotes from them.”

Marie swallowed hard enough that I was sure I heard the gulp over the chatter.

“I’ll hunt them down and send them your way.” Marie stepped back. “Have a lovely evening.”

My mum looked at me. “Did she just gulp when you asked about Bev and Theo?”

“Who are Bev and Theo?” my dad asked.

“The archeologists who found the mummy.” I squinted at him. “You weren’t paying any attention on the drive over, were you?”

“These people are acting very strangely,” my mum whispered. “There’s lots of furtive scurrying.”

“There is,” my dad agreed, then faced me. “Maybe the mummy escaped and murdered someone else.”

I shook my head at him. “You’re not allowed to talk to Jake for the rest of the night.”

“Anything is possible, lovely. Something is definitely afoot.” He winked at me. “Or an arm. Or a leg. Or maybe even a torso.”

I turned to my mum. “Can’t you do something about him?”

“Not really. When does the unveiling start?”

“An hour or so.”

“Okay.” My dad motioned to Jake. “You go and grab the boy wonder and poke around. We’ll pump the rest of the guests for info. Starting with that Mrs Winterbourne.”

“Will you look after—” I took a breath and drew her name out to try to pronounce both ‘z’s. “Lizza?” One ‘z’ I could manage, but somehow trying to pronounce the second tripped me up.

My dad grunted, and my mum elbowed him for his effort. “Of course we will, lovely. As long as she doesn’t get underfoot.”

“Hey,” Jake hissed as he scurried back over, Lizza in tow, looking distinctly unhappy. “I just saw Bart acting weird.”

“Define weird.” Bart was shaking hands with some of the guests, but he had that same forced smile Marie had. Where had the cartoon villain guy gone?

“Well, he wasn’t quacking.” Lizza arched an eyebrow at me.

My parents exchange a glance and then stared at the floor, both clearly struggling to keep their expressions neutral.

“Super furtive. Pale. Sweaty. Something is definitely up.” Jake lowered his voice. “Do you think it’s the curse?”

“There’s a *curse*?” Lizza shrieked and attracted the attention of a nearby group of guests.

“There’s no curse,” I said as definitively as I could. “There is no curse.”

“Come on, there’s *maybe* a curse,” Jake cajoled.

My dad gestured to himself and my mum. “We think the mummy has escaped.”

“Escaped?” Lizza hissed and lifted up her dress to check her feet, as if the mummy were the size of a rat.

“Nothing has escaped. Nothing.” I swiped my hand through the air for emphasis. “And there’s *not* a curse. There is no curse.”

“There is,” Jake whispered. “It’s called the Hom-Dai. The *worst* of all curses.”

“Like in the mummy film?” my dad asked.

My mum grabbed Jake’s arm and hissed at him. “*No! You must not read from the book!*”

“Oh, you two are *definitely* related,” Jake said to me while patting my mum’s hand.

“There’s a book?” Lizza glanced around our small group before her attention settled on Jake, clearly confused. “Like a textbook? Is this an assignment?”

This was going to be a long night.

“Who told you about the Hom-Dai?” my dad asked.

I waved my parents off. “It was Marcus feeding him a line to try to get him onboard so—”

“If it’s a line, then why did I just hear the assistants talking about it?” Jake challenged.

I frowned at him. “You heard the assistants talking about the Hom-Dai *specifically*? They mentioned it *by name*?”

Jake hesitated. “Well, no. They didn’t mention the *actual* name, but they were talking about the curse.”

Lizza threw her hands up in the air. “I have no idea what’s going on here.”

“Just now?” I ignored Lizza and found the assistants in the crowd. They were moving slowly through the crowd in the direction of the roped off area. And they were walking separately, as if trying not to attract attention.

“Yeah, that Jerry guy came over and started whispering about how the curse had struck again and—”

“*Again?*” my mum asked before I could.

Jake nodded. “*Again.* That’s what he said. *Again.*”

I watched as the assistants stepped over the low red rope, followed by Marie. And, a few seconds later, Bart.

“Something is definitely up.” I turned to my parents. “Are you—”

“Go. Go.” My mum shooed me away.

“We’ll hold the fort,” my dad said, also shooing me away.

“Thanks, guys.” I motioned Jake to follow me and then had to grab his wrist to hold him back when he tried to charge across the foyer. “Walk *casually*. We don’t want to draw attention.”

Jake followed as I navigated through the crowd, smiling at people as I passed. We made it to the far right corner of the foyer and stepped over the low rope cordoning off everything beyond that archway.

There was no lighting along the corridor so once we were past the entrance the darkness hid us from prying eyes in the foyer. Walking slowly to mute the clip of my heels as best I could, I edged deeper into the dim hallway with Jake so close behind me I was almost giving him a piggyback.

The short corridor ended in a T-junction. Jake pointed left, then right, and then shrugged at me.

I put my finger to my lips to shush him and listened. Faint whispers drifted along the left hand corridor. I pointed in that direction and put my finger to my lips again to reinforce we needed to be quiet. Sometimes he could get overexcited.

I slipped off my heels and we crept along the left, dimly lit corridor. It opened up into a beautifully staged exhibit, from what I could tell. The majority of the lights were off so the whole scene was lit only by the individual lights on each artefact.

The assistants, Bart, Marie and the handlebar moustache villain had congregated around a display case on a raised podium. I assumed it was the mummy. I couldn’t see much since they’d lined up with their backs to us, almost like footballers did when the opposite team was trying to score a penalty or whatever the reason, and they blocked the view.

There was a lot of finger pointing, hissed accusations that I couldn’t quite make out and a general vibe of panic.

“What do you think’s going on?” Jake whispered.

“I don’t know.” There was still a lot of finger pointing, but now Rafe and Jerry had moved behind the mummy display. “What are they doing?”

“Maybe the mummy’s a fake and they think they’ve been found out?” Jake suggested.

“And they’re going to do what about that now?” I asked. “Switch it out with the spare mummy they keep in storage?”

“Maybe it was a fake all along and that’s why we couldn’t find anything out about the dig.”

“I thought you were all about the curse being real,” I whispered. “You can’t have a real curse if it’s a fake mummy.”

“Maybe they took something that belonged to a *real* mummy and that’s where the curse is coming from because they’re passing off a real mummy’s belongings as a fake mummy’s belongings.”

“That would be one intelligent curse,” I muttered. “We won’t find out much from here. Let’s get closer.”

“There’s no way we can get closer without being seen.”

I shrugged. “Then I guess we’ll be seen. They invited us here after all.” I stepped out from our hiding place and strode across the open space, letting my heels click on the floor. It was very rare that I wore high heels, but I always loved the sound they made on hardwood floors. It reminded me of a countdown. Everyone turned.

“No. No-no-no-no.” Bart waved at us and tried to shoo us back. “The exhibit isn’t ready. Please return to the foyer.”

“Aren’t you revealing it in an hour or so?” I asked, still moving forward. “I just wanted to get a couple of good photos before it gets crowded in here.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.” Bart reached across me, grabbed my upper arm and turned me around to face the way we’d come. It was a bit of a departure from the jovial man I’d met earlier, but people react differently under stress.

“Oh, dude.” Jake winced and pointed to his grip on my arm. “You do *not* want to do that.”

“Wait.” Jerry called. “Maybe she can help.”

“Help? How?” Bart stopped trying to drag me away, but still kept hold of my arm. I was willing to give him the chance to let go on his own, if he did it quickly.

“I know her. I recognised her this morning.” Jerry said. “She’s that reporter.”

“I already know that,” Bart snapped at him. “That’s not going to help us right now.”

“No, she can.” Jerry insisted. “She the one who investigated the vampires. She investigates paranormal stuff.”

“She investigates *vampires*?” Micki stressed like she’d misheard. “Vampires?”

“And curses,” Jerry added.

“Curses?” Marie asked. “She can lift the curse?”

“It’s the Hom-Dai,” Jake whispered, eyes wide in excitement.

“What are you talking about?” Micki shook her head at him. “That’s not a real thing.”

“I keep trying to tell him that, but—” I shrugged.

“It *is* a real thing,” Marie insisted. “The curse is *real*.”

“What’s going on?”

“Can we trust your discretion?” Bart asked.

“Yes.” I lifted up the arm he was still holding. “You can also trust that you will get to keep all of your fingers if you let go of my arm immediately.”

Bart’s lips moved in a circle as if he had food stuck in his teeth, and then he released my arm.

“So. What’s going on?” I repeated.

“There’s been an accident,” Rafe said.

“It’s not an accident,” Kendall insisted. “It was the curse.”

“What was?” I asked and Jerry beckoned me to the side of the crowd. Lying behind the mummy’s display cabinet, Theo’s prone form was stretched out face down on the floor.

“It was the curse,” Kendall whispered. “The curse got him.”

“It’s coming for us all,” Marie added.

Jake leant toward me and whispered. “Told you so.”

Chapter Four

Friday 7:31pm

“What happened?” I crouched over Theo’s prone form and prodded around the side of his neck for a pulse. There was nothing. And he was warm, so whatever had happened had *just* happened.

I prodded all over the sides his neck again. I was so tired of finding dead bodies. No, that wasn’t true. At least not entirely. Dead bodies made great stories, but I didn’t like finding bodies of

very recently dead people. Like, still warm dead people. And definitely not of still warm dead people who I'd met.

An image of Theo's smiling face flashed up in my mind. And then he morphed into Marcus asking if I'd gotten any photos of the scene. And why hadn't I called it in earlier so they could have the exclusive banner on the website. Would the paper closing down be such a bad thing? If Gary did sell it, or closed it, or whatever. Would it be such a bad thing? I wouldn't have to take photos of dead people anymore.

But if Jake was right and we did do *something* on our own, wouldn't I still have to take photos of bodies? Wouldn't I be in the same situation?

"Hey." Jake crouched on the other side of the body. "You okay?"

"Hmm?" I blinked at him and realised I was still feeling around Theo's neck.

"If you've not found a pulse by now, I don't think you're going to," Jake said.

"Thoughts wandered," I said and checked both Theo's wrists. He was still so warm. I just wasn't ready to say he was dead. I motioned for Jake to double check the wrists and then the neck. Just in case

Jake grimaced but did as I directed. "Wandered where?"

"To a place where I'm not trying to take the pulse of a dead man I sort of know."

"Sounds like a nice place." Jake shook his head, then wiped his hands on his trousers. As if he were wiping the dead off him.

I checked over Theo's back. There was also no obvious cause of death. No stab wounds. No bashed in skull. No nothing. I could only see his face in profile, his eyes were closed and he almost looked as if he were asleep.

I lifted one of his shoulders a few inches off the ground and checked his front. I tried not to think about how I was moving a dead man around and just focused on the injuries. Or lack of injuries. There was nothing on his front that I could see. No stab wounds to the front. No blood anywhere. Without thinking, I glanced back up at his face and my stomach churned. I closed my eyes, exhaled slowly so I didn't vomit all over him, and lowered him back to the floor.

Jake was standing a few feet away, his complexion ashen. Finding all these dead bodies wasn't great for him either. Maybe we could write a different type of story entirely. Although, our stories never started out as murders, they simply seemed to end that way. How could I change that?

"Is he dead?" Jake asked, and I nodded.

“I can’t see any immediate or obvious signs of what killed him.” I stood, resisting the urge to wipe my hands on my dress, even though I could still feel his skin on my fingertips. I looked out at the group watching me expectantly. “What happened?”

“The curse got him,” Rafe whispered, wiping the top of his left shoe on the back of his right leg and then alternating. “It’s coming for us all.”

“Cool,” I said with a nod because flippancy was my friend right now. I scanned the group for anyone sane. “So, *what* happened?”

“It was the curse,” Kendall whispered, wide-eyed and terrified. “Just like Rafe said. It’s coming for us all.”

“Right.” I pushed to my feet and faced the group. “Does anyone have any other ideas about what could’ve happened?”

“You don’t understand,” Kendall hissed in an urgent whisper. Her attention was wholly on Theo’s body. “It was *the curse*.”

“Okay.” I exhaled a long breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. This was like dealing with a room full of Jakes. Clearly, there would be no real information coming from them.

I stepped back from the body and scanned the immediate vicinity, thinking maybe he’d tripped and fallen really badly. It wasn’t massively outside the realm of possibility. And definitely a lot closer than a curse.

“What are you doing?” The cartoon villain guy narrowed his eyes at me.

“Looking for some sort of explanation as to what happened.”

“I told you what happened,” Rafe said. “The *curse* got him.”

“The curse that supposedly killed three of the workers on the dig?” I asked.

“They disturbed the tomb.” Marie covered her eyes as she spoke. “They disturbed *the tomb*.”

“Yeah, but there had to be more than three people on that dig and they’re all still alive, right?” I asked. “Technically, they *all* disturbed the tomb.”

“Maybe they’re all dead now,” Kendall said. “Maybe we’re *all* going to die.”

“And even *if* I believed that the curse had gotten him, *how* did the curse get him?” I asked. “*How*?”

“Don’t you believe in curses?” Micki asked me.

“I believe *people* believe in curses,” I said, stepping back and checking the wider area around the body. “Maybe he tripped, landed funny and banged his head.”

“Tripped on what?” Rafe whispered, tapping the smooth parquet flooring with his right foot before cleaning the top of his shoe on the back of his left leg again.

I shrugged. “His own feet.”

“And he died from banging his head?” Marie asked, her voice filled with scepticism.

I shrugged. “Yeah, you hit your head any number of ways it can kill you. Maybe his chin hit the floor funny, and it broke his neck.”

“Stop!” Kendall shrieked and covered her mouth with her hands. Her chest convulsed as if she were a snake trying to swallow something huge. And then I realised she was choking back sobs. Interesting. After the way Theo had winked at Marie when we’d met him earlier, I’d thought *they’d* had a thing going, but the way Kendall was crying? Maybe I’d misjudged it. Or maybe he had a thing with both of them. Which leads us nicely along the motive path.

“Who found him?” I asked.

Rafe pointed an accusatory finger into the group. “Bart found him.”

Everyone turned to stare at Bart.

Bart stumbled back under the accusation. “I was checking on the exhibition. I wanted to make sure that everything went off without a hitch.” He took another step back while gesturing to the exhibit. “He was just lying there. I checked to see if he was ...” Bart shook his head. “And he wasn’t.”

“Did you see anyone else around?” I asked.

“Anyone else around?” he repeated, as if he didn’t understand the question.

Kendall gasped. “You think one of *us* did this?”

“Murders are usually committed by close friends or relatives,” Jake explained. “But it’s more so we can rule you out and prove that it *was* the curse.”

I heaved an internal sigh. Jake had literally just told them all to say they saw no one, so they could blame the curse. That would drastically improve ticket sales. The lead archaeologist struck down by the curse of the mummy? It would likely even get some local news coverage.

Talking of the archaeologists, someone was missing from this little group.

“Where’s Bev?” I asked.

“You think Bev did this?” Rafe shook his head so forcefully it made me a little queasy to watch. “She would never—”

“I didn’t *accuse* her. I asked where she was.” I pointed back to the foyer. “I’ve not seen her since I got here.”

The group looked around at each other as if they expected her to jump out from behind someone.

“I’ve not seen her since she went home to get changed for the party,” Bart said. “But she’ll be around here somewhere. She’s all about making a big entrance.”

“She arrived the same time as me, so she’s definitely here,” Jerry added.

“And yet she’s not *here*.” I gestured around the group.

“You think Bev did this?” Micki asked.

“I’m telling you all,” Rafe gestured to Theo as he spoke. “It was the curse.”

“Okay.” I jumped in before we could cycle back down that rabbit hole. “I assume you’ve already called the police?”

An awkward silence filled the air and hung there like a rain cloud, threatening to empty and drench us all.

“You *have* called the police?” I stressed.

“This is a very important exhibit,” Bart said. “We need to make sure we open it to the public.”

“You *do* see the dead guy on the floor, right?” I asked, pointing to Theo for emphasis. “*Everyone* sees the dead guy?”

Bart did a shoulder wiggle which looked like a sort of guilty shrug. “He wouldn’t have wanted his death to ruin the exhibit.”

“Bart’s right,” Kendall agreed. “Theo would’ve hated to think that his death would’ve interrupted the unveiling.”

“Don’t you think that *the dead guy on the floor* might ruin the unveiling?” I asked.

“Well ...” Rafe glanced at Bart and then back to me. “We were going to—”

“Do *not* say you were going to move him.” I shook my head. “Do *not* say that.”

These people were crazy. Maybe it was because they were around very old dead things all the time that they didn’t see a problem with it. But there was most *definitely* a problem with it.

I pulled my phone from my purse about to call Trank, my godfather and police detective, when Jerry grabbed my phone.

“What are you doing?” He backed up with my phone, held high above his head as if I wouldn’t just kick him in the shins and take it back.

“What am *I* doing?” I asked. “*I* was calling an ambulance. And the police. Like you do when you find a dead body. What are *you* doing stealing my phone?”

“You can’t report it,” Kendall said. “You can’t. They’ll close the museum.”

“We’re relying on this exhibit to increase admission sales,” Marie jumped in and the assistants crowded around me in a horseshoe shape. “Without it, we’ll be in real trouble.”

“Okay. I’m going to say this again because I think I might have been too subtle the first time.” I enunciated as clearly as I could. “Everyone does see *the dead guy* on the floor, right? The *dead guy*. Your *dead* colleague. Someone whom all of you know. Lying *dead*, on the floor.”

“What if we move him to the workroom? It’s not far. And temperature controlled,” Rafe said. “Then we can call the police at the end of the opening.”

I sucked some air through my teeth, just like my dad did. “I know we’re speaking the same language, but we seem to be having some difficulties in understanding each other. There is a *dead man on the floor*. When you find a *dead man on the floor*, you call the police.”

“Okay, okay. We know he’s dead. *I* know he’s dead, but you said yourself that there were no obvious wounds,” Jake said almost entreatingly. “It *could* have been the curse.”

“It could also have been a heart attack,” I said. “Or someone could’ve snapped his neck. Or, maybe you’re right and it was the curse of the mummy and he died because he disturbed the tomb. And what if the curse classes anyone who looks on the mummy as someone who disturbed the tomb? Does it seem like a smart move to open an exhibit that could potentially kill everyone who visits?” I kicked Jerry in the shin. He screeched and crouched down to cradle his injury. I plucked my phone from his hands. “How about we don’t take any chances of mass curse deaths and we call the police.”

“Theo didn’t have a heart problem,” Kendall said. “He was really healthy. This can’t be natural causes. He used to drink this awful green concoction every morning.”

“He never missed a day of that stuff,” Marie agreed. “It *has* to be the curse.”

“It *must* be the curse,” Rafe agreed.

“Yeah, or murder,” I added, because that just seemed like the most logical solution. “And someone who knew he always drank that green stuff poisoned it.”

“Someone *poisoned* him?” Jerry asked.

“You think he was *murdered*?” Micki whispered.

“What? No, no. No.” I shook my head, only just noticing the figurative landmine I’d stepped on. “No, I was just—I was saying that it’s not always—I only *meant* there *are* other options than natural causes or this curse.” I couldn’t get my words out fast enough to stop the murder thought from spreading. “And just because he *appeared* healthy doesn’t mean it *wasn’t* natural causes. Healthy people die from heart attacks all the time. Healthy people die all the time. All the time.”

“After being *poisoned!*” Kendall shrieked. “Someone killed him and is using the curse to cover it up.”

“No.” I waved my hand at her as if I could eradicate that entire line of thought. “That wasn’t what I meant. I was trying to explain that—it’s not—I was—” I exhaled a long breath. “I’m calling the police. They can work all this stuff out.”

Before I could call Trank, Jake snatched my phone and backed away, hands held high in surrender.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Really?”

“Don’t kick me in the shin,” Jake said to me and then turned so he could address the group. “Aurora is right. This is very likely murder—”

“That is *not* what I said.” I clenched my hands into fists before I strangled a modicum of sense into everyone. “At no point did I say this was murder.”

“And this is what we do,” Jake spoke over me. “We investigate these types of situations and unveil murderers. This is what we do. Give us two hours to either reveal the murderer or prove the curse is real.”

“What are you *doing?*” I stared at him, not quite able to believe the words coming out of his mouth.

Jake flashed me a grin. “Our job.”

“*This is not* our job,” I hissed at him. “We can’t leave this man on the floor for two hours.”

“You think you can prove the curse is real?” Jerry asked, still rubbing his shin.

“No. I don’t.” I shook my head. “There is no curse.”

“Yes,” Jake said. “Or we’ll find the murderer.”

“There very likely *is* no murderer either,” I stressed, but I was pretty sure no one was listening to me anymore. “We need the police.”

“In a few hours?” Bart asked. “You think you can find a murderer in only a few hours?”

“No. I don’t. Why is no one listening to me?” I shook my head again, but at this point, I was starting to suspect I’d become invisible. They were all focused on Jake.

“I think we should give them a few hours,” Kendall said. “We weren’t going to call the police until later, anyway. What harm will it do to let them poke around? And if someone killed him ...”

“No one killed him,” I said. “No one. We don’t know that *anyone* killed him. It was most likely natural causes.”

“That’s not what you said a minuted ago,” Micki pointed out. “You were all about him being murdered.”

“No, I wasn’t. I wasn’t,” I stammered out as fast as I could while I had someone’s attention. “I was merely explaining how there were other possible causes for his death.” I’d said “no” so many times at this point it had started to lose all meaning for me.

“It wasn’t natural causes,” Marie insisted. “He was too healthy. And everyone loved him, which means it can’t be murder. So that leaves the curse.”

“No one is loved by everyone.” It was out before I could stop it, which Jake took as a sign I was onboard.

“See, she *does* believe it was murder. Just delay the unveiling,” Jake said, excitement shining out of his face. “Give us two hours and we’ll have an answer for you. But no one move the body.”

“Why?” Kendall asked. “Can’t we show him some respect and not leave him sprawled out over the floor?”

“And call the police.” I agreed. “Exactly.”

“I meant put him somewhere nicer,” Kendall said.

“No, because if he was murdered, that’s called tampering with a crime scene,” Jake said. “We need to leave everything exactly as it is, right, Aurora?”

I opened my mouth to sing the now repetitive “we need to call the police” song and then I realised the path of least resistance was to agree to their faces, and *then* call Trank as soon as they’d left the room.

“Jake’s absolutely right,” I agreed. “We could already be charged with obstructing justice and probably a whole slew of other things, so let’s not make this worse, okay? Okay.”

Jake narrowed his eyes at me and I smiled smugly back at him. Admittedly, that smile dimmed when I remembered I was standing over a corpse.

“Wait, we could be charged with something?” Rafe asked.

I bit back my sarcastic response and swallowed it down with the knowledge it would likely be lost on these people because they were clearly idiots. I had no idea how they’d made it this far through life.

“We’ll need to talk to everyone, so don’t leave the museum, okay?” I asked.

“Why?” Jerry asked. “Do you think one of us is responsible?”

“No. I think he most likely died of a heart attack or some such health issue, but if you want my help, you’ll do as I say. And—” I searched the assembled group. “Where’s that moustache guy gone?”

“I was calling my solicitor.” He stepped out of the shadows and waved his phone. “Just in case. We can delay the unveiling by an hour, which gives you two.” He pocketed his phone. “I need to get back outside.”

“And who are you exactly?” I asked.

“This is Mr Winterbourne,” Bart explained. “He and his wife bore the financial weight of the dig, through their own donations and fundraising.”

“I’d say it was a pleasure but ...” Mr Winterbourne gestured around us.

“All of you can go too,” Jake spoke to the rest of the group. “We’ll catch up with you all individually in a few moments.”

The group drifted out of the exhibit area, casting furtive glances at each other. Rafe stopped to wipe his shoes on the back of his trousers again. It was almost like a compulsion. When they were completely out of sight, I slapped the back of Jake’s head.

“Ow.” He jerked forward and rubbed his head. “What was that for?”

“You’re *kidding* right?”

“No.” He handed me back my phone, and I dropped it into my purse so I’d have my hands free to assault him.

“For getting us involved in this murder-slash-natural-causes-slash-curse involved death. For letting Marcus dupe you into doing this in the first place. For telling them we wouldn’t call the police.”

“You’re carrying a lot of anger around tonight.” Jake turned away to look at the mummy case and I slapped the back of his head again. “Ow! What was that for?”

“That was for ignoring me when I told you I didn’t want to do this story.”

“Alright. Okay. I surrender. Stop hitting me.” Jake held his hands up. “I promise I’ll listen to you in the future. Can we focus on the mummy now?”

“Sure.” I gestured for him to go ahead of me.

With a couple of suspicious backward glances, he did. And then I slapped the back of his head for a third time.

“Ow!”

“And that was for breaking your promise.”

“What promise?”

“The one you made this morning. The one where you said that you would listen when I said no.” I gestured around us. “I just said ‘no’ to investigating this and did you listen? No. You broke your promise. The *same* promise you made literally seconds ago.”

Jake’s attention darted around the room as if he were looking for an explanation.

“I did do that,” he admitted.

“I know!”

“I’m sorry, I just got so caught up in it.”

“Okay.” I rolled my shoulders back, satisfied I’d made my point. “But if you break that promise again, I’m going to run you over with my truck.”

“Seems a little excessive?”

“Well, that’s how strongly I feel about promise-breakers.” I pulled my phone from my bag and scrolled through the contacts.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m ordering a pizza. Crime solving is hard work.”

Jake frowned at me. “Really?”

“No. I’m calling Trank, you idiot. There’s a dead guy on the floor.”

“But you promised,” Jake whined.

“Sucks when people break their promises, doesn’t it?” I asked. “And I didn’t actually promise.”

“But this would make such a good story,” Jake said.

“Yeah, maybe we could write it from prison.”

Jake frowned at my phone. “Does he normally take this long to pick up?”

“No. He’s normally—voicemail.” I cleared my throat and put on my phone voice. “Hey. So. Can you call me back when you get this? It’s sort of an emergency. Well, a *semi*-emergency. Sort of. I’m fine. Jake’s fine. My parents are fine. Everyone’s fine. So don’t worry. Well, not everyone’s fine. Listen. Just call me back.”

“Wow, that was an interesting voicemail.” Jake pressed his lips together to prevent from smiling.

“I didn’t want him to panic. But it’s still sort of an emergency.”

“Okay, what now?” Excitement started to twinkle in Jake’s eyes. “Are we going to wait until he calls back? Because we could, y’know, like, snoop around a bit, so we have information for him.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he was driving. He usually calls back pretty quickly.” My thumb hovered over the nine on the phone keypad. “We could call the main police number. A dead body does sort of constitute an emergency.”

“Trank will call back in a few minutes,” Jake assured me. “Until then, we should secure the scene and stuff.”

I was going to argue, but it would be minutes before Trank called back. He always called back super fast. And I didn’t like the regular police. You never knew who was going to show up and a lot of them didn’t like me. And Trank was a better police officer than most of them anyway. If I was murdered, I’d want him solving my case. And he gave me a little more leeway.

“We’ll just poke around until he calls back,” I agreed.

“And since we’re poking around,” Jake grinned at me, “did you see how Jerry was the only one who wasn’t worried about the curse.”

“Micki wasn’t worried. That Winterbourne guy didn’t mention it. Bart didn’t seem all that worried about it either,” I pointed out. “It was mainly Kendall, Marie and Rafe. What else did you notice?”

“Well ...” Jake shrugged. “I mean, like, that was the most obvious thing.”

“That was *not* the most obvious thing.”

“Then what was?”

“That Theo was sleeping with Marie *and* Kendall.”

“Why? Because they were both upset he was dead?”

“Because they both knew he never missed a day of that green stuff.”

“So?”

“So, they were the only two to mention it and no one else corroborated it, so it implies he drank it at home. And the only way they would know he drank it every morning—”

“Was if they were there.” Jake frowned at me. “You think he was sleeping with them both at the same time? Like, literally at the same time? Like a threesome?”

“No. I think he was likely switching them out every other day, but it’s been going on with either long enough for them to know that was his routine.”

“Do you think they know about each other?” Jake asked. “It could be jealousy.”

I glanced at Theo’s prone form and then back in the direction of the foyer. “I’m more curious—or confused—about how they think this is going to play out.”

“What do you mean?” Jake checked over his shoulder at the mummy.

I counted the options on my fingers. “Outcome one. Theo was murdered, we find the killer, we call the police. Outcome two. Theo was murdered, we *don't* find the killer, we call the police. Outcome three. We have no idea if Theo was murdered or died from natural causes, we can't prove the curse, we call the police.”

“Outcome four,” Jake added, counting on his own fingers. “We prove the curse is real and use it to explain away Theo's death.”

“And *then* call the police,” I added.

“So?” Jake asked.

“There's no option where we *don't* call the police and this unveiling gets interrupted.”

“So?”

“So, why are they letting us poke around if they know—and they *have* to know—that we're going to call the police?”

“Maybe they just haven't thought it that far through.”

“Winterbourne was on the phone with his solicitor. At the very least, *he's* thought it through.”

“What are you saying?”

“You remember the Maison de la Mort?”

“I'm not likely to forget since—” Jake's attention jumped to Theo. “You think he's faking?”

“No. No, he'd *definitely* dead. But this has that same type of vibe. Like everything isn't what it appears to be. Something is off.”

“Like what?”

“*Something.*” I grimaced and shook my head. “And where's Bev? And why is no one bothered that Bev's not here.”

“You think Bev killed him?” Jake asked.

“I don't know what I think.” I examined the body and then pulled my phone back out of my purse and snapped some photos. “Are you done checking him out?”

Jake nodded. “You want to get on with the interviews?”

I hesitated. “I want to turn him over.”

“You want to turn him over?” Jake repeated, like he wasn't sure that was what he'd heard.

“I want to turn him over. Normally, I wouldn't mess with a crime scene, but one of his hands is under his body. What if he's holding a sign that says ‘Winterbourne killed me because I made fun of his moustache’?”

“You think Winterbourne did it?”

“I think Marie did it.”

“What? Why?”

“Because she had a plaster on her finger this morning and she doesn’t tonight.”

“She lost it during the murder?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “No. Maybe.”

“You don’t know?”

“No. But if this was *Murder, She Wrote* that would be the clue that identifies the killer.”

“Right.” Jake nodded. “You don’t believe in curses, but you’ll take crime solving advice from a fictional TV sleuth.”

“Hey, Jessica Fletcher is the best. I wouldn’t want to be her friend, but she’s like a Mountie.”

“A what?”

“A Mountie. She always gets her man.”

“So often when you talk, I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Sucks to be you.” I gestured to Theo with a grimace. “Stand back while I roll him over.”

“You want to roll him over?”

“Didn’t we just go through this?” I asked. “No. I don’t really want to turn him over, but he might have something on his front that would help us.”

“All the way over?” Jake mimed pushing Theo onto his back.

“Okay.” I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand and hoped that my stomach would settle down. “Yeah. You stay back there and—”

“We’re partners, partner.” Jake stepped toward me, stepped back, rolled his shoulders and stepped forward again. He crouched beside me. “Partners break the law together.”

“Please never say that in front of my parents.”

“Pretty sure your parents would help too.”

“Okay. Are you ready?”

Jake gingerly placed his hands on Theo’s shoulder, looked at me and grimaced. “Ready? On three?”

I had my hands on Theo’s hip bone, ready to push.

“One,” Jake counted. “Two. Th—”

I pulled my hands back. “How about we leave him as he is? We’ll work around it.”

“Yep.” Jake yanked his hands away from Theo and wiped them on his jacket while he clenched and unclenched his jaw. “You know I would have?”

“I know.” I slapped him on the shoulder, glad I hadn’t eaten anything. “Let’s see what we can see as he is.”

After snapping on some latex gloves, I knelt down in front of him and lifted up his tuxedo jacket to get a better look at his sides.

“What are we doing?”

“Going through his pockets.” I pointed to my purse for Jake to get some gloves. “Seeing if we can—oh.”

“What?”

“Look at that.” I pointed at the rainbow plaster stuck to the inside of his jacket. The same rainbow plaster Marie had been wearing on her finger that morning. “Told you so.”

Chapter Five

Friday 7:42pm

Jake scooted around the body and stared at the rainbow plaster. “You called it!” Jake raised his hand in a high-five motion to me.

“I’m not high-fiving over a dead body. It’s unseemly.”

“But we solved the—” Jake shrank in on himself, as if all the excitement had leaked out of his body and left him deflated.

“You just realise that if it’s death by person, it’s not death by curse?” I asked as I awkwardly tried to take a photo of the plaster while still holding the jacket up.

“Yeah.” Jake pouted at the body and then seemed to recognise that pouting over a corpse was also unseemly. “What are we going to do now?”

“What do you think we should do?”

“Ask Marie why she killed him? And what poison she used.” Jake sighed. “Wait for Trank to get here.”

“Do you *know* that’s Marie’s used plaster? Because I don’t. Do you *know* she killed him? Because I don’t.”

“What?” Jake gestured with an open palm at the plaster. “That’s *clearly* her plaster. You said that you suspected her. Right off the bat. She was your first suspect.”

“And what if someone *else* gave her that plaster? What if this plaster belongs to *that* someone? What if the killer stuck that plaster to his jacket because they knew it would implicate Marie?”

“Why are you trying to overcomplicate things? It’s bad enough that it’s not a curse of the mummy—”

“Look, it might belong to Marie. It might not. But right now you’re missing the more important aspect.”

“What?”

“How did it get *inside* his jacket?”

“It—she hugged him?”

“Did you see how the plaster was fixed to her finger this morning? The cushion was on the pad of her thumb. One side of the sticky bit was on her nail and she’d looped the plaster around the pad of her thumb and stuck the other side to the part of the plaster already attached to her nail.”

“So?”

“So, even if the plaster had got caught and stuck firmly enough to the jacket to pull it off, it would’ve pulled it off in that looped shape, not straight like that.”

“You’re saying this is a different plaster?”

“That’s what it looks like to me.”

“Okay.” Jake nodded with renewed enthusiasm. “Okay. What does that mean?”

“It means we need to find out who’s handing out rainbow plasters. On the down low.”

“Why on the down low?”

“Because we’re waiting for Trank to call us back and if you hadn’t noticed, there’s no enormous gate locking everyone in.”

“You think the killer is going to run?”

“Not right at this moment. It would look too obvious. If there is a killer and they’re still here, I think they’ll try to play this out. Maybe plant some more evidence, or destroy some more evidence.” I frowned down at a lifeless Theo. “That’s if Bev isn’t the killer and she hasn’t already run.”

Jake pulled his phone from his pocket, and tried to tap around the screen with his latex gloves, then snapped them off in frustration. “Remember how I said our social media was going to be off the chain? It’s going to be *off the chain!*”

I stared at the phone in his hand. “Tell me that you’re not posting that we’d found a dead body at the museum.”

Jake backed up a step. “Would that be bad?”

“Would it be bad that you had just announced to the entire world we found a dead body and didn’t *immediately* call the police? What do you think?”

“We did call the police.”

“We called Trank.”

“Trank’s police.”

“Yes, but Trank didn’t answer, so we’re investigating waiting for a callback, instead of calling the emergency number. I mean, we kind of covered, but not really. So let’s not advertise this, okay?”

Jake winced. “People are already responding to it.”

“You’re going to get us arrested.” I rubbed my forehead with my forearm. “Okay, how about you don’t post anymore?”

“Solving a murder in two hours?” Jake asked. “This case was *made* for social media.”

“You see the dead man, right? The guy who, only a few hours ago, grinned at me and told me how healthy he was. How much he was looking forward to the opening. And now he’s sprawled out on the floor. Dead.”

“I do. And I see that we can tell the world about him and this exhibit. His legacy.”

“Okay, look, just don’t post about any illegal things we’re doing. Or about our suspects in case they see and we tip them off.”

“That’s everything interesting. If I can’t post about the interesting stuff, what am I supposed to post about?”

“I thought you said *you* were going to handle it?” I held my hand up to stop him before he could say anything. “Look, post updates, but schedule them to publish in two hours. So it’s real time, but two hours delayed real time. If you get me? Trank will have called back by then. He’ll be here and we’ll be on safer ground.”

“Okay.” Jake snapped a photo of the plaster and started tapping around on his phone.

Watching Jake take photos of Theo, knowing he was going to post them online, made me pretty uncomfortable. It felt like cashing in on someone’s misfortune. I was about to tell him to stop, and then I realised that being a reporter, that’s what we did. Not cashing in on other’s misfortune, but telling people about this. It was news. And I was going to write an article about it, so publishing it on social media wasn’t all that different.

I turned my attention back to Theo’s body to distract me from Jake’s happy snapping. I checked him over from head to toe, looking for anything that might give us a clue to how this had happened.

“Can you see that?” I pointed to left cuff of his shirt. It was a brownish red smear, almost the length of a finger.

“Is that blood?” Jake asked.

“Maybe.” I pulled the sleeve of his jacket up. “I can’t see any blood anywhere else, though.”

Jake snapped a photo. “Does that look like a finger mark to you?”

“Yeah, it does. But I can’t see any blood on him anywhere else. At least not from this angle.” I lifted up the back of his jacket to check the back of his shirt. “Maybe it’s from the last time he wore it,” I suggested, taking my own photos of the cuff. “I’d have thought he’d have gotten it dry

cleaned for tonight, though.” I pushed to my feet, only too glad to turn my back on Theo while I looked around for other clues. “If this is the tux that was hanging up in the workroom earlier, it’s definitely been dry cleaned. So if it’s fresh, that combined with the rainbow plaster ...”

“You’re thinking Marie?” Jake guessed.

“I mean, she has the same patterned type of plaster on her finger that he has inside his jacket. And she had a cut on her thumb. Maybe her cut reopened, and she grabbed him while she was getting a plaster and—” I shrugged.

“Seems like a lot of blood for a paper cut.” Jake leant over to get a better look at the cuff.

“I thought so, too.” I glanced around the exhibit. “Do you think we could station Lizza in here, hidden and at a safe distance, to keep watch.”

Jake frowned at me. “Why do you keep saying her name that way? You sound like you’re chewing on it.”

“I find the extra ‘z’ a struggle to pronounce.”

“It shows.”

“Are you finished looking at the body?” I asked, because calling it “the body” made it easy to detach from the situation. “Tell me what you see.”

“Well, he’s dead.”

“Wow, I’m stunned by your powers of observation. What else?”

“There’s no obvious signs of death or murder and ...” Jake gestured to the body with an open hand. “And you checked his front, kind of. And there was nothing obvious there either.”

“And?”

“And ...” Jake waved his open hand at Theo’s body. “And what did you find?”

“He has some type of oil on the centre of the sole of his left shoe. Another small splotch on the sole of the heel of his right foot. Scuff marks on the back of his heels which—”

“Means he was dragged here.” The excitement in Jake’s voice made me smile despite the circumstance. He bent over Theo’s shoes to get a better look.

“He also has a couple of stains on the back of his trousers—could be the same oily substance—in a couple of places. Mid calf on his left leg. Lower calf, mid and upper thigh on his right leg. It’s a little difficult to see on the black trousers and in this dim light, but if you bob around a bit and find the right angle, you should be able to see it.”

“Someone dripped oil on him?” Jake used the torch app of his phone and examined Theo’s calves and shoes.

“Look at the placing. On the sole of his shoes and the back of his leg. I think something was sprinkling oil. You know the type of sprinkler that covers lawns. Maybe they have a piece of rotating equipment that is leaking oil. And oil spreads so it would only be leaking really small droplets.”

“Maybe somewhere in the workshop?”

“Seems the most logical place,” I said as I followed the drag marks on the floor to a door labelled “staff only” and secured by a card reader.

“You think he was murdered there and dragged here?” Jake asked.

“That doesn’t make much sense.” I wandered around the exhibit space. There were no easy access to fire doors that I could see, or closets, only corridors that led to other exhibits. “Why drag him from a back area across an exposed area? Where would they be going? To another exhibit? No one was supposed to be back here, so I suppose they might have felt it was a safe option. But surely, at some point, someone would’ve come looking for him.”

With my latex gloves, I bent back over Theo and checked his pockets.

“What are you looking for?” Jake asked.

“Little things we call ‘clues’.” I held up Theo’s keycard, then continued to check his other pockets. There was nothing in his other jacket pocket, but there was in his right trouser pocket. I pulled it out and held it up.

“Is that a locker key?” Jake asked.

“Looks like.”

I put the key card and locker key in separate evidence-type bags and stashed them in my purse with the gloves.

“What now?”

I pointed to the staff only door. “The drag marks come from that way.”

“I thought you wanted to question everyone first?”

“And what if, while we’re questioning everyone, someone’s through there disposing of evidence?” I winced as I spoke. “We should call Trank again.”

“Let’s give him another ten minutes to call us back,” Jake suggested. “If there *was* evidence, they likely would have done the best they can to get rid of it already. *And* if there is still evidence in there and we wait for Trank, they could destroy it while we’re waiting. It’s better we investigate and salvage what we can.”

“You know that it’s very unlikely if we find anything that it will be admissible in court?”

“We don’t need court. We get confessions.”

“Right. You know this still isn’t *definitely* a murder, yet?”

“Drag marks on the floor say it’s a murder.”

“No, they say the body was moved.”

“Either way, at the risk of sounding callous, I hope it's either a murder or a curse. Otherwise this is going to be a social media bust.”

“Well, as long as you have your priorities in the right order, I suppose that’s all that matters.” I glanced back at Theo. “I feel really bad just leaving him here. What do you think about Lizza?”

“What do I think about her?”

“Yeah, do you think she’ll be okay standing guard over a dead body?”

“No. I don’t. At all.”

“Maybe I could ask my dad.”

“I think that’s a much better option.”

“Okay, let me fill my parents in and then we’ll go back and follow the drag marks.”

“Good plan,” Jake agreed as we headed back toward the foyer. He threw me a furtive glance, but said nothing.

“What?”

“How come you let everyone go and didn’t question them all together? We had them all there. We could’ve hashed it out quickly.”

“That’s not how people work. You can’t come at them head on like that unless you have something and we had nothing at that point.”

“But they’re going to talk to each other. Probably come up with alibis and stuff.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. The most likely result of giving them a few minutes to mull over Theo’s possible murder, is that they’ll be thinking about all the reasons everyone else had to kill him. So when we ask them, they’ll likely have that info to hand.”

“You think they’ll turn on each other like that?”

“Yes.” I nodded with certainty. “Yes, I do. No matter how much they say they believe in the curse, I’m betting they’ve all picked out who they think killed Theo by now. And if we accuse them, I’m pretty sure they’ll offer everyone else up super fast.”

“You’re so good at this sometimes it’s frightening,” Jake murmured.

We walked out of the roped off area and I scanned the crowd for my parents. My mum was chatting with Mrs Winterbourne and my dad was eavesdropping on Jerry and Rafe, who were trying to make it look as if they weren’t huddled together in the corner and gossiping.

“It’s like you and your parents have a telepathic link.” There was something akin to awe in Jake’s voice.

“You *know* they raised me, right? Why do you think I am the way I am? Where’s Liz—your date?”

Jake scanned the crowd. “I can’t see her.”

“Maybe she’s—”

“I want to leave,” Lizza announced from Jake’s left and we both jumped at her sudden appearance.

“Can you give me a few minutes to sort this story out with Aurora and then we’ll go?”

Lizza eyed me with disdain before turning back to Jake. “You told me this would be fun. An instagrammably glamorous party. So far, you’ve dumped me with your boss’s parents to run off on some secret mission and none of them can get my name right. And now I just heard some girls talking about a murder. Someone’s been *murdered*. This is not instagrammably fabulous.”

“Who was talking about murder?” I asked.

“Who cares?” she scoffed and turned her attention back to Jake. “I want to go.”

“I’ll get you a taxi,” Jake offered.

“You’re not coming?” she asked. “You’re not taking me somewhere else?”

Jake opened his mouth to reply. And then something dramatically different from what I had expected came out.

“Of course.” He turned to me. “Goodnight.” He offered Lizza his arm, and they headed toward the extra.

Lizza glanced over her shoulder at me with an expression that looked a lot like a victory sneer. I stared after them, not really sure what had just happened. I couldn’t believe Jake had just walked out on a story. Especially one he’d gotten us into. If that was it and he really did leave with her, and *then* tried to come back to the paper? Well, it wouldn’t end well for him.

“Is she leaving?” my dad whispered as he offered me a glass of champagne. “Is Jake escorting her out?”

“You don’t need to sound so happy about it,” I whispered to him. “And I’m not sure what Jake’s doing. I smacked him in the head earlier and now I’m worried I might have done some permanent damage.”

My dad frowned at Jake’s back. “How hard did you hit him?”

“If he’s leaving with her, too hard. Or not hard enough. It’s difficult to tell.”

“I’m glad she’s leaving, too,” my mum said as she joined us. “She was a very limited conversationist. And she’s really not Jake’s type, is she? Not like your lovely fraud detective.”

“I don’t think Charlie’s Jake’s type either, mum.”

She nudged me with her elbow. “You know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean and he’s not *her* fraud detective,” my dad jumped in a little too quickly. “*He* didn’t show up for Sunday lunch when he said he would. Unreliable.” My dad brushed a strand of my dark hair out of my face. “You can’t go out with someone who’s unreliable. It’s the equivalent of saying they don’t respect you or your time.”

“He is a police officer,” my mum chided him. “Perhaps he was side-tracked by an important case.”

“Too side-tracked to call?” my dad asked. “Is that the standard you want to set for your daughter? That it’s okay for boys to stand you up. That it’s perfectly acceptable to have someone not respect you or your time. To not be the most important thing in their life.”

“Of course not, Harry. I’m—”

“Guys,” I interrupted because I didn’t really want to talk about Charlie, or how disappointed I was he hadn’t shown up for Sunday dinner after he’d said he was coming. Or how very annoyed I was he hadn’t called when my mum had gone to a lot of effort for him. “We have more pressing matters.”

“Like what?” my dad asked.

I checked over my shoulder and lowered my voice. “Like the lead archeologist lying dead on the floor in the other room.”

“Did you call your godfather?” my mum asked.

I nodded. “I got his voicemail. I left him a message to call back. And Jake somehow convinced the museum people to give us two hours to solve it.”

“What are you going to do with the other hour and forty-five minutes?” my dad grinned at me and nudged my shoulder with his.

“Solve it?” my mum asked. “He was murdered?”

I seesawed my hand. “There’s not obvious signs of murder, but I’m pretty sure the body has been moved.”

My parents exchanged a glance and spoke in unison. “Murder.”

“Guys, that’s not necessarily murder.”

My dad shook his head. “Why else would you move a body?”

“What do you need us to do?” my mum asked.

“Ideally, I’d like you and dad to eavesdrop on the people I pointed out earlier, but I need someone to keep an eye on the body.” I glanced over my shoulder, looking for Jake, but he was nowhere to be seen. “Maybe we could set up a phone to record the scene instead. Since we’re shorthanded.”

“What did I miss?” Jake asked.

“Has Lizza gone home?” My mum mangled her name as much as I did.

“How come you three struggle so much with that extra ‘z’?” Jake asked. “But yes, she’s gone home and will probably never talk to me.”

My dad placed his hand on Jake’s shoulder. “That’s no big loss, son. She wasn’t the girl for you. You’ll find someone else.”

“Someone without an extra ‘z’,” my mum muttered and winked at me.

“Thanks, guys. Oh, since we’re one short now, could I borrow either of your phones?” He asked my parents and my mum offered hers without question. “It’s so we can record the body.”

My dad nodded to Jake. “See how smart he is now that girl’s gone.”

“Okay, dad, let’s not blame women for male stupidity.”

“While I was putting her in the taxi, I also found out that Micki and Marie were the girls she overheard talking about murder.”

“Micki is the girl with the purple hair and Marie is the one with victory rolls?” my mum asked, and I nodded.

“Lizza said they were talking about Bev and how jealousy can ruin lives.”

“Just like Lizza was jealous of Aurora.” My dad stated it like it was a foregone conclusion.

“Smart. Funny. Beautiful. Fearless.” My mum counted my apparent attributes off on her fingers. “Who wouldn’t be enthralled by her?”

I pointed at my dad’s face. “Do not say it.”

“What’s he not allowed to say?” Jake asked. “Oh, are we talking about how Charlie stood you up.”

“People, there is a dead man on the floor of the other room,” I hissed. “Do you think it would be possible to focus for just a moment? Just one little moment?” I gestured to my parents. “You two have your assignments. Jake and I are going to question everyone. If you guys could hover around them when we’re doing questioning in case they say something good, that would be extremely helpful.”

“Wait for me to get back,” Jake said and strode back to the roped off area in the most not subtle way possible.

“Do you have an idea about who the culprit is?” my dad asked.

“He had oil on his shoe and the backs of his trousers. What I think is blood on his cuff and a rainbow plaster on his inside jacket, the same type I saw on Marie’s finger earlier today.”

“As if it had come off her finger and she’d bled on his cuff?” my mum asked and I shook my head.

“The plaster was straight. It looked new.”

“Can you tell where he was dragged from?” My dad checked the floor as he spoke. As if expecting to see drag marks.

“Not yet. Somewhere back of house. The drag marks come from a staff only door. I have a swipe key so we can get in. I was planning to check out the drag marks first, but now I’m thinking we should question everyone, *then* check out the drag marks.”

“I think you’re better questioning them,” my mum said, and my dad nodded in agreement.

“Evidence is all well and good, but if someone has killed this poor man and then dragged his body to the exhibit, they’re clearly not thinking straight. Especially now he’s been found.”

“And what if it’s not one of the assistants or other people related to the dig?” I asked. “What if it’s about something completely different and the killer has already gotten away? Maybe I should try Trank again.”

“Lovely, Trank will call you back as soon as he can. You know that,” my mum reassured me. “And if the killer is not related to this exhibit or these people, they’ve likely already left. So waiting for your godfather to call back isn’t going to make that much difference.”

“I want to say that makes sense, but I also feel like you’re telling me what I want to hear.”

My mum made a noncommittal noise.

“You seem a little off balance. Is there something else?” my dad asked.

“Jake said that the guy who owns the paper is getting divorced. Apparently, he bought the paper as a gift for his wife and maybe he’ll sell or close it down or maybe she’ll take over.” I shrugged. “Jake only told this morning so we don’t know yet.”

“Sometimes life throws us curve balls. They’re nothing more than a chance to grow. You’ve been doing this for a long time now.” My mum gestured around the room. “Maybe this is just the universe giving you a gentle nudge.”

“To do what?” I asked.

“Podcast,” my dad said without hesitation. “We think your articles would be a great podcast. And you write fast. You do at least one story a week as it is. You could do daily episodes.”

“Have you guys been talking about this?” I glanced between them.

My mum nodded. “We *were* talking about some podcasts we listen to and how you’d do a much better job. How your articles are much more interesting. And a lot of the true crime stuff doesn’t really always get tied up in a neat bow, but your articles do.”

“And they’re very hip right now,” my dad added.

“Hip?”

My dad nodded. “Cool. Trendy.”

“Who’s cool and trendy?” Jake asked.

“Not you,” I quipped. “Did you set the phone up?”

“Ouch.” Jake mimed being stabbed through the heart. “Yep. Good to go.”

“Excellent. You guys know what you’re doing?” I asked my parents who nodded.

“We’ll eavesdrop.” My mum shoed us away. “You two go ferret out a murderer.”

Chapter Six

Friday 7:53pm

“Have you found any evidence of the curse?” Kendall whispered. “Or anything else?”

I nodded. “We have some leads we’re following up on.”

“Like what?” Micki asked, her attention shifting between me and Jake as if she couldn’t decide who was the greater threat. That was kind of insulting because it was clearly me.

“First, do either of you have a plaster?” I waved my hand at them too quickly for them to be able to see anything. “I cut myself earlier, and the cut keeps opening.”

Both Micki and Kendall stared at me with blank expressions. Almost as if I’d asked them a completely random question.

“I think there’s a first aid kit in the workroom,” Micki offered reluctantly. “I can get you a plaster from that?”

“Never mind. I’ll survive.” I waved her off. “Can either of you give us anymore information on this curse? The origin? The people who died? Anything?”

Both of them shook their heads, Kendall’s bun sloshing with the movement.

“Neither of you know anything about the curse?” I passed. “The curse you’re so quick to blame for Theo’s death?”

They shook their heads in unison once again.

“Come on, guys,” Jake cajoled. “You have to know *something*. Either about the curse or maybe about someone who might have it in for Theo.”

“It has to have been the curse,” Kendall whispered, her eyes filling with tears. “Because if it wasn’t the curse, then that means someone killed him. It *has* to be the curse. No one would want to kill Theo.”

“No one?” I glanced between them, but neither met my eye. Instead, both chose to stare at the floor.

“He was a good man,” Micki said with a solemn nod. “He was a great boss. He always had a kind word for everyone.”

Kendall’s attention briefly jumped to Micki before refocusing on the tiled floor.

“You don’t think so, Kendall?” I asked.

Kendall’s head jerked up. “What?”

“Do you think he had a kind word for everyone?”

Kendall glanced at Micki and then back to me. “I—”

“He wasn’t always the easiest to get along with,” Micki jumped in. “Sometimes he and Rafe wouldn’t always see eye to eye.”

“On what?” Jake asked before I could.

“Small stuff.” Micki shrugged. “Just regular workplace tensions. Nothing worth killing over.”

“And yet he’s dead,” I pointed out.

“But that was the curse,” Kendall insisted.

“About this curse,” I gestured between them. “Is it meant to strike down those who looked on the face of the mummy or who disturbed the tomb? You’re cursed for disturbing the tomb or looking on the face.”

“Neither,” Micki said.

“*Both*,” Kendall insisted.

“Okay.” I nodded like I was taking both their answers and glanced between them as if I were addressing the next question to both of them. “And how long were you and Theo in a relationship?”

“I *know* she’s not talking to me.” Micki gave Kendall a closed mouth stare.

“Not long.” Kendall placed her hand over her heart, and her eyes welled up with tears again. “But he was my penguin.”

“Yeah, yours and Marie’s and Bev’s,” Micki scoffed. “And anything else with boobs and a pulse.”

I thought Kendall was about to challenge that statement, but Jake beat her to it.

“So, you too?” Jake asked, gesturing to Micki’s chest. I watched him do it yet still couldn’t actually believe that he had.

Micki folded her arms and enunciated clearly. “No.”

“He’d called it off with Marie,” Kendall said. “Whatever anyone says. He told me—he told me that I was the one he wanted to be with.”

“When did he tell you this, Kendall?” I asked.

“When did he—he—this morning? This morning when we were prepping the exhibit. And he never dated Bev. Never. Marie seduced him and he had a moment of weakness. That’s all it was.”

“Several moments of weakness,” Micki muttered.

“And when was the last time you saw him?” I asked.

“This morning,” Micki said. “We did the fire drill and then I went home.”

Kendall nodded in agreement. "Same here."

"You went home this morning?" Jake asked. "I'd have thought you'd have had to stay to get everything ready?"

"Apart from moving the cases which Jerry and Rafe were supposed to do, everything was done," Micki explained.

"Can either of you think of any reason someone might want him dead?" I asked.

"I don't know about dead," Micki hedged. "But I do know that he and Bart got into an argument. I heard them yelling and Bart said something about how he was going to destroy Theo."

"What?" Kendall asked. "When was this?"

"Before we left. Bev had me cleaning up, so I had to get stuff from the cleaning cupboard and I heard them arguing in the staffroom. I couldn't work out exactly what they were yelling about, but Theo stormed out and Bart yelled that after him."

"What did Theo say?" I asked.

"Nothing. He turned the corner and saw me. He just rolled his eyes and made a comment about bureaucrats."

"*Bart* killed him?" Kendall said. "Bart found him. Or pretended to find him. Maybe he killed him and then pretended to find him to draw suspicion away from himself." She looked to me for confirmation.

"Sure, it's possible," I agreed.

"Do you know what he was talking about?" Jake focused on Micki, with his usual not-very-polite excitement at the prospect of finding a killer. "Could you guess?"

"Honestly, I have no idea." She shook her head. "Other than him sleeping with Kendall and Marie and it being somewhat unprofessional, I don't know what problem Bart could've had with him."

"If it wasn't the curse, who do you think killed him," Jake asked and Micki shook her head again.

"Honestly, I can't think of anyone. I can't imagine what it would take for a person to want to kill another person."

"Jealousy is a good motive. It can ruin lives." I purposely used the same language Jake had said Lizza had overheard.

Micki focused on me, her tone hardened. "I don't know who killed him."

"What about you?" I motioned to Kendall. "If I asked you to make a guess."

“Bev or Marie,” she said without hesitation. “Because Theo and I were going to be together, and they were jealous.”

Micki rolled her eyes but said nothing.

“You’ve both been incredibly helpful.” I offered them my most grateful smile. “Just one more thing. Is there any reason you can think of that both Bart and Mr Winterbourne would be happy to let us investigate instead of immediately calling the police?”

“Maybe they want to find a way to lift the curse so more people don’t die,” Kendall suggested.

“You know we’re going to have to call the police, right?” I asked. “Regardless of what we find. We can’t move the body and have the exhibit anyway. We have to call the police at some point.”

Kendall shook her head, her voice coming out breathy. “It was the curse.”

It wasn’t quite an answer to the question, but okay.

“How about you, Micki? What do you think? I noticed that when everyone else was talking about how it was the curse, you didn’t volunteer an opinion on it. Or on not calling the police.”

“I think we should’ve called the police. Immediately,” Micki said. “Curse or not, I agree with you and think that it was either an accident or murder. And even if it *was* the curse, which it wasn’t, you can’t leave a dead man on the floor.”

I didn’t know if I was imagining it, but I was pretty sure the unspoken end of her sentence went something like “even if the guy was a bad guy.”

“You’ve both been incredibly helpful.” I gave them a polite nod and turned as if I were about to leave. “Oh, one more thing. Do either of you know where Bev—Dr Sato is?”

“I saw her when I first got here.” Kendall scanned the crowd as she spoke. “But I’ve not seen her since the guests started arriving.”

“Haven’t seen her since I left this morning,” Micki volunteered.

“It’s a little weird that she’s not here, right?” I asked.

“You think she killed Theo and then ran?” Kendall asked, eyes wide.

I shook my head. “Just think it’s weird she’s not here. And I think it’s weirder that no one cares she’s not here.”

“It’s not that I don’t care.” Micki sighed. “Look, she’s all about big entrances. She likes attention. She probably went to check on the exhibit earlier to make sure it was perfect, then went to hide somewhere until everyone was curious about where she was. Theo said—not that I put much

stock in what he said about anything other than archeology—that she did that during the fundraising to make people curious about her. To get more attention.”

“Do you think that’s true?” I asked.

Micki shrugged. “I never saw that side of her, but then I wasn’t at the fundraising events.”

“I can imagine her doing it,” Kendall chimed in. “If Theo said it then it must be true.”

“Right. Thanks for your help.” I gave them another polite nod and guided Jake away.

In the corner of my eye, I saw my mum sidling up close to them, ready to eavesdrop. I loved my parents.

“What do you think?” I asked Jake as I slowly guided him across the foyer toward where Marie was chatting happily to one of the guests.

“I think Theo cheating gives Kendall a motive. And Micki—” Jake grimaced. “I’m not sure. Something about the way Kendall looked at her when she said that Theo was a nice guy.”

“I caught that too.”

“You think Bev did it?” Jake asked. “And that’s why she’s not here? She killed him when she went to check on the exhibit when she first got here?”

“You heard Micki.” I shrugged. “Theo said that Bev likes to make an entrance.”

“What’s wrong with your voice?”

“What? Nothing.”

“There was definite tone.” Jake pulled me to a stop and dropped his voice to a whisper that was more accusation than question. “You think she’s dead.”

I waved him off. “Of course not.”

“You *do!*” He pointed to my face. “You think she’s dead.”

“Maybe. It’s a possibility.” I blew out a breath and gestured around the room. “She’s not here, and this is her exhibit. Her’s and Theo’s. Or maybe she likes to make an entrance like Micki said Theo said.”

“You think she killed him and ran.” Jake accused.

I shook my head. “I would simply prefer her to be in attendance. Oh, and please don’t gesture to women’s chests.”

“She mentioned boobs first,” Jake said with a heap of indignation. “And I was pointing out that she fit her own criteria of boobs and a pulse.”

“Yes, but you could’ve done that *without* pointing to her boobs.”

“Fine.”

“Do you want to take the lead questioning Marie?” I asked and nudged him in her direction as the guest she was talking to walked away.

“Yes,” he said, with far too much conviction. “But you need to ask about the plaster again. You were awesome with that.”

“High praise,” I muttered.

Jake darted through the crowd and made it to Marie before she could dodge us and find someone else to talk to.

“It’s my turn to be interrogated?” she whispered, then smiled and nodded at another guest as they passed by.

“It’s not quite an interrogation.” Jake turned his boyish charm up to maximum and hit her with his trademark grin. In all fairness, it seemed to soften her hostility.

“Okay.” She sighed. “What do you want to know?”

Jake dived right in. “Were you and Theo together?”

“Yes.” She answered firmly and without hesitation, which I thought was interesting.

“What about Kendall and Bev?” Jake pressed.

Marie rolled her eyes. “Kendall was a dalliance. And Bev, there was no relationship with Bev.”

“They weren’t dating, weren’t sleeping together?” I asked, and she shook her head. “But they were on the dig together? The dig where they uncovered the mummy?”

“They were colleagues, nothing more.” Marie leant closer. “I think Bev has something going with someone else. A *married* someone else.”

“What makes you say that?” Jake asked.

“The way she was secretive with her phone.” Marie pushed her hair up like she had done earlier in the day, but this time she actually touched her hair. The cut on her thumb appeared much deeper than a paper cut, and angry. “I know everyone likes their privacy, but it was just a little more than that.”

“Do you know who?” Jake asked.

“I could guess.” Marie looked pointedly at Bart, who was talking in furtive whispers to Rafe. When they saw us looking, Bart nodded in our direction and he and Rafe separated. Interesting.

“You think she was having an affair with Bart?” Jake asked, completely unable to hide the disbelief in his voice.

“This was her first ever real dig,” Marie explained. “She had plenty of classroom experience and plenty of hours of fieldwork on other digs, but this was the first one she’d helped to lead. And she was a late addition. It was almost as if someone pulled strings.”

“And you think it was Bart?” Jake pressed.

“Who else?” Marie asked.

“I can think of another name,” I said.

“Oh, you mean Mr Winterbourne?” Marie shook her head. “That wouldn’t happen. Mrs Winterbourne has all the money. He married into it. He would get nothing if he cheated or divorced her.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I overheard her talking about it with another guest at a function maybe a year ago. She was advising this younger woman to get a prenup and explained how hers was ironclad.”

As a reporter, I loved how people would have semi-private conversations in public without giving it a second thought. It made my job so much easier, dented my faith in the level of intelligence of most people, but made my job easier.

“When was the last time you remember seeing Theo?” I asked.

“Late this afternoon. Before I left, he promised he was going to make it clear to Kendall that it had been a mistake. And I—” Marie’s voice cracked, and she shook her head. “That was the last time I saw him.”

“Did he say he was going to speak to Kendall that afternoon?” I asked.

“He just said he’d do it today.”

“Have you seen Bev this evening?” Jake interrupted before I could continue with that line of questioning. I knew I’d said he could take the lead, but I’d have thought he’d have noticed we were onto something.

Marie opened her mouth to answer, frowned, and closed it. “I think I saw her going into the workshop just before people started arriving. I can’t be sure it was her. I didn’t see her face, but it looked like her from the back.”

“Why would she be going to the work area?” I asked.

Marie rolled her eyes. “Probably to check up on Micki’s attempt at cleaning.”

I nodded. “Micki said that Theo and Bev were always on her case.”

“That’s putting it mildly. Micki has a lot of questions. She questions *everything*. So I think they just had her doing all the menial type of tasks to get a break from her interrogations.”

“What type of questions?” I asked.

“On everything. I think they just got tired of it. How would you feel if you were constantly questioned?” Marie countered.

“I guess that would depend on what I was being questioned about.” And what I had to hide. “I have to say, Marie, I think you’re taking Theo’s death really well.”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than her eyes welled up with tears. She pinched her arm so hard she grimaced in pain, but it seemed to help her lasso her emotions back into check. A couple of deep breaths and a flurry of blinking and she was back, smiling and happy.

“Can you think of anyone that might want to harm Theo?” Jake asked, throwing me a scowl, which I interpreted as him telling me to be quiet.

“I thought you were trying to prove it was the curse?”

“We need to rule out all possible logical explanations first.” Jake delivered the line like a pro, making it sound totally reasonable.

“Not really.” Marie inclined her head. “There’s Kendall. She’ll have been upset when he broke it off with her and maybe Micki because he was always kind of dismissive. But they don’t seem like good motives to kill someone. And how would they have done it, anyway? You think they poisoned his morning smoothie?”

“You said ‘she’ll have been upset’ referring to Kendall, not ‘she *was* upset’,” I quoted back at her. “You didn’t see him after he spoke to her? You don’t know for sure they had that conversation?”

“No, but he said he’d speak to her today. That’s what he said. We were—” Marie’s voice caught in her throat and she pinched her arm again, before any tears welled in her eyes. “We were leaving for the Galapagos Islands tomorrow.”

Jake’s head jerked in my direction. We so needed to work on his ability to mask his surprise or excitement. Or just all of his feelings in general.

“For a holiday?” I asked.

“Holiday, but we were going to see how we liked it. Maybe stay longer.”

“Tomorrow? When the exhibit is about to get into full swing?”

“Theo wasn’t one to court attention, unlike Bev. He was happy to let her do all the rest of the promotion alone.”

“I did hear she liked attention,” I agreed. “Is that why you think she’s not meeting and greeting everyone yet?”

Marie nodded. “I was at a fundraising event with her and she was over an hour late. She said it was car trouble, but it wasn’t. She wanted everyone to be asking about her, to be in demand.”

“That doesn’t seem very professional,” I said.

“Maybe not, but who would you remember? The regular people you spoke to, or the striking, gregarious woman who was an hour late and made an entrance.”

I inclined my head. “Fair point.”

“Give it another thirty minutes and she’ll burst in here and make it all about her.”

There was a bitterness in Marie’s voice, but I couldn’t tell if it was jealousy or general dislike.

“Who do you think killed him?” Jake jumped in. I wasn’t sure if he couldn’t hold the question in any longer or he was trying to catch her off guard.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I really don’t know. I don’t know if I’d prefer it to be murder or for the curse to be real.”

“You know we’re going to have to call the police, right?” I asked. “That the exhibit can’t really go ahead?”

She glanced toward the roped off area. “I know. But it’s almost like he’s not really gone yet. The longer we postpone unveiling the exhibit, the longer I get to talk to people about him as though he’s still alive.”

There was a real weight to her words, one that struck me as genuine. It actually tugged on my own emotions, which, as a heatless reporter, was pretty rare.

“I’m so sorry.” I almost wanted to give her a hug. “Oh, and this is super silly, but do you have anymore of those rainbow plasters?”

“What?” She blinked at me and I gestured to the cut on her thumb, which she quickly tucked into her fist. “Oh. No. No, I—actually, I don’t know whose they are. I found it on the desk in the workroom. I was going to get one from the first aid kit, but it was prettier than a regular plaster. So I swiped it.” She looked over my shoulder and waved at someone. “Am I free to go?”

She phrased it like a question, but she was already walking away.

“What do you make of that?” Jake asked. “I feel like she gave us three pretty strong suspects.”

“I do as well, but I have a feeling we’re not talking about the same people.”

“Micki, Kendall and Bart.” Jake counted them off on his fingers. “Micki because Theo was treating her poorly, Kendall because he broke it off, and Bart because maybe Theo knew about the affair and threatened Bart with telling his wife.”

“Treating you poorly at work is not a real reason to kill someone. Unless Micki’s killing Bev *and* Theo—”

“You *did* say you thought Bev was dead.”

“I said I *suspected* simply because I thought it was weird that she’s not here. But now two people have told us she likes to make an entrance, so she’s looking less dead and more like an attention seeker. For now, let’s treat her as MIA and not KIA.”

“Fine, but MIA or KIA, if they were both on Micki’s case, she easily could’ve snapped.”

“Dude, you have to listen better. No one said they were both on Micki’s case. No one but me. Marie said that Micki had a lot of questions, that they got tired of the questions so they gave her tasks to keep her busy.”

“So?”

“So, who doesn’t like questions?”

“Theo and Bev?”

“People trying to hide things.”

“What could they be trying to hide?” Jake asked.

“Exactly. We’ll need to check back in with Micki about what questions she was asking later. And I agree with your suspicion about Kendall. She wasn’t talking like someone who’d just been broken up with. So that means either he did have that conversation, she killed him and now she’s pretending they were penguins to throw off suspicion, or he was killed before he spoke to her. Although she was very keen for this to be blamed on the curse, so maybe she did do it.”

“And Bart,” Jake reminded me.

“Bev is *not* having an affair with Bart,” I scoffed. “It was clearly Mr Winterbourne. I mean, if it had to be one of the players here tonight, it would be him. He was funding the dig, so he likely had a lot more sway as to who would get to lead it than Bart. I don’t even know if Bart would have any input about it.”

“But what about the thing Marie said about the preup?”

“First, that’s Marie telling us something she overheard, so the reliability is questionable. Second, if Theo found out about the affair, that’s a pretty good reason for Winterbourne to kill him. And maybe even Bev, if she threatened to tell his wife. Maybe he killed Bev first and Theo saw, so he had to kill Theo.”

“You literally just said that Bev was MIA, not KIA,” Jake hissed at me. “Make up your mind.”

“I’m just providing options.” I inclined my head. “And he *does* have the evil villain moustache.”

“You’re picking suspects on the basis of facial hair?”

“Didn’t you see it?” I shook my head. “If this was Scooby Doo, he’d totally be the villain.”

“Well, this *isn’t* a cartoon,” Jake reminded me. “So what now?”

I nudged Jake back into the crowd. “Bart’s free. Let’s talk to him and find out if he was playing around with Bev.”

“Five seconds ago you said it was Winterbourne.”

I shrugged. “I’m keeping our murderer options open.”

Chapter Seven

Friday 8:06pm

“Miss North. Mr Cutter.” Bart greeted us with a forced smile. I wasn’t sure if it was because he didn’t want to talk to us or if the smile was to reassure anyone watching us that everything was okay. Perhaps both. “How can I help?”

“I’d like to know how this whole exhibit happened,” I said. “Who contacted whom about the dig. Where the actual dig took place and for how long. All the nitty-gritty details.”

Bart frowned. “What does that have to do with the curse?”

I shrugged. “We won’t know until we have all the details.”

“Right. I don’t actually have all the details off the top of my head—”

“You can’t remember whether your museum contacted Theo about the dig or they contacted you?” I asked.

“As I told you earlier, I’ve only been here for a short time. All of this was arranged before I took up the position. I’m sure the paperwork will be in the files, but, to be honest, my predecessor had a system I haven’t quite been able to crack yet.”

“But you know whether your museum helped fund the dig?” Jake asked.

“That I do know. I believe the Winterbournes spearheaded the fundraising efforts.”

“Are they affiliated with the museum somehow?” I asked.

“They’re patrons, but plenty of digs are funded by private donors. They usually have some sort of personal investment, be it a love for history or something similar.”

“And how did your museum come to show the exhibit?”

“I’m not sure I like where these questions are leading,” Bart said.

“Hopefully, they’re leading to the truth.” I gave him my most reassuring smile. “We just need to ascertain the background so we can identify which direction the curse will take next.”

“So, you *do* think it was the curse?” Bart whispered. I couldn’t tell if he was excited about that or panicked.

“We’re still piecing it all together,” I said. “You were telling us about how the opportunity to show this exhibit was presented to you.”

“Again, it was all arranged by my predecessor.”

“Can you talk to us about the relationship between Theo and his assistants,” Jake asked. I assumed that he, like me, realised that the current line of questioning wasn’t getting us anywhere.

“What do you mean?” Bart glanced between us.

“How was Theo around Kendall or Micki, for example?” I offered. “Did he give Rafe more interesting tasks than Jerry? How involved were you and Marie with this exhibit?”

“I didn’t really notice any behaviour that warranted concern.” Bart shook his head. “Or that he treated any of them differently. Even Rafe.”

“Why would he have cause to treat Rafe differently?” Jake jumped on it with no subtlety at all.

Bart hesitated, almost like he realised he’d given something away and was working out how to try and take it back. “Rafe had some ... trouble in his past. He’s been nothing but a model employee from what I can tell.”

“What type of trouble?” Jake rushed the question out with far too much interest. It was almost enough for me to considering dissolving some valium in his coffee. Maybe then he’d act like a regular reporter.

“There was—” Bart winced and lowered his voice. “It was nothing. According to him, it was just some foolishness. A fight. He had to pay a fine. It was nothing.”

“He has a criminal record.” I stated it as a fact.

“But he has been an *excellent* employee,” Bart stressed. “I’ve not had so much as a whiff of trouble from him.”

I nodded. “And if it’s not the curse that killed Theo, and he was murdered, who do you think it was?”

Bart scanned the foyer. “I don’t think any of these people would’ve hurt Theo. He was friendly. All the assistants liked him. There were never any issues.”

“Not even between the two of you?”

Bart paused. “No. As I said, there were never any issues.”

“So, the argument you had with him earlier, that wasn’t an issue.” I asked.

“It was more of a spirited debate than an argument.”

I nodded. “And do you always threaten to destroy people during a spirited debate?”

Bart pressed his lips into a thin line. “I didn’t kill him, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I’m not implying anything,” I said with a shrug. “I’m asking what you were arguing about.”

Bart scanned the room behind me, and he worked his jaw as though it were stiff. “His conduct with the assistants. I thought it was unprofessional.”

“You mean because he was giving Micki a hard time? Or because he was sleeping with Kendall?” I frowned at him. “I thought you just said he treated all the assistants the same.”

Bart chewed on the words as he spoke. “I was trying not to talk ill of a dead man.”

“That’s nice of you,” I said. “So I assume the spirited discussion went something along the lines of you telling him to stop sleeping with Kendall and then him saying you should stop sleeping with Bev and then—”

“What?” Bart jerked forward as if that would help him hear better. “Bev? Dr Sato? What on earth are you talking about? I’m happily married.”

“Oh, my mistake.” I gestured back over my shoulder. “It’s just what the others said. They said that you and Bev were an item.”

“Who? *Who* said that?”

“One of them. I forget who.” I waved his question off. “More importantly, have you seen Bev this evening?”

“No.” Bart snapped. “No, of course not.”

“Of course not?” Jake parroted. “I’d have thought you’d be expecting to see her tonight.”

“I just—I meant—” Bart snapped his mouth shut, took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out through his mouth. “I haven’t spoken to her myself, but I think I saw her go into the workroom after Rafe. Or before him. I wasn’t really paying attention. But, yes, I think she’s here somewhere.”

“After him, like she followed him through the door? Or after him as in you saw him go in and then a little while later you saw Bev go in?”

“The first,” Bart said. “Or the second. I’m not sure, I wasn’t paying that much attention. I just remember seeing her go that way.”

“And you’ve not seen her since,” I asked, and Bart shook his head. “And you’re not even remotely worried?”

Bart scanned the crowd behind me. “She has a reputation for liking to make big entrances.”

“If it isn’t the curse that killed Theo, does anyone in here have a reason?” Jake asked.

“I’d like to think that none of the people that I’ve spent the last few weeks working with would be capable of that.” Bart nodded at someone over my shoulder. “Excuse me.”

He strode away into the crowd.

“I’m finding it easier and easier to believe why no one’s worried about Bev,” Jake said as he watched him go. “Why did you ask him about the police? About how we have to call them.”

“Bart’s a smart man.” I checked my phone to make sure I hadn’t missed a call from Trank. I hadn’t. “He has to know we’re going to have to call them. But I didn’t want to put him on the spot in case he called nine-nine-nine to call our bluff.”

“Do you believe him when he said he was arguing with Theo about the assistants?”

“Did you?”

Jake shook his head. “I *did* believe his reaction when you accused him of having an affair. I think you’re right and it’s not him.”

“Me too.” I checked my watch. “I’m pretty sure Trank is going to call any minute. We don’t have long to sort this all out. I could really do with a whiteboard to mind map everything we know.”

“Tell me about it.” Jake pinched the bridge of his nose. “I feel like I’ve taken in too much information to see what’s relevant.”

“Before we talk to anyone else, let’s head into the workroom and see if we can find a pen and some paper. It’s not ideal, but at least if we can map it out a bit, we can maybe see where we are.”

“Sounds like a plan, Batman.” Jake followed me across the floor. “I’m surprised you don’t have that in your purse.”

“I have a dry wipe marker that we could use if we can find a good surface, but with the pepper spray, Swiss Army knife, phone and mini torch there wasn’t much space for anything else.”

“Why did you bring a torch? You have one on your phone.”

“And what if we get stuck in some sewers with no signal and drain the battery on the phone using the torch app, so we can’t call for help when we *do* get to an area where there’s a signal.”

“Has that happened to you?”

“Only once. Now I bring a torch.”

“And you thought that would happen tonight? In a museum?”

“Sure. It happened last time I was in a museum.”

Jake grabbed my arm. “Tell me everything.”

I kept moving forward with him still clinging to my arm. “Maybe later. I meant to ask, but I didn’t because I also kind of didn’t want to know, what did you call our social media accounts?”

“Paranormal investigators. Exposers of the truth. Righters of wrongs.”

I sighed. “I hope you’re kidding.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I mean, it’s accurate, I suppose, but it doesn’t really roll off the tongue, does it?”

Jake grinned. "I called it Aurora North Exposés."

"Okay." I nodded slowly. "That sounds ... actually that sounds okay."

"I created a hashtag for us as well. It's 'Aurora Exposed'."

"Annnnd we're back to you joking again?"

"No, why? You don't like it? It goes with the title. It means something you've exposed.

Like, you've shone a light on something."

"Yeah, I can see what you were going for, but when you string those two words together like that, that's not what it means. It means *I'm* exposed." I pulled the access card I rescued from Theo's body and, still in the plastic bag, I swiped it across the keypad. The light flashed green and the door unlocked.

I shoved Jake into the corridor ahead before he could completely give us away with his head spinning around so much it reminded me of the girl from the Exorcist, popped the card back into my purse and pulled the door closed behind me.

We'd only taken a step along the corridor when the door at the other end opened.

"Mr Winterbourne." I smiled into his startled expression. "I'm so pleased we ran into you."

He held up his hand. "Before you try to ask me any questions, my solicitor has advised me not to answer."

"Did he advise you to call the police when you found a dead guy on the floor?" Jake asked.

"He did." Winterbourne walked slowly toward us. "But he also assured me I couldn't be prosecuted for *not* calling the police. Though I assume you will have to at some point." He checked his watch. "In the next hour."

"We will." I nodded. "Hopefully, whether curse or murderer, we'll have a culprit by then."

"Excellent." Mr Winterbourne stepped to the side as if to walk around us.

"Do you have a theory on what or who killed Theo?" Jake asked.

"I don't believe in curses." Winterbourne shook his head. "Other than that, I'm afraid I'll be no help. I didn't really know the man. I dealt with Dr Sato, mostly."

"Mostly?" I asked.

He inclined his head. "Always. I *only* dealt with her. It was a figure of speech. And, actually, I *barely* dealt with her. It was mainly my wife who was involved with all that."

"Really?" He was being remarkably forthcoming since his solicitor had told him not to say anything.

“Yes, we met at an art gallery event. She was very passionate about this particular dig and my wife and I were very taken by that. By her passion. So we offered to hold some fundraising events and find her the funds she needed. I say ‘we’, but it was really all my wife’s doing.”

“So you weren’t all that involved in this?” Jake asked.

Winterbourne shook his head. “I only spoke with Dr Sato a handful of times, and that was only when she couldn’t get hold of my wife. And before you ask, I’d rather you didn’t bother my wife with any questions. I haven’t told her about poor Dr Tomlinson.”

“I can understand that,” I said with a nod. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen Dr Sato this evening?”

“I was actually back here looking for her.” Winterbourne gestured behind him. “I thought I saw her come in here earlier, but I can’t seem to find her anywhere. With Dr Tomlinson being ... absent, we could really do with her to keep the guests happy. I don’t suppose either of you have seen her?”

“We haven’t.” Jake shook his head.

“I know that she likes to make an entrance, but without Dr Tomlinson, we could really do with another archeologist out there. If you see her, will you mention that?”

“No one seems all that worried about her absence,” I said.

“From the several fundraising events I’ve attended for this project, she’s always been late. I thought she might have been hiding out in the workroom.” He glanced behind him. “I was hoping to let her know about Dr Tomlinson. So she wouldn’t wander out into the exhibit and find him. Do you think the curse killed him?”

“No,” I said without missing a beat. “Do you?”

“I told you, I don’t believe in curses.” Winterbourne turned his attention to the door behind me. “That said, I would prefer it to be the curse than thinking he was murdered.”

“You can’t think of any reason anyone might have to kill him?” Jake asked.

Winterbourne pressed his lips together and shook his head. “Like I said, I didn’t really know the man.”

“How come you didn’t call the police?” I asked. “You were smart enough to call your solicitor.”

“I expected you to do it,” he said. “I thought you were just agreeing that you wouldn’t to keep everyone here, so if the poor man *was* murdered, the killer wouldn’t panic and run.”

Winterbourne gestured to the door behind me. “If you’ll excuse me, I should get back to my wife.”

“Of course.” I stepped aside. “How did you get back here?”

“I asked one of the assistants who was coming this way and he let me in. Tall, dark hair. Ralph?”

“Rafe.” Jake pointed to the opposite door. “Rafe is back here?”

“I’ve no idea. He was.” Winterbourne pressed the door release and exited the corridor before we could ask him anything else. Just before the door closed I noticed a faint white-ish mark on the back calf of his left trouser leg. Like dust. Had he been looking for something in the work room and gotten dust on himself. What could he have been looking for? Or maybe he was looking for Bev, like he said.

“That was weird,” Jake said once the door was closed. “Listening to him talk, I’m more inclined to believe that Bev was having a fling with his wife.”

I sucked some air through my teeth and clicked my tongue. “Hmm.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I think he took pains to explain that he didn’t know Bev or Theo.”

“Maybe he doesn’t.”

“Then why is he back here looking for her?”

“Maybe because he told his wife he would? Maybe to take a break from party small talk?”

“Maybe.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I think he told us his solicitor told him not to talk to us. And then he talked to us.”

“How is that a bad thing?”

“If you don’t know anything, you just say you didn’t know either of them that well. But he made a point to say his solicitor had told him not to speak, and then he spoke to us.”

“So?”

“So, that creates the image of him being helpful.”

“Maybe he *was* trying to be helpful.”

“Don’t you find that suspicious? At all?”

“I prefer to be the voice of reason.”

“Oh, that’s definitely what you are.” I frowned at the close door. “Did you catch that dig about the police? Almost as if he was daring us to call them?”

“Sometimes you’re really astute. And sometimes your paranoia reaches unhealthy heights.”

“You’ve heard the saying, ‘just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you’?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s him,” Jake announced as I swiped the card over the keypad, then pulled the door open, gesturing for him to go through first.

“Who do you think it is, then?” I spoke in a low voice as we wandered into the empty work area.

“I think it’s Kendall. Woman scorned and all.”

“Yeah, let’s totally just ignore the fact that Bart said he would destroy Theo and focus on the stereotypes.”

“Which we only have Micki’s word for,” Jake reminded me. “Which, like you pointed out earlier about Marie overhearing Mrs Winterbourne, the reliability of overheard conversations is questionable.”

I made a disgruntled noise. “It’s like I teach you stuff and then you turn around and use it against me.”

Jake followed as I led us past the shelves and to the back of the work room where we’d met Theo and Bev that morning. The area was clear now.

“Let’s find some paper, write our notes out, and then create a timeline before we forget.”

“Okay. Write neatly, though. I want to post this to our social media.”

“Really?” I pulled a few blank sheets of paper from the printer tray and handed a couple to Jake. “I’ve not seen you doing it, so I was hoping you’d given up.”

“I’m quick and sneaky.”

“And setting them all on a delay?”

“Yes.” Jake rolled his eyes at me. “I’m delaying them.”

“Good.” I plucked two biros from the penholder and offered him one. “Let’s get all this info down and see if we can catch anyone in a lie or something that will help narrow this down.”

“I still think Kendall’s our front runner.” Jake scribbled something on his paper. “What about you?”

“I’m thinking of changing my vote from Marie to Micki.”

“Micki?” Jake asked. “Why?”

“Because I feel like she’s been mostly honest, open and helpful.”

“And that makes you suspicious of her?”

“Yeah, ’cause if I’d just killed a guy, that’s the image I’d want to portray. So, I think it might be Micki. Or Bev.”

“You said Bev was KIA.”

“I said she was MIA. *Potentially* KIA. But pretty much everyone we’ve talking to now has mentioned how they’re not worried because she likes to make an entrance. What if she killed Theo and used the fact that everyone knows that about her to run?”

“So, Bev has moved from victim to top suspect?”

“Yeah, I think she’s a pretty good suspect.” I inclined my head. “Or she’s dead.”

Chapter Eight

Friday 8:17pm

“Are you done?” Jake asked, taking a photo of his illegible notes. And *he* was telling *me* to write neatly.

“Yep. What do you—” Before I could finish asking, Jake snatched my notes from my hand and photographed them.

“What do I have?” Jake put his phone away and scanned my notes.

I took them back from him. “Don’t cheat.”

“I didn’t realise this was a test.”

“Only of my patience.” I pointed to his face. “Speak.”

“Okay. Micki overheard Bart and Theo arguing. Micki said Theo was a nice guy, but Marie said that Theo and Bev were always giving Micki menial tasks and she wasn’t happy about it.”

I nodded. “Which, if Micki can be believed, gives Bart a motive and, if Marie can be believed, gives Micki a motive.”

“I don’t think someone not valuing you at work is really a motive,” Jake said.

I shrugged. “It depends. And you think Kendall has a motive because Theo was going to break it off with her—or broke it off with her—and that’s why she killed him?”

“I think that’s a good reason.”

“Except we only have Marie’s word that was what he was going to do. And remember, both Marie and Kendall seemed to think he was in love with them. Maybe he was in love with neither.”

“And then there’s Rafe,” Jake added. “Micki said he and Theo had some tension and Bart said he had a criminal record from a fight.”

“Yeah, but ‘a fight’ is a pretty vague description. We don’t know what happened there. But I *do* think Bart made a point of mentioning it. Maybe to throw suspicion off him. So we need to talk to Rafe. And Jerry. Have you noticed nobody’s pointed the finger at Jerry?”

Jake hesitated. “I would have.”

“Or Winterbourne.”

“Except you.”

“It’s that moustache. I don’t know how he wasn’t everyone’s first choice of suspect. And I genuinely think he made a huge point of explaining how he didn’t know Bev. And where *is* Bev?”

And why is no one worried that she's not here? I mean, I *know* why no one is worried she's not here, and under normal circumstances I could accept it. But Theo's dead. Why is no one worried about Bev?"

"I think Bev killed Theo and ran."

"I hope not, because if that's what happened and we're still waiting on a callback Trank, we've given her a massive head start and we'll be in so much trouble. And probably jail." I glanced at my notes and then back up at Jake. "You really think it's Bev?"

Jake shrugged. "Yes. No. Maybe."

"I love it when you're decisive. Okay. Suspects and motives, from the top." I counted them off on my fingers as I went. "Micki, because Theo was giving her rubbish jobs. Bart, for whatever their argument was about. Winterbourne because he was having an affair with Bev. Theo found out and Winterbourne killed him to keep the secret."

"You've literally pulled that from the air," Jake exclaimed. "No one has accused Winterbourne of having an affair."

"Marie said Bev was secretive with texts and she thought it was because it was a married man, namely Bart, but—"

"*But* Winterbourne said that his wife dealt with all the dig stuff. Bev could have easily been going at it with his wife."

"Going at it? How delightful."

"You know what I mean."

"I do. I just think that Winterbourne made such a big point of saying that he wasn't involved with the dig that it created the opposite impression." I paused. "Unless he thinks Bev and his wife were going at it, as you say, and it could somehow implicate her in Theo's death, so he stressed it so we'd think it was him to protect his wife. Unless he overstressed it on purpose so we'd see he was trying to protect his wife because he really wants her out of the way so he has access to her fortune."

"Or maybe Elvis did it," Jake suggested.

I shook my head. "Don't be daft. Everyone knows Elvis is a vampire. If he'd killed Theo, there'd have been bite marks."

"I was kidding."

"Really? I couldn't tell from that enormous heap of sarcasm in your voice."

"You were just going in circles about the Winterbournes."

"There's something shifty there. Maybe it's not murder. But it's *something*."

“Well, let’s just deal with murder for the moment. We can deal with the *something* later.”

“Fine.” I tried not to pout. “Then there’s Kendall and your woman scorned theory. But I’m not sure if she’d be more likely to kill Marie than Theo.”

“If Theo broke it off with her, maybe she just lost her mind for a moment.”

“Yeah, but when people lose their minds, it’s a whole big violent thing, and Theo didn’t look like he’d been the victim of a whole big violent thing. He didn’t look like he’d been the victim of any violence. And he’d been dragged, remember? He’s not that big of a guy, but he’d definitely have given Kendall some trouble dragging him.” I frowned at my notes. “And I still don’t understand why he was dragged to the exhibit area. What is the purpose of that?”

“Maybe they were interrupted taking him somewhere else?” Jake suggested. “To another exhibit?”

“But why? Why not shove him in a cleaning closet or toilet or something?” I shook my head. “Okay. As far as I can see, we still need to talk to Rafe, Jerry and Bev, but no one really has that strong of a motive yet.”

“Unless there’s something going on that we don’t know about,” Jake said.

“Yeah, but the problem with that is that if we don’t know about it, we can’t use it to help us find the killer.”

“Or it could just be the curse.”

“Or it could just be natural causes.” I folded my notes up and slid them into my purse.

“Maybe this is just natural causes and—”

“Drag marks,” Jake reminded me. “Drag marks say murder.”

“No, they say ‘I was dragged somewhere after I died’ which isn’t the same thing.” I sighed. “I just don’t feel like anyone has that good of a motive. We don’t *know* enough. We don’t actually know anything. We need time to dig into these people. Into their lives. See what else they have going on.”

“Well, we don’t have that.”

“Of course we do. We can spend tomorrow researching these people. Making phone calls to find out something about this dig that there seems to be very little information on. Finding motives.”

“We’ve still got that locker key to check out,” Jake reminded me. “We need to see where those drag marks lead to or come from. And the blood on Theo’s cuff—”

“The cut on Marie’s thumb did look angry. Like it had reopened,” I said. “The blood on Theo’s cuff could’ve come from her.” I squinted as I tried to remember what the cut looked like. “Though how did it bleed on his cuff like that?”

“That’s something,” Jake encouraged, nodding and staring at me with wide eyes. “There are still a few more avenues to run down before we call Trank again. And, like you said, we need to question Rafe and Jerry.”

I sighed. “Fine. But then we’re calling Trank again. And if he doesn’t answer we’re calling Charlie.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?”

“No, but I’d rather call someone we know—or more accurately someone who knows us than the regular police. We’re less likely to get into trouble that way. Hopefully.”

“How did you get in here?” Rafe said from behind me.

He stood in the doorway of on the far side. A different door than the one we’d used to get in.

“We were just talking about you.” I ignored his question. “We were wondering if you could tell us anything about Theo or the dig?”

“You can’t be in here.” Rafe tried to shoo us in the direction of the door we’d come through, but neither of us moved. “There are all manner of delicate things in here.”

“Rafe, a man’s dead.” Jake spoke in a deeper voice than he normally used. It sounded familiar. The intonation of it. And then I realised he’d modelled it on my dad’s voice. “Now is not the time to be concerned about bronze coins.”

Rafe shook his head. “I can’t leave you in here unsupervised.”

“We’re not going to touch anything.” I drew my finger across my heart. “Cross my heart. We were looking for Bev. Or where Theo was murdered.”

“You think he was murdered in here.” Rafe glanced between us. “And moved?”

“Do you?” I asked.

“No. No, I don’t—I don’t think anything.” Rafe shook his head, denying all knowledge of anything.

“What were you doing back there?”

“I ... needed the toilet.”

“Was Bev back there?” I asked.

Rafe shook his head. “I’ve not seen her since the guests started arriving.”

“Oh, that’s weird.” I frowned at him. “People keep telling me she came in here with you before the party started.”

“Yeah, I mean no. She didn’t come in here with me. She was coming in as I was leaving.”

“What were you doing back here earlier?”

“I’m not great at social events.” He rubbed his right shoe on the back of his left leg. “They make me anxious. I usually need a minute to collect myself.”

“That’s fair enough. Can you tell us a little about the dig? Where the mummy was found?”

“About the dig?” Confusion washed over his face. “Not really.”

“I couldn’t find any information about it, not on your website. Not anywhere.”

“Well, the museum wasn’t really involved in the dig.” He shook his head. “It was privately funded and then I think someone reached out to the museum—I think it was Mrs Winterbourne—about showing the finds here. That’s when we all got involved. Don’t take that as gospel, though.”

“So, the only people who were actually on the dig were Theo and Bev?”

He nodded. “I’m sure there were more, but they were the only ones I ever met. I only helped when it came back here. I don’t have those details. I can ask Bart for you?”

“I’d appreciate that, Rafe,” I said with a smile. “Who do you think is responsible for Theo’s death?”

“I think it was the curse.” He answered before I’d even finished asking the question.

“You don’t think that anyone could have, even accidentally, killed Theo?”

Rafe hesitated. “Honestly? I think it could’ve been anyone. He was always heaping the rubbish jobs on Micki to keep her busy, he and Bart got into it over something to do with funding this afternoon, he was cheating on Marie and Kendall with each other and I *think* maybe Mrs Winterbourne because I saw him and Mr Winterbourne nose to nose in some sort of whispered argument just before everyone started arriving. *And* I think he and Bev had a thing, too. I heard them arguing yesterday. And this morning.”

“That’s a lot,” Jake said. “How come you know so much.”

“I’m quiet. Mostly people don’t notice me. And in case no one’s told you, Theo wasn’t happy about me working here. He threatened to fire me because I’ve got a record, so I guess you could add me to that list. I didn’t kill him, but I guess I had as much motive as anyone else.”

“Can I ask what happened? The record thing?”

“Just a bar fight. I’d turned eighteen the day before. We were celebrating. Some dumb guy said some stuff, and dumb me responded. It was more of a scuffle than a fight. No one was really hurt so we had to pay a fine and got a hundred hours of community service. Nothing too serious, luckily.”

“Thanks for being up front about that. Can I ask about Jerry?”

“Ask what?”

“You said everyone had a motive to murder Theo, but you didn’t mention Jerry?”

Rafe hesitated again and frowned. “No, I don’t think they ever had any issues.”

“If you had to pick one of them, who would it be?” Jake asked.

“Bev.” He said with no hesitation this time. “When they were arguing, she *threw* something at him. They were both yelling about how the other had betrayed them. And now no one knows where she is. What if she killed him and left before she was caught?”

“Is that what you think happened?” I asked and he shrugged. “That’s been really helpful, Rafe, thank you.” I walked over to the door we’d come through, slapped the release button, and held the door open for him. It was the politest way I could ask him to leave and by taking charge of the situation, it meant he’d be unlikely to insist we left as well.

Rafe walked through the door without a backward glance.

“Bev.” Jake said as I wandered around the workroom. “Do you think it’s Bev?”

I shrugged. “I mean, it *would* make sense. Theo’s having at it with two, possibly three, other women, but I just can’t see it. I didn’t get any sort of romantic vibe from them when we met them earlier.”

“Maybe they hid it,” Jake suggested.

“But why hide his relationship with Bev, but not Marie or Kendall?” I shook my head. “And you can’t hide that stuff. People think they can, but they can’t. They definitely had a partner vibe, but not a romantic one.”

“And you can tell that after a few seconds?”

“Sure. It’s about body language and when and how people interact. And your gut. Always trust your gut.” I peeked in a large crate on the lowest shelf near me.

“And your digestive system told you they weren’t romantically involved?”

“It did. She didn’t like how he told us to call her Bev instead of Dr Sato. There was a sort of chaffing between them.” I moved to the next large crate and peeked inside that. Nothing but vases.

“And don’t you find it odd that no one thinks Jerry and Theo had any issues? That no one has pointed a finger in his direction?”

Jake shrugged. “Maybe they just got along.”

“You know, I can’t get past the fact his body was moved to the exhibit. The only thing that I can think of is that it was to hide the evidence of where he was murdered. *If* he was murdered. Maybe he died of a heart attack and they moved him. But that brings us back to why would you

move him to the exhibit? Regardless of why you murdered him, or whether he had a heart attack, why move him there?"

"I have no answers for you." Jake wandered around the worktable in the middle of the room.

"What do you think about Rafe?" I moved to the next line of shelves and checked inside the single large crate on the bottom shelf.

"I think he has a point about Bev. Especially if they were having a thing."

"They weren't having a thing."

"Says you.

"Yeah, says me."

"She threw something at Theo and they were arguing over the fact they each felt betrayed. That's who I'm putting my money on."

"Didn't we just talk about the validity of overheard conversations?"

"Doesn't mean it didn't happen. That's my new favourite suspect."

I inclined my head but said nothing.

"You don't think it's Bev?"

"I can't see anything in here that would spray oil." I'd looped around the workshop twice and found nothing that could even potentially spray oil.

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm not. The subject is whether we can find any machinery that sprays oil."

"Why don't you think it's Bev?" Jake asked, while ducking to look under the table.

I sighed. "Rafe said that Bev threw something at Theo when they were arguing. That they were both yelling about betrayal. *If* that happened. *If*. That's jealousy and passion. That's an impulse killing. That's bloody and messy. Just like Kendall."

"You told me that women mostly kill with poison."

"Statistically. If it's premeditated. But if it's not, I think they're just as likely to take a baseball bat to someone's head as a man. *If* it's fuelled by impulse and passion and *if* there's a baseball bat to hand." I shrugged. "If they had that argument this morning. Where would she find poison in an afternoon? And let's imagine that she *did* buy a heap of rat poison and somehow get him to ingest it, despite the fact I'm sure there would be signs on the body, why move him? Why not leave him where he dropped?"

"That's the sticking point for you?" Jake asked. "The body being moved?"

"It should be the sticking point for you, too."

“And you’re sure it was moved?”

“I mean, am I positive? No. But I’m about ninety-nine percent sure. The scuffs on his shoes. The trail along the polished parquet flooring. He was moved.” I scanned the work room. “There’s definitely nothing in here that looks like it might spray oil.”

Jake threw his hands up. “So if it wasn’t Bev, where is she? She’s not back here. She’s not out there.”

I shrugged and shook my head. “Maybe she is out there now. Maybe we missed her.”

“Why won’t you look me in the eye when you say that?”

I shrugged and shook my head again. “Y’know, she could be anywhere.”

“You think she’s dead.”

“No, I just—”

“You do.” Jake accused. “You think she’s dead. That’s why you were looking in those crates. For her body.”

“No, I think she’s MIA. Like I said. I—”

“Admit it. You think she’s dead.”

I sighed. “Fine. Yes. I think she’s dead.”

“What did Rafe say to make you think that?” Jake asked and I winced. His eyes stretched wide. “You thought she was dead *before* that? How long? How long have you thought she was dead?”

My wince deepened. “From the beginning.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

“Why would she be dead?”

“Why’s she not here?”

“Because she likes to make an entrance. Because she killed Theo and ran. Because she got something on her dress and went home to change.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Don’t indulge me.” Jake lifted the lid of the crate next to him, peeked inside, and closed it again. “I don’t think they’d store her body in these crates with all these pots and stuff, either. They’re all about the past and saving this stuff.”

“I suppose.” I lowered the lid on the crate I’d been looking at. “Let’s follow these drag marks now we’re back here.”

I turned in a circle, making sure I'd checked in all the body-hiding sized creates and then headed over to the door Rafe had come through. I slapped the release and yanked it open. Jerry was standing in the corridor, in front of an open door on the left-hand side of the corridor. He twisted in our direction, eyes wide in surprise.

Goosebumps rose all over my body as if someone had just dropped the temperature in the corridor.

"I didn't do it." He backed up, hands raised in the air, something red on his fingers and palm of his left hand, something that looked like a dagger in his right. "I didn't do it!"

Chapter Nine

Friday 8:26pm

“Didn’t do what?” Jake asked, but the way his voice shook, and the fact he didn’t move forward, I guessed he already knew.

“I—I—I found her.” Jerry was still backing up. “I just found her. Someone spilled—I was getting—I was—I *found* her. I swear I didn’t do it”

“Okay.” I held my hand up and motioned for him to lower his as I inched toward him. “It’s okay. Everything is going to be okay.”

“*How!*” He yelled at me. “*How* is it going to be okay?”

He stopped backing up, and by now I was level with the open doorway. I steeled my nerves, or more accurately my gag reflex, and glanced inside.

Bev was slumped in the corner, her back against the shelves and her legs tucked under her. Almost as if she’d been sitting on the floor and fallen asleep. Her red dress was stained dark around the midsection.

My stomach lurched as I realised something. She looked like me. Not facially. But she was about the same height, we were wearing similar red dresses, similar black heels. Her long dark hair was loose, the same as mine. No one who knew either of us well would mistake us for the other in a close up meeting, but from across the room, from the back, at a quick glance, I was pretty sure I could pass for her, or her for me.

“You’re not going to say ‘I told you so’, right?” Jake mumbled as he doubled over and rested his hands on his knees to support himself while taking deep breaths.

“That’s not the first thing on my mind right now.” I felt detached from the situation. Normally, dead bodies caused a reaction of some kind, but all I could see was a woman who could’ve been mistaken for me.

“Aurora?” Jake placed his hand on my shoulder. “You okay?”

“Hmmm.” I dragged my eyes away from her and shook my head to clear it of those thoughts. “Yeah. Yes. Jerry, did you check her pulse?”

Jerry shook his head, then nodded, then shook his head again. His speech came out in huffed breaths. “I couldn’t ... find ... anything.”

“Okay. First, how about you give me that dagger?” I pulled an evidence bag from my purse and opened it so he could drop it inside.

He blinked at me. “What dagger?”

“The dagger in you hand.” I offered him the opened bag again and pointed to the dagger in his hand for emphasis. “Pop it in here, hilt first.”

He followed my gaze and stared at the weapon as if he’d never seen it before. He stilled for several seconds and then all but flung it in the bag, hilt first.

“Good.” I passed the bag to Jake, who dutifully took possession of it with a grimace, before I turned back to Jerry. “I’m just going to check her pulse again, okay?”

“I can’t—I’m not—” Jerry turned and sprinted along the corridor.

Jake took a step as if he were going to give chase, but I grabbed his arm.

“We need to check her first.”

“But if he’s the killer, he’s getting away.”

“And if she’s not dead, she could die while we chase him down.” Her blank stare into nothing said she was dead, but maybe there was a chance. “And did you see him freak out? I’m not sure he is the killer.”

“And if he is? You check her. I’ll catch him.” Jake lunged forward, but I yanked him back again.

“And if he *is* the killer, and if he has another dagger up his sleeve?” I tightened my grip on his arm. “*We* check her, then *we* catch him.”

Jake sighed, but changed his posture, implying he wasn’t going to sprint if I let him go. I stepped into the cupboard and reached down to see if I could find her pulse. There was nothing. And she was cold. Dead-for-a-while type of cold.

“Is she dead?”

“Very.” I backed out of the cupboard.

“Very as in Jerry didn’t do it?” Jake asked.

“Very as in she’s been dead a while.” I expected for my gag reflex to act up or the scent of the blood to make me dizzy or something, but it didn’t. I just kept staring at her.

“What’s wrong with you?” Jake nudged me out of the way to take some photos.

“Anything about her strike you as familiar?”

“I met her so everything strikes me as familiar.”

“Look at her dress.”

“Yeah. So?”

I pointed to my dress. My heels. My hair. Jake's attention jumped between me and Bev several times. When he'd catalogued all the similarities he stepped back and stared at me.

"Oh, sh—"

"Hey. No swears."

"I think this is a moment made for swears." He looked at Bev, then back at me. "You think someone mistook her for you? And killed her by accident?"

"No. If they'd shot her across the room in the back, maybe." I pointed to the stab wound on her abdomen. "To do that someone would've had to get up close and be facing her."

"Maybe they approached from the back, spun her around and didn't realise it wasn't you until they'd stabbed her."

"Except who would want to kill me?" I asked, not able to take my eyes from her. "We didn't know anything about anything when we got here."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I just feel a bit dazed by the similarity. Give it a minute and I'll be appalled and queasy."

"Now can we go after him?" Jake was already shuffling along the corridor.

I snapped on my latex gloves and reached for her purse. I might as well do it while I was still dazed, it would be easier.

Her purse, like mine, looked like a large change purse with a snap lock. It was open. I poked around, but there wasn't much inside. Lipstick. Powder. Phone. I swiped the phone and put it in a plastic bag, then quickly removed the lipstick and powder and felt the lining of the purse. There was nothing.

If the killer had been looking for something, they'd found it. I was replacing the lipstick and powder when I felt something odd in the balance of the powder case. I shook it gently, and it rattled. I glanced back at Jake, but he was too focused on the other end of the corridor to be paying me much attention. I flipped the powder open and inside it was a locker key. Just like the one Theo had.

I tossed it into an evidence bag with an uneasy feeling that I was very likely destroying any chance Trank would be able to use this to build a case against the killer, returned the powder to the purse and left everything as I'd found it.

I closed the door and exhaled. It was odd, but once I couldn't see her anymore, the queasy washed over me. I focused on calmly removing my gloves and neatly placing everything in my purse, taking several deep breaths to calm my churning stomach. And then nodded at Jake.

It was as if he'd heard the starter's gun. He sprinted down the corridor as I was still taking off my heels. I followed him around the corner. Jake had stopped halfway along the corridor to the left, hovering outside a door that had blood on the handle and a sign that said "staffroom".

I jogged up to him, put my shoes back on, retrieved my pepper spray and depressed the cleanest part of the handle. Jake tried to jostle me out of the way, but I waved him back with my pepper spray. At least I had some type of defence. He pouted but stepped back.

The room beyond looked like a regular staffroom. On the back wall were a line of coat hooks, filled with coats. Lockers on the left-hand wall, an overloaded bookshelf against the right wall, and a wooden table with six chairs in the centre. A sink was nestled in the centre of a line of counters on the opposite wall.

Jerry frantically scrubbed at his hands with a nail brush in water that was so hot it was steaming.

"Okay, hey." I tossed my pepper spray back in my bag, tucked it under my arm, and crossed the room. "Hey? Jerry?" I switched the tap off, but he kept scrubbing at his hands. "Stop. Stop." I pulled the nail brush from his fingers and dropped it in the sink before taking hold of his hands.

Jake offered me a few sheets of kitchen roll and I dried Jerry's hands as he watched me, his eyes oddly vacant.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" I asked, not because I thought he was a tea drinker, but because that's what English people do in stressful situations. They sit down and drink tea. I could've used a cup of tea.

"Tea?" He blinked at me.

"How about we just sit down?" Jake placed his hands on Jerry's shoulders and guided him to the table.

Jerry dropped into a chair without prompting.

"Is she ..." he didn't finish the question, but I knew what he was asking.

"Yes."

"I thought—when I saw the dagger—I just pulled it out." Jerry stared at the opposite wall, but his attention was turned inward. "I didn't know—I didn't think—"

"Do you have any idea who might have wanted to hurt her?" Jake asked.

Jerry's head jerked in Jake's direction. "Not me."

"We know." I patted his hand. "Did you see her arguing with anyone?"

"I don't—" Jerry removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes closed. "I'm going to be the prime suspect. My fingerprints will be all over that dagger."

“We think she’s been dead a while,” Jake said. “We can tell the police that. We can tell the police when you found her. The time, I mean.”

“The police?” Jerry’s attention jumped between us.

I nodded. “We have two dead bodies now and whatever you might think about Theo’s death, Bev was definitely murdered.”

“But what about the curse?” Jerry’s voice broke as he asked. “What about *the curse*? That could have killed her. She could’ve fallen on the dagger.”

“Maybe.” I nodded again, not wanting to point out that we’d found her in the *cleaning* cupboard, not a dagger storage cupboard. “But the police can sort that out. Let’s get you back outside with Bart and the others and they can take care of you.” I stood and gestured for him to do the same.

“Outside.” He stared at me with wild eyes. “But you think one of them is the killer.”

“And how much safer will you be in a public place surrounded by everyone?” I asked and gently pulled him to his feet.

He allowed Jake to lead him to the door, and he followed meekly. Jake held the staffroom door open for me and I wiped the blood from the external handle with the damp kitchen roll. I leant over to drop it in the bin by the door and noticed a wad of blue roll. Scrunched up and stained darker from having absorbed some type of oil. And covered in dirt. Like someone had used it to wipe oil off the floor.

“Aurora?”

“Coming.” I dropped the tissue by the side of the bin so it didn’t touch the blue roll and followed them along the corridor. We passed the closed cupboard where poor Bev was slumped, through the workroom and along the final corridor.

“It would be really helpful if you didn’t tell anyone about Bev,” I said to Jerry. “I know that’s tough, but if they leave before the police get here they’ll look guilty and then the police will have to chase them down and—well, you get the idea.”

“I understand.” He nodded and then walked away into the crowd.

“Text my dad and ask my parents to keep an eye on him.”

“You think he killed Bev?” Jake was already tapping around on his phone.

“If he did, he didn’t do it just now.” I scurried back the way we’d come until I was standing in the corridor where we’d found Jerry in. I stopped and looked behind me. Then turned and faced forward again.

“What?” Jake checked both ways as well.

“Jerry must have come through the exhibit way.”

“So?”

“So, would you rather come through the workshop or past a dead body?”

“Maybe he was on the far side of the foyer and just forgot until he had had to walk past him.”

“Hmmm.” I crouched down and angled my head to get a good look at the linoleum flooring.

“What are you doing now?”

“Remember a million years ago when we found Theo and said we were going to check out those drag marks?”

Jake crouched next to me, squinted, and then pointed along the corridor. “There. They go from the door on the right, which must be through to the exhibit, halfway along the corridor. So he was attacked here, in the middle of this corridor, and dragged through that door to the exhibit?”

I bobbed around, trying different angles to see if there was a hint the drag marks lead further along the corridor. They didn’t.

“Here’s my problem with this,” I said as I pushed to my feet. “If it happened in here, why didn’t the killer just dump the body in the cleaning cupboard with Bev? It’s maybe three metres further along the corridor than the door to the exhibit. *And* the body would be out of sight.”

“Maybe they knew Bev was already in there,” Jake suggested. “Maybe they killed Bev first.”

“Yes, but they put *her* in the cupboard out of sight. Why not do the same with Theo?”

“Respect?”

“Maybe. People are weird.” I sighed. “I still can’t get past the fact he was dragged to the exhibit. I just can’t see the logic there. Why kill and hide Bev, but not Theo? And if it’s two different killers, the question is still why wouldn’t they dump their body in the cupboard with someone else’s body. What is the significance of putting Theo out on show?”

“Are you going to call Trank again?”

“I think so don’t you? If he doesn’t answer, we’ll try Charlie. And if *he* doesn’t answer, we’ll have to call the main number. I don’t think we can put it off any longer.” I plucked another pair of latex gloves out of my purse and retrieved Bev’s phone. “I just want to see who she was texting and calling before we do.”

“Did you use gloves when you collected that?” Jake asked.

“Always.”

“Then how did you get that smudge of blood on the back of it.” I pulled the phone from the bag and flipped it over. The smudge was dry.

“That wasn’t me.”

“I saw you get it from her purse. There wasn’t any blood in her purse, right? So where did it come from? It had to be you.”

“I’m telling you it wasn’t me. I’m really careful.” I frowned at the phone. “I checked her pulse without gloves, but pulled a fresh pair to look through her purse. This isn’t from me.”

“Then how—” Jake stared at me, wide eyed. “The *killer* touched it.”

“The killer went through her phone and then *put it back*? Why not just take it?” I answered my own question. “Because there might have been something on here that incriminates them. If they take the phone, the police will get records. They thought if they didn’t take the phone, the police might not take that much notice of it. Because they thought the police would assume if it was still there, the killer wasn’t worried about what was on it?”

Jake was gesticulating like a windmill. “Exactly.”

“But if they’ve already checked it, they’ve likely wiped anything that was on there that pointed to them.”

Jake’s arms dropped. “That is a good point. Are you going to check, anyway? See if she has the thumbprint lock?”

“Yes.” I clenched my teeth, opened the cupboard and looked everywhere but Bev’s face. “I’m so sorry about this,” I whispered and pressed her cold thumb to the home button. The phone opened, and I immediately backed out of the cupboard, letting Jake close the door.

We scanned through her photos, emails, and texts. The only thing that was even remotely interesting was a text thread with some extremely descriptive messages.

“There’s something weird about this text thread.” I squinted at the screen.

“Other than the whole sex thing?”

“Yeah. Don’t they read weird to you?”

Jake grimaced. “All sex texts read weird to me.”

“There’s definitely something odd about them.” I read the texts, trying to focus on the sentence structure and not the meaning.

“They just read like gross texts to me.”

“I don’t know why I even bring you along. Is there anything else you notice?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Like what?”

“This is where I’m going to say I told you so.”

“About what?” Jake read through the texts over my shoulder. “Because she’s sexting with some guy? You never said anything about that.”

I twisted to look at his face. “Look who she’s talking to.”

“I can see who she’s talking to. But we don’t have a suspect called Wyatt.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“What?”

“Wyatt Earp. She’s talking to *Wyatt Earp*.”

“Why does that name sound familiar?” Jake frowned at me.

“Gee, I don’t know. Maybe because he’s a super famous law man from the wild west.”

“Is that one of those On Demand shows?”

“You are *killing* me, dude.”

“What?”

“He’s a historical figure who brought law and order to the wild west. And do you know what else he was famous for?” I asked, and Jake shook his head. “His handlebar moustache.”

I watched understanding slowly dawn on Jake’s face. “She *was* going at it with Winterbourne.”

I nodded smugly. “Told you so.”

Chapter Ten

Friday 8:39pm

“Why are you still staring at the phone?” Jake asked.

“I’m trying to work out whether to keep hold of it or put it back. I took it so no one else would, but if the killer left it maybe we should too.” I made my decision and returned it to the plastic bag. “We’ve already disturbed the scene. Probably best we keep hold of it.”

I placed the bagged phone back into my purse, pulled out my own and called Trank.

“I was just about to call you back,” he said by way of greeting.

“It’s been an hour,” I said. “And since when do you not answer your phone when I call?”

“This may come as shock, but I have a full-time job that prevents me from being at your beck and call.”

“That’s fine, but I just want you to know that this is your fault,” I said, making sure to foist the blame onto him as quickly as possible.

“What’s my fault? Has the mummy attacked?” Clearly, my parents had filled him in on the evening’s activities.

“I’m not sure if it was a mummy, but someone *definitely* attacked this poor woman. And stabbed her. To death.” I added, just in case there was any confusion.

All I got was silence. There were no sounds whatsoever on the other end of the phone. And then I realised he must have muted himself. More than likely to swear. A lot. A click and ambient sounds returned a few seconds later.

“Can you secure the scene?” he asked, his voice heavy with resignation.

“For the woman?” I glanced along the corridor. “It’s in the back of house area and she’s in a cupboard, so I think we should be okay. No one but us, the guy who found and whoever killed her—if they’re not the same person—know she’s here.”

“What do you mean ‘for the woman’?” Trank asked.

“Oh, there’s also a dead guy in the exhibit area. It’s not open yet and Jake rigged a camera to catch anyone who messed with the scene.”

Trank paused. “Why would you need to rig a camera?”

“Because it happened an hour ago. When I first called you and *you* didn’t answer.”

“You left a possible murder victim on the floor for an hour?”

“You didn’t answer,” I repeated. “What was I supposed to do?”

“The same thing *everyone* else does when they find a body. They call the main number. It’s three nines. It’s really easy to remember.”

“There’s no need for the attitude. And it’s your fault anyway for not answering the phone. So you’re coming to the museum? Excellent,” I rushed on before he could ask anymore questions. “We won’t mention it to anyone, so the killer won’t up and leave. Okay. See you in bit. Bye.” I ended the call and winced at the phone, almost expecting him to call me back and tell me off. Several seconds passed without it ringing, so I decided I was safe. For now. When he arrived I was guessing that was going to be a whole other issue.

I returned my phone to my purse and pulled out both bagged locker keys. “We should check these quickly.”

“Where did you get the second one?” Jake asked as he followed me along the corridor to the staffroom.

“It was hidden in Bev’s powder case.”

“*What?*” Jake took both keys from my hands and examined them through the clear plastic. “What do you think is inside her locker? Diamonds? Nuclear launch codes?”

“Your common sense?”

“She had a key in her *powder case*,” Jake stressed, as if that somehow made his outlandish claims more sensible. “You don’t hide a locker key in there unless you have something *really* good.”

I opened the staffroom door and gestured for him to go in first. He practically skipped over to the lockers and started examining them for the matching numbers on the keys.

“Got them. Do you have any more—” Jake stopped speaking when he saw me pluck a wad of blue roll from the bin with my latex gloves. “What are you doing? There’s kitchen roll on the counter if you need it.”

“See this?” I held the wad up for Jake to see.

“I see a wad of blue roll.” It was a statement, but he meant it as a question.

“Do you see this patch?” I spread the used paper out on the table. “This dark patch here?”

Jake moved from the lockers to the table to look. “Yeah.”

“See the way it’s soaked in to the material? It’s oil. Someone used this to wipe up oil.”

“The oil on Theo’s trousers?”

“It’s the *only* place we’ve seen oil. It doesn’t *mean* it’s the same oil, but it does seem likely.”

Jake scanned the kitchen. “What in here would sprinkle oil at shin height?”

“What if it wasn’t *sprinkled* on him?” I asked. “He had oil on the heel of his shoe. I thought he’d just stepped in it. But what if he stepped in it, slipped and fell? Maybe there were extra drops of oil on the floor and that’s how it got on his trousers?”

Jake nodded. “He hit his head, broke his neck, whatever. And *then* someone moved the body. From in here.”

“The drag marks start in the corridor near the exhibit.”

“So he slipped in here, got up and walked out, *then* something happened to him?” Jake asked.

“No, because if he’d *walked* out, he’d likely have walked the oil off his shoes. Or dirt would’ve stuck to the oil. And there was hardly any dirt in the oil on his shoes. *And* I didn’t see any oil on the floor of the corridor, so he didn’t track it out.

“So it happened in here, then someone gave him a fireman’s lift or something to the middle of the corridor. He got too heavy and they decided to drag him instead?”

“I think so. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Do you think some poured the oil on the floor on purpose? To make him slip?” Jake asked.

“I think there would’ve been more oil on him if that was the case, so I think the real question is was the oil wiped up *before* or *after* Theo slipped in it?”

“If it was wiped up before, how could he have slipped in it?” Jake pointed out. “And you say *I* have no common sense.”

“Someone could’ve spilled it and not wiped it all up. They could’ve missed the spot that Theo slipped in. It was an accident.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Do you see any blue roll in here?” I asked, and Jake dutifully searched the kitchen.

“No.”

“Do you know where there *is* blue roll?”

“In the cleaning cupboard,” Jake guessed. “Where Bev is.”

“Exactly. So if someone spilled it this afternoon and cleaned it up. No big deal. Theo slips in it. It’s an accident. But if someone spilled it this evening—” I cut myself off. “Though why would anyone be back here messing around with oil just before the party? It’s not like—” I sniffed the scrunched up paper.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to see if it’s nut oil.”

“You think Theo was allergic?”

I shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe someone just spilled it earlier in the day, missed a spot, Theo slipped in it and it means nothing."

"Well, that's one clue solved, sort of. Not really, at all." Jake jangled the locker keys in front of my face. "Can we open these now?"

I handed Jake a pair of latex gloves and let him have at the lockers while I returned the crumpled blue roll to the bin. And then collected the used kitchen roll I'd discarded on the floor earlier into the bin as well.

"Okay. This is interesting." Jake held up a cheap looking phone in his gloved hand. "From the key you found in Bev's powder compact. She has two phones?"

"That's weird." I took the phone from him and tried to open it. "There's no thumbprint option so it needs a passcode. And there's no photo on the lock screen."

"Who has two phones?"

"People up to no good."

"Maybe that's what got Bev killed."

"Yeah, maybe." I put it in another evidence bag and added it to the collection in my purse. "What's in the other locker?"

Jake peered inside, frowned, and stepped back. "Er ..."

I hesitated to look. "It's not body parts or anything, right?"

"What? No." Jake reached in and pulled out a packet of rainbow-patterned plasters.

"Okay. That's unexpected." I motioned for him to give me the bagged locker key, the first one he'd used to open the locker that contained the phone. "Are you sure you didn't get the keys mixed up?" I held the bagged key up to the light. I could still see traces of powder on it.

"Absolutely sure. The phone was in the locker Bev had the key to, and this is from the key you took from Theo's pocket."

"I have no clue what's going on here."

"Ditto." Jake offered me the plasters. "Are we bagging these as evidence?"

I hesitated. My purse was getting pretty full. "No, we'll leave them. I only took the phones in case there's something on them that the killer or someone else might want to destroy."

"These could be evidence." Jake motioned for me to hand him an evidence bag. "I'll keep hold of them."

"Really?" I handed him a bag. "I don't think that's necessary."

"Better safe than sorry. There might be spy messages hidden in the cushion part of the plaster." He took his phone from his jacket pocket and slid it into his inside breast pocket, then

added the plasters to the outside pocket. He tapped them and smiled at me. “Safe and—what’s wrong with your face?”

I pointed to his jacket. “It’s a secret pocket.”

“It’s not that secret. I think most jackets have them.”

I turned and scurried out of the staffroom.

“Aurora?” Jake called and easily caught up with his long-legged stride and flat shoes. “What is it?”

“Theo’s jacket. The plaster.” We rounded the corner, and I moved as fast as I could in the stupid high heels. “I think he made a secret pocket in his jacket lining and used the plaster to tape it closed.”

“Rainbow plasters?” Jake asked as we exited the corridor and emerged out into the exhibit area. “Not exactly covert.”

I shrugged. “Maybe that’s all he could find.”

“But Marie was wearing one this morning.”

“She said she found some in the workroom. There was a tux hanging up in the corner.” I strode over to where Theo’s body lay, just as we’d left it. “Maybe he was fixing it this morning.” Still wearing my gloves, I crouched over him and lifted his jacket open. I felt the hem of the lining. “There’s something in here. How did I miss this earlier?”

“Something like diamonds?” Jake hovered behind me, peering over my shoulder as I peeled the plaster from the lining and revealed a slit.

“What small thing could you easily conceal in your jacket lining?” I reached in and pulled out a thin, small booklet the size of my hand and showed it to Jake.

He gasped. “A passport.”

Wedged inside was a one-way ticket to Cancun, Mexico. I held it up so Jake could see while flipping through the passport with my other hand.

“This flight leaves in a few hours.” Jake read the ticket over my shoulder without touching it. “Marie already told us they were going on holiday.”

“To the Galapagos. This ticket is to Mexico. One way.”

“And *you* didn’t want to do this story,” Jake mocked me. “*You* said it would be boring.”

“I’m running out of evidence bags,” I muttered, ignoring Jake, and slipped the passport and ticket into my second to last bag. Once they were secured, I closed Theo’s jacket and, in the dim light, a shadow on his neck caught my eye.

I pulled my torch from my now stuffed purse. It cast a wide circle of light directly ahead of me.

“What’s up?”

“Can you hold my purse for a second?” I shoved it in Jake’s direction, expecting him to grab it, and then moved Theo’s shirt collar down.

“Is that—what is that?” Jake was leaning over me so closely it felt as if I was supporting his weight as well as my own. “Is that a bruise?”

“Not quite. But it’s something.”

“How come you didn’t notice that before?” Jake accused.

“His shirt collar was in the way. It’s dark in here. I’m not a medical examiner. I didn’t roll him over. A slew of other reasons.”

“It looks like a straight line. What makes a mark like that?”

“A countertop could,” I said. “He slipped in some oil in the staffroom, twisted as he fell somehow and struck his neck on the counter. Or the table. Or the back of a chair.”

“So it really was an accident?” Jake asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Because that sounds like a string of extremely bad luck,” Jake said. “You could almost say ... he was cursed.”

“Did the curse drag him out here? No, it did not. Be quiet.”

“Maybe they’re all in it together and they dragged him out here as a warning? A warning to all those who disturbed the tomb.” Jake nodded, eyes wide. “It could happen.”

“Bev disturbed the tomb so maybe the curse made her accidentally fall on a dagger, yet ‘they’ shoved her in a cupboard. Surely two curse deaths would be better than one. So why dump her in that cupboard.” I held my hand up. “Please don’t answer.”

“Maybe—”

“No.” I shook my head. “To whatever you’re about to suggest, no.”

I stood and wandered around the body to examine his shoes again. There was barely any dirt in the oil. He definitely hadn’t walked anywhere after stepping in it.

“I’m waiting for you to offer something better,” Jake said.

“Let’s say his death was an accident and someone carried him out,” I said as another possibility occurred to me. “Why would they carry him half way and then drop him? It was only a few more steps. Surely whoever was carrying could’ve managed a few more steps.”

“I’m sensing you already have an answer,” Jake said.

“Because Bev saw them.”

“Yes!” Jake snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “Bev saw them, so they dropped Theo and chased after her. They caught her, stabbed her, and shoved her in the cupboard. *Then* they dragged Theo to the exhibit.”

“But that just leads us back to why not shove Theo in the cupboard with Bev? And where did that person get the dagger? Did they plan on stabbing Theo, but he slipped before they could? But if Theo’s death was an accident, why have the dagger? Unless *Bev* had the dagger. And if *Bev* had the dagger, what was she doing with it? All the—”

“What?”

“What if Bev was stealing things? Artefacts from different digs? That second phone in her locker was for making deals. What if she was stealing them to sell? Or stealing to order? *That’s* where the dagger came from. *Bev* had it and then someone used it on her.”

Jake nodded along. “That would make total sense.”

“And the blood on Theo’s cuff was transferred after the killer had stabbed Bev.”

“That all makes sense. And the killer would have to be a guy because the women wouldn’t be able to carry Theo over their shoulder. That narrows down our suspect list to Jerry, Bart, Rafe and Mr Winterbourne.”

“I can’t really see any of them slinging a guy over their shoulder, can you? And I just can’t get past the killer not dumping Theo with Bev. Why put him out in the exhibit? On show? Why do that?”

“You’re just not letting that go, are you?”

“I feel like that is the lynchpin of this whole thing. If we can understand why that happened, we can work the rest out.”

“How are we going to work that out?” Jake asked.

“We’re going to get a new perspective.”

“Your parents?”

I nodded. “My parents.”

Chapter Eleven

Friday 8:47pm

“How’re we doing?” my mum whispered as we rejoined my parents in the foyer.

I sighed. “Not great.”

“We’ve been keeping an eye on that Jerry fellow for you.” My dad nodded subtly to the far side of the foyer, where Jerry was talking to Rafe. “Do you think he’s the culprit?”

I sighed again. “I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“Lay it out for us, lovely,” my mum suggested. “Maybe we can help.”

So I explained everything that we’d found, everything that we knew, everything that we suspected.

“Let me walk this back through to make sure I’ve got it all right,” my dad said with a super fast eyebrow raise in Jake’s direction since Jake kept interrupting as I was explaining. “You found Mr Winterbourne, Bart, Marie, and the four assistants standing around Theo’s dead body. Theo had blood on his cuff and a key in his pocket to a locker that holds nothing but rainbow plasters. The same type of plaster you found taping a secret compartment of his jacket closed where he was hiding a passport and one-way plane ticket for tonight. *And* that Marie was wearing on her thumb earlier in the day.”

“Yes, but she said that she found a couple on the counter near the first aid box,” I added. “So that might be nothing. Even if she’s lying and Theo gave her the plaster, I can’t see that really makes any difference to anything.”

My dad nodded. “Okay. Now, Theo had oil on his shoe and the lower half of his trousers. In the staffroom you found blue roll that had been used to wipe up oil. He also had a sort of bruise in a straight line on his neck and drag marks on the floor that led from the middle of a corridor out to the exhibit. Is that about right?”

“And this poor Bev woman,” my mum continued, while I nodded at my dad. “You found her in the cleaning cupboard with a dagger in her stomach—”

“Actually, *Jerry* found her in the cupboard,” I corrected. “We found Jerry finding her. And I can only assume the dagger was in her stomach because it looked like that was where she’d been stabbed, but he had it in his hands when we discovered them.”

“Right.” My mum nodded. “And in her powder case, you found a key to a locker with a phone you can’t access. But it wasn’t *her* phone because her phone was in her purse.”

“With a bloody smudge on the back which we think means the killer checked to see if there was anything incriminating on it and possibly deleted it, if there was.” Jake said. “But left it so that if they had deleted something, maybe the police wouldn’t think to check her phone that closely because she still had it on her.”

My dad squinted at Jake. “I’m not sure that completely makes sense. The police are pretty thorough.”

Jake pointed to me. “It was Aurora’s theory.”

“I was thinking that *I* know how thorough Trank would be, but maybe a regular person thinks deleting the messages or texts is enough,” I explained.

“Okay, that makes sense,” my dad agreed. “Suspects and motives?”

“Before that,” Jake interrupted hesitantly, “I think we should mention how similar Bev looked to Aurora.”

“Similar how?” My mum focused her attention on me with laser-like precision while my dad searched the crowd, as if looking for assassins.

“We had the same type of dress. Same colour. Same type of shoes. Both had our dark hair loose. Similar purses.”

“You think you were the intended target?” My mum glanced at my dad. It felt like they were about to enact a grab and go. Like, grab me and go. Run for safety.

“I can’t see how I could be. Or why.” I shook my head. “I think she was murdered almost as soon as she got here. And we hadn’t even started to cause any problems at that point. I think it was coincidence.”

My dad narrowed his eyes into the crowd. “You don’t go anywhere without your mother or me. You understand?”

“Yes, dad. And I managed to get through to Trank. He’ll be here any minute so you can stop trying to dial him behind your back.”

“You’re too smart for your own good.” He tapped my nose with his forefinger and slipped his phone back into his pocket. “Let’s get back to suspects and motives.”

“I was thinking maybe Jerry killed Bev,” I said with a lot more uncertainty than I usually had naming suspects. But then I usually had a lot more time to work it all through. “At first I was thinking maybe Bev was stealing stuff, but if she was, why keep the second phone in a locker and the key in her powder case? It’s not like she always carried her purse around with her, right? She didn’t have it in her hands when we met her this morning. Why not just eradicate that step and keep the phone on you? Surely it would be a lot more covert to take the phone to the dagger than the

dagger to the phone to take a photo. And why do it during an exhibit when there's a whole bunch of extra people around? What if I've got that back to front, and it was *Jerry* stealing and the phone in the locker is his? Maybe Jerry put the key in her powder case to implicate her. Or maybe Bev was keeping it to—I want to say turn it in and report him, but if she hasn't done that already—”

“You're thinking blackmail,” my mum finished for me. “And Jerry killed her instead of paying her. Then he went back for the dagger and you walked in on him.”

“But why wouldn't he have taken the dagger with him after he stabbed her?” I asked. “Why stab her, leave the dagger, then go back for it? That's like asking to get caught.”

Jake snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “Because she caught him moving Theo. He couldn't carry the dagger *and* move Theo.”

“If he was moving Theo, why did he have the dagger?” my dad asked. “And you said Theo slipped. If that was an accident, why move him?”

Jake turned to me and waited for me to answer, but all I had to offer was a shrug.

“You know what I don't get about this whole thing?” my mum asked. “Why leave Theo's body in the exhibition area? Were they dragging it somewhere else and got interrupted, or did they mean to leave it there? Out in the open. And if they did, why?”

I waved an open hand at my mum. “Exactly.”

“I feel like that is the key,” she added. “If you—”

“Wait-wait-wait,” I interrupted her. “What if *Theo* is the one stealing all the artefacts and Jerry had nothing to do with anything? He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time? Theo has the passport and the plane ticket, right? What if he got the blood on his cuff from killing Bev?” I shook my head at myself as I felt all my hypotheses get tangled up. “This is why I love my white board. If I can see everything, I can fit it together. Without it, I forget vital pieces, like the blood on the cuff.”

“If it *was* Theo who stabbed Bev, then who dragged him to the exhibit?” my dad asked. “Are we dealing with more than one killer?”

“Who was definitely back of house?” I asked our small group. “Rafe, for sure. And he said he saw Bev. Bart also said he saw both of them go into the work area. Someone else said they saw Rafe go back there too, but I can't remember who now. No one else mentioned seeing anyone else go back there. Which doesn't necessarily mean they didn't, but ...”

“*And* Rafe has a criminal record,” Jake reminded me.

“For what?” my dad asked. “You never mentioned that.”

I threw my hands up. “Because I don't have my white board.”

“Assault,” Jake added for me. “Well, more of a bar fight. He was fined and got community service, but not jail time.”

“Well, he’s the *perfect* patsy,” my mum said, and my dad nodded in agreement. “Who better to frame for a murder than someone with a conviction for assault.”

“Yeah, unless that assault was the beginning of a pattern of behaviour and not a one-off incident,” I countered. “In which case, that makes Rafe the most likely suspect. Micki mentioned he and Theo had some work place tension, but I don’t think anyone else said anything about him. Except Bart. Bart didn’t seem too keen on him because of his record.”

“Patsy,” my mum repeated.

“Your mum has a point,” my dad agreed. “You said the drag marks start halfway along the corridor and led out to the exhibit. What if he found Theo in that corridor and figured no one would believe he didn’t do it. Especially if that Bart fellow already has it out for him. So he dragged Theo out to the exhibit, so anyone *but* him could find the body?”

I stared at my dad as I worked that theory through. It was the most logical explanation for Theo being dragged to the exhibition that I could think of. In fact, it was the *only* explanation I could think of for Theo being dragged out into the open. It was the only possible thing that made real sense.

“This is why I bring you guys along. Although, that doesn’t explain how Theo ended up in the corridor in the first place.”

My mum shrugged. “Whoever was carrying Theo heard Rafe coming, dropped the body and went out through the exhibit.”

“That makes sense to me,” Jake agreed.

“Right.” I checked around the foyer, ensuring all the suspects were still here. “If we take Rafe out as a suspect in either murder, that leaves us Bart, Micki, Kendall, Jerry, Marie and the Winterbournes.”

“You can count Mrs Winterbourne out of that,” my mum said.

“Are you sure?” Jake asked. “What about the texts we found between Bev and Wyatt Earp? If that *is* Mr Winterbourne, that’s pretty solid. Jealousy is a pretty common motive.”

“Having chatted to that woman, while I can fully believe her to be capable of stabbing someone or carry a man over her shoulder, she has no reason to.” My mum checked around us and lowered her voice. “She’s serving Mr Winterbourne with divorce papers on Monday. She has proof he was cheating. She has no reason to kill either of them that I can see.”

“She just told you that?” Jake asked.

My mum shrugged, looked pleased with herself. "I'm an *excellent* listener."

"That knocks her out of the running," Jake said, narrowing his eyes on the Winterbournes, who were chatting with Marie like there was nothing wrong in the world. "What about him?"

"Hang on." I waved Jake off. "That doesn't *necessarily* knock her out of the running. She might be serving him divorce papers, but he could still fight it in court. Even with a prenup. She might be framing him for murder to make it airtight."

"Why frame him and not just kill him?" Jake asked. "Surely killing him would be quicker."

"Because it's *always* the spouse," my parents said in unison.

"First people the police look at when a husband or wife is murdered," I elaborated for Jake. "By *framing* him, it removes that direct suspicion from her. Though, I'm not sure what difference that would make in terms of the divorce. Unless there was some clause in the prenup about being convicted of a crime. And Marie already said that it was ironclad. Maybe he doesn't know she's serving him or has proof. Maybe he killed Bev to keep from exposing him. That seems a bit messy and extreme, though. And that's *if* Wyatt Earp in her phone is Winterbourne. That's a lot of ifs."

"What do you think of Jerry?" my dad asked. "Are you sure he's not the potential thief? Maybe he waited to find Bev until he knew you were around to make him look innocent."

"If he wanted to look innocent, why pull the dagger out of her?" Jake asked.

"To legitimately get his fingerprints on it," my mum said.

"Or maybe he didn't hear us and went back to collect the dagger, and we just happened on him by accident," I offered. "And we have *no* evidence that anyone is stealing anything. It was just one more thing I plucked from the air to try to make this all make sense."

"I still think it's Kendall," Jake said. "Woman scorned."

"*If* he broke up with her like Marie said he was planning to. Remember that Kendall said the same thing about Marie," I reminded him.

Jake shook his head and eyed Kendall from across the room. "I still think she killed him."

"I thought we'd all but agreed his death was an accident?" my dad said. "That he slipped and hit his neck."

"And, accident or not, she's far too slight to be able to have carried him to the middle of that corridor," my mum pointed out. "Unless she had help. But then you're left with the question of why move him from the staffroom? If it looked like an accident, why not leave him there? And if you're saying it's Kendall, why did she kill Bev?"

Jake shook his head. "I hear everything you're saying and I still think it's Kendall."

"What about this Bart fellow?" my dad asked. "Or the purple-haired girl?"

“Bart, I have no idea.” I shrugged. “If we’re talking theft, then maybe it has something to do with that. But there is no proof of theft. So I don’t know. I *do* want to talk to Micki again about the why Bev and Theo gave her rubbish jobs. And Kendall about whether Theo really did break up with her. And Marie about the trip she and Theo were supposed to take. And—” I paused and angled my head. “Does everyone hear the sirens?”

“Time to face the music,” my dad said, smiling at me.

“Hey, I called him. It’s not my fault he didn’t answer.” I said. “It’s his fault and I’ll tell him so.”

My dad laughed. “I’m sure that will go down well.”

Chapter Twelve

Friday 9:01pm

“I’m starting to think you’re a—what do you call those things that predict death?” Trank said as we stood several feet from Theo’s body.

“Banshee.”

“That’s it. A banshee. I was thinking about speaking to the higher-ups about getting you a police escort. Someone to follow you around and pick up all the bodies.”

He’d immediately cordoned off the new exhibit and the back of house area when he’d arrived and penned all the guests inside the foyer and instructed a bunch of constables to take details and statements from anyone and everyone.

“I think that’s a little bit offensive,” I said. “Yeah. I think I’m a bit offended.”

“Only because if you had an escort you wouldn’t be able to do half the things you do.”

Trank gestured to the body. “Explain this to me.”

Although Trank was only a few inches taller than me he always managed to make me feel short. Tonight was no exception. Especially since I already felt kind of small for not dealing with the whole murder-slash-accident thing properly.

He still had his short-back-and-sides haircut from when he’d been in the army, only now his hair was grey. It matched his grey suit. And despite his clean-shaven, respectable looking face, there was something very James Bond-ish and suave about the way he carried himself.

“Explain what?” I glanced at the scene and then back at him. “Oh. Okay. Well, that’s a dead guy and when someone dies—”

“I *meant* the part about how you found the body and didn’t call me immediately.”

“I *did* call you immediately. You didn’t answer.”

“You could’ve called Charlie.”

“I could’ve stabbed myself in the face as well. It doesn’t mean it’s a good idea.”

“It would’ve been a better idea than not calling anyone and waiting for me to get back to you,” Trank said. “What if I hadn’t answered? What then?”

“You did so can we just say I’m sorry and move on?”

“You know you could’ve done real harm here.” It was phrased like a question, but Trank delivered it like a statement. “*Real* damage to any case we might be able to bring against the culprit. That is if we can catch them with the hour long head start you gave them.”

“You remember I’m a reporter, right?” I asked, not ready to tell him about the mass of evidence I had secured in my purse. “It’s not like I *try* to find bodies, but it *is* my job to investigate when I do.”

Trank stared at me stoney-faced and waited.

“Yes,” I continued. “I know that, but I figured the killer wouldn’t rush away in the middle of the opening so we had some time.”

“And if the killer had nothing to do with the event?”

“You are an excellent detective and you would’ve found them.” I placed my hand on his shoulder. “I have every confidence in you.”

“You can’t keep doing this.” Trank took my hand from his shoulder and squeezed it. “You can’t keep messing with my crime scenes.”

“I wasn’t *messing* with any crime scene. And random body-finding-people mess with crime scenes all the time.”

“But they don’t all call me.”

I sighed. “I understand it puts you in a difficult position. I’m sorry. I should’ve called it in properly when you didn’t answer, but I just thought—no. No buts. I’m sorry.”

“And you won’t do it again?”

I winced. “I’ll do it better?”

Trank sighed. Heavily. Just to make sure I got the point. He gestured around the exhibit.

“What do you have?”

“What do I *have*?” Automatically, I gripped my purse tighter. “You mean what do I know?”

Trank sighed even more heavily and rubbed his hand across his face. “Can I assume that the evidence you have in your purse will make its way to my desk at some point?”

“If I removed any evidence from any scene, I would only do so in case I was worried about the killer coming back to take it and would make it available to the police as soon as possible.”

“What do you know?”

“We’re a hop, skip and a jump away from working out who the killer is.”

“Really?” Trank’s eyebrows inched up to his hairline. “In only a few hours. That’s impressive. Care to give me a hint?”

“No, but you’re keeping the assistants, the Winterbournes, and both exhibit coordinators here after you let all the guests go, right?”

“I can make sure they’re interviewed last,” Trank hedged, “if you’ll tell me what you have.”

“How about you give me twenty minutes and I’ll give you the killer?”

Trank sighed. “Why not? We’ll be here longer than that anyway. But after twenty minutes, you’ll give me everything?”

I crossed my heart. “Everything.”

“Everything?” Trank looked pointedly at my evidence-stuffed-purse.

“Pinky swear.”

“Uh-huh.” Trank jerked his head in the direction of the foyer. “Skedaddle.”

I strolled out of the exhibit area as calmly as I could while my mind spun out. Twenty minutes? Twenty minutes! What was I thinking? We were nowhere near finding the killer. At this point I felt like pulling a name out of a hat would be as effective as my investigation.

The only thing that made any sort of sense was that Rafe moved Theo from the corridor to the exhibit. That was my cornerstone in the investigation now, and I really needed to get him to confirm it. But the explanation I was attributing to Rafe moving the body, I could attribute to anyone. Maybe Marie thought she would be a suspect and she moved it. Maybe Bart did it.

I didn’t like being rushed. I had so many questions about everything. And maybe some weren’t relevant, but how would I know until I had all the answers?

“Hey,” Charlie greeted me and pulled me from my tangled mess of motives and opportunities and self doubt.

His dark stubble matched his short dark hair which was still slightly uneven in places from when he’d let his niece practice her hairdressing skills on him. He’d switched out his usual faded jeans for smart navy trousers and a white shirt, the sleeves of which he’d rolled half way up his forearms as though he wasn’t aware it was winter.

“I’m almost at the point where, when we get a call about a murder, I expect to see you on the scene.” He unhooked the rope from one pillar and motioned for me to walk through to the foyer.

“Really? That’s so funny. Because *I’m* almost at the point where, when you say you’ll do something, I expect you to do it.”

Charlie hesitated as he hooked the rope back up. “Am I supposed to know what you’re talking about?”

I nodded, eyes wide. “Yes.”

“Oh.” He frowned at me. “How would you feel about giving me a clue?”

“A clue?” I asked. “You need a clue? How many things have you promised to do and then *not* done that you need a clue to ascertain which one *I’m* talking about?”

Charlie frowned at me, opened his mouth like he was about to respond, and then closed it again. “How about you just tell me?”

“My mum invited you to Sunday dinner. You said you’d come. You didn’t.”

“This is about me not making it to Sunday dinner?”

“No, this isn’t about you not coming. This is about you not *calling* to explain that you weren’t coming. Come. Don’t come. I don’t care, but my mum went to a lot of trouble for you. She made some extra fancy side dishes to go with the roast because you were coming. Because, for some reason that I don’t understand, she seems to like you. And then you didn’t come, which is totally fine, but you didn’t call. You can’t just not call. It’s rude.”

Charlie’s frown deepened. “I *did* call.”

“Is this the point where you tell me that there’s something wrong with my phone?”

“I called your parent’s house. I caught a case and Trank told me that you’re not great at keeping your phone charged or on you, so I called your parents.”

“Then how come they didn’t know anything about you not coming? We waited for you. Do you have any idea how much Jake complained?”

“I don’t know. I spoke to your—” Charlie tilted his head back and smiled at the ceiling. At least I thought it was a smile.

“What?”

He looked at me. “I spoke to your dad.”

“You told *my dad* you couldn’t make it?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

“Am I sure I called your parents house and spoke to your dad?” he said. “Yeah. I’m really sure.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what to say to that. “I *told* you he didn’t like you.”

Charlie nodded again. “I’m coming around to your way of thinking.”

“You really spoke to my dad?”

“I really did.”

“Hey!” Trank beckoned Charlie over. “If you can tear yourself away ...”

“Duty calls.”

“I’m sorry. For—” I gestured in the direction of the foyer and hoped he would take that and not make me have to actually voice what I was sorry for.

“I’ll win him over.” He winked at me and then disappeared into the exhibit.

“I doubt that,” I muttered and headed back into the main part of the foyer.

Constables were swarming around, taking details from the guests while Bart and Marie flitted around the leaving guests, talking about the curse of the mummy. It made sense they were trying to salvage something.

The four assistants were each talking to a uniformed officer while my parents tried to eavesdrop on all four conversations, and Mrs Winterbourne sat in a chair on the far side with a dazed expression on her face while she stared off into the distance.

“Get anything good from Trank?” Jake asked.

“When does he ever tell me anything?” I scoffed and beckoned my parents over to us. “He didn’t say much of anything other than likening me to a banshee and threatening to give me a permanent police escort. And that he was thoroughly disappointed in me. And that at some point I was going to get myself in real trouble. And that the killer might have escaped due to me not calling him.”

“He said he was disappointed in you?”

“Not in those words. But it was definitely in the subtext.”

“I really thought we’d manage to get this sewn up before he showed up.” Jake watched as the constables let guests leave. “It would’ve been great for our first social media outing. Solved in an evening. Old school detecting. No extras. No phone records or social media checked. Just good old-fashioned detecting.”

“You remember that we’re reporters and not detectives, right?”

“We *are* detectives. We just report what we find.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but there was a certain sense in that. “Did you hear anything good from anyone while I was talking to him?”

“Nothing they’ve not already told us,” Jake said.

“What did Trank say?” my dad asked as he and my mum joined us. “Did he tell you off?”

“Kinda. Gave us twenty minutes to reveal the killer.” I nodded. “Charlie had something much more interesting to say, though.”

“Oh?” My dad’s poor attempt at nonchalance made my mum face him.

“What did you do?” she accused.

My dad gestured at me. “I’m weeding out the potential suitors that aren’t good enough. That aren’t invested enough to overcome some obstacles.”

“Invested? Obstacles? They haven’t even been on a date yet,” my mum hissed at him. “Give the man a chance.”

“No.” My dad adjusted his bow tie. “He has to put some effort in and then we’ll consider letting him take our *only* daughter on a date.”

“You haven’t had many boyfriends, have you?” Jake asked me.

“Not one who was a threat,” my mum said, pursing her lips at my dad.

I cupped my dad’s face in my hands and kissed his cheek. “I love you, dad. I appreciate you weeding out the potential suitors who aren’t good enough.”

“Will you stop,” my mum chastised me. “Don’t encourage him.”

“I love you too, lovely.” My dad pulled me in for a brief hug, released me, and then cleared his throat. “Now, how are we going to find the killer?”

“I don’t know.” I scanned the foyer. “I still don’t think we have the real motive yet.”

“I’m telling you, it’s Kendall,” Jake insisted.

I shook my head. “I can’t see it. At least, not on her own.”

“What about the Winterbournes then?” Jake asked.

“Look at her face.” My mum subtly gestured over her shoulder to the couple. “She looks dazed. I’m not sure if that makes her more of a suspect or less.”

“Why?” Jake asked.

“Because if you act dazed, you can get away with not immediately giving a statement,” I explained. “So she’s either acting dazed because she did it and wants time to plan out what she’s going to say or she’s stunned that—” I glanced around the room. “Did Trank say who was dead? Did someone make an announcement that I missed?”

“No, why?” my mum asked.

“Unless Winterbourne’s the killer, he only knows that *Theo* is dead. Maybe he told his wife about Theo.”

“And?” Jake asked.

“And,” my dad jumped in. “You said that he said his wife dealt solely with Bev. If she didn’t know Theo, why is she so upset?”

“Maybe he told her Bev was dead,” Jake suggested.

“But how would *he* know unless he killed her?” I asked Jake. “I doubt Jerry went blabbing it around.”

“Maybe she killed them both and is doing the whole dazed thing like you said, to avoid giving a statement straight away,” Jake said as we all watched Mrs Winterbourne dab at her eyes with a wad of tissue.

“Why would she do that?” my dad asked.

“To frame her husband.” I shrugged. “Though I don’t really see it.”

“What’s the plan from here?” My mum lowered her voice as a constable passed us and gave us a curious glance.

I counted our actions off on my fingers. “Talk to the Winterbournes. Talk to Micki. Talk to Kendall and Marie.”

“Anything we can do?” My dad nodded back over to where the police were questioning the assistants. “Eavesdropping?”

I nodded. “Just observe. After we’ve spoken to people, see what they do.”

“We can do that.” My mum shooed me away. “Go find the murderer, lovely.”

“You’re not angry at your dad?” Jake whispered as we wandered toward the Winterbournes. “For not telling you Charlie called?”

“Nope.”

“Why?”

“One day, dude, you’ll have your own parents to raise and then you’ll understand.”

“Miss North.” Mr Winterbourne greeting me, a lot less cordially than earlier. He stepped to the side and beckoned us to follow him, leaving his wife alone, his cane tapping on the floor as we walked. By the vacant expression on her face, I doubted she noticed.

“We didn’t call them,” I lied. “I have no idea who did.”

He pursed his lips as he glanced around the room. “It had to happen at some point. I saw you talking to the detectives. What do they have to say? Did you explain about the curse?”

“I did mention it.”

“And?”

“And I mentioned it. They’re the police. I’m not sure they believe in curses,” I said. “Probably because you can’t prosecute a curse for murder.”

“Murder.” He lowered his voice and glanced back as he spoke. “Do they have any evidence of murder?”

“They wouldn’t tell me. I’m a reporter. We’re not exactly loved by the police.” I shrugged as though there was nothing I could do about it. “When we write up the article, we’ll definitely lean into that curse angle, though. It makes the most sense, what with the victims being both archaeologists from the dig.”

Winterbourne jerked. “Both? What do you mean *both*?”

I glanced at Jake. “I thought the police had told you. They also found Bev—Dr Sato—murdered as well.”

A gurgling, choking sound erupted from Mr Winterbourne's throat as shock rippled all over his face.

"I—was she—" he cleared his throat and started again. "Where?"

I hesitated. "I'm not sure I should say."

"*Where?*" He gripped my upper arm so hard I knew there would be bruises in the morning. In other circumstances, I'd have shaken him off and added a threat of violence for good measure, but that would've interrupted our interview and I felt like we might get something good from him.

"She was stabbed. They found her in the cleaning cupboard."

"The cleaning cupboard?" He released my arm and clasped his hands over the head of his walking cane. I had the impression he was trying to hold his emotions together. While his mind was processing that, I darted around him and offered my hand to his wife.

"Mrs Winterbourne? It's so lovely to meet you."

She blinked rapidly at me and it was almost like watching a fog lift from her vision.

"Yes, yes. You too." She shook my hand, using only her fingertips as if my hand were something dirty she didn't want to touch.

"I'm Aurora North and this is Jake Cutter." She shook Jake's hand the same way she'd shaken mine.

"Now is not the time, Miss North." Mr Winterbourne tried to move us away, but Mrs Winterbourne waved him off.

"You're the reporter here to do a piece on the exhibit." She stated it like fact. "Got a little more than you bargained for, didn't you?"

"Just a little." I smiled. "Had you met Theo—Dr Tomlinson? We were led to believe you helped with the funding for the dig?"

"Yes, yes." She nodded and then shook her head. "But I actually never met Dr Tomlinson. I dealt exclusively with Dr Sato. She was such a talent. Such a vivacious young lady."

"Was?" I asked.

"Yes, she—" Mrs Winterbourne looked to her husband and then back to me. "Hasn't anyone told you? They found her in a cleaning cupboard. Stabbed to death. She'd been there all night, apparently. So sad."

"Who told you that?" her husband asked, but it sounded more like an accusation than a question.

"One of the police officers." She shook her head again. "Such a lovely young woman."

"Do you know if she was in any trouble or if anyone would wish her harm?" I asked.

“Do you mean other than my husband?”

I prided myself on my poker face, but in that moment, it failed me. “Your husband?”

“Stop talking,” he hissed at her. “Right now.”

“You don’t tell me what to do.” She looked him over with disdain. “They were having an affair. She came to me a few days ago. So upset. He’d lured her in like he had so many other women. But *she* came to me. *She* told me everything. She said she’d be a witness in our divorce proceedings if necessary.” She leant closer to me as if sharing a secret. “If I have proof of his infidelity, he doesn’t get a penny of my money. I’d say that was a motive, wouldn’t you?”

“I would.” I agreed. Jake was vibrating with excitement next to me. Since I hadn’t been able to hold my poker face, there was no way I could chastise him.

“I didn’t kill her,” he hissed as his wife. “If I was going to kill someone, it would be you.”

“You heard that?” She looked at me and gestured at her husband, but she appeared unconcerned with his accusation.

“You have no evidence of anything because there was nothing going on.” The way he said it, angry but tired, you could tell it was an old argument. “I wouldn’t give you that satisfaction.”

“Excuse me.” She gave us a full smile. “I need to call my solicitor.”

“Would you care to make a statement to refute any of that?” I asked him as he stared after his wife, fists clenched on the head of his cane.

He shot me a look of disgust and stalked in the opposite direction.

Jake spoke quietly. “What do you make of that?”

“His reaction seemed completely genuine to me,” I whispered. “At least, I think it did. I don’t think he knew about Bev. About her being dead. Or maybe he just didn’t know we’d found her.”

“What about the police telling the wife?” Jake asked. “I’m not sure I believe that.”

“Maybe they told her by accident. Maybe they told her on purpose. Maybe they didn’t know they were supposed to keep that to themselves.” I shrugged. “I’m more interested about how Mr Winterbourne reacted to the cheating comment.”

“He knows that if he gets caught cheating, he gets nothing. Why cheat with Bev?” I shook my head. “That satisfaction comment rang true to me.”

“I don’t know. If you’re a cheater, you have to be a decent liar. And if Bev was going to testify for the wife, that means Mrs W has no motive to kill her.”

“*If* Bev was going to testify. What if she made that up because she killed Bev and wanted to give herself an excuse not to be a suspect? Maybe she knew about the text messages so she had her proof *and* her revenge.”

“I don’t like it when you exonerate a suspect, then go back and set up a really good motive.”

“Sucks to be you,” I said. “The problem is that we still don’t know enough about anyone. Or anything. I feel like there are any number of ways and reasons Bev and Theo were killed.”

“But we’re still going to solve this tonight, right?” Jake asked. “Do the big reveal thing while everyone is here? It will be such a great story to write up. And I know I keep talking about it, but how awesome will this be as our debut on social media? A murder mystery involving the curse of a mummy that we solved in only a few hours with limited resources? People will flock to follow us.”

“Yes. It will be great,” I agreed, somewhat indulgently. “*If* we can solve it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Friday 9:12pm

“What now?” Jake asked.

I jerked my head in Micki’s direction. She was standing alone in the corner of the room. “Let’s see what we can get from Micki now the police are done with her. I’m curious about why Marie said Theo and Bev were giving her a hard time.”

“Maybe they didn’t like her,” Jake offered.

“My reporter sense tells me there’s something more.”

“I’m not talking to you,” she announced as we approached. “I have nothing to say. The police told me not to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk about the murders.” I held my hands up as though I were surrendering. “I just wanted to talk about your relationship with Theo and Bev.”

“Yeah, because *that’s* not related to the murders,” she sneered at me.

“I *genuinely* have no questions that will relate to their murders,” I offered. “None.”

“Any questions about them relate to their murders because they were *murdered*,” she stressed.

“Okay.” I nodded and lowered my hands. “That’s fair. But we’re trying to help exonerate you. We don’t think you had anything to do with their deaths.”

I was so relieved Jake didn’t question that assertion. Sometimes he could hold it in, other times he couldn’t. You just never knew.

“Exonerate me?” Her face wrinkled up like a raisin. “Exonerate me? No one is *accusing* me.”

I inclined my head. “Not to your face. But we’ve been eavesdropping on the interviews and everyone is pointing their fingers at you.”

“Bunch of backstabbing—” Micki shook her head and bit her tongue. She literally sank her teeth into it. It seemed like an effective, if painful, way to curb a temper. “You know it’s because they’re all jealous?”

“I definitely got that vibe,” I said with a nod.

“Yeah,” she added, as if she hadn’t expected me to agree so easily. “They’re jealous.”

“But none of them specified what it was they were jealous about. I thought it might have been your hair, because it’s amazing.”

“I’m glad you think so. All Bev could say was that it wasn’t appropriate. She even tried to ban me from coming tonight.”

“Because of your hair?” I asked.

“Yeah. Like I wasn’t the one who worked the hardest on this exhibit.”

Micki was a lot more forthcoming than when we’d spoken to her earlier. I couldn’t decide if it was due to my implying everyone was pointing the finger at her or the small collection of empty champagne flutes on the table behind her. Either way, I was grateful.

“They seem to think that the way they both treated you gives you a motive,” I said. “I just want to hear what your take on it was. Because we don’t think you killed either of them.”

“Because I didn’t,” she insisted.

“Who told you about Bev?” I asked. “I know the police asked us to keep it quiet.”

“Jerry.” Micki nodded in his direction. “He was freaked out by it, saying we had to call the police. Honestly, I thought he was just making stuff up at first. He’d wanted to call the police when we first found Theo. I thought he was just making it up, upping the stakes so we’d call them.”

“Did he tell anyone else?”

Micki shrugged. “Probably. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You said he wanted to call the police about Theo. I don’t remember him mentioning anything at the time. I thought he said it was all about the curse.” I was being polite about it because he *definitely* hadn’t said anything about the police when we’d found Theo. I was sure he hadn’t.

“Yeah. In front of everyone else,” Micki said. “He’s not great at confrontation.”

“What made you believe him about Bev?” Jake asked.

“I went and looked for myself.” Micki closed her eyes and massaged her eyelids. It looked like she was trying to rub the memory away.

“You called the police?” I guessed.

Micki dropped her hands from her face and lowered her voice to a hiss. “Bev was slumped in a cleaning closet. What was I supposed to do? Leave her there while you two chumps bumble around pointing fingers at people with no clue what you’re doing? What if the person who killed Theo also killed Bev? What if they’re picking us all off one by one? I’m supposed to wait around for someone else to get killed?”

“You think someone else is going to be murdered?” Jake asked, completely unfazed by the “chumps” comment.

“Not now I’ve called the police.” She paused and then frowned around the room. “I think someone else must have called them first, though. They got here too soon after I called.”

“Didn’t they say they already had units on the way?” I asked and she did a sort of head-shake-shrug combo. “You told them there was a body, gave them the address and hung up before they could say anything,” I guessed.

“At least *I* called them.”

“Did you see anyone or anything while you were back there?” I was going to point out that if she intended to take the high road, ideally she should’ve called them when we first found Theo, but since we weren’t done questioning her, I saw no reason to try and score points.

She placed her fingertips on her eyelids and massaged her eyes again. “I backed into the workroom and called the police. I didn’t see anyone.”

“Can you tell us about your relationships with Bev and Theo now?”

“It was fine,” she stressed. “We were fine. I don’t know why people are pointing the finger at me.”

“People keeping saying they gave you the worst jobs, kind of menial jobs, because you asked a lot of questions,” I added. “I was just wondering what questions you were asking?”

“I wasn’t asking anything. Just about the cost and logistics of the dig and the best way to deal with hiring people to help and how to approach companies about funding and whether to give them a breakdown of costs and—” She shrugged. “Uni is great, but it’s not real world experience. And I have time logged on different digs, but it’s not the same as arranging your own dig. I have a site in mind. I did a research paper on it and I wanted ... advice. I asked if they could take me through the process of their dig.”

“And they gave you the worst jobs because of that?” Jake asked.

“They weren’t the *worst* jobs. I don’t know why people would say that. All tasks are important. They were jobs that kept me busy and—” she sighed and shrugged. “I guess they just got tired of my questions. I was just trying to get some advice.”

“And was it both of them? Theo *and* Bev that got tired of your questions?” I asked.

Micki shrugged again. “At first it was just Theo, but then Bev got tired of me too, I guess. Maybe I was directing most of my questions to Theo because he was the lead on the dig, and when he wasn’t answering, I turned to Bev.” Micki shrugged for the millionth time. “I can be a bit much. I get passionate about this stuff. Maybe I just overpowered them.”

“What is it you’re not telling us?” I asked. “They’re both dead now. They’re not going to get into any trouble. And whatever it is might help exonerate you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You shrugged like, six, seven, eight times in under a minute,” I said. “You want to give the impression of not knowing anything. But you know *something*. Something that you think you shouldn’t know. Maybe something you discovered in a not so legit way?”

“I don’t *know* anything.”

“But you *suspect* something.” Jake looked as if he were about to jump on her and shake the answers loose. “What? What is it?”

I squeezed Jake’s wrist, hoping he took that as a warning to calm down just a tad.

She scanned the foyer behind me and lowered her voice. “Look, I just wanted a template, a guide of what things would cost, how to set things up. I *may* have seen some finances of the dig. And it *looked* like the numbers didn’t add up.”

“Didn’t add up how?” I asked.

“There were charges for equipment that, as far as I knew, had never been used. Like radar or soil tests or things that neither of them talked about using. When we first started, they told us about the dig and how they’d found what artefacts, the whole process of it, but they never mentioned using half the stuff that was listed.”

“Maybe they used it and it didn’t work,” Jake suggested.

“Sure.” Micki agreed easily. “Maybe, but why not tell us that stuff. Why not say, this tool *can* be effective but doesn’t always work under certain conditions?”

“Where did you see these documents?” I asked. “Did you get copies?”

Micki winced. “I was rooting through Bev’s briefcase. It looked like—I’ve never seen that type of—they looked like balance sheets. Where someone was keeping track of the equipment used and the costs, but one version had a massive list of expense and the other was like a pared down version.”

“When was this?” I asked.

“A couple of weeks ago.”

“And was Bev funny with you before or after this?”

Micki paused. “It was after. Do you think she knew I’d been in her briefcase?”

“And before that, she had no problem with your questions?”

“I don’t think so, but I don’t think that I directed that many her way in the beginning. I can’t remember exactly. Why?”

“Did anyone ever mention how much the dig cost to fund?” I asked.

“I think it was something like eight million pounds.”

Jake choked the words out. “*Eight million?*”

“Sure, you have all the equipment, living costs, travelling, visas, staff. It adds up quickly.”

“Just a couple more things,” I said. “Weird question. Did you spill any oil in the staffroom?”

“Marie did. At lunchtime. She does this weird oil and vinegar dressing on her salad. Like, just use salad cream, you know? And she dropped the oil. It bounced off the counter and went everywhere. I was about to leave for the day, but I had to wait in the staffroom while she went get stuff to clean it up so no one slipped. Why?”

I shrugged it off. “One thing and another.”

“Has anyone been acting weird tonight?” Jake asked.

She arched an eyebrow at Jake. “Other than you two?”

“Nervous or jumpy?” Jake clarified.

“Jerry.” Micki nodded in his direction. “A guest spilled some champagne. He went to get something to clean it up, but he came back empty-handed and was acting really weird. But then he told me about Bev, so I guess that explains that. Rafe, but he’s always anxious in social settings. He does this thing where he keeps rubbing his shoes on the back of the opposite leg.”

“I noticed. Anyone else?”

Micki shook her head. “To be honest, after finding Theo, pretty much everyone. But I think that’s kind of normal.”

“Last question,” I said. “Do you know if Theo really did break up with either Kendall or Marie?”

Micki pursed her lips at me. “That man wasn’t breaking up with either of them. He just told them both what they wanted to hear.”

“Thanks.”

She grabbed my arm as I was about to walk away. “Do you know who murdered them? It was murder, right?”

I nodded. “I need to check one more thing, but yeah, I do.”

Her grip tightened on my arm. “Who?”

“Let me check this one more thing and I’ll tell you.”

She released me and Jake and I slowly made our way over to Bart and Marie, who were standing by the food table.

“I wish people would stop grabbing me.” I massaged my arm. I could still feel her fingers.

“Do you really know who it is?” Jake whispered and I gave him a closed mouth stare. “Right, you wanted her to think you did so she’d spread the word. What do you think that list of equipment meant?”

“It could be something completely innocent.”

“But?”

“*But* what if Theo was taking money from the funding for equipment that they didn’t use?”

“You mean embezzling it?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“If Bev had the documents, then she had to be in on it too.”

“Or she thought it was weird the way Theo was treating Micki and looked into it. Which explains the balance sheets Micki found in her briefcase and why she started acting weird around Micki after that. From there you can go down several paths. Maybe she was helping Theo cover it up for a cut and he killed her. Maybe she was blackmailing him and he killed her. Maybe she was going to turn him in and he killed her.”

“But how could Bev have *not* known?” Jake asked. “Bev was the one who dealt with Mrs Winterbourne and did all that fundraising. Surely she knew. She had to know.”

“Yeah, she brought the money in. It doesn’t mean that Theo wasn’t totally in charge of it. He was the lead archeologist on the dig, remember? She was his second in command, so to speak.”

“Maybe Bev told Mr Winterbourne. If they were having an affair, maybe she told him and he killed Theo out of anger.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.”

Jake grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop. “You don’t know who did it?”

“Not really. I just want to see what shakes loose if I keep telling everyone I know.” I knocked his hand from my arm and rubbed it. I was going to be as bruised as a dropped apple by the end of the night. “Why do people keep grabbing me?”

“How about handcuffing you to a chair?” Charlie asked from behind me. “Would that be a good way to stop you from interviewing everyone?”

I shook my head. “Not particularly. No cuffs can hold me, copper.”

“It’s true,” Jake said. “She’s been teaching me.”

“That’s—” Charlie pressed his lips together and let that sentence die. “Jake, I’m looking for your date? A Lisa Peabody.”

“Lizzzzz-ar,” I corrected out of what was now habit.

“Le-zar?” Charlie repeated, trying to make the same noise I had.

“Lizzzzz-ar,” I repeated, fully aware I was pulling a face as I tried to get it right.

Charlie frowned at the piece of paper in his hands and tried again. “Liz-zar?”

“It’s Lizza.” The name rolled effortless off Jake’s tongue. “Lizza. *Lizza*. Like Pisa. But for some strange reason the whole North family struggles with the extra z.”

“Pisa is spelled p-i-s-a,” Charlie said. “There’s no ‘z’ in there.”

“What is wrong with you people?” Jake asked. “It’s not that hard.”

“She’s not here anyway,” I said. “She left when she realised it wasn’t an ‘instagrammably fabulous’ party.”

“There’s no need for that mocking tone,” Jake said.

“Hey, I asked her to eavesdrop for anything strange and she asked me what constituted ‘strange’. Who doesn’t know what ‘strange’ sounds like. And then *she* made that duck quacking dig. But I let that slide because I’m a good person.”

“Who couldn’t even pronounce her name,” Jake scoffed. “I swear you were doing it on purpose.”

“Excuse me.” Charlie looked from me to Jake and back again. “If you two children can call a truce for a moment, I’ll still need her contact details.”

Jake sighed and handed them over. “You might as well have them because she’ll never speak to me again.”

“Hear me when I say it’s for the best,” I said. “If you’d have just asked Butts in the first place, this thing would’ve been wrapped up in minutes.”

“Butts?” Charlie arched an eyebrow at me over the name.

“Big brown eyes like chocolate buttons.”

“I *told* you, she’s away with her parents,” Jake said.

“How would she have helped you wrap this up so fast?” Charlie focused on writing Lizza’s details as he asked.

“She’s great with—”

“Dead people,” I jumped in before Jake could say anything that would highlight any illegal activity by Butts or us. “She’s psychic.”

Charlie paused in scribbling Lizza’s details in his notebook. “She’s *psychic*?”

“Uh-huh. She’s been instrumental in numerous cases,” I said.

“Because she’s *psychic*?” Charlie stressed the work with a heap of disbelief.

“No one likes a skeptic,” Jake said.

“Aren’t you both skeptics?” Charlie handed Jake his phone back. “Isn’t that what you do? Investigate spooky stuff and disprove it?”

“But *we* do it with an open mind,” I said.

“And apparently with psychics,” Charlie retorted.

“You have Liz—Jake’s date’s details. Can we go now?”

Charlie eyed my bulging purse. “Found anything interesting?”

“Sure. How about you?”

“Trank says you’re going to have this solved in another ten minutes or so.”

“We already know who did it.” I gestured around the room. “We’re just giving them a chance to do the right thing and come forward on their own.”

“You already know?” Charlie arched an eyebrow at me. “Who did it?”

I motioned for him to come closer. He did, and I lowered my voice.

“It was the curse of the mummy.”

Jake leant in, too. “Don’t look upon her face.”

Charlie straightened with a smile and checked his watch. “You know he’s holding these people for you, right? So if you don’t know, you have to tell me.”

“We know,” Jake scoffed. “We told you. We’re just giving them time to come forward.”

“Okay.” Charlie nodded and walked away.

“Do you still want to ask Bart and Marie more questions?” Jake whispered.

I sighed. “I don’t think we’re going to wring anything else from them. I don’t even really know what to ask. Without phone records and bank statements and other stuff that would help us narrow this all down ... We could take a few more days, I guess. Gather more evidence.”

“No, we can do this. We’ll—remember how we faked out the killer at the Maison de la Mort? Or how you only worked out the whole witch thing right at the end? We can do that. Fake these people out. Accuse everyone and then see how they all react.”

“And what if no one reacts like a murderer?”

“Someone will.”

“And what if they don’t?”

“They will.”

“But what if they don’t?”

“They *will*.” Jake beckoned me to the middle of the foyer.

“I feel ill prepared for this.”

“It will be *awesome*.”

“Why can’t you do it?” I hissed at him.

“Because you *always* do it. You *always* work out who the killer is. Come on.” He clapped loudly to get everyone’s attention. “Ladies and gentleman. If I could have your attention for a moment. We have concluded our investigation and found the culprit.”

“Who was it?” Micki called out.

“Gather around and we’ll explain.” Jake motioned for everyone to gather around. All our suspects and my parents closed in around us. Even some police officers edged closer. “That’s it. Come in nice and close.”

“I thought you were giving them time to come forward,” Charlie whispered.

I made a noncommittal noise in response.

“Do you really know?” he asked.

I made the same noise.

“Who was it?” Bart asked.

Jake gestured to me. “Aurora, why don’t you explain?”

Everyone in the group faced me with matching expectant expression.

I heaved an internal sigh and then pasted my professional smile to my face. “I’d love to.”

Chapter Fourteen

Friday 9:23pm

“First, we need to work through a few things,” I hedged.

“Why can’t you just tell us?” Mrs Winterbourne asked.

“Because it’s not quite as simple as Jerry murdered Theo and then stabbed Bev,” I said.

Kendall gasped. “*Jerry* did it?”

“*I* didn’t do it,” Jerry shrieked. “I didn’t do any of it.”

“She just *said* you did it.” Marie gestured at me but addressed her comment to Jerry. “She said *you’re* the killer. And you tried to blame it on the curse.”

“Bart found him.” Jerry pointed across the circle at Bart. “Bart found Theo. *He* did it. It was him. And then he killed Bev and framed me.”

“*I* didn’t do it,” Bart exclaimed. “I would never—how dare you accuse me!”

“Okay.” I clapped my hands to get their attention, much like Jake had moments earlier, only this time they continued talking amongst themselves. Or accuse each other.

“Hey!” I yelled, and they finally settled down.

“Are you saying that Jerry did it?” Kendall asked again. “He killed my Theo?”

“He wasn’t *your* Theo,” Marie snapped. “He wasn’t *your* anything.”

“I was using that as an example,” I explained. “If you think you can all pay attention for a few minutes, we can get this sorted out.” There was a little more muttering, but it died down quickly. “Thank you. First, I wanted to walk through the timeline of what happened because—”

“Are you saying it *wasn’t* the curse of the mummy?” Bart interrupted.

“Is that even a legitimate question?” asked a familiar looking constable, hovering nearby. “How about you stay quiet and let her get on with it?”

“Who are you to tell me—” Bart twisted to face the speaker and then, I think, realising he was a constable, swallowed the rest of the sentence and turned back to me.

I pointed at the constable. “You gave us a lift home from the forest.”

“I did.” He grinned at me. “And I’m glad I get the opportunity to watch you in action.”

I nodded my gratitude at him because I wasn’t really sure what to say. I was sure I heard my dad mutter something about potential suitors, though. I found him in the crowd. My dad was

filming me on his phone and my mum gave me two thumbs up. It reminded me of the one and only time I'd done a school play.

"The timeline," Jake whispered.

"Right." I nodded. "The timeline. Everyone was arriving for the party. Bev went into the workshop to check something and Rafe followed her."

Kendall gasped. "*Rafe* did it? *Rafe* killed Bev and then Theo?"

"I always knew I'd regret hiring you," Bart chimed in.

"I didn't do anything." Rafe glanced around the ground with a panicked shaking of his head.

"I didn't do anything. I didn't do *anything*."

"That's what you get for hiring a criminal," Mr Winterbourne told Bart. "I warned you."

"Whose a criminal?" Marie glanced around the group and Mr Winterbourne pointed to Rafe.

"Attempted murder, wasn't it? Or was it aggravated assault?" Mr Winterbourne asked Rafe, then without waiting for an answer, jabbed his cane at Bart. "I told you, Bartholomew. I told you that you'd regret hiring him. Now we have two deaths to prove it. You should've listened to me."

"You tried to kill someone?" Jerry looked Rafe over. "*You* did?"

"Hey!" I yelled and clapped and I'd have stamped my foot if I hadn't been wearing heels.

"If one more person speaks before I get through this, I'm gagging everyone."

"Maybe forget the timeline and explain motives," Jake whispered to me.

"Yeah, because I'm sure *that* will be less provocative," I muttered quietly, then raised my voice so everyone could hear. "Since everyone's already pointing fingers, how about we discuss motives? From what we know, everyone here had a motive to kill Theo." I held up my hand to halt denials. "Please don't say you didn't, because you did. Kendall, he was cheating on you with Marie and whoever else."

"He wasn't." She clasped both hands over her heart. "He was my penguin."

"You were a dalliance," Marie said. "He and I were going away together."

"You're a liar!" Kendall screamed. "A liar!"

Kendall lunged as if she were about to charge across the circle and scratch Marie's eye's out but Micki held her back. With a resigned reluctance, but she held her back.

"Marie, he wasn't taking you anywhere." I looked between the two women. "Cheating on you both is a good enough reason for you both to kill him, so that's you two. Micki. He was mean to you at work and—"

"That's it?" Micki scoffed. "My motive is he was a bad boss?"

I shrugged. "You challenged him on it. You got into an argument. Things got heated and—"

“And I *killed* him?” Micki’s voice was filled with disbelief. “There were no wounds on him. How did I kill him? With the power of my mind?”

“We’re talking motives,” I reminded her. “We’ll move onto logistics in a minute. Rafe—I wasn’t going to out you, but since Mr Winterbourne has already told everyone, you have a criminal record. You say a bar fight. Winterbourne says attempted murder. I haven’t had chance to check it out, so I can’t validate either. But if Theo didn’t know, he could’ve found out about it and threatened to fire you—”

“Theo *did* know,” Rafe said. “I told him on the first day. I didn’t want it to look like I was hiding anything.”

“And we’re supposed to take *your* word for that?” Kendall snapped. “The word of a criminal?”

Micki raised her hand and winced apologetically. “I overheard him telling Theo. I’m sorry, Rafe. I didn’t mean to. And I didn’t say anything because it was none of my business.”

Rafe pointed to Micki. “See. Proof.”

“Unless you’re in it together.” Kendall shuffled away from Micki.

“Yeah, Rafe and I decided to kill Theo because neither of us had a motive.” Micki nodded. “That makes *total* sense.”

“She admitted it!” Kendall cried, and jabbed a finger at Micki. “Did everyone hear that? Everyone heard that? She admitted it.”

Micki turned to me and sighed. “Please tell me it was her.”

“Just a couple more motives to go—” I started.

“I don’t see why we have to go through everyone’s motives,” Mrs Winterbourne said. “If you looked deeply enough, everyone has a motive to kill everyone. Can’t you just tell us and get it over with so we can go home?”

“There’s a process to this,” Jake informed her. “You have to trust the process.”

“I think she has no idea what happened,” Bart said. “I knew I should’ve refused to let you do the piece on the exhibit. I knew I should’ve insisted on Miss Watts.”

“Because you think Miss Watts wouldn’t have found out about the row you had with Theo this afternoon?” I asked. “The one where you threatened to destroy him?”

“It was a discussion,” Bart insisted. “I’ve already explained that.”

“But if Bart was threatening to destroy Theo, wouldn’t it make more sense that Bart would end up dead so Theo could keep his secret?” the constable asked.

I seesawed my hand. “Yes, and no. Bart and Theo could’ve fought. Maybe Theo *tried* to kill Bart, but Bart won.”

“But there were no signs of a physical altercation on the body,” the constable said. “Apart from the—” he gestured to his neck.

“I’m just making a point,” I whispered to him. He mimed zipping his mouth closed and motioned for me to continue.

“Are you?” Bart asked. “I’ve yet to see it.”

“Well, what if what you were threatening to destroy Theo with, would also destroy you?” I asked. “So, by killing him, you were reducing the number of people who knew about that thing to one? You. Or at least, as far as you knew.”

“What thing?” Bart asked. “There was no thing. It was nothing. He kept running through supplies like there was no tomorrow. I have a budget. I may have gotten a little overexcited about it, but that doesn’t mean I killed him.”

“That sort of does track with Theo’s reaction when I saw him afterward,” Micki agreed. “His comment about bureaucrats.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But I think your argument had less to do with supplies and more about embezzlement.”

Mouth closed, Bart ran his tongue across the front of his teeth several times. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t, huh?” I asked. “Maybe we should ask Mr and Mrs Winterbourne, then.”

“Do you know how much this dig cost? Or how much money I have?” Mrs Winterbourne asked before I could direct a question her way. “This cost me a couple of million pounds. That’s all. I spend more than that on shoes. The majority was raised from other sources. You think I’d kill someone because of a few measly million pounds of my own money?”

I nodded. “Yes, because stealing is stealing. And *you* were the one who championed Dr Sato and the whole thing. *You* introduced her to your wealthy friends and held fundraisers to raise the money. It was *your* reputation on the line. And I’d also like to point out how not surprised you and your husband seem about that accusation.”

“*She* did it?” Kendall asked.

“Kendall, would you give it a rest? The more you accuse everyone else, the more guilty you look,” Micki informed her.

“But I didn’t do anything,” she screeched. “I *didn’t*.”

“Okay. So those are motives for killing Theo,” I continued, ignore Kendall’s outburst.

“Pretty much everyone had a reason to kill Theo.”

“Except Jerry,” Marie pointed out. “You never said why Jerry wanted to kill Theo.”

“The thing is, we couldn’t really find a motive for Jerry to want Theo dead,” I explained.

“I *told* you all I didn’t do it,” Jerry exclaimed.

“That’s not what I said,” I clarified. “Only that we couldn’t find a motive for you to kill Theo. That doesn’t mean we won’t if we dig a bit deeper. Or that it wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment thing.”

“I killed my boss in the spur of the moment?” Jerry asked. “Who *does* that?”

“I’ve been tempted,” I admitted, “But that’s by the by. Then we move on from motive to opportunity. Which all of you have. Except Mr and Mrs Winterbourne.”

“Anyone could’ve hopped that rope without being seen.” Bart pointed to the roped off area.

“They could have,” I agreed with a nod. “Two problems with that. The first is it’s not exactly a concealed entrance, so whoever hopped that rope stood a very good chance of being seen. And the Winterbournes are a pretty striking couple. Someone would definitely have noticed. The second is that both Bev and Theo were killed back of house. In the staff only areas. The Winterbournes don’t have access to that area.”

“You’re officially clearing us?” Mr Winterbourne rolled his eyes. “Finally. He offered his arm to his wife. Let’s go home.”

“I said you didn’t have access, but that doesn’t mean you didn’t steal a key card to access the work area,” I explained.

“So now we’re murders *and* thieves?” Mrs Winterbourne asked.

“Isn’t that how rich people get rich?” Micki muttered.

“Is no one curious about what happened to Bev?” I asked. I was dragging this out the best I could because I still hadn’t worked out who the killer was. And no one had particularly reacted in a way that was suspect enough for me to point a finger.

“Wasn’t she killed by whoever killed Theo?” Jerry asked.

I seesawed my hand. “Well ...”

“You have absolutely no idea what’s going on, do you?” Bart shook his head and pointed at Kendall. “I can’t *believe* that you convinced me to let her try to solve this. We should’ve called the police immediately. Just like *I* wanted to.”

“You were all about her finding proof of the curse,” Jerry accused Bart. “*You* were the one who thought it would be a great idea. You never wanted to call the police. Probably because *you* did it and having her tamper with all the evidence would mean it couldn’t be used against you.”

“I just want to go home.” Rafe wrapped his arms around his chest as if he were giving himself a hug. His slightly too big jacket gaped at the front and he stood on one leg while bending the other leg behind him to polish his left shoe in the back of his right calf.

I watched him and suddenly all the clues we had arranged themselves. Like a Rubik’s cube solving itself. How Theo had died. What had killed him. Why Bev had been stabbed. How, why and when. And most importantly, I had the who.

“Ohhhh.” It came out on a sigh. It took a few more seconds for the Rubik’s cube to get all the clues lined up, but when I came back to the moment, I realised everyone was staring at me.

“Oh, what?” Jake whispered, furtively scanning our audience, who were all still staring at me.

“I know what happened.” I stared at the faces around me. “I know *exactly* what happened.”

Chapter Fifteen

Friday 9:29pm

“Didn’t you know before?” Micki asked. “When you said you knew?”

“Oh, no.” I shook my head. “I was lying to buy time. But now I actually *do* know.”

“And we’re supposed to believe you know?” Kendall asked. “How do we know you’re not lying now?”

“Because I can lead you all the way through it. And I have evidence.”

“Evidence.” Rafe pointed to where I was standing and then glanced around the room. “But you haven’t moved.”

“Oh, I had the evidence all along.” I patted my purse. “I just didn’t actually realise until now what it proved.”

“I’m not listening to any more of this nonsense.” Mr Winterbourne stepped back and offered his arm to his wife again.

“Don’t you want to hear me officially exonerate you?” I asked.

Mr Winterbourne exhaled through his nose. “Fine. But for heaven’s sake, do it quickly.”

“So?” Jerry asked. “Who killed Theo?”

I calmly pointed to the woman standing next to him. “Kendall did.”

Kendall covered her face as huge sobs wracked her body. Marie dashed across the circle and wrapped her arms around Kendall, making soothing noises.

“With Marie’s help,” I added. “Sort of.”

“They were in it together?” Rafe asked. “I thought they hated each other.”

“It was an accident,” Marie twisted to face me while still hanging on to Kendall. “It was an accident. We were all arguing. He said something awful and she shoved him. She barely touched him, but he fell. He hit his head. It was an accident. It was an *accident*,” Marie repeated as if that would make it all go away.

“Oh, my god.” Regret rippled over Micki’s face. “I am so sorry, Kendall. It’s my fault. I should’ve minded my own business.”

“You’re sorry because you encouraged them to confront him, right?” I asked Micki.

“I said they should tackle the situation together. That he couldn’t lie to them both if they went to him *together*. That they would get the truth from him. I shouldn’t have said anything. I

should've minded my own business." Micki wrapped an arm around Kendall's shoulders. "I am *so* sorry."

"It was an accident?" The constable asked me. "He tripped and fell."

"Not exactly. Marie and Kendall had gone to him to get him to—to choose, I guess. Or simply confront him. Kendall shoved him and he slipped in a tiny drop of the oil."

"What oil?" Bart asked.

"They were in the staffroom. Marie spilled some earlier in the day when she was making her salad and wiped it up. But she missed a couple of tiny splashes. It was just really bad luck that he stepped in it. *How* he stepped in it. His foot could've hit that spot any number of ways and he'd have been fine. It was all just really unfortunate."

"And then they moved him to the exhibit?" Rafe asked. "To try and pass it off as the curse?"

"Yes and no." I seesawed my hand. "I think they panicked and that was their plan. Marie held his wrists and Kendall had his feet."

"That's how he got blood on his cuff," Jake guessed. "It had nothing to do with Bev or her killer."

"Wait, how did he get blood on his cuff?" The constable asked.

"Marie has a paper cut on her thumb. It looked angry when we first arrived. Like it had been reopened and aggravated. The incident with Theo must have happened only minutes earlier. The pressure on it of grabbing Theo's wrists and carrying him must have reopened it."

"What about the drag marks?" Jake asked. "And Bev?"

"I'm getting to that."

"We didn't kill Bev," Marie rushed. "That was nothing to do with us."

"It wasn't, I swear," gushed Kendall. "

"I know," I said with a nod. "I know."

"Theo—it was an accident." Kendall choked out the words and stared up at me with swollen, red eyes. "I don't want to go to prison."

I shook my head. "I don't think you have to worry about that."

"You don't think she has to worry about *prison*?" Mrs Winterbourne asked. "She killed a man."

"She *killed* a man," Bart echoed before I could answer. "Accident or not, of *course* she has to worry about prison."

"Yeah, except he wasn't dead when they dropped him in the corridor," I explained.

"The corridor?" Micki asked. "We found him in the exhibit."

Kendall's choked sobs stopped as if someone had thrown a switch. "He wasn't dead?"

"Nope. When you left him in the corridor he was still alive," I said.

"What are you talking about? We didn't *find* him in the corridor," Jerry said. "We *found* him in the exhibit. Are you saying he got up and walked from the corridor to the exhibit and *then* died from something else?"

I seesawed my hand. "Yes, and no."

Bart grunted in frustration. "Will you stop this yes and no business? It's either yes or it's no. Which is it?"

"Well, the answer is yes and no. No, he didn't get up and walk to the exhibit. And yes, he died of something else." I held my hand up at Bart before he could complain again. "Kendall, you and Marie were a few feet from the exhibit door when you heard someone coming, right? So they dropped the body and ran. They escaped out through the exhibit door before they were seen."

"And then I found him," Rafe said before I could. "I found him. I was sure he was dead. I was so sure. Are you certain he wasn't dead?"

I nodded. "Yep."

"I was so sure he was." Rafe stared at the ground but from the emotions rippling over his face he looked as if he was reliving the moment he found Theo. "I checked for his pulse. I checked. I was *sure* he was dead."

"And then you moved him to the exhibit because you thought no one would believe that you found him that way," Jake finished and whispered to me. "Just like your parents said."

"It was so stupid." Rafe shook his head. "All because of that stupid bar fight. You punch some guy once and it changes the rest of your life. I knew no one would believe I hadn't hurt Theo. I have an assault charge on my record. Who's going to believe me? Even though I had no reason to hurt him, I knew I'd get the blame."

"So you dragged him to the exhibit because you thought the same as Kendall and Marie," I guessed. "People would think it was the curse."

"I thought that—I was hoping they'd put it down to the curse. Or a general accident." He looked up at me. "Are you *sure* he was still alive?"

I nodded. "I'm positive."

"I couldn't find his pulse," Rafe insisted.

"It happens." I shrugged. "This was the first time you'd seen a dead person. And it was someone you knew. Your body floods with adrenaline. You panic. All you can hear is the beat of your heart. Kendall and Marie missed it, too. Because you were all so panicked."

“If what you’re saying is true, I could’ve save him.” Rafe stared at me with eyes full of guilt. “He could be alive now if it wasn’t for me.”

I seesawed my hand. “That’s another yes and no.”

“What’s *wrong* with you?” Bart yelled at me. “Yes or no. *It can’t be both.*”

“How are you so sure he was alive?” Micki ignored Bart’s mini meltdown. “Three people thought he was dead. And you weren’t even there.”

“I am *certain* he was still alive. He had to be,” I said. “Otherwise Mr Winterbourne would’ve had no reason to strangle him.”

All heads turned in Mr Winterbourne’s direction. Even Mrs Winterbourne.

“I thought you said you were going to exonerate me, not accuse me of murder,” he snapped.

I shrugged. “I lied.”

“You already have that girl’s confession.” Mr Winterbourne gestured to Kendall. “She killed him. She shoved him and he hit his head. You have no proof he was alive.”

“There was no evidence of strangulation,” Jake said to me. “How are you getting that?”

“There was, we just misread it,” I said. “The straight line across Theo’s neck. We assumed it happened when he fell. That he twisted and hit his neck on something—”

“He didn’t,” Marie jumped in. “He just fell straight back.”

“Right.” I pointed to Winterbourne’s cane. “Because the straight line came from that cane.”

“How can you strangle someone with a cane?” Winterbourne scoffed. “How thoroughly ridiculous. You’re going to take *her* word that he didn’t hit his head? Someone who’s already admitted to murder?”

“That’s not what she admitted to,” I said. “She admitted to pushing him. You were the only one who was alone with him while he was in the exhibit. Bart, you told him first, right? You left him alone with Theo while you went to round up everyone else.”

“I—” Bart stared at Winterbourne. “*He* told me to round everyone up. To tell everyone.”

“You knew he was alive, didn’t you? Did he wake up? No, you must have found a pulse that somehow everyone else missed. Maybe it was weak or slow. Maybe it was because you weren’t as panicked as the others. But you found it and got Bart out of the way. And then you killed him. It was perfect. Bart already thought he was dead,” I said. “No one would suspect you, right? Because he was dead when you got there. So you knelt down on one knee and pressed the cane across Theo’s throat and strangled the life out of him. And then you closed his eyes to hide the broken blood vessels that are indicative of strangulation and you flipped him on his front to hide the bruise.”

“He was on his back when I found him,” Bart slowly raised his arm and pointed at Winterbourne. “She’s right. She’s *right*.”

“And then I let *you* investigate?” Winterbourne asked. “That doesn’t seem like a smart idea.”

“Course it does,” I said. “Jerry explained it earlier, though his comments were directed at Bart. You let me poke around because you thought, if you’d left any evidence, I’d contaminate it and it couldn’t be used against you. *That’s* what you were talking to your solicitor about. I thought it was weird that you’d make that call and then not insist we called the police straightaway.”

“This is thoroughly ridiculous,” Winterbourne shook his head. “I suppose I killed Dr Sato as well.”

“You did,” I agreed easily. “Though, in all fairness, it took us a while to work it out.”

“We kept getting tripped up with why someone would dump Bev’s body in a cupboard and move Theo’s to the exhibit,” Jake said. “We couldn’t work out how it could be the same person. It made no sense.”

“Do you want to—” I gestured for him to continue, but he shook his head.

“You do it better.”

I assumed that meant he hadn’t quite fit all the pieces together yet.

“Rafe when you went into the workroom when the guests had just started arriving?”

Rafe jerked as if he hadn’t expected me to call on him. “I needed the toilet. Honestly, I’ve been in and out of there all night.”

“You told us earlier that Bev was coming in as you were going out.”

He nodded. “Right.”

“But you had to swipe her in, right? She didn’t have her keycard.”

“She said it was in her work clothes.”

“Hey constable,” I beckoned the forest constable toward me. “I bet you ten pounds if you look through Mr Winterbourne’s pockets you’ll find Bev’s swipe card.”

Mr Winterbourne pulled the card from his pocket. “I found it on the floor. I was going to return it. It doesn’t prove anything.”

I nodded easily. “Okay. If you say so.”

“We’re leaving.” Mr Winterbourne offered his arm to his wife again. “And when I get home, I’ll be calling my solicitor and suing your paper for slander.”

“You could try and sue us, but not for slander,” I said. “Slander is when Person A says things about Person B which aren’t true and those things damage Person B’s reputation. But my accusations against Person B, which is you, are not only true, but provable.”

“We’re leaving.”

Mrs Winterbourne stepped away from her husband. “I’m interested in what she has to say.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, “Cause you don’t come off great.”

“Maybe not,” she said. “But I didn’t murder anyone.”

“That is very true. But you did entice Dr Sato to fake an affair with your husband which was ultimately what led to her death.”

Mrs Winterbourne placed a hand over her heart. “I didn’t know he’d *kill* her for it.”

“What affair?” Mr Winterbourne exclaimed. “There *was* no affair.”

“She was faking the affair?” Jake asked. “I’m lost. We found the phone with the texts on it.”

“Remember how I said there was something weird about them? It was the sentence structure. They were written by the same person. She was sending them to that second phone and replying as Winterbourne.”

“What phone?” Jerry asked. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Mrs Winterbourne asked Bev to fake an affair with her husband so she could divorce him under the infidelity clause in their prenup and not have to pay him anything. I’m assuming that Mrs Winterbourne offered to help Bev with funding her own digs if she would fake the affair. With a string of text messages and lunch dates and—”

“How could she have orchestrated romantic lunch dates?” Micki asked.

I shrugged. “Mr Winterbourne told us that he occasionally dealt with Bev when his wife couldn’t. My guess is those dates were planned out and Bev made some romantic overtures with a private investigator, ready with a zoom lens, to catch them.”

“But the text messages,” Kendall jumped in. “The police or whatever can triangulate where you are. They’d be able to prove—or his solicitors—would be able to prove he wasn’t where the message came from.”

“That’s how you caught onto her, right?” I asked Winterbourne.

“I have *no idea* what you’re talking about,” he exclaimed.

“Sure you don’t. I don’t know if you accidentally saw a message or her phone or what. Maybe she left it behind at a lunch date. You saw it while she was in your house talking to your wife. I don’t know. But whatever it was, it happened this afternoon.”

“You are absolutely insane,” Winterbourne cried. “I know nothing about this so called affair.”

“Are you sure about this?” Jake whispered. “I’m getting a truth-ish vibe from him.”

“Yeah, me too.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “But you did it. You definitely did it. You— ohhh.”

“What?” Jake asked. “What ‘ohhh’?”

“He *didn’t* know anything about the faked affair,” I said. “I thought it was weird he’d leave those texts on her phone after he’d obviously checked it.”

“It’s still him, though, right?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s still him. Just for a different motive. It was all about the embezzlement. He and Theo were in it together. That’s why he killed him.” I sighed in relief as everything settled neatly into place. “*That’s* why he killed them.”

“You’re only just working this out?” Micki asked.

“Hey, I’ve only had two hours, limited resources and no whiteboard,” I said. “And I knew how, I just didn’t really know why. I couldn’t get the motives to line up. The embezzlement makes so much more sense. Bev knew about it. She told Theo she knew. That was the whole betrayal argument that Rafe overheard. Theo told Winterbourne. Winterbourne swiped Bev’s pass at some point today to look for the documents because I’m pretty sure he’s been siphoning money away from his wife for years in case she divorced him and if she found out about this latest scam with Theo, she’d likely investigate all his money dealings and find his nest egg. You met with Bev today?” I asked Mrs Winterbourne.

She nodded. “Yes. This afternoon.”

“I’ve no idea why you swiped Bev’s pass.” I said to Winterbourne. “Maybe you thought she’d hidden the documents here. I’m guessing you eavesdropped on her conversation with your wife and realised that she hadn’t mentioned it. Maybe you thought you could blackmail her into silence. I don’t know. But she walked in while you were searching her stuff, you confronted her about it. You argued. Maybe she tried to walk away and that’s how you ended up in the corridor. You stabbed her. Then you heard Marie and Kendall coming and dragged her into the cupboard. They heard Rafe coming back into the workroom to use the toilet so they dropped Theo and ran. Rafe heard them, came out to check and found Theo. He moved Theo to the exhibit and then you escaped back through the workroom.

“And then Bart finds Theo and comes to tell him,” Jake finished. “Winterbourne checks for a pulse. Finds one and directs Bart to get everyone else. He can’t believe his luck and strangles

Theo so he doesn't have to split the money. Then he lets us investigate, thinking we won't find anything, but on the off chance we do, we'll taint it."

My dad raised his hand. "I have a question. If he wasn't checking for the affair texts, why did he look at Bev's phone?"

"Evidence of the embezzlement. He was checking she hadn't photographed the balance sheets or sent emails or anything that could tie him to the embezzlement. Do you have another question?" I asked when my dad didn't put his hand down.

"As fascinating as this is," Mr Winterbourne said. "You have no proof of anything."

"How did you know Winterbourne had strangled Theo with the cane and that Theo hadn't just hit his neck when he fell?" my dad asked, ignoring Winterbourne's interruption.

"The police will be able to verify that, but Rafe had been wiping his shoes on the back of his trousers all night. And I noticed a small streak of dirt on the back of Winterbourne's trousers. He must have knelt down on one knee to strangle Theo and then dusted that knee off. But he's scuffed up the toe of his right shoe when he knelt and didn't notice until someone else was there. No one would've thought anything of it. He could've even explained it away as happening while you checked for Theo's pulse, but because it happened while he was killing him, that dirt was like a beacon of guilt. So he had to get rid of it quickly and discreetly."

"He cleaned it like Rafe kept doing?" Jake guessed. "Wiping the top of his right shoe on the back of his left leg."

I nodded. "Rafe's been doing it all night. It's a nervous habit for him. Something he does when he gets stressed. Whether Winterbourne realised it or not, he saw how Rafe kept cleaning his shoes and did the same thing."

"This is utterly ridiculous," Winterbourne cried. "I strangled a man because I had a little dirt on my trouser leg? Utterly ridiculous."

"There's also the tiny thing that you were the only one to be alone with him," I reminded him. "He was only just dead when we found him."

"He was dead when Bart came to get me," Mr Winterbourne said. "He was already dead. And I have no knowledge about any embezzlement. I wasn't involved in the dig at all. If there's any oddities with the financing, it's all her doing." He pointed to his wife.

"I'm pretty sure the police will be able to prove it was you. The way Theo died. The money. All of it."

"Give it up. You've been exposed." Jake wiggled his eyebrows at me. I assumed it was a pun on his oh-so-not-funny "Aurora Exposed" hashtag.

“This is normally the part where you go crazy and admit what you did and give some crazy rationale for it,” I said. “Any time now.”

“Well, *two* murders?” Mrs Winterbourne looked her husband over, disgust plain her face. “It’s not what I was going for, it’s not infidelity, but I’m sure the judge will see it my way.”

“Fifteen years of my life.” Winterbourne shook his head. “You stole *fifteen* years of my life.”

“I think the reporter has made it quite clear that you’re the thief.” she scoffed. “And I’m not funding your defence. So don’t even ask. And don’t think you’ll get to hold onto what you’ve stolen from me. When my accountants are done with their investigation, you won’t have two pennies to rub together.”

“Okay, then.” He sighed, nodded and threw his cane upward, grabbing it by the bottom and swung the silver wolf handle at her face.

I didn’t know if Charlie simply had super fast reactions or he read the situation better than I had, but he tackled Winterbourne. The cane sailed past his wife’s face less than an inch away.

Everyone stood in a stunned silence as they grappled around on the floor until Charlie wrestled him into submission.

Our small group watched, mesmerised as the police dragged him to his feet and marched him out of the museum.

Jake was the first one to recover. He pointed to my dad.

“Did you get that?” My dad gave him a thumbs up, still pointing the camera in our direction. Jake turned to me. “Off. The. Chain.”

Chapter Sixteen

Friday 9:42pm

“That was so amazing, lovely,” my mum said after I’d finished talking to the constable.

“You’re so good at this.”

“I got it all on film.” My dad showed me the screen of his phone and played back a little bit of my big reveal. “One for the family album.”

I grimaced. “Is that what I sound like?”

“You have a beautiful voice,” my mum said.

“What’s he doing?” My dad jerked his chin in Jake’s direction.

He’d shoved a couple of trays of food over and was sitting in the space on the table, typing furiously, pausing to stuff a handful of anything in his mouth, then typing again.

I looked at his gleeful expression. “I’m afraid to guess. Probably something to do with our social media stuff. If he asks for that video, dad, please don’t give it to him.”

“Too late. Already gave it to him.” My dad pocketed his phone. “He was talking about doing a follow up piece, an interview with you to answer questions from views.”

I grimaced. “Maybe I can get Marcus to fire him. I could make something up. Or frame him for murder.”

“Miss North.” Bart approached our little group with a tight smile. “Might I have a word?”

“Sure.”

“In private?” Bart gestured to the far side of the foyer.

“Stay where we can see you, lovely,” my dad called as I followed Bart. Bart glanced over his shoulder at my dad, but said nothing.

“How can I help?” I asked Bart when we were some distance away from my parents, but still in their eye line.

“I was wondering how—if you were going to—how exactly—”

“You’re asking what I’m going to write? About tonight.”

Bart grimaced. “Yes.”

“I *was* thinking about writing two separate articles. One about the exhibit and one about the whole murder thing. I’m not entirely sure if I can do that, though. I don’t feel as if I know enough about the exhibit and I assume it won’t be opening after tonight?”

Bart nodded. “The museum will be closed for a while, I think.”

“What would you like me to write?” I asked him.

“Ideally? Nothing.”

“If I had to write something?”

“I’d prefer for you not to mention anyone by name or the museum.”

“I *could* do that,” I said with a shrug. “And I’m willing to use pseudonyms in the article, if that would help you at all. But that’s not going to stop other reporters identifying you, everyone involved, and the museum, though. And I think my trainee might have already spilled the beans on social media.”

“Ah.”

“Is there any other way I could help?”

Bart gave me a closed lipped smile. “Do you have a time machine?”

I opened my purse with the intention of pulling out a card and realise it was still jam-packed with evidence. I was not looking forward to the telling off I was going to get from Trank when I handed that over.

I pulled a card from the side pocket of my purse and handed into Bart.

“Not a time machine, but, for the future. If you should ever need a story about an exhibit, give me a call and I’ll give you a write up so phenomenal people will be throwing money at you to come in.”

“Thank you.” He scanned the room as if he were seeing it for the first time. “I had such high hopes.”

He wandered off, his gaze still sweeping around the room as if he’d forgotten I, or anyone else, was there.

“That was a really nice thing to do.” Charlie wandered over from a group of constables.

“It hurts my feelings that you sound surprised by that.”

“I’m not surprised.” Charlie nodded at my purse. “That looks heavy. Need me to carry it for you.”

“This? Oh, you know? I found it.” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder at the table where Jake was sitting. “Over there. And it *is* really heavy. It’s got an odd assortment of things in it, as well.”

“Ohhh, so it’s not yours?”

“Absolutely not.” I shook my head for emphasis. “Nope. Not mine.”

“Really? Because I thought I just saw you pull one of your cards from it.”

“Oh.” I nodded. “Right, see, what happened was, I found it and I thought it would be great to store some of my belongings in.”

“In someone else’s purse?”

“Well, I—” I sighed. I was too tired to keep up any pretence. “Look. Do you want the whole purse or just the evidence?”

“How much evidence is there?”

“Couple of phones. Couple of lockers keys. A dagger.” I opened my purse and showed Charlie inside. “Jake has the rainbow plasters.”

He pulled out a bagged phone. “You put everything in evidence bags?”

“Yeah. It’s *evidence*.”

“I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

“Me either. It’s almost like we’ve never met.”

He dropped the phone back into the bag. “Take what’s yours and give me the purse. I’ll get it back to you on Sunday.”

“Sunday?”

“Sunday.” Charlie grinned at me. “Your mum invited me. Again.”

“Are you going to show up?”

“If no one is murdered. Oh. And, fair warning, I think your dad might have invited Constable Jarvis.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know who that is.”

“The constable who was asking all the questions.”

“Oh. The one who drove Jake and I home from the forest that night.” I frowned him.

“Why?”

“If I had to guess?” he asked and I nodded. “Competition.”

“Why would he feel the need to pit me against a police constable? Whatever the situation, surely he knows I’d win.”

Charlie laughed. “No. Competition *for me*.”

“Oh. Right.” I glanced over at the constable who was happily chatting to my dad. “Okay, look, you need to get my dad onside. I can’t be doing with random guys showing up for Sunday dinner. It’s bad enough that my parents have adopted Jake, I don’t need them turning Sunday dinner into some sort of blind date disaster.”

“And how do you recommend I get him onside?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Tell him you’re not looking for a serious relationship right now.”

“Tell him I’m *not* looking for a serious relationship? While I’m trying to date his *only* daughter?” Charlie shook his head. “That’s not going to go down well. What else?”

“Fine. Tell him you’re looking for true love—”

“And have him think I’m trying to steal you away?” Charlie shook his head again. “That’s going to go down worse. What else have you got for me?”

“Oooh, get my mum onside.”

“Your mum *is* onside. *She’s* the one who keeps inviting me over.”

“Well ...” I shrugged helplessly. “Get her *more* onside.”

Charlie stepped back. “What you’re saying is you’ve got nothing for me?”

“Dude, I don’t know what to tell you. This has never been an issue before.” I frowned over at my dad. “That I know of, at least.”

“I’ll work it out. You’re lucky I’m not a quitter.”

“Probably be safer for you if you were,” I muttered as I watched him walk away.

“Was that Charlie?” my mum asked as she came over to me, linking her arm with mine.

“The short latino guy I was just talking to? No, that was Detective Donavon.”

“Don’t sass me, young lady,” she scolded. “What did he say?”

“About what?” I asked.

“He’s coming over for Sunday dinner. Did he tell you?”

“He told me that dad invited that constable.”

My mum rolled her eyes. “He’s just not ready to let you go, lovely. That’s all.”

“Mum, I’m not going anywhere.”

“*You* know that and *I* know that.” She sighed. “You’re so smart and beautiful and brave and he wants you to find someone who appreciates that.”

“I don’t need—”

“And I know, you don’t *need* anyone, but as your dad says, it’s always helpful to have extra cannon fodder.”

“Can we please be done with this conversation?”

“Of course.” My mum patted my hand and I thought I’d bought myself a reprieve. And then she spoke again. “Let’s talk about you leaving the paper.”

“Mum, come *on*.”

“What?”

“You want to talk about my romantic future and my career future in consecutive conversations? At a crime scene? It’s just a bit much.”

“We’re going to have to talk about it sometime,” she said. “We both know that you can’t stay at the paper forever.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s not how life works. No one likes change, lovely. No one. But it doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing.”

“Have you told dad that?”

My mum rolled her eyes. “Only every day for the past twenty years. But we’re not talking about him. We’re talking about *you*. And *your* future.”

I sighed. “I just don’t like getting pushed around by circumstances. And I feel like that’s what’s happening. Like I’m at the mercy of someone else’s decisions.”

“Then, what if you made that change now. Before the paper is sold or closed or whatever is going to happen? What if you decided it was time for a change now. And then you made that change? You have Jake. That boy would follow you off a cliff. You have his friend, that smart computer girl. Maybe it’s time for you to step out on your own. Test your wings.”

“Doing what?” I shook my head. “I’m not really ready for that.”

“You can’t wait until you’re ready. You’ll never be ready. Sometimes you just have to jump and believe that you’ll land on something.”

“Something that pays me a regular salary so I can put food on my table.”

“Would it be the worst thing to move back home while you get it up and running?”

I stepped back from her, lips pursed and arms folded. “Yeah, because *dad’s* the one who can’t let me go.”

“Oh, shush.” She waved me off and linked her arm with mine again. “It was just a suggestion. There’s nothing wrong with cutting down your expenses while you’re trying to launch something new. Or what about building a runway? Give yourself three months to build up a following on all the social media channels and then jump? And then, once you have the audience and the sponsors and other things that Jake was talking about, you won’t have to rely on anyone. You can do whatever stories take your fancy. You can do whatever you want.”

“I don’t think it’s as easy as you’re making it sound, mum.”

“Sure it is. Life is as easy or hard as you make it.”

“Pretty sure *that’s* not true.”

“Come on, now.” She tugged a strand of my hair. “You’re tougher than that. It won’t be hard unless you make it hard. So make it easy. And while we’re talking about easy, what are we going to do about your detective and your dad?”

“He’s not *my* detective.”

“Sure, he is. Your dad keeps knocking him away and he keeps coming back.”

“You make him sound like a mosquito,” I said. “Hey. How about this Sunday, you and I go out for dinner. Leave dad and Jake and Charlie and that constable and Trank and everyone else who turns up to work it out for themselves?”

“That sounds wonderful.” She smiled at me. “See. Change isn’t so bad.”

Chapter Seventeen

Sunday 7:45pm

“It’s a little creepy in here on a Sunday,” Charlie said as he strolled into my basement newsroom office.

“Yeah, if you’re a scaredy cat.” I glanced up from my computer screen and frowned at him. “What time is it?”

“Nearly seven. Did you have a nice time with your mum?”

“I did.” I pushed back from my desk, interlinked my fingers and pushed my palms upward to stretch out my back and shoulders. “Did you have a nice time with my dad? And Jake? And the constable? And Trank?”

“I’d say ‘nice’ was overstating it.” Charlie dropped into one of the visitor’s chairs. “I only came to dinner for you. And *you* weren’t there.”

“Did you manage to work something out with my dad?” I dropped my arms and rolled my shoulders.

“We have a semi-cordial truce in place.” Charlie scanned the small office. “Jake not around?”

“For the actual work? Of course not.” I inclined my head. “I say that but he’s doing a great job with all the social media stuff.”

“I saw.” Charlie nodded. “How do you feel about that?”

“Not great, if I’m honest. I like being able to reach people, but I don’t like that they can reach me back. If you know what I mean. Hey.” I leant forward and lowered my voice. “Want to give me a quote for the article?”

Charlie leant toward me and lowered his voice as well. “No.”

“You could be my unnamed source in the police department?” I wiggled my eyebrows at him. “That’s a very coveted position.”

He laughed and relaxed back in the chair. “Tempting, but it’s still a no.”

“Pffft.” I saved my work and pushed back from my desk. “If you’ve not come to offer me insider info what are you doing here?”

He waved his phone at me. “I noticed you were still here. Thought I’d check in. I’m a little surprised you haven’t turned off the location sharing.”

“Yeah, well, I figure it’s not something you’re likely to check every ten minutes to make sure I’m not doing something wrong. But if I go missing, it’s probably helpful for you to be able to find me. Or my phone.”

“If you go missing?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah, like, if I’m tracking Bigfoot, fall down a well and Lassie can’t find me, you still can.”

“If you have your phone on you.”

“I’m not letting you microchip me, so take that and be grateful.”

“Are you working on a story about Bigfoot now?”

“Maybe.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Why?”

“Just wondering what you were doing tomorrow night.”

“Actually, someone sent me a tip about werewolves a few days ago that sounded pretty interesting. I get a lot of werewolf tips, but this one sounded really good. With the full moon coming up, I was going to check out the area and see what’s what.”

“You’re doing this tonight or tomorrow night?”

“Er ...” I checked the calendar. “The next full moon is a week away. So, probably every night this week. Why?”

“I was thinking maybe it was about time we went on a date.”

I blinked. “A date?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “A date.”

“Together?”

“Unless you wanted to go separately. But then that wouldn’t really be a date.”

I pointed at him. “Right.”

“So? What do you say?”

“What do I say?”

“Yeah.” Charlie grinned at me. “Go on a date with me.”

I hesitated. “Can I choose what we do?”

“Sure.” Charlie shrugged. “What do you want to do?”

I slid a single printout across the desk toward him. “I want to go werewolf hunting.”

