

## Chapter 1

*Blood covered everything in the small room. It splattered the walls, coated the floor, and even dripped from the ceiling. The smell was nauseating, overwhelming all other senses with its metallic bite. It was hard to imagine that so much blood could come from only one person, but the killer knew that the body parts scattered around the room had once been a part of a single individual.*

*The killer felt a sense of satisfaction at the sight. Some portion of his brain registered that the satisfaction was not right, but he couldn't help the way he felt. His heart pounded as fear mixed with an intense adrenaline rush.*

*What should he do now? The easiest course of action would be to leave everything for someone else to discover. The carnage would not be found quickly. The person that the bits and pieces had once comprised was not the sort of person anyone would miss, or if someone did, it would only be to appreciate the fact that he was absent. The idea of someone else discovering the man's bloody and undignified end was very compelling, but it was too dangerous. As careful as one was, one just couldn't be sure what kind of evidence they'd left behind. If even half of what they showed on TV was true, then the forensic investigators could practically work magic. No, leaving everything was definitely too risky.*

*Luckily, the killer had come prepared.*

*Gasoline splashed across the floor, mingling with the blood and overpowering the smell of death.*

Kane gripped the dashboard in feigned fear. "Will you slow down?"

"We don't have time to slow down. We're running late."

"And we'll never get there if you have an accident and we die in a fiery explosion."

I glanced away from the road long enough to give my little brother a skeptical look. "You watch too much TV."

"Okay, so cars don't generally blow up in real life, but still, you have to admit we'll be even later if you rear-end some poor, defenseless old lady in a Buick."

I was a little edgy after oversleeping and being violently awakened by a disturbing nightmare, but I had to smile at Kane's comment. And he claimed *I* was a drama queen.

"What's got you in such a weird mood, anyway?" Kane asked. "You never sleep through the alarm."

"Whereas you do on a daily basis."

He shrugged. "Yeah, so that's not unusual for me. What's your excuse?"

I frowned and shook my head slightly. "I had a nightmare."

Kane suddenly became serious as he studied my face carefully. "The same one as before?"

I shook my head. "Those seemed to have stopped finally. This one was even worse."

"Tell me about it?"

"I'd rather not." He made a face. "Later, maybe. Right now, I just want to forget it."

He nodded. "Are we picking up Asher this morning?"

Some days we picked up my boyfriend and some days we didn't. It all depended on our schedules. "Why do you think I'm rushing?"

"So that means you both have to stay after school?"

"Yep. I have play practice and Asher has GSA." We were doing *The Laramie Project* for our spring play, which was a really big deal for our high school. There were only eight roles, but I got one — and not just because I was openly gay. A couple of the other guys auditioning for the part were gay as well.

Kane sighed. "I guess I'll go to the GSA meeting then." He attended the gay/straight alliance sporadically as a straight supporter. One of the guys who went religiously had a crush on him, though, so Kane — one of the least homophobic people I'd ever known —

eventually got tired of fending off the guy's persistent romantic overtures and had been avoiding the meetings. "So, how are rehearsals going?"

"You know what they say — the worse the rehearsals, the better the show."

He gave me a cynical look. "They actually say that?"

"They do, but I think it's just supposed to make us feel better. It's not really working. Opening night is only a week away, and I'm nervous as hell."

I picked up my cup of coffee, and Kane eyed it hungrily. I didn't usually drink the stuff, but I figured I could use the caffeine boost that morning. Kane, on the other hand, was hopelessly addicted. He'd already finished his own.

"Forget about it," I said warningly.

"Oh, come on. You don't even like it."

"You've had enough. It'll stunt your growth."

"Is that what happened to you?"

I rolled my eyes. "Here come the short jokes."

"You started it."

As I set my coffee back in the cup holder, Kane made a dive toward it. I tried to snatch it back, and a brief tug-of-war ensued. The game ended when the hot liquid sloshed over the side and onto Kane's lap. He let out a howl and released the cup, causing me to splash myself.

With all the distraction, I failed to notice the car sitting at the stop sign in front of us. However, it got my full attention when it brought us to a sudden, bone jarring, metal crunching halt. We hadn't even been going that fast, I'd hit the brakes after the first coffee spill, but there was still enough of an impact to deploy the airbag. The safety device exploded in my face, scaring me more than the actual accident.

I punched the bag down and checked on Kane. He was white as a ghost, but otherwise unscathed. I then turned to see what I had hit and groaned. There was an older model, faded yellow Buick growing out of the front end of my Volkswagen Beetle. Kane's earlier joke about running into an old lady in a Buick suddenly seemed like prophecy.

I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and tossed it into Kane's lap. "Do me a favor and call Adam."

"Sure, give me the dirty job," he grumbled.

"Kane." My voice was sharp. "Not now. Just call Adam and tell him I need him." Adam was our dad, Kane's biological and my surrogate. He'd taken me in when my own father kicked me out upon discovering I was gay.

I drew a deep breath and stepped out of my car. By now, the Buick's driver-side door had swung open and a tall, thin, older man had emerged. At least he wasn't a little old lady.

"Are you okay?" the man asked me. He was in his late fifties or early sixties, with short-clipped, battleship gray hair and a clean-shaven face. Judging by his hairstyle and state of extreme physical fitness, I guessed he was probably retired military or a cop.

"I think so," I answered as I took in the crumpled front end of my beloved Bug. The front bumper had been shoved down and the hood had buckled from the impact. With the exception of a pair of busted taillights, the Buick didn't appear to have a scratch. "I'm so sorry. I spilled coffee and got distracted... Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Wish I could say the same for Bessie."

My stress level jumped several notches. "Bessie?"

"Bessie," he said with slow deliberation, "was my trusted companion of twenty years. We've been through a lot together. It's hard to believe it could end like this."

I stared at him in horror, feeling as if I might throw up at any moment.

He chuckled. "Don't pass out on me, kid. Bessie is, or rather was, my car."

I felt lightheaded as relief washed over me. "Your car?"

"Yes, my car. Speaking of cars, I'm assuming you have insurance on your little windup toy there."

"Yes, sir!" Something about his military bearing made me want to salute. I dove back into the car.

"Is he mad?" Kane asked, his hand over the phone.

"He doesn't seem too upset," I answered as I rummaged through the glove box for my insurance card. "What about Adam?" He held up the phone, and I heard Adam's voice squawking hysterically. I made a face. "Better you than me."

It took me a few minutes to figure out which card I needed. By the time I returned, the man was waiting for me with a business card in hand. He passed it to me in exchange for my information.

*Shane Novak, Private Investigator* was embossed on the card in neat, black lettering, and under that, a phone number and address.

"You're a private detective?" I was unable to keep the note of awe out of my voice.

Novak gave a grunt. "Retired police detective," he said distractedly as he copied my insurance information onto a 3x5 index card. "I left active duty three years ago and quickly discovered I wasn't cut out to sit home and tend the lawn. When I became a widower two years ago, I decided to open my own practice. I only take the cases I want. It keeps me busy. It's not like it is on TV, though." He straightened up and looked me over from head to toe. "You're the famous Killian Kendall, huh?"

"Famous?"

"You're the kid that shot and killed that serial killer a couple years back, aren't you?"

"What? Oh. Um, yeah." I wasn't used to people recognizing me on the street.

"I followed the story at the time. Interesting case. You handled yourself pretty well for an amateur. Not many kids your age would have had the guts to do what you did."

"Uh, thanks?" I was unsure of the proper protocol when someone compliments you on killing another person.

"I wrote my insurance info on the back of my card there," he said as he handed me back my information. "Get in touch with your people, and they'll take it from there. It was a pleasure getting rear-ended by you, Mr. Kendall." He pumped my hand once and turned toward his car.

"Wait! Don't we have to call the police or something?"

"Not unless you want a reckless driving charge. It's doubtful they'd even do anything, since no one was hurt. I'm not going to sue you or anything." He looked down at the back of his car, currently buried in the front end of mine. "I probably won't even file a claim."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. You're going to have enough headaches with your insurance company; you don't need the police involved. Trust me. I was a cop for thirty years."

"But your car—"

"My car is fine. I was just teasing you about her dying. She's going to outlive me. She's built like a tank. They don't make 'em like this anymore."

I must have had a dubious look on my face.

"Okay, here. Watch this." He climbed in behind the steering wheel and turned the key. After a few sputters and an asthmatic wheeze, the Buick roared to life. He got out, leaving the engine running. "Don't worry, she always sounds like that. Unless you want me to hang around, I should get going. I'm late for an appointment. If you need anything, just call me. My number's on the card I gave you."

I nodded dumbly, and we shook hands again. He got back into his car and pulled away from mine with a metallic screech, leaving a trail of broken glass from the VW's headlights. He waved and then drove off. I turned to Kane, who had climbed out of the car in time to catch the end of my conversation with Mr. Novak.

"That went a lot better than I would have expected," he said.

I nodded. "He looked kind of scary, but he was really nice."

"A lot nicer than he had to be, considering you slammed into him."

"I didn't slam into him! I wasn't going that fast." Kane cast a pointed glance at the front end of my car, and I sighed. "Do you think it's totaled?"

He shrugged. "Beats me, but one thing is for sure. Dad is going to freak when he sees it. You'll be lucky if you ever drive again."

My stomach knotted up at the thought of Adam's reaction. He was a great guy and more of a father to me than my real dad ever was, but he tended to be a little overprotective.

"What did he say when you called him?"

"Well, after he stopped speaking in gibberish and I convinced him neither of us had critical head injuries, he said he'd get here as quickly as possible."

"Let's hope he doesn't have an accident on the way, then we'd only have Steve's car for transportation."

Steve was Adam's partner. He was an architect and worked in a town about an hour from where we lived. If we were dependent on his vehicle, things would get very complicated.

"Way to think positive there, Killian," Kane commented dryly. "Shouldn't you call Asher and let him know we're running a little later than planned?"

"Oh my God! I forgot all about him!"

Kane tossed me the cell phone and went to examine the damage to the car more closely.

I speed-dialed Asher's house and his mom answered the phone. "Hi, Mrs. Davis. This is Killian. Is Asher there?"

"Hi, Killian. Actually, you just missed him. Marcus took him to school."

Marcus was Asher's older brother. He lived at home and went to one of the local colleges. On mornings when I couldn't pick Asher up, Marcus drove him. However, I was certain Asher and I had agreed the night before that I would pick him up this morning.

"Oh. Was he mad?"

There was a long, rather pregnant pause. Mrs. Davis was one of the sweetest ladies I'd ever met. She loved me to death and hated it when Asher and I fought, which lately seemed to be more and more often. "He did seem a little upset. He said something about being late for a test."

"I'm sorry. I had an accident on the way there."

"Heavens! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine and so is Kane, and the other driver. It just made us even later than we already were. I'll explain to Asher when I see him at school."

"Okay, sweetheart. I'm sure he'll understand when he hears what happened."

At least one of us was sure.

Adam pulled up behind my Beetle just as I slipped the phone into my pocket. He was out of his car before the motor had even completely cut off.

"We're fine—" I broke off as Adam grabbed me in a rough hug.

"Are you sure you're okay?" His voice was thick with emotion.

"Ahm fahn." My response was muffled by my face being mashed against his shoulder. "Weally," I added for emphasis.

He released me from the bear hug but held me by my shoulders at arm's length to look me over.

"Hey, I'm okay, too, just for the record," Kane deadpanned.

Apparently satisfied that I was unhurt, Adam let me go and repeated the hug and inspection process with Kane. Once that was out of the way, he turned his attention to my car. "Oh my God," he whispered. He sounded as though he might cry.

"We're okay. Nobody got hurt," I reminded him.

"Yeah, it looks worse than it is," Kane chipped in.

"Our insurance premiums are going to skyrocket," Adam moaned.

Adam called our insurance company and they sent someone out to assess the damage. Assuming it would even run at all, they advised us against driving the car since the front bumper was pressed against the tires. They were unsure as to the extent of damage to the engine itself.

By the time the tow truck arrived and Adam finished dealing with the insurance company, Kane and I had missed most of our morning classes. Adam dropped us off at school, and we visited the office to get excused absences. I didn't run into Asher until the

final period was over, and we only had a few minutes before we had to be at our respective after-school activities.

“Asher!” I called as I caught sight of his retreating back from the opposite end of the hall. He stopped and waited for me to catch up, but he didn’t look happy about it. His usually silver eyes were a dark, stormy gray. “Asher, I’ve been trying to find you all day.”

“Well, here I am. We have to keep this quick. I’m running late. In fact, I feel like I’ve been running late all day, starting with this morning.”

“Ash, I’m sorry about that. I overslept, then got into an accident on the way to get you.”

A startled look softened his expression. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah, no one got hurt, but the Beetle got busted up pretty badly. They had to tow it off.”

He frowned again. “I’ll call Marcus to pick us up.”

“Adam can—”

“I’ll call Marcus. I have to go. I need to be there before the meeting starts; I am the sole president, you know. Besides, don’t you have play practice?”

I sighed. This had been a sore spot between us ever since I decided to step down from my position as co-president of the gay/straight alliance to focus on drama during our senior year. I hadn’t thought it would be that big of a deal — the GSA was running smoothly, and Asher knew acting was important to me — but apparently it was a big deal to Asher. It was months later and he was still pouting about it.

“Asher—”

“Oh, and would a phone call have killed you?”

“I did call, but your mom said you’d already left. Asher, I’m sorry. Really.”

He defused a little. “I was worried. You didn’t show up, and then I didn’t see you here at school.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I should have called you sooner.”

“You’re sure you’re okay?” When I nodded, he said, “We’ll talk more later.” He turned and quickly walked away.

True to his word, Asher had called his brother. Marcus was waiting for us in the parking lot when we got out of school.

“So, Killian, I hear you wrecked your car,” he said conversationally as I slid into the backseat with my boyfriend. Kane had called shotgun.

“Dude, you should have been there,” Kane started in enthusiastically. “It was awesome! He just plowed into that guy’s rear end.”

Marcus snorted and twisted around in his seat to face Asher and me. “Bet that was a first for you, huh, Kill?”

“Ha ha, very funny. I’m glad everyone thinks my accident is so amusing.”

“I fail to see the humor in it,” Asher said grouchy.

“Big surprise,” Kane muttered under his breath, and Marcus guffawed.

Asher’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Nothing,” Kane sang merrily. He and Asher hadn’t been getting along any better than Asher and me for the last few months.

“So how’d the GSA meeting go?” I asked Asher. It was a measure of how desperate I was to distract him that I broached this touchy subject.

Asher shrugged. “It was okay.”

“Okay? It was great,” Kane crowed. “Marco has a new crush so he barely noticed I was there.”

Asher rolled his eyes. “We had a new kid today. I talked to him a little after the meeting while we waited for you.”

Play practice had run a few minutes longer than GSA.

“He’s a grade behind me,” Kane added. “He’s a little weird.”

“How so?” Asher asked.

“Stays to himself, kind of quiet.”

“He seemed really sweet.” Was it my imagination or did Asher sound a little defensive?

"He probably just seems quiet because he can't get a word in edgewise when you're around," Marcus teased. Kane laughed good-naturedly.

"Is he gay?" I asked Asher.

"He said he's not sure, but I think he probably is. I don't think he's ever told anyone before. It took a lot of courage for him to come to the meeting."

"It takes a lot of courage for anyone to attend the meetings." Even though our school had become a pretty accepting place since Asher and I had come out publicly the year before, it still had its share of bigots and loudmouths.

"That's why the GSA is so important!" Asher was suddenly impassioned, coming out of his funk for the first time that day. "Our school needs this group. It makes us visible. Who's going to take over next year after we graduate? Nobody has stepped forward and shown any interest in being president. Brandy's already made it clear she doesn't even want to be vice president again next year. Nobody else has any leadership skills."

"Do you have to be gay to be president?" Kane asked.

"No." Asher sounded guarded. "It's a gay and *straight* alliance. Why?"

"I could be president."

Asher snorted. "Right."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kane demanded belligerently.

"Like you could take things seriously long enough to be the president."

"I could! And I'd do a damn good job."

"You don't even come to half the meetings."

"I'd be there if I was president."

"What if some other poor guy got a crush on you?"

"Poor guy? Marco slipped naked pictures of himself into my locker. I was never even mean to him. I just...avoided him whenever possible."

"That's my point. You can't avoid people if you're the president."

"You avoided Trish when she decided she was bi and wanted to be in a three-way relationship with the two of us," I pointed out. Probably not my best move, judging by the nasty look Asher shot me.

"That's different. Trish is clinically insane."

"Look, if you don't want me to be president, just say so," Kane challenged.

"I don't want you to be president," Asher snapped back.

"Fine, then when the GSA folds next year, don't blame me."

A tense silence fell over the car until Marcus couldn't handle it any longer. "So, uh, anybody going to see the new Tom Cruise movie this weekend?"

"Tom Cruise sucks," Asher, Kane, and I chorused loudly. Finally, something we could all agree on.

No one made any more attempts at conversation for the rest of the drive to our house. Asher didn't even say goodbye when I got out of the car.

"What got up his butt?" Kane asked as Marcus drove away. He smirked. "We know it's not you."

"I'm really not in the mood, Kane." That was another sore subject — one that too many people around us knew about. Even though we'd been dating for almost two years, Asher and I had never had sex, not real sex. We'd fooled around, but for some reason, I just didn't feel ready to take that next step — much to Asher's chagrin. "In case you haven't noticed, this has not been a good day."

"Sorry."

Kane sounded sincere, so I gave him a break. "Asher's been mad ever since I decided to step down as co-president of the GSA. He keeps saying he's over it but then he brings it up again. It seems like all we do anymore is fight."

"Maybe it's just sexual tension," Kane suggested impishly.

"You never let up, do you?" I started toward the door.

Kane followed me inside. "Sorry, sorry. I just couldn't resist."

"You don't help things with the way you purposefully irritate him."

“Again, can’t resist. He’s such an easy target. He never used to be that prickly.”

“Are you guys bitching about me again?” Adam asked with a smile as he stuck his head out of the den. He worked from home and used the den as his office.

“No, we’re bitching about Asher this time,” Kane answered as he started up the stairs to our shared bedroom.

Adam’s brow furrowed. “Something wrong?”

“Just the usual,” he called back. “Asher’s a jerk.”

“What happened?” Adam asked me.

I dragged my backpack past Adam and into the den. I usually did my homework in there while Kane did his in our bedroom. “Asher was mad that I didn’t pick him up this morning.”

“Even after you told him about the accident?”

“He said I should have called. And technically, he’s right. I mean, I did call, but I should have done it sooner.”

“You were in a car accident. You’d think he’d give you a little slack.”

“There hasn’t been much slack lately.”

“Is he still mad about the GSA?”

“Yeah. Actually, it seems like he’s mad about everything these days, especially if I don’t do exactly what he wants me to do.”

Adam ruffled my hair. “Relationships have their ups and downs. You guys have had pretty smooth sailing since things settled down after...”

I nodded. “I know. I just wish things could have stayed like that.”

“Nothing ever stays the same, kiddo. Consider this a test of your commitment to one another. If you pull through, your relationship will be stronger than ever.”

“And if we don’t?” I asked, hoping he’d tell me I had nothing to worry about.

He gave me a reassuring smile. “Then you’ll find someone even better.”

That wasn’t the answer I was looking for.