

Chapter 1

I sat slumped in my chair, eyes on the clock, counting the seconds until I was free. While the professor droned in the background, I'd stopped listening half an hour earlier. Luckily for me, he wasn't saying anything of real importance. This class was a waste of time. The professor had a love affair with the sound of his own voice, and we students were mere voyeurs. I could have simply read the book, showed up for the tests, and done just as well. Unfortunately, attendance counted as much as test scores for this professor, so I had to make an appearance.

Finally, the class ended, and I was the first person out the door. I was supposed to meet Micah, my boyfriend, on the other side of town. He'd told me he had something he wanted us to talk about. I had no idea what he had in mind, but that phrase alone was enough to strike fear in my heart.

Or maybe I was just overreacting. It didn't have to be anything serious.

I started my car and checked the dashboard clock. If I hurried, I could swing by my office, check my messages, and still have no problem meeting Micah on time, as long as the roads weren't too congested. Despite being only a small city on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Salisbury did have its share of traffic woes.

I made it to the office with no great delays. I parked my car in the small lot next to the building and I ran up the stairs to Novak Investigations. Shane Novak, the private investigator I worked for, was out on business for the afternoon. As his assistant, I mainly did a lot of paperwork, but I also got to help out on some of his cases. I'd even been assigned one of my own recently, which was why I'd wanted to stop by the office.

I sat down at my desk and jiggled the mouse to wake up my computer. I left it on during the week in case Novak needed to look something up. The first thing I did was turn on some music. I hated being in the office when it was empty and silent as a tomb.

"I didn't think you were coming in this afternoon," someone said behind me a few moments later.

I jumped and spun around. "Oh, hey!" It was Novak. "I didn't think you'd be here, either. I just wanted to check my messages."

"I finished up early, so I decided to get some work done while it was quiet." He gave me a meaningful look.

I made a face at him and turned off the music. "Don't worry, I'm not staying long. I wouldn't have even known you were in if you hadn't snuck up on me."

Novak chuckled. "I didn't sneak up on anybody, and you're fine. I'm just giving you a hard time. Since you're here, why don't you give me a quick update on the Knox case?"

My mentor was referring to my first official solo job. He was keeping close tabs on my progress, but I wasn't complaining. I was a little nervous about being out on my own, even though it was a fairly run-of-the-mill, cheating-spouse case. A woman came into the office the week before and asked to speak to Novak. When I wanted to know what about, she replied, "I think my rat-bastard of a husband is cheating on me. If he is, I want proof so I can file for divorce and sue him for every damned penny he has."

You'd be surprised how often we hear variations of that statement. Or maybe you wouldn't.

"Well, I've been doing surveillance on Mr. Knox. As you know, his wife thinks that if he's having an affair, then it's happening either at work or when he goes away on business trips. I've been following him back and forth to work every day, and so far he's been a good boy. He hasn't taken any side trips, unless you count the grocery store one night and the liquor store another."

"What about when he's at work? Or when you're at school? How can you be sure he isn't cheating then?"

"I thought of that. I'm paying the receptionist to alert me if any women come to see him regularly or if he leaves unexpectedly."

Novak raised one eyebrow. "Nice thinking, but how do you know you can trust her? What if she's the one having the affair with Knox?"

"She didn't seem to like Mr. Knox very much. That's what gave me the idea of making the offer to her in the first place. I was asking questions about him, and I could tell she didn't care for the guy. Every time I said his name, you'd have thought she smelled something bad. When I asked her what she thought of him, she told me he was smarmy and had a reputation for being a ladies' man. I asked her if she'd like to make a little extra cash, and she jumped at the chance. Actually, she seemed sort of excited to help."

"So what's the deal? She calls you if he does something suspect?"

"Or texts me, whichever is easier. She might not always be able to call if there are people around."

Novak shook his head. "You young'uns and your texting." He turned to go back into his office. "Keep up the good work, kid."

I glowed. His praise didn't come often, so when it did, I tried to soak it in.

I flipped open my phone to check the time and almost fell off my desk chair. If I didn't hurry, I'd be late for my date with Micah. I'd check my messages tomorrow when I came in to work. They could wait.

Fortune smiled upon me, and traffic was light on my way to the diner where I'd agreed to meet Micah. So light, in fact, that with my rushing I managed to arrive a few minutes early. I didn't see Micah's car in the parking lot, so I went in, got a booth, and ordered a soda while I waited.

"Somebody joining ya, or you ready to order?" The waitress, a middle-aged woman with a chipped front tooth and greasy grayish-brown hair falling out of a half-hearted ponytail, stared at me with a blank expression. Maybe she'd had a rough day. Or a rough life.

"I'm waiting for someone." I gave her a small smile so she wouldn't hurt me. She didn't return the gesture as she stalked away without another word. She wouldn't be winning any personality contests in the near future.

I was just beginning to get a little concerned that Micah wasn't going to show up when I saw his silver Civic pull into the lot. I watched him unfold himself from behind the steering wheel and turn to face the restaurant. He stood by the car for a minute, just staring into the windows, almost as if he was posing. I waved, but was pretty sure he didn't see me.

He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts and moved quickly across the parking lot, where I lost sight of him. He reappeared inside a few seconds later and quickly spotted me.

"Hey, Killian," he said, sliding into the booth across from me. He brushed his floppy brown hair out of his dark eyes and smiled.

My heart skipped a beat. He was so gorgeous. "Hey, I was beginning to think you were standing me up." I grinned to let him know I was only teasing.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said distractedly. "I got hung up with the story I'm working on right now. I told you they finally gave me one with some real weight, right?"

"Yeah. The county council thing." Micah was a reporter for the local newspaper. "It's about time you got a real story, especially after all the attention you attracted with your piece about Amalie's House."

He shrugged. Amalie's House was a pre-Civil War mansion turned bed and breakfast, run by my surrogate father, Adam, and his partner, Steve. The place came complete with its very own ghost. When the inn had opened, Micah wrote an account of the haunting. The article received a huge response — almost all positive — leading Micah to start a weekly series on local haunted hot spots. As a result, he was also getting more respect around the paper. He'd told me the day before about being assigned his first big story, the possibility of major corruption and payoffs in the county council. He was as excited as I'd ever seen him about his work.

Sitting across from me in the diner, though, he seemed withdrawn and preoccupied. I wondered if something had gone wrong. I hoped the newspaper hadn't taken the assignment away already and given it to their star reporter, a jerk named Walters. "Is everything okay at work?"

“Oh, yeah, things are going great. That’s why I was late. The council member who we think is up to his eyeballs in graft made the mistake of firing his secretary last week. She’s just dying to blow him out of the water. I was on the phone with her, and she was talking so fast I could barely write it down quickly enough. Of course, everything will have to be verified. I’ve really got my work cut out for me on this one, but it could be huge.”

“That’s great.” So it wasn’t the story he was upset about. While I figured he’d tell me in his own time, I was not known for my patience. “What are you ordering?”

“I think I’ll just get a burger.” He hadn’t even glanced at the menu.

The waitress was once more approaching our table. “Ready to order?” Her tone suggested she was half hoping we’d change our minds and leave.

“I’ll have a hamburger — lettuce, tomato, and ketchup, no pickle,” Micah said.

Between the tension I was sensing from Micah and our waitress’s dour mood, I suddenly didn’t have much appetite. “I’ll just have a house salad.”

“Drinks?”

“Water is fine with me,” Micah said.

I held up my still-full glass. “I’m good.”

She made the proper notes on her little pad and moseyed off toward the kitchen.

After she left, an awkward silence fell between us. Micah sat looking down at his hands twisting nervously in his lap. I found myself getting more and more worried since that sort of behavior was so out of character. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore. “So, what’s wrong? What did you want to talk about?”

“Hmm? Oh, it’ll wait until the food gets here.”

“Why? You afraid I’ll lose my appetite if you tell me now?” I tried to keep my voice light, but inside I was tensing up like crazy.

“It’s not that.” He looked away, suddenly entranced by the giant fish tank near the door.

“Micah, what’s going on? Are you breaking up with me?”

He turned back to face me, his eyes wide. “No! At least...I hope not.” He sighed. “Killian, where are we going?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Our relationship. Where is it going?”

“I...I don’t understand what you’re asking.”

“Killian, we’ve been dating now for several months, but I feel like we’re not getting anywhere. I’ve tried to be patient, but how much can a guy take?”

“Is this about...sex?” I was eighteen and, for all intents and purposes, a virgin. I’d only had one other boyfriend, with whom I had never gone all the way. Micah had said from day one he didn’t want our relationship to be about sex, and, to his credit, he’d never pushed me.

“No, this isn’t about sex.” He sighed. “You know it’s not about sex. And you know what this is really about. I need more from you than mere companionship, someone to go to dinner with or to the movies or out dancing. I want intimacy, and I’m not just talking about sexual intimacy. I feel like you’re constantly holding me at arms’ length. I want to be closer to you. No, I need to be closer to you. I need you to let me in.”

“Micah... I... Wow!”

“I told you it should have waited.”

“No, I...” I paused and took a deep breath. “Look, Micah, I don’t know what to say. I thought we were doing fine.”

“We are. We’re doing just fine. But that’s the problem. I don’t want to just do fine. I want to do great. I want to be completely satisfied in our relationship.”

“And you’re not.”

“No, I’m not. I feel like there’s a part of you — a big part — that I’ve never even seen. Although I’ve caught hints and brief glimpses, and those are what have kept me around, I rarely get to see the real Killian. I want to know you completely and totally, but you have to trust me and let me in.”

“I thought I was...”

“Did you?”

Before I could answer, our charming waitress appeared at the table with my salad and Micah's burger. "Enjoy." She plopped the platters down in front of us unceremoniously and stomped away.

I looked at the limp, dreary salad and realized I'd completely lost my appetite after all. Micah was apparently experiencing a similar predicament. I pushed the salad to one side.

"Killian," he started again, "I care about you. I really do. I even...I would even say I love you. I've never known anyone like you. You're so smart and funny. I enjoy being with you, and God knows you're never boring." He worked up a weak smile. "And, of course, it doesn't hurt that you're one of the cutest guys I've ever met." The smile slowly disappeared. "But I can't live like this. I can't keep going on in this limbo unless I know there's a reason to hope for something more."

I stared down at the table. "I care about you too. I've loved spending time with you and getting to know you."

"But?"

"There's no but."

"So...what are you saying? You'll let me in?"

"I...I don't know what you mean."

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Sometimes—"

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes I feel there's something coming between us still. Or someone."

"What do you mean?"

"He's still here, between us, almost like he'd never left."

"What? Who?"

"Asher. That's what this is all about, isn't it? You can't let go, can't move on."

I blinked. "Asher? How'd he get into this?" Asher was my ex-boyfriend. We'd broken up months ago, and he'd moved away when school started. I didn't understand why Micah would bring him up after all that time.

"I think you still have feelings for him."

"That's not..." I stopped with the word "true" still on my tongue. Was he right? If I was honest with myself, I had to admit Asher was at least part of the reason I hadn't been moving faster with Micah. I'd been hurt pretty badly after our breakup, and wasn't at all eager to rush into another situation where I'd be that vulnerable again. Micah was right when he said Asher was coming between us, just not in the way he thought. "I'm sorry."

"Me too. Sorry won't fix this, though."

"That's not what I meant. Look, I don't have feelings for Asher. Trust me. I'm definitely over him. The thing is...he hurt me. A lot. He was my first love, and he broke my heart when he dumped me for somebody else. I just—"

"You're afraid I'll hurt you?"

I nodded.

"I can't promise I won't. I wish I could, but nobody can make a promise like that. All I can tell you is that hurting you is the last thing in the world I'd ever want to do."

"So...how do I fix this? How do we fix it?"

"You have to move on, Killian. You have to be willing to take a risk with me."

"What do you mean by risk?"

"Moving to the next level is going to require a certain amount of risk for both of us. We both risk getting hurt, risk losing what we have. All love involves risk. You have to decide if what we have, or what we could have, is worth that risk. Do the benefits outweigh the potential costs? I've decided that for me they do, but only if you're willing to commit to this just as much as I am."

"I..." I stopped, at a loss for words. My brain was going a mile a minute trying to keep up, but I was starting to feel overwhelmed. What if I didn't have an answer for him right that moment? Would he walk away and never look back?

Luckily, Micah responded to my unspoken question before I could launch into a full-fledged panic. "You don't have to tell me right now. That wouldn't be fair. I don't want to put

you on the spot.” He pulled out his wallet, selected a twenty, and tossed it on the table. “Take your time and think about it. Be sure you know what you want, and then call me. I won’t call you. If I don’t hear from you in a reasonable amount of time, I’ll know you decided it wasn’t worth the risk, and I’ll try to understand.” He stood up and looked down at me sitting with what I’m sure must have been a stupefied expression.

“Micah, wait...”

“For what?”

“What’s a reasonable amount of time?”

He forced another smile. “I want you to have time to think about this, about what I’m asking of you. There’s no real timetable. I’m not giving you a deadline or anything. I hope I’ll be talking to you soon, but if not, no hard feelings. I’ll always love you.” He turned and walked out the door.

I watched him through the plate-glass window as he crossed the lot once more, climbed into his car, and drove away without ever once looking back. I was still sitting there several minutes later when the waitress came back.

“Can I getcha anything else?” she asked disinterestedly, as if our food wasn’t still sitting completely untouched on the table and my dinner partner hadn’t just walked out on me.

“I, uh, think we’re done here.” I slid out from the booth. “Keep the change.”

“Do you want a doggie bag?” she called after me.

“No thanks,” I said. Whether she heard me or not I didn’t know and didn’t particularly care.

I was sitting in my room that night with a school book open in front of me on my desk, ostensibly studying. In reality, I can’t begin to tell you the first thing about the chapter I was supposed to be reading. My conversation with Micah kept replaying over and over in my mind. I wondered what I could’ve said differently, and what I was going to do about what he’d said.

I liked Micah. I really did. It wasn’t entirely out of the question that I could fall in love with him...if I let myself. And that was the problem. Micah was right. I had been holding a part of myself back from him. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if he was also right about the reason. Maybe I wasn’t as over Asher as I’d led Micah — and myself — to believe. I still missed him. If I was honest, I knew I did. It had been months since we were a couple, and we hadn’t been happy even before that. Still, he had been my first boyfriend, and I’d loved him. I think somewhere in the back of my mind I always thought we’d get back together. I had been thrown for a loop when he announced he was moving away.

I wasn’t sure I was ready to do what Micah asked. Could I take the next step and put myself at risk? It hurt so much when Asher left, more even than when we’d broken up. I’d lost so many people in my life I guess in some ways it was only natural for me to eventually begin building up defenses to keep others away. It wasn’t entirely intentional either. I knew it wasn’t fair for me to expect Micah to keep coasting along uncertainly, but I wasn’t sure if I was prepared to open myself up the way he wanted. I was afraid to allow him in for fear I’d lose him; however, it looked like I was about to lose him anyway.

I slammed the book shut and let my head drop onto the desk with a thud. “What am I going to do?” I moaned out loud.

“Why do you always have to make everything so hard?” a familiar voice asked from behind me. I snapped my head up and around so quickly I felt something crack in my neck.

“Ow!” I yelped. “Damn it, Seth. You scared the crap out of me.”

My deceased friend reclined on the bed, arms behind his head, and feet crossed at the ankles. He wore what I was beginning to think of as his uniform: faded jeans, heavy black shoes, and a clingy black shirt. His expression was one of benign amusement.

Unfortunately, it was not uncommon for me to see dead people, especially Seth. I had been his friend before he was brutally murdered. Actually, I’d been his one and only friend. He was the only openly gay kid in our school at the time, a fact that made him terribly

unpopular with the in-crowd. He was the one who started me on my own coming-out journey.

After Seth's death, when my biological father found out I was gay and kicked me out, Seth's dad Adam, who was also gay, was the only person I'd known to turn to. He'd taken me in without a second thought and become more like a father to me than my real one ever had. Of course, Adam didn't know his dead son had a bad habit of showing up in my bedroom unannounced.

"What? No hello?" Seth grinned at me from his perch on my pillow. "No 'Gee, Seth, it's been a long time, how've you been?'"

"You're dead. I don't have to ask how you've been. I wish you wouldn't just appear like that. And what is it with people sneaking up on me today?"

He sat up and pulled his long limbs into a cross-legged position. "Oh, quit being such a drama queen. I didn't sneak up on you. I was just lying here. For God's sake, you're never happy unless you have some sort of crisis going on."

"That's not true." My protest came out whinier than I had intended.

"Okay, so maybe it was a little harsh, but you do make mountains out of molehills. Shall I list examples?"

"Please don't."

He shrugged and grinned, satisfied he'd made his point.

"So where have you been the last few months? I'd pretty much convinced myself you were just a stress-induced hallucination. When was the last time I saw you? At the barn?"

"Yes, at the barn. I got in a little trouble over that, broke a few rules. I guess you could say I'm on probation."

"Probation? What rules?"

"I've told you there are certain rules I have to obey if I'm to be allowed to come here."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I meant what rules did you break?"

"Oh. Well, that's another rule. I can't tell you what the rules are, remember?"

"You just like being mysterious."

He stuck his tongue out at me. "No, there really are rules. Although I have to admit, this whole mystical-entity thing does appeal to me. Look, we're supposed to help out by dropping enigmatic hints, no direct advice. And we're never allowed to interfere with the Pattern. When I gave you the strength you needed to escape from those ropes, I crossed the line."

"You gave me...what? The Pattern? What are you talking about?"

"Pretend I didn't mention that, okay? If I keep this up, you'll never see me again. Anyway, I didn't come here to enlighten you about how this all works."

"Why did you come?"

"You need me."

"I do?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"I'm here to help you figure out what to do about Micah."

I rolled my eyes. "It's like having my very own fairy godmother."

"Fairy something, anyway."

"Seth..." I said warningly.

"Right, so as usual, you've gotten yourself into a quandary over something that should be simple."

"Simple for you, maybe."

"It should be simple for you. Do you like Micah?"

"Yes. You know—"

"Do you care about Micah?"

"Yes, but—"

"Do you love Micah?"

That one stopped me cold.

"Killian, do you love Micah?"

"I...I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Quit hiding and face the truth. If you don't stop being an idiot you're going to lose him forever."

Hearing his words so closely echo my thoughts from earlier caused my stomach to lurch. I didn't want to lose Micah.

"I do love him."

"Then tell him so, and then let him help you get past your fears and insecurities. He'll work with you if he knows there's something to work for. If you don't give him anything, though, what reason does he have to stay?"

I stood up and started pacing. "I don't even know why he'd want to stay with me. I mean, I'm a freaking mess. I'm scared to let someone I care about love me, I'm hung up on my old boyfriend, and I'm sitting in my bedroom talking to a dead guy."

"Hey, leave the dead guy out of this. Micah wants to be with you because he loves you. Asher is a part of your past now. He'll always be a part of you, but you have to let him go."

I stopped pacing and faced Seth. "What if I can't?"

"Can't what? Let Asher go? You can."

"You sound so sure."

"That's because I am sure. I know you, Killian. I know you can do this. Deep down you know you can, too. You're scared, and it's okay to be scared. Just don't let the fear control your life."

I sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, near Seth but not too close. He looked as if he'd be as solid as I was, yet I was always afraid if I touched him I'd go straight through him. "You're right. I have to stop being an emotional cripple. It's time to move on. I'll call Micah now." I jumped back up and reached for my cell phone.

He grinned. "That's the spirit. No wait, that's me." He cackled at his own awful pun.

I groaned. "Are we finished here?" I hit Micah's speed-dial button.

"Almost. Just one more thing. Since you're confronting your fears about Micah, don't you think it's also time you confronted your fears about your Gifts?"

I froze with my finger on the Send button. "What?"

"Your Gifts. You haven't forgotten them, have you?"

"No, despite the fact that I've been valiantly trying."

Gifts. That was what my friend Judy called my unwanted abilities to see spirits and sometimes catch glimpses of the past. I called them a curse.

"Why are you so scared of them, Kill? You have them for a reason."

I snapped the phone shut and set it back on the desk. "Yeah, well, I didn't ask for them."

"You didn't ask to be blond either. Or have blue eyes. Or to be gay."

"This is different."

"No, it's just another facet of who you are, and the sooner you deal with it, the better."

"I'm doing just fine without them, thanks."

"We'll see."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He stood up and stretched, his body twisting in an almost feline manner. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

"No, tell me!"

"Sorry, I can't."

"You can't just say something like that and not explain."

"Sure I can. I'm enigmatic, remember?" He seemed to be taking entirely too much pleasure in my squirming. "Now, as much I'd love to, I can't sit here and argue with you about your Gifts all night. I have to go."

"Seth...please." I frowned. "There. I'm begging. Are you happy now?"

Seth's goofy grin faded. "I'm sorry. Really. I'm not just being a jerk. I can't tell you what I meant, but you'll find out soon enough. Just believe me when I say you're going to need to deal with your Gifts sooner or later...and the sooner the better."

"You're scaring me."

He broke into a smile again. "Don't be scared. Just deal with them already. I'm going to leave now and let you call Micah."

"Wait! When will I see you again?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? When you need me."

"Seth...wait..."

"Can't. Sorry." He flashed me one more goofy smile, and then he was gone.

It's very disconcerting to have someone simply vanish right before your eyes.

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