

THE
AWAKENING TRILOGY
BOOK 1



LEGEND OF
MERMAID
CLIFF

BRANDON ROHRBAUGH

Legend of Mermaid Cliff

Brandon Rohrbaugh

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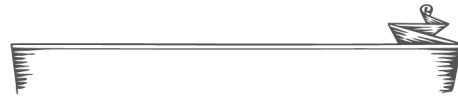
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Dedication



To my wife, *Jessica*, who supports me on this journey I have begun.



Chapter 1



The piercing screech hit me like a train. It was unusually foggy on that cool early morning, and I was in the middle of my daily jog on Mermaid Cliff; the sound made me peer cautiously over the edge at the sharp rocks below. It was low tide, but the fog was too thick for me to tell what was going on below.

I bolted down the walkway and onto the beach. As I got closer, I could make out an ambulance and Sheriff Richards' truck parked on the sand.

Deputy Butler approached me. "Mark," she said with an exhausted look on her face. "You can't be here right now."

"Why not?" I asked. I could see Sheriff Richards and Old Man McGinty standing by the rocks.

She ignored my question and unrolled one of those yellow crime scenes tape I'd seen on TV. Several cars pulled up next to me, likely wondering the same thing that I was.

"Answer your phone, kid," a man said as he stepped out of his car.

Several others joined him with cameras. The vibrating in my pocket continued buzzing.

"Hello?" I questioned, staring out at the vast ocean.

"Where are you? You're going to be late!" The voice on the phone replied.

"Almost there, Mom!" I said.

I started jogging again, back through the town of Rockport. I ran by the same streets and people I saw every day. But something felt off this time. My mind was flooded with ideas of what could possibly have happened below Mermaid Cliff.

In our small town, nothing interesting ever occurred, so all I could think was that maybe a shark or whale had washed up on the shore. Maybe the legend of Mermaid Cliff was true? There always had been something eerie about this place.

I saw Ryan, Andrea, Rachel, and my older brother Charles—some of the “cool kids” at Rockport High—all sitting at a table inside Barney’s Restaurant. I paused for a moment, it looked like they were in the middle of an argument, quite unusual given how “awesome” they always appeared.

Not that I was uncool, but I hung out with the not-so-popular kids in school. My dad had always told me, *Mark, it’s just two more years and then it’s on to college*, which was true. But to a sixteen-year-old like myself, high school was life itself, and everything you did impacted your status with the other students.

I turned down my street, and my phone vibrated again. Figuring it was my mom, I ignored it. I could see her car now anyway. I was close enough to notice a black mark on the back of it and that her flower bumper sticker was peeling off. I ran up the front steps.

“Mark!” called my mom from the kitchen as I entered.

“Daisy,” I called back, mocking her.

“Not funny, young man, go get washed up and get to school.”

“Did you hear about what happened at the beach?” I blurted out, grabbing a piece of bacon out of her hand.

“No, I didn’t hear anything about the beach.”

“I couldn’t get too close, but Sheriff Richards and Deputy Butler had the area roped off.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, just a dead fish or something,” she sighed, shrugging me off.

This town was so old and boring; no one ever had a creative thought.

“It’s been twenty-five years since the last suicide; you don’t think it could be the next victim?”

“You don’t honestly believe that stuff, do you, Mark?” she scolded, pouring herself a glass of orange juice.

I ignored her question and grabbed a slice of toast from her plate and ate it.

“What happened to your car, anyway? The stickers are peeling off.”

“Oh, it’s fine, I backed into a trash can yesterday. Now, go get in the shower and get to school.”



AS THE WARM WATER FROM the shower hit my face, I couldn't take my mind off what could've happened. I was sure one of the kids in school would know, though. I heard my phone vibrating again and remembered it had done the same earlier, while I was jogging. Maybe it was Veronica texting me about the party at the Grays' house last night? I didn't remember much, but I knew it was the biggest party they'd ever had.

Lexi and Jimmie Gray were twins at my school and by far the richest family in town. Their dad was Raymond Gray, the Mayor of Rockport. Raymond and his wife Joyce were always out at events, so Lexi and Jimmie threw plenty of parties at their mansion; last night's party was the first I had gone to—or even been invited to.

I hopped out of the shower and grabbed my phone. I had a few texts from Jason Miller. Jason and his mom, Emily, were family friends. His dad, Damon, wasn't really in the picture right now. He'd been in and out of prison his whole life, and he belonged to the Rockport Crusaders, a biker club in town.

As I opened up the texts from Jason, I noticed in the mirror that I had scratches on my chest. Ignoring that for now, I read the messages.

Need a ride? was followed by, are you there?

I replied that I was ready to be picked up. I noticed several alerts from social media but didn't get a chance to read them.

Downstairs, I was overwhelmed by the smell of fresh-cooked bacon and burnt toast. My stomach started growling as if I hadn't eaten in days. I grabbed a few pieces of bacon from the kitchen and headed for the door.

"Thanks, Mom, see you later."

"Be safe!"

I ran out the door just as Jason pulled up in his beat-up truck that his mom had bought him for his sixteenth birthday. Jason's family wasn't the richest in town, but his mom did what she could. I tossed my bike in the back and opened the door.

“What’s up, man?” I asked.

“Where’d you go last night?” he asked in a shaky voice before I could even get my seat belt on.

“After the party?” I questioned, finishing off the bacon.

“Yeah; Lexi Gray’s telling people she saw you leave with Veronica.”

A sudden knock at my window made us both jump up in our seats. I turned to see my dad standing there and reluctantly rolled the window down.

“Hello, boys!” he called with an awkward smile.

“Mr. Parker,” Jason replied, leaning forward.

“How’s your mom doing, Jason?”

“She’s doing good, just taking it a day at a time.”

“We’re kind of in a hurry, Dad,” I blurted, cutting into the conversation.

“Okay, just had to come back to grab my phone before heading out.”

My dad had a construction business and worked around the town on numerous projects. I rolled my window up as we pulled away and headed toward school.

I looked over at Jason. He still had that weird look.

“Why does it matter when Veronica went home?” I asked.

“Because she never went home.”

I turned and looked out the window at the silvery drops falling around us. Time froze in that moment as my brain began to put this information together.

As Jason parked into a spot in front of the building, he looked over at me. “If there’s something you need to tell me, I can help you.”

My mind flooded with ideas of what could have happened. Was that what I’d seen—or tried to see—at the bottom of Mermaid Cliff? It all started coming together. Was Veronica McBride dead?

I got out of the car and headed to the door of Rockport High. A bright flash hit me. Dazed, I turned to see Patrick Morris taking a picture of me.

“It’s for the yearbook,” he said, continuing to snap pictures.

“Not right now, Patrick.”

“Hey, loser! Take a picture of me,” Ryan called to Patrick as he brushed past me.

On the way to class, I was overtaken with unease. I barely made it into the bathroom before I puked all over the bathroom stall.

“You alright?” said a voice from outside my stall.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I stood there for a minute, hoping they would leave. After a few moments, I had worked up enough courage to open the door. Standing in front of me was the school Principal, Mr. Grimm.

“You sure everything’s okay?”

“Yes, Sir. I just ate something bad, I think,” I answered, heart racing faster.

“Nonsense, Daisy’s’ cooking is top of the line,” he said. “Okay, well, get to class fast; there is an important situation we all need to talk about.”

I heard him leave the bathroom and exited the stall. I stood in front of the mirror with water dripping off my face, I couldn’t understand how it could have been Veronica at the bottom of Mermaid Cliff. I had walked her home; I knew I had. I left the bathroom and looked over to the doors to the outside, and for a second, I thought maybe I could just leave.

I took a half-step toward the doors when Russell Lewis walked up to me. “Mark, get to class or I’ll be forced to write you up.”

Russell was the student body President and thought he was above the rest of us.

“You got it,” I said as I headed to first period.

I passed by the school janitor, Griffin, who was headed into the bathroom with a mop and bucket. He had been the janitor here for as long as I had been going here. He seemed nice but always did this weird twitching thing and it just felt like a piece of him was missing. Jason thought that he might be an undercover android from another planet.

I entered the classroom and headed to my seat as the bell rang. Immediately after, Sheriff Richards and Mr. Grimm came in, and my attention shot in their direction.

“Hello students, quiet down!” Mr. Grimm demanded. “Today, we are going to do things a little different. The Sheriff is going to talk to

all of you about something that has happened and then we are going to have an assembly this afternoon.”

I could feel my stomach turning but tried to keep it down, I shouldn't have eaten that bacon.

Sheriff Richards stepped forward and began talking. He has been the sheriff here for quite some time but seemed more like a town drunk at times than a sheriff. "Students! Today, we have a travesty. For the first time in the history of this great town, we have a murder. This morning, we found the body of your fellow student Veronica McBride on the beach below Mermaid Cliff. If you know anything about where Veronica was last night, please contact us immediately."

An unease swooped in over us as a loud gasp forced Sheriff Richards to pause for a moment. "Mr. Grimm, take over," Sheriff Richards said.

My mind went blank in that moment. I slowly closed my eyes and pictured her face. I felt my eyes watering but stopped them from forming.

"How do you know it wasn't a suicide?" Cheryl Wood blurted out as the Sheriff was leaving the room.

"No questions," he replied as he exited.

She wrote something in her journal with a partial smile on her face.

"Students, we understand this is a hard time and if anyone would like to talk about it, we have a support system set up for anyone who needs it."

Veronica McBride was the newest kid in school, and not the most popular. Her family had moved here from Chicago two summers ago, and rumors about her and Ryan Johnson quickly spread through the gossip grapevine that is High School. We had history class together, and we, along with Jason, worked part-time at the local drive-in theatre. The more time I spent with her the more I realized that the rumors were not true.



Chapter 2



The rest of the day was pretty depressing. We had an assembly about Veronica and about being safe when walking around town. We were let out fairly early, and I waited for Jason by his truck.

“Mark,” I heard from behind me.

I turned and saw Ryan Johnson and Rachel Kelly headed my way. They were among the most popular kids in school.

“Hi, guys,” I responded awkwardly.

“So, what’d you do with Veronica after the party last night,” Ryan asked.

“I walked her home and then went home myself! Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“Well, that’s obvious! Because it seems you were the last to see her alive,” Rachel said.

“Leave him alone,” Jason cut in as he walked up from behind me.

“Oh, look who it is, poor boy Jason Miller!” Jimmie Gray called over as he approached us. “Where’s your daddy at? Probably the murderer!”

An angry squint came over Jason and he took a step toward them. I quickly reached in and pulled him back by his jacket.

“Don’t you ever talk about my dad,” he called back, clenching his fists.

“Okay, boys. Let’s not get into this here; people are watching,” Rachel said.

“We need to talk about what happened at the party,” Jimmie called over as Jason and I got in his truck.

“What did Jimmie mean when he said we have to talk about what happened?”

“You really don’t remember anything?” Jason responded.

“I was so drunk, man. I never get that way but last night I got wasted. All I remember was going there to meet Veronica.”

“We’ll talk about it soon.”

“Jason don’t listen to them about your dad. They’re just trying to get into your head. You know what they’re like.”

“I know, I guess I’m just mad at my dad for doing this to us. So, the legend of Mermaid Cliff strikes again?”

Rockport had been founded in 1917, and every twenty-five years, a body had been found at the bottom of Mermaid Cliff. To date, there’d been four suicides and now one murder since the town officially existed. All five bodies were found mangled by the sharp rocks at the cliff base.

No one knew why, but the legend went that a mermaid lured people to the edge of the cliff with her singing and bright shining skin in the light of the moon, and they were in such awe of her that they walked right over the edge, falling to their death. Some people in town believed this, and I admitted it was weird that Veronica was found at the bottom of the cliff exactly twenty-five years after the previous body had been discovered there.

I looked at Jason and smiled as neither of us believed the legend to be true.

“You want to go check out the cliff before work?” Jason questioned.

“Yeah, sure.”

It hadn’t hit me yet that Veronica was actually gone. I’d known her a year and a half, but I’d really started talking to her when she got a job at the drive-in, the summer just gone.

As we approached Mermaid Cliff, we hit a lot of traffic piling up.

“Where did all these cars come from?” Jason asked, confused.

“I have no clue.”

I sat up in my seat and looked ahead at the cars parked all over the sprawling clifftop; dozens of news agency cars and reporters spilled out and headed in all directions, all the way from the road fork and right across to the cliff’s very edge. I just couldn’t imagine how so many journalists had even managed to show up; we only had a small newspaper business in all of Rockport, with a grand total of two employees.

“These reporters must be from out of town,” I said as we parked in the grass. “Vultures. Look at them.”

We made our way to the top of the cliff where cameramen and reporters all focused their attention. I could see Sheriff Richards, Veronica's parents, Mayor Gray, and a woman I didn't know, all standing next to them in front of the cameras. We stood in the grass and stared up at the rocky edge of the cliff.

"Guess the legend finally caught some national attention," Jason said as we got closer.

"We are asking anyone who knows anything to please step forward and contact us so we can find justice for Veronica," Sheriff Richards said to the cameras. "It is my pleasure to introduce Agent Amelia Taylor, who will be helping out with this investigation."

"The freaking FBI is in Rockport!" Jason whispered—although somewhat loudly—to me.

I ignored Jason for a moment and took a few more steps to get a better view.

"Hello, citizens of Rockport, and to everyone watching from around the country," Agent Taylor began, looking out into the crowd. "My name is Amelia Taylor and I, along with the FBI, will be assisting the Rockport Sheriff's Department. I will be talking and interviewing most of you local citizens at some point, as we piece this together."

She looked around the crowd and she stopped and stared directly at me. "And to the person or people who did this to Veronica, I promise, we will find you. When a young girl is killed in a small town, it may go overlooked. Not this time; I am dedicating my full attention to tracking down the person, or people, who committed this heinous crime."

"Why is the FBI involved in a small-town murder?" A reporter yelled from the crowd.

"The unfortunate news and manner of the murder of Veronica has spread across this nation and has caught the attention of the bureau," she answered. "Sheriff Richards asked for our help specifically in catching the killer."

Jenny McBride was crying hysterically into the arms of Eric McBride. I'd only met Veronica's parents once, but they acted like a normal happy couple.

"Did she say *around the country*?" Cheryl asked as she walked up beside me.

“Hi, Cheryl. Yeah, the news must have gone viral.”

“I need to get down to writing, then. I fell terrible for what happened to her, but this could make for a good writing piece.”

“A girl we went to school with is dead, and you’re going to take advantage of that by writing a story about it?”

“I go where the story goes,” she said as she walked away.

Cheryl Wood was the school writer and she’d do anything to get a good story. After the fourth body had been found twenty-five years ago, her dad, Jack Wood, had written a book about the legend of Mermaid Cliff. Everyone in town had called him mad and he’d moved outside the town, swearing it was a curse to live here.

As Agent Taylor was done with her announcement, everyone moved closer to the cliff’s edge to get a better view of the rocks.

“Town’s first ever murder on a cliff called Mermaid Cliff,” a reporter laughed. “This is going to sell.”

“Let’s get a closer look,” Jason said as he brushed past me.

Now, standing a few feet from the edge, I felt a sense of unease come over me. This could have been the exact spot Veronica stood before she was thrown over—or before she fell.

The memory of when I’d first met her shot into my head.



IT HAD BEEN A RAINY summer day at the Rockport drive-in when I’d first seen Veronica. She walked in and came straight up to me, and I remember thinking how pretty she was and didn’t want to embarrass myself.

“Are you Mark Parker?” she asked as she approached. I was in awe that such an attractive girl would even know my name. “Excuse me. Can you hear me?”

“Hello. Yes. Yeah, I can hear you,” I said. “I...I’m Mark.”

“Okay, good,” she said. “When I interviewed last week, they said I would be working with you and that you’d show me around.”

I remember thinking how excited I was to be working with someone who would never talk to me in real life. And a girl, at that!

“Be careful!” I heard Jason yelling from beside me.

I snapped out of it and back to the present. I looked down and was inches from the edge of the cliff..

“Sorry, I didn’t realize how close I was.”

A sudden flash in my face almost knocked me off the edge anyway.

“What the hell are you doing, Patrick?” Jason said.

“Taking pictures; what does it look like?” he said.

“I’m fine,” I said too, as I took a few steps away.

“What do you think happened to her?” Patrick asked as Ryan and his friends approached us.

“Don’t worry about it, loser,” Jimmie said as he put his arms around Patrick.

“What do you guys want?” I asked reluctantly.

“Wanted to see where you threw her over,” Ryan said as he turned and said with his friends.

Clenching my fists, I turned to Ryan. “Maybe I should throw you over, next.”

I immediately regretted saying it but was sick and tired of people thinking I’d done something to her.

“Big mistake, Marky boy,” Jimmie said as a swift swing connected with the side of my face and knocked me straight to the ground.

“Hit him again, Ryan,” I heard Jimmie yelling.

I peered up and saw Jason swinging at Ryan in my defense.

“Break it up!” a voice demanded from above me.

Ryan and Jimmie walked away.

“Let me help you up.” The voice said as I forced myself to my feet.

“Thank you,” I said, pain spreading on my face.

Standing in front of me was Agent Taylor. I took a step back as she asked, “Mark Parker, right?”

“Yes, I am Mark.”

“Nice to meet you. Now, what was that fight all about?” she asked, handing me a tissue.

“Just some stupid disagreement,” I responded. Pressing the tissue to my cheek, it immediately filled up with blood.

“And you must be Jason Miller?” she said, turning to my side.

“Yes, that’s me,” Jason answered.

“It’s nice to meet you both, even if it is in an odd situation,” she said in a serious manner. “It looked like more than a disagreement though. Did either of you know Veronica McBride?”

“We worked with her at the Rockport Drive-In.”

“Ah that’s right; her parents did mention her job. Do either of you know where Veronica was last night?”

“We saw her at school but that was it, Mrs. Taylor,” Jason answered, lying straight to her face.

“Okay, well, I’ll be set up at Sheriff Richards’ office if you guys remember anything else,” she said while she wrote something in her notepad.

“Okay, we’ll keep that in mind, Agent Taylor,” I replied as she walked away.

“He got you good,” Jason said, taking a look at my face.

“Why’d you lie to her?” I asked Jason while we walked back to his truck.

“Don’t know, I panicked, and she’ll think we’re suspects or something.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me, Jason?”

“Get in,” he demanded, starting the engine.

It was silent as we drove through Rockport. I thought about saying something but waited for him to be ready to answer me. We drove a little bit out of town and parked off the road, in the woods.

“I saw them that night,” he mumbled, looking out the window. His hand was shaking on the steering wheel.

“Saw who? What do you mean, Jason?”

“I was helping the Crusaders make a run,” he started.

“You what?” I cut in. “You’re with those criminals now?”

“No, I was just helping them with a run,” he answered as he slammed on the steering wheel. “They threatened to kill my mom if I didn’t make up for the work my dad was supposed to do.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I could’ve helped you.”

“You were too busy worrying about going to your first party. I tried to tell you, but you brushed me off.”

“I’m sorry, Jason. I know things were going bad with your dad, but I didn’t know how bad.”

“Well, Dad didn’t show up last night, so they called me while we were at the party. All I had to do was take a package from them to Asheville. I was going to tell you... but you disappeared with Veronica at the party.”

“Jase, sorry, man. So, where was your dad, then?”

“We haven’t seen him today, probably on another drinking binge.”

“So, what does this have to do with me?” I questioned, feeling sorry for him.

“On my way back into town, I drove by the entrance to the top of Mermaid Cliff. I saw Veronica getting out of a car and slowed down to see who else was in it... and that’s when I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“Charles. Getting out of the driver’s seat.”

“Charles? You mean *my brother*, Charles?”

“Yeah. Charles and Ryan were driving two separate cars full of people.”

“Who was in the cars, then? What were they doing there?”

“I parked along the road and watched them. It was Charles, Veronica, Ryan, Jimmie, Andrea, Russell, Rachel, and Katherine getting out. I was going to get a closer look, but my mom called me and made me come to meet her. I wanted to stay, but I had to go.”

“What was so important that you left Veronica alone with them?”

“You...”

“Me? What do I have to do with this?”

“Mom called and said she’d just picked you up from the party at the Grays’ mansion. She said you were drunk and that you’d called her, and she couldn’t understand you so she came and picked you up and drove you home. She wanted me to come back, fearing something had happened to us.”

“I thought I walked home with Veronica, though. You said Lexi was telling people I left with her.”

“I don’t know, man. Really, I don’t know. But I wasn’t there. My mom said you were halfway down the street when she picked you up, so maybe you and Veronica started walking home when something happened.”

“Don’t remember any of it, Jason.”

A sudden vibrating in my pants pocket made me jump up in my seat. I quickly reached for the phone.

"Hello," I said as I answered.

"Where are you at?" a voice said.

I was instantly taken over with fear as Charles asked again. "Can you hear me?"

I took a deep breath. "Hi, Charles, I'm with Jason."

"Alright. Just wanted to check in and see how you're doing."

"I'm doing fine."

"You want to meet up at Barny's and talk about some stuff?"

"Sure, I can head there in a bit."

I hung up the phone and took a deep breath.

"What did he want?" Jason asked.

"Wants to meet up at Barny's and talk about something."

Jason started the engine and began driving back into town.

"What are you going to tell him?"

"Don't worry, I'm not going to tell him what you told me. You sure none of them saw you?"

"I'm positive," Jason answered, with a terrified look.

"Jason," I paused and looked out the window, "we have to find out what happened on Mermaid Cliff last night. We have to find out who killed Veronica. Those seven are going to pay if they had anything to do with her death."

"*The Seven*, that's what they'll be known as," Jason suggested. "You're right though, we owe it to her to find her killer."



Chapter 3



Still processing the information I'd just been given, we pulled into Barney's.

"Text me later," Jason said.

I grabbed my bike out of the truck and leaned it up against the wall. Barney's was one of the only restaurants in town and a local hangout for most of the kids at Rockport High.

"Mark!" Charles called from a booth inside the door.

"Hey. How's it going?" I asked, nervously sitting down at the table.

Sitting across from him, I couldn't help but think this was the first time he'd ever invited me anywhere. Charles and I hadn't had the best relationship as we were two very different people.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"What can I get you guys to eat," Katherine asked as she walked up to our table.

Katherine was one of *the Seven* people Jason said he'd seen getting out of the cars last night. She was in school with us and worked at Barney's part time.

"Hi, Katherine. I'll just get the usual," Charles answered.

"And for you?"

"Same thing for me, thank you, Katherine."

"Ok. I'll get that started right away, guys."

"So, hey, man, I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing."

"I'm fine, why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, I know you knew Veronica, so just wanted to make sure everything was ok with you. It's crazy what happened to her."

"Yeah, I mean I knew her from working at the drive-in, and from school, but we never really hung out," I answered, breathing harder.

"Were you at the Grays' party last night?"

Could my brother really have done something to Veronica? Could he have killed her?

“Yeah. I was there with Ryan and Rachel. I saw you and Veronica sitting together on the couch.”

“Yeah. I can’t believe she’s gone; we did have some good times working at the drive-in.”

“Two combo burgers with fries, here you go boys,” Katherine said as she sat our food down in front of us.

She gave Charles a look as she walked away. I couldn’t explain it but it caught my attention.

“I didn’t know Veronica much, other than the rumors, but yeah—I wonder what happened to her. Let’s not go trying to play detective, though. It’s best to leave it to the cops.”

“You know those rumors weren’t true, Charles. And I’m not playing detective.”

“If you say so,” he said as we both began eating.

“Ryan tried to have sex with Veronica and when she rejected him, he started the rumors,” I said knowing it wouldn’t change his opinion of her. “Ryan and Rachel started saying it happened the other way around, which is just wrong!”

“Woah man, you don’t need to get defensive about your girlfriend.”

I decided to get up and leave before I said something to him that I’d regret. Leaving the diner, I looked back and noticed Katherine and Charles arguing.



I HAD TO WORK THE DRIVE-in that night. I’d arrived on my bike just in time for my shift. Our boss had been installing two cameras around the outside of the property when I showed up.

“Hey Mr. Fink, what are the cameras for?” I asked, approaching him.

“There’s a murderer on the loose, don’t you know, boy?” he said.

“That’s true, you can never be too careful.”

I walked inside the concessions shop, and it immediately felt weird knowing Veronica wouldn't be working there anymore. The drive-in was a pretty easy job; we just had to change the films and sell candy. The worst part was cleaning up after the movie. Oddly, though, Jason enjoyed doing that part. I took a look at the schedule; Veronica had been scheduled to work tonight too.

"Shame what happened to that girl," Mr. Fink said as he walked inside. "She was supposed to work last night but called in sick."

I knew that already; she had called in sick because I'd asked her if she would go to the party with me. I couldn't help but feel partly responsible for that.

"Yeah. And I hope the cops catch the people responsible," I answered.

"Mark, if you need any time off to deal with this, you're welcome to take some sick days."

"I appreciate that, but I should be alright."

"Okay, well, I'm headed out, so make sure you close up at ten," he said as he left the office.

It was about eight when I went up to put the film on. Only about four cars were parked for the movie. The ones we played there were usually old or had been out for some time, but they were the only movies we had in Rockport.

"Mark," a voice called from behind me as I started the film.

"Not this movie again," Jason said as I turned toward him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Fink called and wanted me to help you close up tonight. I guess he doesn't trust you." He said while punching me on the arm.

"He just knows how much you like cleaning up the trash after the movie," I replied.

"It's free food and sometimes money. So, what did Charles say at Barney's?"

"Not much, said he was at the party and told me not to play detective. There was a moment when Katherine walked past and gave Charles a look."

"What kind of look?"

"Don't know, kind of like a *don't say anything* look."

“Well, we know they were together with Veronica on Mermaid Cliff last night.”

“We need to figure this out, Jason.”

“Have you seen this only,” Jason said and showed me his phone. “This story is all over social media and even in the national news. Internet sleuths are trying to find the killer from all around the world.”

“Excuse me,” came a voice from the concessions stand.

“Mark, you got that?” Jason called over, grabbing some popcorn out of the maker to eat it.

I walked over to the counter and Andrea Ross was standing there. Andrea had been my friend in junior high, but we’d lost touch. By *lost touch*, I mean she stopped talking to me and started hanging out with my brother and his friends.

“Hello, Mark, how’s it going?”

“Hi, Andrea, I’m fine. What can I get you?”

“A small popcorn with butter.”

“Alright, give me a minute to get that for you,” I answered, turning to see Jason stuffing his face. “Jason, fill her up a small popcorn!”

“So, how have you been doing?” I asked her, starting to feel awkward.

“I’ve been fine, busy, you know with school and cheerleading.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Jason was waving his arms. I looked over and he was mouthing something. I took a second and realized he was saying, *she was there, she was part of The Seven*. It clicked in my head Jason had said Andrea was one of the people getting out of the cars on Mermaid Cliff.

“You don’t seem *fine*,” I pressed, handing her the popcorn.

I never really got why we’d stopped talking after junior high. She was always a very happy person but didn’t seem right today.

“We’re not friends, Mark, so don’t talk to me like we are.”

I was going to ask her more, but she turned and started back to her car.

“Wow, you’re worse with women than I am.”

“At least I haven’t been obsessing over the same girl my whole life. Something was up with her, man.”

“One day, I’m going to work up enough courage to talk to Chloe, just wait. Weren’t you and Andrea friends at some point?”

“Yeah, we were in junior high, and one day she stopped talking to me and started hanging out with Charles.”

“She was pretty upset about something. If one of them did kill Veronica, they all know about it.”



AFTER THE MOVIE ENDED, we went around and cleaned the trash left behind. As I went to take the trash bag out to the dumpster, I saw a shiny object inside. I picked it up, but it was too dark to tell exactly what it was. I took my phone out and hit the flashlight app. I looked at the thing; it was a bracelet, and not just any bracelet either; it was Veronica's. A memory entered my mind of one of the first times Veronica had talked to me.

That first time had been in Mr. Grumbles' history class when her bracelet had gotten stuck in her backpack as she reached in it for something. She turned to me in the middle of class and asked if I would help her. I nervously reached over and grabbed her arm to free it.

Her skin was so soft, and I think in that moment, I started liking her as more than a friend. After class, she told me that when she'd lived in Chicago, her father bought her that bracelet to remember their home. It was a silver chain with a Chicago charm dangling.

I bolted back into the office to show the bracelet to Jason.

“Jason!” I took the bracelet out and tossed it up on the counter. “Look what I found in the dumpster out back!”

Jason walked over and picked up the bracelet. “Is this Veronica's?”

“It has to be; no one else here is from Chicago.”

As we looked at it further, we noticed something was on it.

“Is that blood?” Jason asked.

He tossed it back up on the counter and I went over to get a better look. It was missing a charm and some of the links were red.

“I think you're right, that is blood. We have to take this to Sheriff Richards or Agent Taylor.”

“No, we can’t do that Mark, our fingerprints are all over it now.”

Jason was right, we were already suspects in Agent Taylor’s eyes after the fight on the cliff. He’d also lied to her about not seeing Veronica at the party.

“So, what do we do about it then? We can’t just leave it in plain sight.”

Jason climbed over and up onto the candy counter.

“What are you doing up there? This isn’t the time to mess around.”

He lifted up one of the ceiling panels and looked at me. “We hide it up here until we know what to do with it.”

I wanted to take it to Agent Taylor, but hiding it, for now, wouldn’t hurt. I grabbed the bracelet and went over to Jason. As I went to hand it to him, I heard a loud bang outside.

“What was that?”

“Give me the bracelet!” Jason called.

I handed him the bracelet and grabbed the flashlight, running outside. As I opened the door, I turned the light on and began shining it around. I slowly moved toward the dumpster when the flashlight went out.

“Stupid thing ran out of batteries at the worst time,” I said, banging it against my leg.

I took my phone out and shone it around. I didn’t see anyone, but the dumpster lid was now closed.

“What do you see?” Jason asked as he came out behind me.

“Nothing, I see nothing.”

“I’m sure it was just a raccoon or something but let’s get out of here,” he said nervously.

He was probably right, and I didn’t think anything more about it. Driving home, I looked in the rear-view mirror. Was she really gone? Staring out into the dark night, it really was a beautiful place. Clear, starry skies, peaceful. But something was off, this small town had a secret, and we were going to uncover the truth.



Chapter 4



The next morning, I was woken by a knock at my bedroom door. I pretended to ignore it and rolled over, not wanting to get up; I'd been awake most of the night wondering why Veronica's bracelet had been in the dumpster at the drive-in.

"Mark," a voice whispered from behind the door. "Mark, we need to talk, are you up?"

I knew I'd have to confront her about Veronica eventually but couldn't let her know what I knew. I reluctantly got up, walked over, and unlocked the door.

"Come in, Mom," I said reluctantly.

"I know you're getting older and need privacy, but you know I don't like locked doors," she said, opening it. "Why didn't you call me when you found out about Veronica?"

"It's not a big deal, Mom." I brushed it off.

"Well, you went to school together and worked together, I'm sure you interacted quite a bit."

"I guess so, we talked here and there."

"Are you okay, Mark? Do you need to talk to someone?"

My mom was a lawyer and always prying. She got straight to the point.

"If I need to talk, I'll come to you first."

I went into the bathroom and closed the door. I turned the shower on, so she'd think I wasn't just ignoring her. I stood in front of the mirror trying to piece this together.

"What happened to you, Veronica?" I whispered.

If I could just remember more of that night, I might get nearer to the answer.



I GOT TO SCHOOL JUST in time for first period. It wasn't the same without Veronica there. We used to joke about how the teacher, Mr. Grumble, would always wear cat vests. After first period, I saw Andrea sobbing in the hallway.

"Andrea, is everything alright?"

"Mark, I just wish we knew what happened... to Veronica. It's scary, I never knew anyone who died before."

"Yeah, it is weird right now, especially with it being the town's first ever murder. Did you see her at the party the night it happened?"

"Yes, I saw you two together a while and then saw you guys leave abruptly," she said and wiped the tears from her face as she became more serious. "Just figured you guys had an argument or something."

"An argument? I don't think we were fighting. What are you implying?"

"Why are you grilling me, anyway, Mark? Why were you interested in Ryan's sloppy seconds?"

Andrea was referring to the rumors that Ryan and Rachel had spread around the school about her when she'd first moved here.

"Ryan made that up, Andrea! Veronica didn't try to sleep with him, she rejected him, and he got embarrassed."

"Whatever happened, happened, just leave me alone."

"The girl said to leave her alone," Ryan said as he came up beside us.

"What did you guys do to Veronica after the party?" I asked him.

"I heard that FBI agent was looking for you, Mark, so the better question is, what did you do to her?"

I figured he was trying to rattle my cage again so headed to class. I was half asleep when a knock at the classroom door woke me. Mr. Grumble stopped in the middle of his sentence and opened the door. In walked Agent Taylor and everyone sat up with curiosity, waiting for her to speak.

"Hello students, sorry for interrupting, but I need to talk with Mark Parker."

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I looked over at Jason who looked just as nervous as I felt.

"That's me," I said, raising my hand.

“Come with me, it’ll only take a few minutes.”

I got up, grabbed my things, and headed for the door.

“He killed Veronica!” Jimmie called from the back of the classroom as everyone began laughing.

“Mr. Gray, I don’t think your father would appreciate those outbursts,” Agent Taylor scolded. “As I said, I will be interviewing all of you.”

My mind immediately started racing as we walked down the quiet, desolate hallway. Did she find out we’d lied about seeing Veronica at the party? I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, and she didn’t flinch as we walked to the guidance counselor’s office. Should I tell her what Jason and I had found out or just keep my mouth shut? I could ask for a lawyer as I knew I didn’t need to answer her at all. We’d learned all about the Fifth Amendment in Mr. Grumble’s class. And with my own mom an attorney, I’d heard enough about the legalities of things like this.

“We’re going to use Ms. Green’s office to have a little talk,” she said as we entered the room. Ms. Green got up from her desk and headed for the door.

“Mark, if you need to talk about anything, come see me anytime,” Ms. Green said as she left the room. Agent Taylor closed the door behind her and sat down at Ms. Green’s desk. She reached in her bag and the contents spilled onto the floor. I reached down to help her and seen three prescription pill bottles. She scooped them up and put them in her bag, acting as if I hadn’t seen them. She then pulled out a recording device and sat it on the desk.

“I hope you don’t mind me recording this.”

“Not at all, I don’t mind.”

My hands were starting to get sweaty, so I rubbed them on my jeans.

“Nervous?”

“No, it’s just a little warm in here.”

“Before we begin, I must ask you if you would like a lawyer present for this talk. This isn’t an interrogation, and you are not in trouble. It is just two people talking.”

I thought about my mom and being that she was a lawyer, maybe I should call her. But I didn’t want her knowing about this and

worrying.

“No, I don’t need a lawyer.”

“Have you noticed anything weird around here?”

“No, not really, it’s just a small town.”

“You haven’t seen anything you couldn’t explain?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She paused for a moment, writing something on her notepad.

“So, Mark Parker, is there anything you want to tell me?”

I had contemplated telling her everything ever since we found the bracelet at the drive-in. The more I thought about it, I could be their leading suspect and the bracelet could be just what they need to put me away.

“Not that I can think of.”

“So, you don’t want to tell me anything about you and Veronica?”

I started thinking that she knew Jason and I had lied. Starting to feel the sweat run down my face, I looked down for a moment. I could feel my mouth was dry and had a gut-wrenching feeling something bad was about to happen.

“Okay, I did know Veronica and I did see her at the party that night.”

“Thank you for finally telling me the truth.”

I was relieved after telling her that, and her response was welcoming.

“You’re welcome, and I’m sorry about lying before. It’s just we were afraid you would think we did something to Veronica.”

“I’ve been told by several students that you and Veronica had a thing and were seen together at the Grays’ party.”

“We were friends, that was all. We did hang out at the party but didn’t leave together.”

I started noticing that Agent Taylor didn’t show any emotion. It was like talking to a wall; she always had a serious demeanor.

“That’s not all, Mark, I also heard you and Veronica had an argument at the Grays’ party that night and that’s why you didn’t leave together.”

I paused for a moment and thought of who could’ve told her that. Was it Ryan and Rachel or maybe Jimmie or Andrea? Everyone seemed like they were out to get me. To be fair, I didn’t remember

much about that night other than Jason telling me his mom had picked me up.

“Honestly, Agent Taylor, I had been drinking that night. I don’t remember the argument happening, but Jason’s mom picked me up and drove me home.”

“So, you don’t remember what you guys argued about? Did she reject you, Mark? Did you try to have sex with her and when she rejected you, it sparked an argument?”

In that moment, I knew she thought I’d killed Veronica. She had a stone-cold serious look on her face. If we’d had an argument that night, I could very well be a suspect to her.

“So, could this argument have turned violent, Mark?”

“No, not at all. I liked Veronica; we were friends.”

“Well, if you don’t remember much about the night because you were drinking, wouldn’t you say it’s possible?”

Feeling the pressure now, I tried to think what we’d argued about? Could it have been so bad that it had made her get in the car with Charles?

Just as I began to answer, the door flung open.

“This interview is over. Mark, get your stuff, we’re leaving!” my mom demanded as she walked up to Agent Taylor. “Next time you want to interrogate my son, call me first!”

“Mom, it’s fine, we were just talking about Veronica.”

“Mrs. Parker, do you know where your son was two nights ago?”

“Of course, I know. He was at the Grays’ party and then Emily Miller drove him home.”

“So, you are saying you saw Mark come home and he was there all night?”

“Yes, and if you have any more questions for my son, we will do it at the station with me present.”

I could tell she was really upset as we headed for the front entrance of the school.

“Where are we going, Mom?”

“You’re going to take a sick day today so we can talk about this.”

Everyone wanted to talk about that night as if I’d done it. Now I was even more of a suspect.

“Is something wrong with you?” I asked, noticing her driving faster.

“Why were you talking to her without calling me first?”

“Well, I was going to, but I have nothing to hide so I didn’t think it would hurt, just talking.”

I knew I’d upset her, but she was acting strangely, like something more was going on.

“I am a lawyer and I’m your mother, so I would appreciate you calling next time. I do know a few things about the law, you know.”

I nodded to her. It then occurred to me, how had she known about it in the first place?

“Mom, how did you know I was talking to her anyway?”

“Jason texted me and said he saw you and Agent Taylor leaving the classroom.”

Jason had saved me. I wouldn’t have known how to answer the last question Taylor had asked if my mom hadn’t busted in. So, in the end, it was a good thing she’d shown up.

“Thank God for Jason texting me; it looked pretty intense when I got in there. Thank God for Jason’s mom picking you up from that party too.”

“I was going to tell you about that and I’m sorry.”

“Emily called me after she picked you up from the party and told me what had happened.”

“So, you were home that night when Emily dropped me off?” I asked her, not remembering anything after I’d got home that night.

“Yes, I tucked you in your bed and went to sleep.”

It just hit me that she and my dad had been supposed to go on a date night that night. Maybe she’d lied for me to keep me from getting in trouble with Agent Taylor. I decided in that moment to ask her straight up.

“Where was Dad that night, Mom?”

“He got held up in a meeting and then had an emergency at work, so we canceled our date and I stayed home instead.”

So, I guessed she was telling the truth...

“Do you remember anything from the party?”

“Not really, just seeing Veronica there.”

“I told you not to drink more than a few sips.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

The rest of the drive home was pretty quiet. As we pulled up the driveway, she just stopped and stared forward.

“You okay, Mom?”

“Do you know what happened to her?”

“No, Mom, don’t you think if I did, I would tell Taylor?”

“Well, I don’t want you talking to her anymore!”

“You got it, Mom. I’ll call you next time she comes up to me.”

Texting Jason, I thanked him for telling my mom what had happened. Lying back in my bed, eyes growing heavy, I closed them.



Chapter 5



Opening my eyes, I sat up and looked around; I was lying in the middle of a field. The sun was just setting behind the trees as the wind began picking up. By the tree line, I spotted something, a dark figure just standing there.

My eyes shot open. A dream. It was just a dream, and I began thinking how it was weird Taylor had had us all interviewed in school and wondered who'd told her about me and Veronica? I decided to get on my laptop and look into this agent.

The more I looked, the more I understood why she acted so detached. Three years earlier, her husband and son had been in a car accident, and both killed. The person who'd hit them fled the scene and was never found. It then fell into place why she had those pill bottles in her bag.

There was a knock at my door, and I slammed the laptop closed. "Come in."

The door opened slowly and in walked Charles. He closed the door behind him and came to sit on my bed.

"You've been sleeping all day," he said. "Mom told me you had a run-in with Taylor again."

Not interested in talking with him, I just nodded and got up from the bed. We didn't really leave off on the best of terms last time we'd talked.

"So, I wanted to apologize for how I acted at Barny's. Just be careful with Ryan and Jimmie, alright?"

"Don't worry about it, Charles, but why would I need to be careful with them?"

"Just promise me you and Jason will leave it alone."

He got up and left, leaving me with more questions. Did he know Jason and I were looking into Veronica's murder? Did they see Jason that night on Mermaid Cliff? He had to know something, and I

needed to tell Jason. I headed for the door when I was met in the hallway by my dad.

“Hey, tiger. Where you headed?”

“Don’t call me that, Dad, I’m going to Jason’s for a little while.”

“Alright, well, be back here by ten.”

“Dad, where were you two nights ago?”

“Emergency at work, nothing to worry about. If you want to talk about anything, I’m here for you, Mark.”

“Thanks, Dad, I’ll keep that in mind,” I said as I walked down the stairs.

I grabbed my bike and texted Jason to meet me on Mermaid Cliff; he said he would. On my ride through town, my brain was whirring; what had Taylor meant when she’d asked if I’d seen anything weird? It was a small, old town, and nothing interesting ever happened.

The roar of an engine forced my attention behind me. There was a dark car with tinted windows. I tried to wave them by, but they just stayed in place, following me. I pedaled faster toward the cliff. Just as I approached, I could see Jason waiting by the rocky edge. The car sped off, continuing down the road.

Jason was staring down at the beach where Veronica was discovered. I walked up next to him where a dark black and blue bruise stood out on his cheek.

“What happened to you?”

“After school, Ryan and the rest of them idiots followed me and tried to run me off the road. I tried outrunning them, but Jimmie drove up in front of me, so I had to pull over. I reached for my phone to call for help, but they opened the door and pulled me out. They started hitting me and I fell. I lay there thinking I was going to die, Mark. I heard them talking about what to do with me. They knew I’d seen them that night on the cliff.”

“How would they know that?” I questioned.

“They didn’t say, but I’m guessing one of them saw me.” He was fighting back tears, fear across his face. “A car was coming so they pulled me up off the ground. It was Deputy Butler, and she asked if everything was ok. They said yes, so we got in our cars to leave. They told me if I talked, I’d die. And they drove off. I don’t know what

to do, Mark, they know I saw them and that means they had to have killed Veronica. They're going to kill me next; I know it."

I'd never seen him so shaken up before. He was trembling with fear as he talked.

"I'm not going to let that happen, Jason. They said *don't talk or you die* which means they won't kill you. They're just trying to scare you away. We just have to be more careful and get some evidence against them."

"How is this happening to us? We're teenagers in a small town, we're not investigators. If they did kill Veronica and think we know it, they'll kill us too."

A rustle in the trees behind us almost made us jump in fear. I turned in fear to see what it was, and out walked Sheriff Richards.

"What are you kids doing up here? Are you trying to be the next ones we find dead?"

"Don't say a word," I whispered to Jason. "Nothing, Sir, just wanted to see where Veronica was pushed."

"Look, it's pitch black out. You guys shouldn't be up here. Don't you know the murderer is still out there?"

"They could be closer than you think," Jason added.

I gave Jason a look, trying to shut him up.

"Yeah. Hopefully, you guys will catch them soon," I said, trying to turn his attention off Jason. I could tell something was bothering the Sheriff; he'd usually be at home with his feet up, swigging from a bottle. Everyone in town knew about his past and his alcohol problem. He walked up on the rock beside us and sat down on the edge of the cliff.

"Isn't it beautiful," he said staring out over the glistening water. He was right. I hadn't been up here at night in a long time, and the way the moon shone over the sparkling water was a great sight.

"Yes, it is, Sir. Aren't you a little too close to the edge?"

He didn't answer me, but he pulled out a flask and took a swig. I had heard the rumors of his drinking problem too but never seen it firsthand. Now, I had.

"So how is the investigation going?" Jason asked as he sat down beside him.

The Sheriff was drunk, and I didn't want him to become Rockport's next *suicide*. Although, with his condition, this could be a great time to find out some crucial information.

"Maybe you should get back from the edge," I suggested.

"I'm fine Mark, take a seat, live a little. When I was younger, I was in a bad place. But that all changed when I met him. He was an amazing person; he could do things you wouldn't believe. Anyway, he saved me, gave me purpose in life. What I wouldn't give to go back there, you wouldn't believe the waterfalls, the animals."

I looked over at Jason and we both shrugged, figuring he was speaking nonsense. I made my way over and sat down on the edge, staring down at the sharp rocks and roaring waves below.

"The investigation you ask about; Agent Taylor is covering that, I'm just doing what she asked me to do, to stay out of her way. The small-town Sheriff, the drunk, no one trusts me to figure it out."

It occurred to me, they'd never said why Veronica's death was ruled a homicide and not a suicide.

"So, Sheriff, why was Veronica's death ruled a murder?"

He looked over at Jason, then over at me, then took a drink and stared out over the moonlit water again.

"What I'm about to tell you boys stays here. I could lose my job for saying this."

We both nodded at him as we would never put his life in danger. He'd let Jason's dad go free a few times in the past and always been nice to me.

"It was about four in the morning when I got the call, I was on the edge of town at a bar I've been going to for years. It was Old Man McGinty, I couldn't really understand him other than him saying *Mermaid Cliff, body, and beach*. I quickly called Deputy Butler and told her to meet me there."

Old Man McGinty was a fishing boat captain. Maybe I should have gone to visit him and get more information, as he might have seen something else.

"Now that I think about it, Mark, I saw your mom as I was pulling out of the bar that night."

He must have been too drunk because my mom was at home that night. She said she was there when Emily Miller dropped me off

after the party.

“My mom was at home with me that night.”

“Well, I saw her driving away with someone in the passenger seat, Mark. It’s all I can say.”

“How do you know it was her for sure; you said you were drinking?”

“She’s the only one in town with those flower bumper stickers; they were peeling off and there was a black mark on the back of the car.”

I sat back in shock at the thought that my mother had lied to my face and had a secret. Something so secret she would lie to the FBI to keep it hidden.

“Did you get a look at the passenger’s face?”

“No, it was too dark and with the news of a body on the beach, I didn’t pay too much attention.”

“I’m sure there is a perfectly fine explanation for why she was there, Mark,” Jason added.

“So, back to the investigation that night,” I said, wanting to change the subject.

“Yes, alright so I got the call from Old Man McGinty about the body he’d found while walking the beach.”

“What was he doing on the beach?” I cut in, wanting to know more.

“He was collecting mussels. Trust me, he’s not a suspect. So, I got in my truck and drove over to Mermaid Cliff beach. When I arrived, McGinty was sitting on the beach with a bucket of mussels laying in the sand beside him.

“When I got out of my truck, I approached him and he just pointed over to the bottom of the cliff, on the rocks. I went back, grabbed my flashlight from the truck and headed over to where he was pointing. The smell of the saltwater almost made me puke. Seven years and I still haven’t gotten used to the water here. Anyway, I maneuvered my way around the sharp rocks, searching everywhere until I spotted something.

“The first thing I noticed was all the crabs, y’know, all over the body, just dozens of them. I kicked some off and that’s when I saw

the body was face down. I flipped it over and that's when it hit me who it was. I turned and just puked all over the rocks behind me."

"That's rough. She didn't deserve to go that way," Jason cut in.

"Deputy Butler showed up soon after and we roped the area off and photographed the body. I believe that's when you came jogging by, wasn't it, Mark?"

"Yeah, I was out for my daily jog extra early, around six, and saw cars parked on the beach," I said.

"We then had the coroner come out and take the body for examination. Initially, we thought it was a suicide, but what the coroner found changed that."

"What was it?" I blurted out, nervously awaiting the answer.

"She had someone's DNA on her, and her clothes had been ripped. There were pieces missing from her shirt that we later found lying on top of the cliff."

"So, she was attacked and then thrown over the edge?" Jason blurted out.

"They also found traces of Flunitrazepam in her system," Sheriff Richards said, wobbling, almost falling over the edge.

"Fluni what?" Jason questioned, grabbing his hat.

"Basically, it is a drug that can knock you out for a few hours," Richards explained. "It makes you forget things from the night before."

It took a moment for it to sink in, that this could've really happened to Veronica.

"What I found weird was that Mayor Gray and his wife, Joyce, kept insisting I release it to the public as a suicide."

"Why would they want to do that, to cover it up?" Jason cut in.

"I guess they didn't want the attention on their town."

"Yeah, it got the attention of the nation and the FBI," Jason replied.

Feeling weak and sick to my stomach, I got up and started walking to my bike.

"Mark, are you alright?" Jason called.

"Mark, all of this stays between us, do you understand me?" Richards demanded.

“Yes, Sir, I understand. I just need to get back before my parents wonder where I’m at,” I said while I picked up my bike.

“Mark, no matter how crazy things get, just know, I have your back,” Jason said. “Things aren’t always what they seem on the surface. Sometimes, the truth is what lies below.”

“He’s right about that, Mark, just keep an open mind and stay strong,” Richards added, belching.

I nodded at them before starting down the road. I took the same route home as I’d done that morning, they found Veronica’s body. Except this time, it wasn’t the same. The town had an eerie fog looming over it. Sheriff Richards had answered some questions but opened up so many more mysteries. If Ryan, Jimmie, Russell, and the others were the last to see her alive on the cliff, did that mean they’d attacked her too? Was my brother a monster?

It didn’t make sense to me, but then again, what did I know? My mother had been keeping a dark secret and I needed to find out what she was doing that night. Also, why would the Grays want to cover up Veronica’s murder? Did they know Jimmie had something to do with it and want to protect their son? Would Ryan really kill Jason to cover it up? I needed to regroup with Jason in the morning to figure this out.

I decided that night that I wasn’t going to include my mom in any of this.

I needed to figure this out without anyone else knowing what Jason and I were up to. I couldn’t risk Jason getting hurt again, or worse. Heading upstairs, trying to avoid my parents, I went into my room and closed the door behind me.



Chapter 6



I didn't get much sleep that night, and honestly, was a little afraid that Jimmie or one of the others would come to my window. I skipped a shower and breakfast and went right out front to wait for Jason who was on time to pick me up for school.

"Hey," Jason said as I got in the truck.

"Hell of a night. How are you holding up?"

"I'm doing alright, just scared and confused, you know?" he answered, his eyes red, strained-looking.

"We just need to figure this out. Somehow, we need to find some evidence against them. I can't believe Richards told us all that last night."

I could tell Jason wasn't doing good at all. Eyes partially closed; he must not have been getting much sleep. I might need to dig deeper without him, to protect him.

As we pulled up to school, I could see *the Seven* standing by the parking lot, talking. I could tell Jason was getting nervous as he began breathing heavier.

"Don't worry, they won't touch you again."

I realized Jason was never going to feel safe again until we found evidence against those seven. I decided to get out of the car and go talk to them. As I walked over, a sense of unease came over me and I began breathing faster.

"What do you want?" Rachel asked as I approached the group.

"Listen, I don't know why you guys hate us but believe me, we're not going to look into Veronica's murder anymore," I said.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mark," Russell claimed. "We all cared about her in some way and want justice for her."

"Jason told me about you guys running him off the road and telling him to keep quiet," I said.

"Mark, just leave it alone alright, no one's coming after you guys. Just get to class," Charles claimed. Charles gave me a look, like go

away before you make it worse. I walked away not saying another word.



AFTER SCHOOL, I DECIDED to ride my bike down to the fishing docks to speak with Old Man McGinty without Jason. I drove by Veronica's house and just stopped in front of it, still in disbelief that she was gone. I must have been sitting there a while because the front door opened and Veronica's mom, Jenny, walked out on the front porch and stared at me.

"Can I help you?" she called over to me. I noticed her clothes were wrinkled and stained. Her hair was frizzled and makeup rain down her face.

I paused for a moment longer and walked over to the front steps.

"Hi, Mrs. McBride," I nervously mumbled. "I was a friend of Veronica's, and I was just passing by."

"Mark Parker, right?" she asked, wiping the drenched makeup from around her eyes and cheeks.

She must have heard about me from Agent Taylor.

"Yes, that's me."

"Come in Mark, let me get you something to drink."

I didn't want to go in but felt I had to, so as to not seem suspicious. This was the first time I had been to Veronica's house, and it was very clean and organized inside. The walls were covered with pictures of her and the family. I followed Mrs. McBride into the kitchen, and my first impression instantly changed. There were stacks upon stacks of paperwork and news clippings scattered all over the place. Empty coffee mugs, cigarette ashes, and wine bottles littered the floor.

"Sorry for the mess, I'm not myself lately."

I tried not to stare, but I noticed a file on the table that looked like a police report.

She caught me staring at it and said, "Agent Taylor is letting me go through some of the case files."

I was skeptical that she was telling the truth as Taylor didn't seem like the type to let someone view sensitive files. I made my way over to the bar stool and sat down across from her. I took a sip from the iced tea she poured in my glass and saw Veronica's book bag lying on the floor, most likely where she'd put it last.

"Veronica told me all about you, Mark," she blurted out, catching me off guard. She began sobbing lightly.

I was surprised and shocked that she'd told her mom about me as we were just starting to get to know each other more.

"She did? What did she say about me?"

"She had a crush on you and was waiting for you to make a move," she smiled and wiped a rogue tear from her cheek.

I almost choked on the sip of tea I'd just taken and swallowed an ice cube whole. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I had no idea she liked me like that. A memory shot back into my mind of the night of the party. Veronica and I were sitting outside on the swing and she was joking about how paranoid Mr. Fink was, about people stealing candy and popcorn from the drive-in. She got closer and put her hand on mine as she stared at me. I was incredibly nervous, but let instinct take over as I leaned in slowly and met her lips with mine.

"Mark, are you alright?"

I snapped out of it and looked at her. "Yes, sorry I was just thinking about how much I liked her too."

Veronica and I had kissed that night, I remembered it now, my first kiss. And now she's gone.

"Listen, Mark, you seem like a great guy, and I wanted to ask you if you knew anything that happened at the party," she pleaded.

"I wish I did, Mrs. McBride. I wish I would've stayed at that party and protected her that night, but I left early and was home the rest of the night."

"Have you heard anything from any of the other kids at school? Anything would help, I just need to understand what happened to my daughter."

Thinking for a moment, I couldn't imagine how she was feeling.

"I have talked to a lot of people who were at that party, and no one knew anything. Veronica was a kind and smart girl and everyone at Rockport High liked her."

I was trying to make her feel better but knew nothing I could say would help unless it was the truth about who killed her.

“Mark, are you sure you can’t think of anything? Please, anything? Was my baby being bullied?” She pressed harder, aggressively.

Just as I was about to answer, the door opened, and Mr. McBride walked in.

“What’s this, Jenny?” he asked.

“This is Mark, Veronica’s friend from school.”

“What did Agent Taylor tell you? No more interrogating students and let her do her job.”

I was going to defend her, but if she’d kept pushing, I was afraid I’d reveal what Jason and I knew about that night.

“You’re free to leave, Mark. I’m sorry about this,” he said. “Nice to meet you, by the way.”

“I’m sorry Mark, but if you think of anymore, you’re always welcome here,” she added.

“Thank you both and if I hear anything else or remember any more of that night, I will call you,” I reassured them.

I could hear them arguing behind me and walked a little faster to the front door. Veronica had told me how they argued a lot and how they were in a failing marriage. Losing their child now could just push them over the edge. I thought again about that first kiss. Why was I just now remembering it? I remember Sheriff Richards telling me and Jason on the cliff about the drugs found in Veronica. Was it possible I was drugged too, and that was why I didn’t remember anything?

“Mark!” Mr. McBride called from behind me.

I stopped and turned back to the door as he walked up beside me. He looked almost as bad as Veronica’s mother did. I couldn’t imagine what they were going through.

“I just wanted to say thank you. In the short time we were here, you made Veronica’s life so much better.”

“I just wish I could help out more, I don’t get how this happened to her.”

He smiled and turned to walk back to the house as I got on my bike. I could feel a tear forming in my eyes as a rage built in me, an anger at whoever did this to her.

I began riding up the street again toward the docks.

Old Man McGinty was on my list to visit; if he really was the one who'd discovered the body, then he could know more. My dad had done some repairs for him so he should remember me.

That sense of unease once again came over me. The town was so odd and out of place ever since her body had been found. I reached the outskirts of town and could see the docks in the distance. I saw McGinty sitting on his boat and parked right in front of it. The name on the side of his boat, The Aurora.

"Hey there, boy," he said. "Mark, right?"

"Yes sir, do you remember me?"

"Yes, Daniel Parker's son, right?"

"Yup that's me. My dad said he did some work for you down here."

"Yes, he did, what can I do for you, boy?"

"Permission to come on aboard?" I asked trying to show some respect so he would cooperate.

"Of course, of course."

I'd been on boats before, and with living in a seaside town, I'd grown up learning everything about the ocean. I made my way onto the boat and sat across from him.

"This is a nice boat; do you live here?"

"Yes, after my wife passed, I sold our home and moved out here. My place is with the sea now."

"That's great, I noticed the name of your boat is Aurora, was that your wife?"

"No, just someone who used to live here, that's all."

"The reason I'm here is because I was a good friend of Veronica McBride, and I was just checking with people to see if they saw anything that night."

"I see," he said.

"Sheriff Richards told me you were walking the beach that morning and found the body, is that true?"

"Yes, I did find her, poor girl. She didn't deserve that. You see, I walk that beach every morning around four or so and collect mussels and seashells while the tide is low. I've done this since I was a boy

myself. My father, Willie McGinty, loved the ocean too. It just became a way of life, you know?”

“Were you and your father close?”

“Oh no, he died the same year I was born.”

“So, that morning you were collecting mussels—and then what?”

“Yes, so, I was walking right below Mermaid Cliff and saw something up on the sharp rocks. I’ve found all kinds of jewelry and furniture there over the years. This looked different though, like nothing I’d seen there before. I just figured it was a fish or trash washed ashore.”

“I bet you’ve seen all kinds of crazy stuff out there.”

“Oh, yes, yes. I walked up to the mystery object and shone my lantern over it. Took me a few seconds to realize what it was. I guess I was in shock because I dropped my darn lantern and broke it. My father used that same lantern the night he was on Mermaid Cliff.”

“Wow, an old one then, huh?”

“Oh, yes, boy, about a hundred years old now. Do you know who my father was?”

“Willie McGinty? It does sound familiar but can’t say I do.”

“Well, he was the very first mayor of Rockport.”

I thought for a minute. The first mayor of this town was the town’s first suicide ever, back in 1917. That would make McGinty 100 years old. He looked old but not that old...

“So, he was Mermaid Cliff’s first victim?”

“Yes, the first of the five suicides on Mermaid Cliff.”

“Actually, Veronica’s death was ruled a murder, so she isn’t the fifth.”

“Don’t believe everything people tell you, boy,” he snapped.

“Everything in this town is connected in a way you or I will never fully understand, Mark. ” Hello, old sailor,” a voice came from the docks.

“Hey there, what can I do for you today?” McGinty said as the man approached.

“I need some bait and was hoping you had some fresh that I could buy before I head out fishing tonight,” the man said.

“Yes, I certainly do. Pardon me, I will be right back,” he said to me.

As they both walked toward the shop on the docks, I checked my phone and texted my mom to tell her I would be home soon. I decided to look around on the boat for any clues; maybe he had picked something up from that morning?

I peeked into the cabin, all of his things were scattered around the floor and the bed. On the wall were all kinds of old news articles and pictures about the legend of the Mermaid in Rockport. There was also an old picture of McGinty's father kissing, and a woman I guessed was his wife. It looked like he'd been collecting information about the suicides on the cliff all his life.

I heard them talking again outside and looked faster around the room. I happened to look down and seen a box sticking out from under the bed, so I walked over to it and pulled it out. I looked inside and nearly let out a scream. There, lying in the box, was a picture of Veronica.

I could hear them getting closer outside, but I kept looking further. Under the picture was a baggie with a bloody Chicago charm inside it. Could this be the charm that was missing from Veronica's bracelet, the same one I'd found at the drive-in?

Could he have had something to do with her death?

"Mark, are you there?" I heard McGinty calling from the dock.

I put the picture back in the box and pushed it under the bed again just as he entered the cabin.

"You caught me, Mark," he proclaimed. I felt my jaw dropping.

I froze in terror as he walked in. Did he see what I was looking at? Did he just confess to killing Veronica?

He walked over to the wall of pictures and news clippings. "My life's work."

I took a sigh of relief as I realized he was talking about the wall.

"Yeah, I was just noticing all of this information you have here, about the town."

"When I was a boy, my mother told me about my father and how he had committed suicide on Mermaid Cliff, and no one knew why. My father had died in 1917, the same year I was born. Well, I was twenty-five when the second one happened in 1942, and it was then I guess I really started collecting information on the first two. Then there came the suicides in 1967 and again in 1992. I became

obsessed with the legend. The town is blinded, but I see what's going on here and what happened to my father."

"So, what do you believe happened to them, with the legend and all?"

"They were killed, not suicides."

He started getting worked up and slammed his fists down on his desk that had carved names and dates in the wood. He was going crazy, obsessing over all of this.

"You know this has really been eye-opening for me, and I thank you for that, but I need to get home before my mom gets worried."

"Of course, thank you for coming and if you need more information on this, come back anytime."

I nodded to him and headed for the edge of the boat.

"Oh, and Mark," he called out. His wrinkled face looked like a lost puppy. "I've been living on borrowed time for a while now. When I'm gone, someone will need to continue this. The truth is out there; it's like I already know it, but it's lost in my mind."

I nodded to him and left the boat in a hurry without raising suspicion.

On the ride home, I thought about everything he had told me. I needed to figure out what to do about what I'd seen in that box. If he had something to do with her death, he needed to pay for it. I decided to take the long way home and ride up by Mermaid Cliff again.

It was just about pitch black out now, and back in these woods, there was no lighting except for the glimmer of the moon. Riding down the hill from Mermaid Cliff, I turned my head and noticed someone standing on the side of the road.

It caught me off guard and I turned to the left and back to the right, getting thrown off my bike. I sat up for a moment and didn't see anyone there anymore. I laid back down and felt an intense headache coming on, and blood ran down my face from my forehead.

"What the hell was that!" I called. I got up and walked over to the edge of the woods. "Is anyone there? Come out here!" I called into the woods, unable to see more than a foot in front of me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and the feeling like someone was watching me crept in. I had to wipe the blood from my forehead as it was dripping into my eyes. Was I just seeing things, or was Veronica's killer watching me? As I turned onto my street, I could see the porch light on and my mom waiting there, outside.

Another car was pulling away from our house as I rode up the driveway.

"Mom, who was that?" I questioned as I walked up the front steps.

"What happened to your head?" she blurted out, ignoring the question.

"Oh, this little scratch? Yeah, I fell off my bike, and hit a rock."

"Scratch?" she said. "You're gushing blood, Mark. Get inside right now!"

We walked inside and I noticed the cut on my forehead as we walked by a mirror.

"Sit down at the table," she demanded.

I sat down as she went and got the first aid kit.

"Now sit still," she said as she started cleaning up my wound.

"Mom, who was in that car that drove away as I pulled up?"

"Jason's mom stopped by. She needed someone to talk to about Damon. He and Emily are still having problems."

"Why does she even try to stay with him anymore?"

"She still loves him; some people just don't get along as they get older. She said they were starting to reconnect the past few weeks, but he's been avoiding her the past few days now."

"Hey, Mom, do you know where Damon was the night Veronica was killed? Did Emily say anything about it?"

"She thinks he was out of town with the Crusaders; you know how he is."

"Yeah. Jason said they were starting to seem like a family again until recently."

"Alright, you're all set," she said as she stood up to put the first aid kit away.

I walked to the mirror and there were two pink band-aids on my forehead, covering up my cut. "Very funny, Mom." I turned to walk toward the stairs. "Where's Dad at?" I called back to her.

“He’s out of town on a job; he said to tell you goodbye.”

“Alright. Goodnight, Mom.” I walked up the stairs.

I walked down the hall and noticed Charles’ door was half open. I knocked on it and pushed it open further.

“What’s up?” he asked as I walked in the room.

“Jason’s really shaken up about what happened to him,” I said.

“I had nothing to do with that, Mark, it was Ryan and Jimmie.”

“Why do they want him to stop looking into Veronica’s death?”

“They think Jason saw something that could be perceived differently.”

“Saw what?”

“Mark, just leave it alone. She’s gone and the cops will find who did it.”

“If you’re in trouble, I can help you, Charles.”

“Goodnight, Mark,” he said, pushing me out of the room.

Lying in my bed, I start processing everything.

Why did McGinty have a picture of Veronica and her charm under his bed?

Who did I see standing on the side of the road on the way home?

After that dream last night, and seeing this mystery figure, I knew I might be starting to lose my mind too.



Chapter 7



The next morning, I woke up to a text from Andrea Ross saying, “let’s talk.” Maybe she wanted to confess what had really happened with *the Seven* that night on Mermaid Cliff? I got ready for school and headed outside to wait for Jason to pick me up. I waited out front for about five or ten minutes and he didn’t show up. I started getting worried so tried calling him. He didn’t answer. I decided to call his mom, and if she wouldn’t answer, I’d call the Sheriff in fear they might have done something to him.

“Hello?” A woman asked.

“Hi, is this Jason’s mom?”

“Yes, it is, I’m sorry Mark, Jason isn’t feeling good today and won’t be coming to school.”

“Ok thank you for letting me know, have a good day,” I told her before hanging up.

I texted Jason and asked him what was going on, then got my bike out of the garage. I was going to miss first period by riding there on my bike. I thought I should talk to my dad about getting me a car.

I pedaled as hard as I could. Luckily, the fall air provided me with some wind to keep me cool.

I got to school just as the second period bell rang.

“Mark,” I heard as I started walking to my second class.

I turned around and Russell was standing there.

“What do you want?” I gasped.

“Late to school, I’m going to have to write you up for that,” he grunted.

“What’s your problem with me?”

“Hey, it’s part of my duties here at school, to make sure students are following the rules.”

“Who voted you student body President anyway?” I smirked.

“You better get to class before you’re late for a second time.”

I turned and walked to my second class as I didn't want to get into an argument with him any further.

Later in the day, I ran into Andrea in the hallway.

"I got your text, what do we need to talk about?"

"Not here, meet me on the cliff around seven."

"I work tonight."

"Get Jason to cover for you, this is the one and only chance I'm giving you," she insisted as she walked away.

"What was that about, Mark?" Patrick asked as he walked up beside me.

"She was just asking about an assignment for class."

"There's something going on with you guys, you all brush me off whenever I come around."

"Nothing is going on, Patrick, I promise."

"If you say so, Mark. Just be careful," he said as I walked away.

After school, I was heading toward my bike when Rachel and Katherine walked up to me.

"Hey, Mark, nice bike," they said.

"What do you guys want now?"

"I heard you had a pretty intense conversation with Agent Taylor," Rachel smirked.

"Surprised you're not in handcuffs yet," Katherine added.

"Look, I don't care what you guys have to say or what you think I did, but I was in love with Veronica and would never hurt her. I will stop at nothing to ensure whoever did this to her rots in a prison cell."

I instantly regretted saying that, as I'd promised them, I wouldn't look into her death.

"So, if you didn't do it, then who did?" Rachel asked.

"I have no idea; it could have been someone we know or an out-of-town drifter."

"Did you really love Veronica?" Katherine asked as I started riding away.

"Yeah, but I realized it too late!" I called back, leaving the school.

I saw Agent Taylor was leaving Barney's Restaurant during my ride through town. I quickly rode past so she wouldn't try and talk to me again. I looked back for a second and she was staring right at me

with that stone-cold serious look. I kept riding until I got to the drive-in where Jason was working too.

“What’s up, man?” I called over to Jason as I walked into the concession shop.

“Nothing much. Sorry I didn’t pick you up this morning, I’ve just been worried about my mom lately.”

“No problem, you just had me worried there for a minute. Still haven’t seen your dad?”

“No, no one’s seen him since the day Veronica was killed. You don’t think those two have anything to do with each other, do you?”

“No, I highly doubt they knew each other, even in a small town like this. I’m sure he’s doing a run for the Crusaders or something.”

“That’s the thing, I went to talk to the Crusaders, and they haven’t seen him in a few days either. So, if he’s not with us and he’s not with them, where could he be?”

“We’ll figure it out, I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Ok boys; the security system is all set,” Mr. Fink said as he came inside.

“Sounds good, Sir,” Jason replied. “Maybe that’ll stop the kids from throwing trash everywhere.”

“Then there would be nothing left for you to clean up,” Mr. Fink said. “I’m headed out now, so make sure you guys lock up before you leave tonight.”

“You got it, Sir, we will,” I reassured him.

I felt my phone vibrate and glanced down to see a text from Andrea. “Mermaid Cliff at seven. Don’t be late!”

“Did I miss anything at school today?” Jason asked.

“Actually, you did, Andrea came up to me and told me she wants to tell me something and for me to meet her on the cliff at seven tonight.”

“Are you serious? You aren’t going to go, are you?”

“Yeah, she wants to come clean about something, so I have to go.”

Jason slammed his fists down onto the candy counter. “Don’t you see what they are doing?” “They’re going to kill you, it’s an ambush.”

“Jason, calm down, I trust Andrea and I’m going to meet her there, and I need your help.”

“You’re joking, right, I’m not helping you get yourself killed.”

“I know you are scared right now, but if we don’t get them before they get us, then we’re done for.”

“I don’t agree with it, but if there’s no talking you out of it, then so be it. What do you need me to do?”

“I just need you to cover for me here so I can sneak out and get to Mermaid Cliff to meet her. I just need to get past the cameras.”

“Ok. I’ll do it, but promise me if it looks sketchy, you’ll leave.”

“I promise. There’s something else we need to talk about.”

“What else did you do without me there to watch you?”

I could tell he was in a bad mood now.

“Last night, I went to visit Old Man McGinty.”

“You did what?” he said. “That’s extremely risky, Mark.”

“I know, believe me, but we had to see what he knew about Veronica’s death.”

“Well, did you find out anything useful?”

I wasn’t sure how he would take it, but he needed to know what I knew.

“He didn’t know much at all other than that he found the body and called the Sheriff.”

“That’s the big news? Well, that’s nothing we didn’t already know.”

“Well, you might change your mind when I tell you the next bit,” I said. “There was a moment he went to help a customer and I looked around his place. I found an old box under the bed with some things in it.”

“What was is it, dirty magazines?” he asked.

“There was a picture of Veronica—and under it was a plastic bag with a bloody charm in it from her bracelet.”

“Are you serious? Why and how would he have that?”

“I don’t get it either. That’s why I wanted to tell you.”

“Did he see you looking at it?”

“No, I got out before he came back. And did you know his father was the first mayor of Rockport and the first suicide on Mermaid Cliff?”

“No, I didn’t. Did he tell you that?”

“Yes, and in his room, he has a whole wall covered in pictures and news clippings of all the suicides there.”

The sudden crack of thunder made us both jump in fear. Hard rain began pouring around the property.

“Well, I doubt anyone’s going to come to watch the movie now it’s raining,” he said.

“I can’t ride my bike up there if it keeps raining this hard.”

“You can take the truck. I parked it out back so it’s away from the cameras too.”

“Good idea! So, what should we do with this information about McGinty?”

Jason walked over to the window and stared out at the pouring rain. “We turn him in.”

The clattering sound of the rain hitting the roof gave an oddly calming effect to an otherwise scary situation. I walked over to the window with Jason and stared at the silvery drops. “If he didn’t do it, this will ruin his life either way.”

“If he did do it, we would get justice for Veronica.”

Jason was right and the fact that he had the bloody charm meant he at least knew something about it.

“Well then, what were *the Seven* doing on Mermaid Cliff that night if they didn’t do it?”

“I don’t know, but they had something to do with it too,” he urged.

“How should we go about turning him in anonymously?”

“We could go to the next town over and use a payphone.”

“Good idea. We’ll do that.”

The next two hours, we did our job and didn’t talk much at all. I think we were both processing everything we had discovered. At around six thirty, I decided I should leave to go meet Andrea.

“I’m going to head out, alright?”

“Ok. Let me know how it goes,” he said, tossing me his keys to the truck. “If anything, weird goes down, call me right away—or just run.”

I snuck out the back to avoid the cameras and hopped in Jason’s truck. I tried to use back roads to avoid running into anyone. As I approached the road to the cliff, a sense of unease came over me as I remembered seeing the figure of a person right here as I rode

home on my bike. I drove slowly up the hill to the entrance of the cliff.

Pulling in, I could see a car already parked there. I couldn't make out who it was with the rain coming down even harder than earlier. I parked the car a few spaces down and waited for Andrea to text me or show up.

I texted her and told her I was here and waiting. After about ten to fifteen minutes, I started thinking she wasn't going to show up. I started getting worried and noticed that the car was still sitting a few spots down from me. I decided to get out of the truck and run over to it. I wiped the rain off the window and looked in, noticing a lanyard hanging from the mirror with Andrea's name on it. This must have been her vehicle, but she was not inside it.

A flash of lightning appeared over the water, followed by a massive crash of thunder. This whole thing was so weird. It occurred to me that she might have done the unthinkable. I rushed over to the edge and looked down but didn't see anything in the crashing waves below.

I ran back through the pouring rain to the truck and got a feeling like someone was watching me. Fumbling with the keys, I dropped them in the mud. As I reached down to grab them, I saw Andrea's phone lying behind the truck's back wheel. I picked it up and got back inside, locking the doors. I sat there for a good five minutes in complete fear, the water dripping off my face. My clothes were drenched and sticking to my skin.

Something had to have happened to her; she'd seemed really worried the past few times I talked to her. I couldn't just leave her if she was hurt and needed me. I got out of the truck and began jogging toward the woods behind.

"Andrea!" I called out loud numerous times, walking through the woods. "Andrea! Are you out there!"

There were no signs of her ever being there. It was like she had just vanished. I went back to the cars and looked for footsteps around her vehicle but didn't see any other than mine. Another flash of lightning almost knocked me to the ground. In that moment, I thought the worst had happened and somehow, it was my fault. I got

back in the truck as a loud crash of thunder hit again. The torrential downpour picked up to the point where I could barely see outside.

I sat there a few minutes, hoping it would slow down so I could drive back to the drive-in. The rain was coming down so hard, the windows were fogged over. Staring at the cold, persistent rain outside, I was shocked when I saw a blur standing at the edge of the cliff. I turned the windshield wipers on to get a better look, but the rain was too heavy. I got out of the truck and ran up to the edge, but it was gone.

What did I just see there? My mind must have been playing tricks on me. I looked around and still nothing, no Andrea or anything else. Standing there, on the edge, soaked from head to toe, I was calm. The colorless drops that fell around me were silent. Was this Veronica watching over me, keeping me safe? I wanted to believe that.

"I'm here, Veronica," I said out over the cliff, "I'm sorry I let you down."

In that moment, the dark clouds broke up over the ocean and the setting sun peeked through. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen, almost like it was meant for me, and I was the only person looking at it.

I felt my phone vibrating and remembered I needed to get back to the drive-in before Jason's shift ended.

I took off running back to the truck and began driving down the cliff, back to the road. For a moment, I wondered if I should call the Sheriff. He could help find out what happened to Andrea, but what if he told Agent Taylor? I was already a suspect on her list, and this would make it seem worse.

I once again took the back roads to the drive-in without anyone seeing me and parked behind the concession shop to avoid the cameras.

"Jason, you aren't going to believe what happened," I said as I walked in through the back door.

"Hang on, Mark, I'm busy," Jason called, looking back to me.

I looked around the corner and saw Katherine at the window.

"What happened, Mark?" Katherine questioned.

"Oh, nothing important," I responded, trying to act normal.

“Why are you drenched and why do you look like you’ve seen a ghost?” she asked.

Panicking for a moment, I walked over to the counter. “The tire on my bike popped on the way here and I had to walk the rest of the way in the pouring rain.”

I nervously stared at her and hoped she’d bought that story.

“Unfortunate, Mark. Maybe you should get a car like the rest of us. You guys haven’t seen Andrea, have you?”

“No, why?” Jason asked.

“She was supposed to meet us here for the movie and never showed up. Have you seen her, Mark?”

“Me, uh, no, not since school today.”

If the six of them were here, that meant they had nothing to do with Andrea’s disappearance.

“Who is all here for the movie?” I questioned, trying not to seem too suspicious.

“Me, Rachel, Ryan, Jimmie, Russell, and Charles.”

“The gang’s all here,” Jason blurted. “Minus Andrea.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Katherine responded. “Anyway, I’m going to get back to the movie, so I’ll see you guys later.”

“Later,” Jason said as Katherine walked away.

If they were all here, something was wrong with Andrea.

“What was that, Mark!” Jason said as he turned in my direction.

“Sorry. I didn’t see anyone at the counter.”

“So, what really happened?” Jason asked. “Unless you really did get a popped tire.”

“I went to Mermaid Cliff to meet Andrea.”

“Yeah, I know, and what happened, what did she say?”

I paused for a moment. Someone could have overheard us in school and followed Andrea to the cliff. She was going to tell me everything about the night Veronica was killed, but someone didn’t want her to.

“Earth to Mark, are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here; sorry man, she wasn’t there.”

“She didn’t show up?”

“Her car was there, but she was nowhere to be found.”

“Well, where is she? Didn’t jump, did she?”

“No, she didn’t jump, I checked, I searched the whole cliff and the woods. There was no sign of her ever being there except for her car. Someone wanted to stop her telling me, man.”

Jason walked over and looked out the window at the six of them watching the movie. “Could they have killed one of their own to protect themselves?”

“I hope not; maybe there’s a perfectly fine explanation for this.”

“Perfectly fine explanation? Wake up, Mark! They killed her, you said it yourself!”

I walked over to the window with Jason. “Have they been here all night?”

“Yes, they showed up as you were leaving.”

“Did you actually see them all?”

“No, but there were two cars, so I figured it was all of them.”

What about Mr. Fink’s cameras?”

“What about them?” Jason questioned.

“We could use the footage to see if they were all here when I left.”

“That’s a great idea, but he keeps it locked in his office.”

“There has to be a way to get in there; we need to see it.”

“We’ll figure it out, but we’re going to need his keys to get in. The movie is ending, let’s clean up and head home.”

“Oh, Jason, there’s one more thing. I have Andrea’s phone; it was in the grass next to her car.”

“Have you checked it yet?” Jason questioned. “There could be some information on there that we need.”

“No, I haven’t,” I answered pulling it out of my pocket.

I tried to turn it on, but the battery was dead.

“Just our luck!” Jason said. “Put it with the bracelet, we’ll find a charger for it. Shouldn’t we let Taylor or Richards know that we found it and something may have happened to her?”

“Let’s see if we can get more information for them first.”

We waited for everyone to leave the drive-in before we started cleaning up. Just as we began, I heard something hit the window. I looked over at a slushy running down the glass.

“Clean that up, freaks!” Ryan called as they sped off.

“You’re going to pay for that!” Jason started screaming, but stopped halfway through, realizing what they were capable of.

“Just put all your anger toward finding the proof we need to lock them up,” I said.

Jason went out to clean the window as I hopped up on the counter to put the phone in the ceiling void. I felt around to make sure the bracelet was still up there, and it was.

“You want a ride home?” Jason asked as we locked up the shop.

“No, I’ll be fine, we’ll meet up tomorrow,” I answered, noticing the rain slowing to a stop.

Riding home that night, through the wet streets in town, I tried to think of how we could get into Mr. Fink’s office. We would need to get the keys and avoid the cameras. I heard the beep of a horn behind me that almost caused me to wreck again.

I rode into the grass and looked behind; of course, it was Agent Taylor. She pulled over and parked and stared into nothingness for what seemed like an eternity. I wasn’t sure what she wanted me to do so I just sat there, waiting. She got out of the car and slowly approached. She took a seat on the hood of her car and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

“Want one?” she asked as she held it out to me.

“No thanks.”

“Probably a good idea. This is one bad habit.”

I could tell there was something bothering her as she didn’t have that cold look.

“Three years today, Mark.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Three years ago, today, my husband was driving our son home from school when they were struck by another car and killed.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that, I’m sorry to hear,” I responded acting as if I hadn’t known.

“It’s my fault,” she said.

“You can’t blame yourself for that.”

“I was so obsessed with a case I was working on, that I forgot to pick him up from school. He sat there for two hours alone before Brian came and got him.”

I didn't know how to react to that, so I walked over and sat on the hood with her.

"Anyway, I guess I'm just trying to say that I know what its like to lose someone," she said. "Now get your bike and get home."



Chapter 8



“The talk we had made me trust her just a little more.

I got back on my bike and started down the street again toward my house. I pulled into my driveway where my dad walked out of the front door and slammed it behind him.

“Where are you going, Dad?” I asked.

“Got a job I have to go to.”

I could tell something was wrong, and the more I thought about it, he’d been leaving a lot lately.

“Mom, are you here?” I called out as I walked through the front door.

“In here, Mark.”

I walked down the hallway into the living room and saw an empty bottle of wine and a glass sitting on the table. Mom only ever drank when she was celebrating or something really bad had happened.

“Everything alright, Mom?” I asked as I sat down next to her.

“I and your father are just in a rough patch, that’s all. We’ll get through it, don’t worry.”

My parents argued an average amount, but it had increased lately.

“Where’s Dad going,” I asked, seeing if she’d say the same thing he did.

“He’s going to stay at a hotel tonight, and we’ll talk more tomorrow.”

“Did something big happen? I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t mean to; I swear I didn’t have a choice.”

“What are you talking about, Mom?”

“Mark is upstairs sleeping; we can’t talk about this now.”

Figuring she was out of it, I covered her up with a blanket and headed up to my room. She must have been drunk and figured I was someone else. I couldn’t help but think how many dark secrets there were in this small town.

Murderers and rapists were living among us. Everything was going to come out now the entire nation was interested in Rockport. Taylor was going to be distracted by finding the person who'd taken her family from her.

And I needed to keep searching for proof that Ryan and the rest of *the Seven* killed Veronica.



Chapter 9



I happened to wake up early the next morning and decided to go for a jog for the first time since the morning Veronica's body was found. I started off down my street and began looking at things a little differently. Maybe this wasn't just the quiet little seaside town everyone thought it was? A fog had come to town, and it was revealing the darkest, deepest secrets this town had to offer. I'd never look at Barney's the same ever again. There were two killers in town, and it's likely I'd known both of them.

I turned into the Mermaid Cliff entrance and realized Andrea's car wasn't there anymore. Maybe she'd had car trouble, and someone had come to pick her up before I got there last night? I'd have to see if she was at school and then get her phone from the drive-in. I paused for a moment at the edge of the cliff before making my way back down. I stopped at the beach where Veronica's body was found. I took my shoes off and took a step into the cold, wet sand, the scrunching between my toes taking me back to coming here as a child.

I walked towards the water, my legs sinking into the sand with every step. The first step into the bone-chilling water made me take a deep breath. The sand was turning into stones with every step. Now, knee-high in the freezing water, waves crashing up my legs, I looked out at the dark clouds in the distance, lightning cracking down through the clouds above the roaring sea.

The wind began to pick up.

I took a deep breath before heading back to land. Wiping the sand off my feet, now numb from the water, I tried to warm them before putting my shoes back on.

Jogging again, the wind picking up around me, I began running faster before the storm hit. The smell of rain filled the air around, the wind blowing me. I turned down our street. The rain began to fall just

as I turned up the driveway. Charles was walking out of the door and paused on the porch after seeing me.

“How was the run?”

“Felt good, got back just before the rain.”

“Looks like the rain got you,” he said, looking at my wet shorts from the waves. “You haven’t seen or heard from Andrea Ross, have you?”

“No, I haven’t since school yesterday. Why, is something wrong?”

“No, well I don’t think so, none of us have heard from her since school. Jimmie said he thinks she had a huge argument with her parents and that’s why she never showed up at the drive-in last night.”

“If I hear from her, I’ll let you know.”

“Alright, thanks. Don’t worry about Mom and Dad. They’ll be alright.”

“Yeah, I hope so, I’ll see you later.”

He ran to his car through the pouring rain. Heading inside, I peeked into the living room and noticed my mom still sleeping on the couch. Her phone lay vibrating on the table, so I went over and took a look in case it was my dad. I was stunned at what I saw. The name that appeared on her phone was Damon Miller. I quickly answered it without saying a word.

“Hello? Daisy, are you there? I don’t know why you’re acting like this all of a sudden, but we need to talk about what happened.”

He hung up the phone and I put it back exactly where I found it. Jason hadn’t seen him in a few days, so why was the guy calling my mom? She was hiding something from all of us. I had a text on my phone from Jason, asking if I was ready just as I spotted the time. I ran upstairs and washed off and changed my clothes before running outside as he pulled up.

Jogging to the car, I remembered that the night before, I’d decided not to tell him what Taylor had confessed to me. He had enough to worry about with Veronica’s death, his dad missing, and *the Seven* threatening him.

“Have you heard from your dad yet?”

“Nothing yet, my mom even went to the Crusaders and begged for information, but they haven’t heard anything either.”

“You don’t think they’d hurt him, or worse, do you?”

“He’s been a member of the Rockport Crusaders his whole life. They’re like his family, so I don’t think they would.”

“Alright, well I’m sure he will show up sooner or later,” I said.

“Are you going to the game tonight?”

“What game are you talking about?”

“The only thing this town has, the Rockport Seadogs football game.”

“Yeah, I know, I was just joking with you. I wasn’t planning on it, but we can if you want to go,” I replied.

“There’s been so much bad stuff happening lately, I figured we could at least go to watch the cheerleaders.”

“You mean so you can watch Chloe Garcia?” I asked.



WE PULLED UP TO SCHOOL where Rachel and Katherine were standing by the front doors.

“I’ll catch up with you later,” I said to Jason as I got out of the car.

“Rachel!” I called to her as I jogged to the door. “Do you know if Andrea is here today?”

“You didn’t hear?” Katherine cut in.

“She ran away, Mark,” Rachel blurted. “She was having a lot of issues at home and apparently, her parents filed the police report this morning.”

“No, I didn’t hear that, what’s going on in this town?”

“So, did you get your tire fixed?” Katherine questioned.

“What are you talking about?”

Right after I asked, I remembered that was the excuse I’d given the night before when I barged in the concession shop.

“Oh, yes. Yes, I did get it fixed,” I said before she could answer.

“Stay away from my girlfriend, loser!” Ryan demanded as he walked up behind us with Jimmie.

“I’m just talking to her,” I responded.

“First Veronica, now Andrea,” Jimmie cut in. “What are you doing to these girls, Marky?”

“Leave him alone, jerk,” Lexi Gray blurted out as she walked up. I have a few classes with Lexi but had never really had a good conversation with her.

“Excuse my idiot brother, Mark,” she said as she walked by us. I followed her into the school and down the hallway. “Lexi, wait up!”

“What’s up, Mark?” she asked, turning around.

“Thanks, back there; I don’t know why they hate me so much.”

“Don’t worry about it, they only like each other. If you’re not a part of that group, you’re automatically against them. So, how are you doing, you were pretty messed up at the party.”

“I’m doing fine; we spoke at the party?”

“Yeah, well you were a little drunk, so I don’t blame you for forgetting.”

“I don’t remember much of that night at all.”

“I was sitting outside, and you came walking out, and you were pretty upset. Well, you were stumbling out really. I called you over and asked if you were alright, so you made your way over and sat next to me. We had a good conversation.”

“I’m sorry I don’t remember any of that. Did I embarrass myself?”

“It was as though you were on drugs,” she whispered.

“Drugs,” I blurted, “I don’t think I was.”

“Well, in any case, you don’t deserve to be badgered by those guys,” she said as she turned to walk away.

“Hey Lexi,” I called back to her. “You didn’t happen to see Veronica leave the party, did you?”

“Of course, I did, I saw her walking down the street in the direction you left. She came out looking for you and I pointed in the direction you went.”

“I meant to ask you why you told everyone I left with her that night.”

“I told Agent Taylor too, just trying to help out.”

“Do you think I had anything to do with her death?”

“You may have been the last person to see her alive at the party, but I can’t see you doing anything to hurt her. I think she tried to walk

home after she couldn't find you. She was probably picked up by a drifter and taken to the cliff. None of us ever thought such a thing could happen in this town."

"Thank you for saying that Lexi; your brother and Ryan seem to think I did something to her."

"Don't let them get to you. Now I have to get to class," she said, heading off.



NOT MUCH ELSE HAPPENED that day at school. We were forced to watch another safety video on drugs and alcohol. Before school ended, I texted Jason to meet me at his truck so we could decide how to report McGinty for what I'd found in his boathouse. I began having second thoughts on turning him in but couldn't live the rest of my life knowing he could have gotten away with it.

On my way out of school, the door to the photography lab was open. I opened it all the way and didn't see anyone, but I heard a noise coming from the darkroom. I quietly walked up to it and listened for a moment. Not hearing anything, I opened it.

"Mark!" Patrick screamed as he jumped up in fear.

"Sorry, Patrick; didn't know you were in here."

"Close the door!" he cried. "It has to stay pitch black in here or you'll ruin the photos."

"Okay, okay. I said I was sorry," I responded as I closed the door. "What are these pictures of?"

I took a look around at his pictures and was shocked at how amazing they were. He had always been the school photographer, but I never really took a minute to look his pictures over. A few pictures of a sunset over Mermaid Cliff looked stunning. There were also a few of the popular places around town.

"What are these for?"

"These particular ones are for a class project I'm doing of Rockport," he replied, placing another picture on the string with a

photo hanger. "Someone ruined this one, luckily I took several of the same shot."

"Let me see it," I asked reaching for it before he threw it away. I remembered then that he would frequently take pictures around town and could have some very incriminating evidence.

I took the picture from him and stared at it. It was a picture of Barney's restaurant.

"How is this one ruined?"

"You see that car going by right as I took the picture? It takes the focus away from the purpose."

I took another look, and he was right. There was a car going by right in front of the restaurant. I went to throw it in the trash, but it hit me; that car was so familiar. I took a closer look and was shocked. The car was Andrea's; I immediately spotted the lanyard hanging. This could've been Andrea on her way to meet me at Mermaid Cliff. I focused it as much as I could on the driver but they had a hood on which hid their identity.

"You alright, Mark? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I walked to the other side of the room and stared at the picture for a moment longer before looking up at Patrick. "Nothing, I'm fine, just in a daze. So, when did you take this picture of Barney's?"

He walked over and grabbed the picture from me, looking at it for a moment. "This morning. I went around taking most of these pictures, including this one."

The hair on the back of my neck stood up as so many more questions shot through my head. Did she really run away and was this her, leaving town? Was she murdered and this was her killer driving her car out of town?

"Why are you asking, really?"

"I was just making conversation..."

I started walking to the door when he stepped in front of me as if he was blocking the door.

"Mark, you can trust me, I can help."

I thought for a moment. I would rather give him a partial truth than have him going and telling *the Seven* about this.

"Ok. I will tell you, but you have to promise me you won't tell anyone."

“Being a photographer, I see a lot of things that people don’t want others to know about, I can keep a secret.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but I’d ignore it for now. I was going to tell him that Andrea and I had planned to meet on the cliff, but that I’d remembered Rachel telling me she’d run away. I didn’t trust Patrick enough to tell him the real truth.

“Andrea ran away last night, and her parents filed a police report.”

“Yeah, small town, Mark, everyone already knows that. So, wait; this car is hers I take it, meaning she’s still around town?”

“Exactly, see that lanyard hanging from the mirror, I’ve seen her wearing that before.”

“You said she ran away last night. What if the killer got her too, and this is them driving her car this morning?”

“I think that’s getting a little out of the box, but I guess it could be,” I answered.

“It was probably Ryan and his gang who killed Veronica,” Patrick suggested. They are always together, whispering.”

“It could be but how can we prove that?”

“They are the ones that deserve to die, not Veronica,” he scolded.

“What are you talking about, Patrick?”

“They’ve called me names, bullied me, shoved me into lockers for years. If anyone deserved to be murdered in this town, it’s one of them.”

“Calm down, just ignore them. Karma will catch up to them one day.”

“I’ve been ignoring them for too long, Mark, I don’t know how much more I can take.”

I wasn’t sure if he was at his breaking point or just venting to me, but either way, I needed to get out of this darkroom. I glanced at my phone and saw several texts from Jason.

“I actually have to go meet Jason, but feel free to talk to me anytime you see me around.”

“Alright. Thanks for admiring my pictures; us ‘losers’ have to stick together and have each other’s backs against them.”

“I don’t consider us ‘losers’, but I agree, see you later,” I responded as I walked out of the door.

What did he mean, he *knows a lot of secrets from being a photographer*? Had he taken pictures of people committing crimes? I walked out of the front doors of the school where Jason was waiting in his truck.

“Where the hell were you?”

“Sorry, Patrick cornered me in the darkroom, he was talking about how much he hates Ryan.”

“That guy is a freak.”

I wondered if Patrick would actually do something to *the Seven* because of how they treated him.

“He’s not a freak, he’s just different. He had a picture of Barney’s, and Andrea’s car was driving by right as he took the picture.”

“Are you serious? Did you see who was driving it?”

“No, I couldn’t see the driver, but I could see her lanyard hanging from the mirror. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him anything about meeting her on Mermaid Cliff the night before.”

“I didn’t think you would, we got bigger problems right now. So, what is the plan for turning Old Man McGinty into the police?” he asked.

I’d forgotten about that since this whole *Andrea missing* thing started.

“Are you positive we should do this, Jason? He had a picture of her, but that doesn’t mean he did anything.”

“He’s like almost a hundred years old and has a picture of a teenage girl along with a charm from her bracelet; he has to be guilty of something. Either way, it will give Taylor someone else to look at other than you.”

He had a point, but after the night I’d shared with Agent Taylor, something told me she was not after me anymore. I still needed to hunt down this person who could have killed her family. I needed to figure out what the word *dim* meant, but first things first.

“Let’s head just out of town and then make the call to the Sheriff’s station about McGinty,” I said.

“Sounds like a plan, then we go to the game, right?”

I shook my head laughing and turned to stare out the window. The only reason he wanted to go to the football game was because he was in love with Chloe Garcia. She was on the cheerleading

squad and didn't even know Jason existed. Still, he'd been in love with her since we were kids.

On the way out of town, my phone started vibrating and Lexi was texting me.

"Hi, just wondering if you will be at the game?"

"Who are you texting?" Jason questioned as he glanced over at my phone.

"Lexi just texted me and asked if I was coming to the game."

"You don't think she knows about what her brother and the rest of them did that night, do you?"

"No, I don't think she knows what they do, she's not really part of that group."

"Maybe that is our way in," he said. "You get close with Lexi, then we can bring down Jimmie and the rest of them."

"Very funny, Jimmie would kill me if I dated his sister," I said, thinking about how I still had feelings for Veronica.

"Just tell her you'll be there; she'll be busy on the field anyway."

Lexi was also a cheerleader for the Rockport Seadogs. I decided to do what Jason suggested and text her back. Just outside of Rockport, there was an old bus stop with a payphone that we decided to stop at.

"You want to do this, or should I?" I asked, hoping he would take this one.

"You saw the pictures on his boat so you should be the one to explain it."

"How about we flip a coin?"

Jason pulled out a shiny quarter and placed it between his fingers. "Heads or tails?"

"Tails," I called as he flipped it in the air.

"Heads!" he called out, flipping it onto his hand.

"Here goes nothing," I said as I got out of the truck.

"Wait, Mark. You need these."

I turned around and saw him holding white plastic gloves and a quarter. "I saw it in the movies, they can take fingerprints from these phones."

"We're not committing a crime; we're just using a phone."

"Just take it, so we don't have another thing to worry about."

Grabbing the gloves and the quarter, I began walking over to the phone. I was overtaken with nervousness as I could be ruining an innocent man's life. Then again, maybe he did know more about Veronica than he let on. I put the quarter in my pocket as I approached the phone. I made sure no one else was near who could place either of us here.

Shaking now, I cautiously put the gloves on and lifted the phone off the handle, holding it near my ear. I began inserting the quarter in the slot until I heard a dial tone. I then pressed the numbers 911 and eagerly awaited an answer. Feeling nauseous, I almost hung up the phone when they answered, "911, what is the emergency?"

I paused for a moment in fear and wasn't able to say a word. I thought about Veronica and how this could help get justice for her.

"Hello, what is the emergency?" they repeated.

"Hi, yes, I have information on the Veronica McBride murder in Rockport," I said.

"Let me transfer you to the Sheriff's office in Rockport, sir," the dispatcher said.

"No, no don't do that," I demanded, thinking Sheriff Richards or Deputy Butler might recognize my voice.

"Okay, just give me the information and I will write it down for you, sir."

"McGinty has evidence on his boat that could help out the investigation."

"What is the first name and where's McGinty located?"

I couldn't remember his first name as we'd always known him as *Old Man*.

"He lives at the docks in Rockport and is the fishing boat captain there. Get there soon," I urged before hanging up the phone and heading back to the truck. "Go!" I demanded as I got in the truck. Jason pulled out of the bus stop and headed back toward Rockport.

"How did it go?" he asked, picking up speed. "Did you do it?"

"I did it, they are going to check it out!"

We just set this plan in motion and a part of me felt a little sense of ease as this could be a major breakthrough for the investigation.

"You feel the thrill?" Jason said as he sped up even more.

"Yeah, it feels pretty good!"

Jason rolled his window down and started howling like a dog.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t know it just felt right, try it.”

Reluctantly I rolled my window down and began howling.

“You sound like a dying cat!”

I leaned out to howl again and an image of a white wolf with blue eyes entered my mind.

“Was that a police car?” Jason asked.

“Slow down, Jason!” I said as the now darkened sky got brighter with the alternating red and blue.

“We’re done, they’re going to be able to track the phone call to us now,” Jason trembled in fear.

“Don’t worry, let me do the talking. Just pull over.”

Trying to think of what to say when the officer got close to the car, I began shaking. I could feel my throat drying and hands trembling. As we pulled to the side of the road, the police car sped by us and we let out sighs of relief.

“There must be something more important going on than us speeding.”

“That was a close one,” Jason said as he turned back onto the road.

“I wonder where they were headed in Rockport?”

I didn’t get a good look at the car to see if it was a Rockport Sheriff’s car or not. We both stuck our heads out the window and howled again as we sped down the road.

“The game will be starting soon but don’t be speeding again,” I said.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket remembering Lexi was texting me earlier. I had a text from her saying *see you there*. I was not sure why she was so interested in me all of a sudden. My phone started vibrating again as I went to put it in my pocket.

“Who is it?” Jason asked glancing over at me.

“My dad,” I said answering it. “Hello?”

“Hey tiger, what are you doing?”

“Going to the football game at school, are you back home yet?”

“I have another job to go on for a few days, but I wanted to check in with you before I leave. Also, I wanted to ask if you can do me a

favor while I'm gone?"

"Yeah, I can, what do you need me to do?"

"Keep an eye on your mom, she's been acting very odd lately."

"What do you mean by that, aren't you guys just having issues right now?"

"That's what she wants you to think, to distract you from what's really going on with her; she's hiding something, Mark. I have to go now, just promise me you'll keep an eye on her," he responded before hanging up on me.

"What was that all about?" Jason asked with a concerned look.

"He said my mom is hiding something and that I should keep an eye on her."

"Maybe it has something to do with what Sheriff Richards said about the night Veronica was killed," he suggested.

"Who did she pick up from the bar that night, and why was her bumper damaged?"

"This town is full of dark secrets, man, and they are all coming to light," Jason said. "I have a bad feeling about all of this. Like there is something bigger going on that we are just now starting to uncover."

"No matter what secrets come out, or whatever we find, promise me we'll stick together."

"I've had your back since we were kids, I'm not going to abandon you if things go bad," he answered. The rest of the drive to the football game was silent. We were both just unsure about what was going on, what would happen with McGinty.

The lights from the football field were the brightest things in this town and could be seen from far around. The Rockport Seadogs were equally big things, so most of the people who lived there went to the games.

"Here we go," Jason said as we got out of the truck and walked toward the opening to the field.

Walking up the stands to find a seat, Charles, Ryan, Jimmie, Rachel, and Katherine stood talking on the sidelines before the game started. Russell was seated in the stands too, staring right at me.

"Over here, Mark!" he called as Jason looked back at me with a curious look.

“Russell, how’s it going?” Jason asked as we sat next to him.

We hardly ever talked to Russell as he was one of those people who thought they were better than you. Not to mention he was one of *the Seven* Jason had seen on the cliff the night of the party.

“Why aren’t you a football player or a cheerleader like the rest of your group?” Jason said as the game started.

“I’m too busy to play sports, Jason,” Russell answered in a serious manner. “They aren’t my *group* at all—we’re just friends.”

“Hi, guys!” Cheryl said as she sat down beside us.

“How’s it going?” I answered her.

“Oh, pretty good, working on a story,” she replied.

“Writing about how messed up this town is?” Jason said.

“Actually, yeah, something like that,” she replied.

“Leave me out of your stories, Cheryl!” Russell demanded.

“Why, do you have something to hide?” Cheryl asked.

“Whenever you write a story for the school paper, you piss a lot of people off,” Russell answered.

“Look into Russell’s secrets,” Cheryl said as she pretended to write it down.

“Very funny,” he said. “I wouldn’t want you to anger too many people and end up like your dad.”

“Not cool Russell,” I said, defending Cheryl. Her father was crazy but that didn’t mean she was.

“I can defend myself, Mark. Yes, my dad was crazy, but he’s better now, thanks for asking, Russell.”

“I don’t have anything against you, I just don’t want you to write anything about me.”

“Why, do you have something worth writing about?”

“Just watch the game, Cheryl!”

“Woah, did you see that!” Jason said.

“No, what happened?” I asked, looking out onto the field.

“Chloe just did a backflip,” he said.

“She doesn’t even know you exist,” Russell and Cheryl said at the same time.

“A guy can dream,” Jason replied.

“Watch the game,” Russell suggested to him.

“Russell, were you at the party the night Veronica was murdered?” I blurted.

“Yeah, I was there, why?”

“I’m having a hard time remembering that night. Did you happen to see me and Veronica at all?”

“Yeah, I saw you guys headed upstairs, figuring you were finally sealing the deal.”

“What do you mean, finally?”

“It was pretty obvious you liked her all summer; every time I was at the drive-in, there you two were.”

I looked out on the field and watched as Jimmie hiked the ball and threw it to Ryan who caught it but was tackled immediately. Ryan stood up and pushed the opposing player to the ground. They both started fighting and Ryan held him down and began punching him. Both benches cleared, and everyone ran onto the field to fight each other.

“What just happened?” Cheryl called out.

“Ryan just snapped and went psycho on that guy!” Jason said.

I heard screams of *you murderers* and *this town is cursed* from the fans on the other side of the field. Security ran in and broke up the fight, while the ref ejected Ryan from the game. I saw Charles walk over to try and talk to him but Ryan pushed him away as he left the field.

“He does have some anger issues,” Jason said as Russell got up to leave.

“Where are you going?” Cheryl asked.

“I have somewhere to be,” he said making his way down the stands.

“I’m going to go get a drink while they figure out how to get this game under control,” I said as I stood up.

I walked down the stairs to follow Russell, just to see where he went.

“Mark,” I heard as I walked down the track toward the exit.

I turned around and Lexi was jogging up to me.

“Hey Lexi, I like your uniform,” I said.

“Thanks, where are you heading?”

I glanced down at the exit and didn’t see Russell anymore.

“Just going to get a drink, what was that fight all about?”

“You know Ryan has some anger problems, I hear him arguing with Jimmie and Charles all the time when they’re over.”

“What do they argue about?” I questioned.

“I’m not sure, they close the door whenever I get close enough to listen.”

“They all seem really close this year for some reason, like closer than usual.”

“I guess, I mean they’ve always been friends, but yeah, I guess you are right. All seven of them are always over at my house. Maybe it’s because we have a pool,” she said.

If she only knew it wasn’t because they had a pool... They had something to do with Veronica’s death and that’s why they’d been even closer this week.

“Did you see them the night of the party?”

“Yeah, they were all there that night. Now that you mention it, this week especially, they’ve been glued at the hips,” she said.

“So, I guess you aren’t part of *the Seven*?”

“*The Seven*?” she asked. “Is that their group name?”

“Jason came up with it.”

“They aren’t really who I would prefer to hang out with,” she said. “Plus, I don’t think they are accepting new members at this time.”

“Lexi, get over here. The game is about to start up again!” I heard Rachel yell over.

“I’ll talk to you later, Mark. Thanks for coming, don’t be a stranger!” she said as she turned to head back.

“Cheerleaders, man,” Jason sighed as he walked up behind me. “Looks like we’re both into them.”

“I was just talking to her about *the Seven*. She doesn’t know anything.”

“*The Seven*, are they going to be all we talk about?” he questioned. “A week ago, we were into girls and video games and now we’re obsessing over a group of demented individuals who may or may not have killed someone.”

“I can’t just turn my back on what’s going on in this town. I can’t explain it, but there’s something in me that has to find who the killer

is. I need to look them in the eyes and know that they are the real killers.”

I turned and started to walk toward the parking lot.

“What? Are you leaving already?” Jason called after me. “I thought it was our one normal night?”

I didn’t answer him as I entered the parking lot and headed toward his truck. Jason didn’t understand that everyone was affected by what was going on and if we didn’t figure it out, we could end up like Veronica or Andrea.

There were now two missing people in this town and a dead girl. For a small town that’d never had a murder since its creation, that had got to mean something. I grabbed my bike out of Jason’s truck and started riding away. Away from the school, away from the drama.

If Jason wasn’t going to help anymore, I’d got to do this myself, for Veronica. I remembered my dad had asked me to keep an eye on Mom, too, so I figured I’d head home and see what she was up to.



Chapter 10



PASSING THROUGH TOWN, I rode by Veronica's house and noticed a light on in her room. I stopped my bike for a moment, remembering how every time I would ride by, I'd wish she'd come out and see me. How could something so evil happen to such an innocent girl? If someone did drug Veronica and me at that party, who could it be?

Who would want us to forget everything about that night? I looked back at Veronica's window and saw her mom sitting on the bed looking through her things. I couldn't imagine what she went through on a daily basis.

Just as I was about to ride away, a deer went running out from the woods and almost got hit by an oncoming car. The car swerved and honked its horn before driving away. I looked back at the house and Veronica's mom was staring at me through the window. I waved and kept riding so she wouldn't try to get me to come inside again for an awkward conversation. She deserved the truth more than anyone and when I found it, she'd be the first to know.

I turned down my street but didn't see my mom's car in driveway. I decided to go home anyway and maybe I could find something there.

With Dad away on a job and Charles playing football, it was a great time to search around the house. I went inside and hustled up to her room and began searching in drawers. I knew it was weird searching in my parents' room as I could find all sorts of weird things I didn't want to know about. There could be something here that she was hiding, though.

Drawer after drawer and all I saw were clothes. I tried searching behind the drawers and under them as in the movies. I moved onto the closet and looked through boxes in there, but no luck. In the one box I found several old looking books written in other languages. Beneath them was an old black and white picture of a bunch of people standing on what looked like Mermaid Cliff. The back of it had the date September 1917, and it had about ten names written on it.

As I read down the list of names, I was shocked when I saw the name Elizabeth Parker. This must have been my great grandmother; my parents had talked about her before. I looked over the picture and McGinty's father's name was on it, next to Elizabeth's. They were part of the ten who'd founded Rockport.

I rummaged around some more and found an old key. It didn't look like anything I'd seen before, so I tossed it back in the box. I put the picture back in the box and turned to see a black cloak hanging in the corner of the closet. They must have been into some freaky role play. Moving back into the room, I paused and looked around but just as I was about to call it quits, I saw the bottom corner of the mattress sheet was untucked.

I walked over and looked under it, but nothing was there. The headlights of my mom's car shone through the window, and I dropped to the floor. I began crawling to the door but heard the front door open.

I rolled under the bed and waited for my chance to leave. I laid there, silent, for a few minutes before deciding to make my move. Just as I began crawling out from under the bed, I saw her walk into the room. Following her, was someone else, someone wearing black boots. My dad must have gotten off the job early. I couldn't be under there if they decided to get it on above me. I waited a few more minutes as they sat down on the bed. Just as I was about to come clean, they got off the bed.

"I'm going to hop in the shower," she said.

"Right behind you," the man said as he followed her into the bathroom, closing the door.

I laid there for another minute. That voice was not my dad's. I'd heard that voice before, but it wasn't him. I rolled out from under the bed and stood up. There on the bed was a Crusaders' jacket. I

bolted out of the room and down the stairs. I ran out the back door and hopped the fence into the woods before I dropped to my knees.

My mom was cheating on my dad with someone from a biker gang. I tried to let that sink in but couldn't. Breathing heavier, trying to catch my breath, an eerie fog moved in around me.

"Breathe, Mark," I whispered to myself.

Letting the information flow through my mind, it began to come together. The phone call, Richards seeing her picking someone up from the bar, the jacket... Damon Miller. She was cheating on my dad with Jason's father.

I sat there, waiting for an idea to make a move. I heard a noise that brought back an instant memory of camping with my dad, a faint rattling sound, getting louder. I slowly turned around, noticing what I had feared—a rattlesnake in attack mode, curled up no more than a foot from me.

I slowly stepped back as it rose higher. Feeling faint, I made my move to run and instantly tripped over myself. Frozen with fear, it slithered its way right beside. Raising itself higher still, it opened its mouth, revealing its venomous fangs. I didn't know what to do, I was done for. I closed my eyes and thought of a way out.

I opened them just as an owl flew down, grabbing the snake and flying off into the woods.

I couldn't believe what I'd just witnessed; that snake would have bitten me for sure if it wasn't for the owl. I sat there for a moment taking it all in, before deciding to call my mom.

"Hello?"

"Are you at home? I'm almost there."

I heard her scurrying around, likely forcing Damon to get his things and leave.

"Yes, I just got out of the shower."

"Okay, be there soon."

She hung up, and I could just see through the window from where I was behind the fence. I watched as the man came down the stairs half-dressed and ran through the front door. I waited another few minutes before reaching up to hop over the fence. I felt a chill on the back of my neck and froze.

I finally worked up enough courage to turn and seen only trees. I leaned over and tried to catch my breath; something was there. I decided to run around the front so it wouldn't look weird coming in through the back door.

"Mom," I called out from the kitchen as I began frantically making a sandwich.

"Oh, hi, Mark. You scared me!" she said, walking down the stairs. "I figured you would be at the game with Jason."

"I left early, just wasn't into it tonight."

"Is everything going ok?" she questioned. "Has Taylor talked to you anymore?"

"No, she hasn't tried to talk to me since you screamed at her."

"She shouldn't have been talking to you without me or your father there."

"Speaking of Dad, is he home?" I asked, not believing she was cheating on him.

"No, he left for a job, remember?"

"Oh, that's right, I forgot that quick."

I finished up making my sandwich and joined her in the living room.

"Heard any more from Emily about where Jason's dad is?" I asked her, biting into my sandwich.

"No, she hasn't heard from him yet. How's Jason holding up?"

"He's fine, the usual."

I finished my sandwich and decided just to go to bed.

"Goodnight!" she said, as I made my way up to my room.

Lying in bed, I let out a sigh of relief. How long had this been going on with those two? How could she do this to Dad? They did argue, but I never realized it was that bad.



I SAT UP AND LOOKED around only to discover that I was surrounded by murky water, and I was on a raft. Dark, almost pitch

black, the moon moved out from behind the dark clouds of the night. It illuminated the water around me as I gasped at the sight.

I was in the middle of the ocean, so this must have been a dream.

I looked into the water, a pulsing light, moving closer and closer. I leaned in to get a better look as the light moved closer to the surface. Leaning in even closer, just inches from the water, I could see the light just about to break through. A hand grabbed my throat and pulled me off the boat into the bone-chilling water. I watched as the raft got smaller and smaller.

The deeper I fell into the water, the smaller everything looked. I could feel my lungs filling, gasping for air... the feeling of drowning, of my life slipping away. A stiff, frozen hand around my neck was pulling me deeper into the abyss. I closed my eyes, hoping I could wake up.



Chapter 11



I sat up in bed, sweating, and convinced myself it was just a dream. I saw that it was morning, early morning, so I got dressed and headed downstairs. No one was up yet so I left, grabbing my bike. I rode into town to eat at Barny's. I hadn't been there since meeting with Charles and was craving some blueberry pancakes. When Charles and I were kids, our parents would take us here every Sunday to get Barny's famous pancakes. Katherine was working as I sat down at a table.

"Hi Katherine," I said as I sat down.

"Hey, Mark, you're up pretty early for a Saturday," she smirked, walking over to my table.

"Yeah, figured I would get some breakfast."

"Did you hear about Damon Miller?" she asked as she wrote down my order. "Of course, you did, you and Jason are best friends. Not too surprising, he's always been pretty trashy."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you didn't hear?" she said with excitement.

Not knowing what she was talking about, I shook my head.

"Well, he was arrested late last night."

"What?" I questioned. It must have been sometime after he left my house.

"Apparently, he was busted for possession and a couple other charges."

"Wow, Jason hadn't seen or heard from him in a week," I replied.

"Well, now you know where he is," she said, turning back for the kitchen.

"Hey guys, check it out!" Barny called, pointing at the television in the corner of the restaurant.

"Turn it up, Barny," Joyce Gray called over from the table behind me.

I looked over at the television and saw Agent Taylor holding the arm of Old Man McGinty as they walked into the Rockport Sheriff's office.

"Agent Taylor, can we get a word?" the reporter called after her as the door closed behind her. "As you just saw, Rockport has its first suspect in the murder of Veronica McBride, stay tuned."

"No way," Joyce gasped. "I always knew that man was sick, just like his father."

"Do you really think he did it?" Barny asked as he joined Joyce at the table.

"He's like ninety-something years old, I don't think he could even make it up the cliff," they said.

"He's one of the oldest people in this town, he's full of town history. I don't think he would do something to hurt this place," Barny said.

I lost my appetite at the thought that I'd done this to him. I didn't know if I could live with myself if they found out he had nothing to do with it. The town would write him off and he'd never be accepted here again. He'd be exiled like Jack Wood was, after he wrote about the legend of Mermaid Cliff.

"Mark Parker, you're Daisy's boy, aren't you?" Joyce asked as I got up from the table.

"Yes, I am," I replied, reaching for my wallet to pay for the meal I didn't want to eat any longer.

"Lexi tells me how close you and that girl were," she sighed. "It's a shame she had to go so young, but I heard she wasn't all that innocent."

I didn't know what she meant by that. but she was starting to piss me off. I'd met Joyce and the Mayor before, so I was not sure why she was acting like we were strangers.

She and my mom went to school at Rockport together when they were kids. She told me they fought all the time like siblings do. Mom had told me how much of a snob Joyce was back then, and I could see what she meant.

"How's Mayor Raymond handling all this bad publicity?" I asked trying to ruffle her feathers. "Must be hard for a small-time public figure."

“He’s doing quite fine, and now with an arrest in the case, it looks to be going great,” she said looking around the room for praise.

“Two blueberry pancakes and I added a smiley face on that for you,” Katherine said, sitting the plate down at my table.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not hungry anymore,” I replied, throwing the money on the table and leaving the restaurant.

She only cared about her social standing with the rest of these idiots. Grabbing my bike, I decided to do some more digging of my own and headed over to Andrea’s house. Maybe her parents could give me some insight into whether she did run away or something worse.

I started thinking about how Lexi told me I’d come out of her house that night of the party and sat down with her. Why did I leave the party without Veronica? She came out after I left and was looking for me. Sheriff Richards said they found DNA on her that wasn’t hers, and if it didn’t happen with *the Seven* on Mermaid Cliff, which meant it had to have happened at the party. Did I have sex with Veronica? Russell did say he saw us walking upstairs together.

A sense of unease and panic came over me; I could be the killer they were searching for. If they found out my mom lied about being home with me that night, I’d be right back at the top of the suspect list. I needed to find the person who killed Taylor’s family.

I turned down Andrea’s street and noticed her mom was outside watering flowers.

“Hello Mrs. Ross, how are you doing today?” I asked her.

“Oh, hi there, you startled me.” She stepped back, staring at me.

I looked down and realized she was watering dead flowers. She had makeup running down her cheeks and quickly wiped at her tears.

“I’m sorry, I’m a friend of Andrea’s from school.”

“Yes, Mark, I know who you are,” she said as she removed her gardening gloves. “I still have a picture of you and Andrea on my refrigerator, of when you guys were kids.”

“Yeah, we were pretty close back then,” I sighed.

“I never understood what happened, but I guess you guys just grew up. So, what can I do for you, Mark?”

“Well, I was hoping you could tell me what happened with her. We were just starting to reconnect and then I heard she ran away.”

She walked over and sat down on the front steps, so I joined her.

“Lately, Andrea had been very depressed, and she just wouldn’t talk to me anymore. Her father had been working a lot and we just figured we’d give her space and hope it would pass. Now that I think about it, she started acting this way right after Veronica was killed earlier this week. Were Andrea and Veronica good friends? Could Andrea have been that upset that Veronica died?”

“I think they talked here and there, but I don’t think they were good friends,” I responded truthfully.

“You’re a good kid, Mark. I wish Andrea would have stuck around you instead of Ryan and those other idiots. Can I tell you something without you telling anyone else?”

“Of course, I am good at keeping secrets,” I responded.

She looked up, took a deep breath, and looked over at me. “I’m so worried about her, I can’t help but feel like something bad is going on in this town.”

I sat back not sure what to think; could she have run away, or could she have been killed too? Who was driving her car in the picture Patrick took? We needed to get her phone working to check it. If anyone found where we’d hidden it, they could see her last text was to me, saying to meet her at the Cliff.

“Why do you think that?” I asked her.

“After school, the day she went missing, she texted and told me she had someone to meet at seven and then she would be home to tell me everything that’d been going on. She said she knew more about Veronica’s death, and she was in danger.”

I couldn’t believe what she was telling me. No one could find out she was supposed to meet me on Mermaid Cliff!

“Did you tell Agent Taylor what Andrea told you?” I questioned, hoping she would say no.

“I don’t trust that Taylor, only me and you know what I just told you. I’m not sure what to do with this information yet; there’s something going on in town and I don’t know who I can trust.”

“Do you think she knew who killed Veronica and that it’s the same person who came for her?”

“That is a very good possibility, Mark.” She agreed. “Let’s just hope my Andrea comes back to me and this is all a big misunderstanding.”

I got up and looked over at my bike. “Thank you for telling me all that and I will do whatever I can to help.”

“Thank you, Mark, but be careful with these people.”

I glanced back at her as I made my way down the street, and she was watering the dead flowers again. I don’t think she approved of Andrea hanging out with the rest of *the Seven*. Could they have found out she was going to tell people what happened to Veronica, and could they have done something to her? I needed to get those keys from Mr. Fink to get into his office and look at the camera footage from the drive-in. If one of *the Seven* did sneak away that night, they could have taken Andrea well before I got there.

I realized I hadn’t texted Jason about his dad yet, so I stopped on the side of the road and got my phone out. “*I just heard about your dad; where are you at?*” I texted him before riding again.

We were scheduled to work that night so we could use that time to figure out how to get the keys from Fink. Just as I was turning down my street, my phone started to vibrate. I looked at it and it was my mom calling. She was sitting on the front step as I pulled up.

“I was just calling you!”

I parked my bike and went over to her. “Why? What’s up?”

“Sit down for a minute so we can talk about something,” she said.

So many things shot through my mind in that moment. There were so many things going on that I knew about, and she could have found out that I was involved.

“Is everything alright with Dad and Charles?” I asked her nervously.

“Oh yes, they are fine, it’s not about them.”

“Jason’s dad was arrested last night. He’s in Asheville jail.”

“I know, it was on tv at Barny’s.”

“I’m sorry, I know Jason and Emily are going to be really upset. We should make sure we’re there for them.” It annoyed me how she could continue to be friends with Emily while sleeping with her husband.

“There’s one more thing. I know you went through my room, Mark.”

Nervous, I blurted out, “I can explain.”

“I’m sure you have a good explanation for why you were going through our things, but that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

I took a deep breath as I honestly didn’t know what my excuse would have been for being in there.

“You found an old picture of your great grandmother, Elizabeth Parker?”

“Yeah, I did, I was going to ask you why you never showed it to me,” I answered.

“Your great grandmother was one of the first people in Rockport.”

“Why didn’t Dad ever tell us his grandmother was one of the founding citizens of this town?” I asked her.

“No, your great grandmother, Elizabeth Parker, was *my* grandmother,” she said. “When your dad and I married, we decided to keep my name, as it’s a sacred name to this town.”

I sat there for a moment thinking about how I’d never met anyone from my mom’s family.

“Wow,” I blurted. “Why have you never told me that before?”

“Your dad didn’t think it mattered, but you’re part of a very important bloodline,” she said.

“Why have I never met anyone in your family?” I asked her nervously.

She paused for a moment and looked across the street at Mrs. Huber watering her flowers. She looked over at me and then down at the ground. “Do you know what I love about this town, Mark?”

“The pancakes at Barny’s?” I asked.

“Loyalty. We may be connected to the rest of this world by land, but we have our own traditions and secrets we keep to ourselves,” she said.

I wasn’t sure what she was talking about, but she’d been acting so weird lately.

“Our little old town never got many visitors; in fact, all the original bloodlines are still in this town. It wasn’t until Veronica’s family moved here that these secrets started coming to light.”

"It's not her fault she was murdered, Mom," I blurted out, not sure where she was going with this.

"Some secrets are better kept secret," she said as she stood up.

"Well, if I am part of this important bloodline, then shouldn't I know these secrets?"

"You're right and with time, you will know a great deal. Did you know McGinty's father, Willie McGinty, was the first mayor?"

I couldn't let her know I had spoken to him. "No, I didn't know that."

"Then I guess you didn't know Willie McGinty and Elizabeth Parker were together," she said.

I stood up in shock. "So, we're related to him?"

"They were together when they founded Rockport and had twins," she explained. "The McGinty you know and my mother, Debra Parker, were their kids."

I was confused and shocked at the thought of everything she told me. I sat back down in disbelief at the thought of being from such a historic family.

"So Old Man McGinty is your uncle and my great uncle?" I blurted.

"Yes, through blood, but we never spoke about it with him. Like I said, some secrets are better kept secret."

"How do you know all of this, if they never spoke about it?"

"Before your grandmother died, she wrote a detailed diary about the families who founded this town."

"Wow, that is crazy, Mom. So, grandma would be the same age as McGinty if she was still alive."

"Yes, your grandmother got pregnant with me when she was fifty. Your grandfather was a drifter, I never met him. McGinty and my mother never really talked. Which is why we push you and Charles to hang out more because siblings need to stay close."

I looked over at Mrs. Hubert who was staring directly at us. I waved to her as I stood back up, still in shock.

"Do you think McGinty could've done something to Veronica?" I asked her.

"That old man was obsessed with his father's suicide. Over the years of obsessing over that and the other three suicides on

Mermaid Cliff, he lost his mind. It was possible he did something to Veronica, but with his need to find the truth, I don't think he would risk it. Just do me a favor and don't tell anyone what I told you. Some people in town may not understand the truth."

"Trust me, I will keep our family's secrets with me," I answered.

Truthfully, I was a little freaked out at it all.

"One day, Mark, you will be old enough to take on a larger role in this family."

I thought for a moment as she walked toward the door; given what she'd told me, this might be my chance to come clean about something.

"One more thing, Mom," I said to her as she opened the front door. "What were you doing with Damon Miller the night Veronica was killed?"

My heart raced faster and faster while I awaited her answer. She could reveal the truth or give me another lie; the anxiety was almost too much to handle.

"Who told you that?" she cautiously asked as she continued to stare inside.

"Sheriff Richards saw you at the South Side bar that night picking him up, and he wondered what you were doing," I blurted, realizing she now knew I talked to Richards behind her back.

"If he tells Agent Taylor that, then she would know you weren't with me the night Veronica was killed, making me a suspect again," I added.

"That drunk doesn't understand anything, I was with you that night," she said as she walked inside, closing the door behind her.

That was not the answer I was hoping for, and she now knew that I knew she was lying. If she was not going to tell me the truth, maybe Jason's dad would. He was being held in Asheville jail and I might be able to pay him a visit.

I checked the time as I headed over to my bike and realized I had a few hours before my shift started at the drive-in. Jason still hadn't texted me back, so I'd have to talk with him more later.



Chapter 12



I started off down the road, trying to understand everything my mom had told me. My great grandmother was a founder of Rockport and was married to McGinty's dad. Why did McGinty's dad kill himself, becoming the first suicide on Mermaid Cliff?

I felt a vibration in my pocket and glanced at my phone, noticing a text from Lexi. I slowed down and read it. "Sorry about last night. I'm going to the movies tonight with Chloe. Maybe I'll see you there." I texted her back that I'd be working there that night and started riding again.

I rode through town, and everyone was whispering and gossiping about the arrest. A news van blew by me as I came to an intersection. This town would never be the same again. There was a reason for only one traffic light in town. I crossed into Asheville and passed the bus stop where we'd used the pay phone to turn McGinty into the police the previous night. I couldn't think about that right now; we just had to see how it turned out.

I finally got to the Asheville jail and had a bad cramp in my leg from the long ride. As I stepped inside, I was hit with a cool breeze from the air conditioner and smelled the faint odor of burnt coffee.

It was a long walk from the door to the front desk and the whole time I was walking over to it, the officer behind the desk stared me down.

"How can I help you?" he asked as he took a sip from his coffee mug that read, 'world's best Dad'.

"I'm here to visit Damon Miller, I was told he's being held here," I said confidently.

"Only family members can visit, are you family?" he asked looking me up and down.

I thought for a second before answering. "Yes, I'm his son, Jason Miller." I knew if Jason found out he would be very upset, but I

needed to find out what Damon had been doing with my mother that night.

He reached over the side of the desk for a clipboard and pen and placed them in front of me. "Sign and date it here," he said as he pointed where.

I felt my heart race as I was really doing this now. My hand was shaking as I picked up the pen. I took a deep breath and began writing the name *Jason Miller* and the date. I handed him back the clipboard and he glanced over it before giving me a visitor pass and pointing to the door on my right.

"Go through there and place everything in your pockets in the white pan, then wait for an officer to walk you back."

I made my way through the door and emptied my pockets into the pan. The suspense was killing me, sweat formed on my forehead. I waited for about two minutes before an officer came through the door. "You're here to see Damon Miller?"

"Yes, sir," I answered quickly and followed him down the stairs into a dark, damp hallway. As we walked down the long hall, I could smell this disgusting odor like a mix of musty basement and urine. Each cell was dirty looking, with stained mattresses and leaking sinks. Every step we took, I got more and more nervous about meeting Damon there. I'd known him as long as I'd known Jason, and he'd always been nice to me.

"Miller, you got a visitor," the officer called into the cell before continuing down the hall. "Five minutes, kid."

"Mark!" Damon said. His eyes were bloodshot, and he was covered in sweat. He must have been detoxing; he'd tried to sober up before, and this was exactly how he'd looked then.

"Mr. Miller, I need to talk to you," I said.

"Does your mom know you're here? How did you get down here?" he questioned, wiping his eyes with his shirt.

"No, no one knows I'm here and they can't know about this."

"Daisy would kill me if she knew you were here talking to me, Mark. Why do you want to talk to me?"

"Are you alright?" I asked him. He started to shake really bad.

"I'll be fine, I'm going to get sober for Jason," he said as he stood up and took his shirt off. "It's so hot in here."

He must have been going through withdrawal because it was actually freezing in there. I only had a few minutes left, so I decided to just go for it.

“Why were you with my mother a few nights ago, in the middle of the night?” I asked.

He walked closer to me and put his hands on the bars. “She was picking me up from the bar to take me home.”

I could smell the alcohol still on his breath. His rough looks said it all.

“You didn’t go home though; Emily and Jason haven’t seen you since the day before.”

“Your mother isn’t as innocent as you think, kid; she’s done things that would keep you up at night.” He had a sense of terror on his face.

“What were you doing with my mother?” I pressed.

I was starting to get angry and on the edge of exploding.

“Two minutes,” the officer said as he peeked around the corner at the end of the hallway.

“You really want to know, kid? Well, we were having an affair. Satisfied now?” He said again with that same look of terror on his face.

I felt my jaw drop. This must have been why my parents had been arguing lately. This just confirmed what I already knew but hearing it from him made it real.

“She and your dad were having problems and I was there for her; we’ve known each other since we were kids, and I’m sorry you had to find out this way. Look, kid, I know this is all tough to hear, but you’re in danger. There are things going on in this town that you don’t understand. Keep your eyes open, they’ll take you down too if you’re not careful.”

“Time’s up,” the officer said as he began walking down the hall toward me.

“What are the marks on her rear bumper from?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he answered and turned to walk back to his bed.

“Let’s go, boy,” the officer said.



Chapter 13



“WE WALKED BACK DOWN the hall and up the stairs.

“You alright, kid?” the officer asked as I gasped for air, trying to stop myself from having a panic attack after everything that had just happened down there.

“I’m fine, just hard to see him down there.”

“Make sure you sign out before you leave,” he demanded, leaving the room the way we came in.

I stood there for a moment, processing everything. Why would she have an affair with a Crusader criminal?

“Mark!” Emily said, jumping almost out of her shoes. “What are you doing here?”

Flustered, I took a step back, “I was just mad at how Damon was treating you guys and I wanted to see why he was doing this.” I was hoping she would believe me with the already deflated look on my face.

“Mark, I know you care about Jason a lot, but you can’t be coming here to see Damon; he’s not in a good place right now.”

“I know and I’m sorry about that. Can we keep this between us? My mom wouldn’t like that I am here.”

“Your secret is safe with me, Mark,” she winked as she emptied her pockets into the white pan. “Did he happen to say anything to you?”

“No, like you said, he’s not in a good place right now.”

I exited the room and let out a sigh of relief before I walked over to the desk.

“Get everything off your chest, boy?” the officer behind the desk asked me, reaching for the clipboard and pen.

“Yes, sir,” I answered, figuring he’d just seen me sighing.

“My father wasn’t there for me either; it’ll get better.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that,” I answered, signing out on the paper and handing it back to him.

“Have a great night.”

“You too,” I responded.

I looked at the clock on the wall and only had an hour before I had to be at work. I raced out of the door and went to reach for my bike and headed up the road for Rockport.



“HEY JASON,” I SAID as I walked inside the drive-in.

“Why are you soaked in sweat?” he asked turning around to look at me.

“I was just out riding around, getting my head straight,” I claimed, splashing water on my face at the sink. “Why didn’t you text me back today?”

“Sorry, I got busy around the house with my mom. I take it you’ve heard about my dad?”

“My mom told me what happened with him, that he’s in Asheville jail.”

“Serves him right, he should be locked up forever. My mom needs some peace, some closure.”

Not wanting to make him any more upset, I tried to change the subject. “So, are we going after the keys tonight, or what?”

“I need a distraction from my family. Yes, let’s do it,” he replied.

“Fink is up in his office and should be leaving within the hour, so we have until then to figure out how to get his key. Can’t we just wait for him to leave and then break into his office and get the footage?”

“Did you forget about the cameras?” I said, tossing a piece of candy at him from behind the counter.

“Oh yeah, don’t waste the food Mark,” he said in a serious tone, picking up the candy to eat it.

“Jason, Mark! How are you guys doing,” Chloe chirped from the window of the concession stand. We both looked over and saw Chloe and Lexi standing there watching us.

“Hey girls, what can I get for you?” Jason asked nervously, walking over to the window.

This had to be one of the greatest moments in Jason’s life. He’d been waiting for Chloe Garcia to notice him since grade school.

“I’ll take a small drink and whatever candy Mark is throwing,” Chloe said.

“I’ll take the same thing,” Lexi added.

“Hello kids, how is everyone doing today?” Mr. Fink questioned as he walked inside.

“Doing good,” we all replied.

“Jason, how many times do I have to tell you to not overfill this popcorn machine?” he scolded, opening the popcorn maker.

“Sorry, Sir, I’ll get it right next time,” Jason responded, Chloe and Lexi giggling as they walked away. Fink had laid his keys on the counter right beside me. I looked over at Jason then back at the keys in the hopes he could distract him long enough for me to take the key we needed off the ring.

“Uh, Mr. Fink, can you help me with this cash register? The door has been sticking lately,” Jason said, getting his attention.

“Let’s have a look here,” Fink answered walking over to help him. I quietly walked over and slowly picked up the keys.

“See how when you hit *open* it gets stuck unless you hit the side of it,” Jason said, hitting the machine.

“Don’t hit the machine, Jason, you’ll damage it further,” Fink barked.

Mr. Fink was very organized and luckily, he had each key labeled. I carefully flipped through each key until I found the one labeled *office*. Quietly pushing the key around the keychain, I saw Jason look at me out of the corner of his eye and lip the word *hurry*.

“There you go, the drawer roller was just dirty,” Fink said, pushing the drawer open and closed. I pocketed the key and carefully put the rest back on the counter just as he turned around.

“Everything alright Mark, you look pale?” Fink questioned, walking across the room and picking up his keys.

“Yes, I’m fine, just a little hungry.”

“Well, feel free to eat anything here, just make sure you pay for it,” he responded, opening the door. “I’m headed home, boys; make sure you lock up and clean the lot.”

We both let out a sigh of relief as soon as the door shut.

“That was close,” I said, looking out the window to make sure he left.

“Did you get it?” Jason said. “You were fiddling with them for so long.”

I took the key out of my pocket and tossed it over to him.

“Nice work,” Jason replied, holding it up in the air. “So, let’s go do this, we need to see that footage.”

I walked over and closed the door as he opened it. “We need to wait until after the movie when everyone leaves, then avoid the cameras as we go up.”

His office was located right behind the movie screen, so it would be obvious to anyone sitting there that we’d gone up to the office.

“The longer we wait, the more of a chance he’ll realize the key is missing and come back for it,” Jason said. He was right, but we had to take that chance in order to get up there without anyone noticing.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get it,” I reassured him. “So, you talked to Chloe finally.”

“Greatest moment ever, she’s into me, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she is,” I responded.

“Did you find out any more about what your mom was doing at the bar the night of the party?”

“Yeah, she had to pick up a friend and give them a ride home, not as interesting as we thought.”

“Ah, I was thinking she was like a secret assassin or something. Lawyer mom by day, killer mom by night.”

“You watch too many movies, she’s just a normal person. What would make her an assassin anyway?”

“I don’t know, one time when I was over for dinner, she was butchering this fish. I was watching her do it. She went in this trance or something and just kept stabbing it, blood was flying everywhere,” he explained.

“Maybe she’d had an argument with my dad or something that night!”



Chapter 14



We continued on, getting drinks and popcorn for people, until the end of the movie. We waited for people to leave before we could clean the mess they left outside. Veronica would always do the inside while we did the parking lot. She didn't like going out there alone at dark. Now that I thought about it, she was terrified of the darkness. She'd told me a story one time about when she first moved to town. She was walking her dog in the woods behind her house when he got off the leash. She chased him through the woods and lost sight of him. She heard a faint bark coming from a group of rocks. I looked down and there was a hole in the ground, where the dog had fallen.

She reached in and grabbed him out of it, moving the rocks out of the way. She said it was dark out already, so she had to use her flashlight on her phone to see. Behind the rocks, she found a den of some sort. She was trembling when she explained this story to me; she said what she saw there made her terrified to go out at night.

Some animal had been strung up to the wall, with all its insides taken out. She promised me not to tell anyone about it, but she said ever since then, she had a bad feeling about the town. I eventually went out to the place she said it happened, but nothing was there.

"Mark, you going to help?" Jason asked, grabbing the trash bags, heading outside.

Following him, I spotted one car still in the parking lot.

"Maybe one time, the four of us could come see a movie together," Chloe called over to us as we approached their car.

"Yeah, that would be great," Jason replied.

"I'd like that too," I smiled, looking over at Lexi.

"Well, have fun cleaning up," Chloe said. "See you guys at school Monday."

"Bye guys, drive safe," I said as they pulled away.

I could tell Jason was holding in his excitement, it looked as if he was going to explode. As soon as they pulled out of the parking lot, Jason began jumping up and down uncontrollably.

“Did you see that! She likes me!” he said. This was the first time I had seen Jason this happy in a very long time. He’d had a rough life already and deserved something like this.

“I saw, that’s awesome,” I replied.

“Lexi seems into you too! Why don’t you seem as excited as I am?”

“I am, there’s just so much going on in town that we need to figure out first. I can worry about girls once we find Veronica’s killer.”

“Look, man, I know you were in love with Veronica and all, and she’s only been gone a week, but you deserve to be happy. We can’t keep getting involved with stuff out of our control.”

Jason was right to a point, but we owed it to Veronica to get justice for her, whether it was because I felt partly responsible for her death, or I just wanted to find out what was going on.

“Let’s just take it one day at a time,” I answered. “Let’s lock up the shop, get in your truck and drive down the street out of view of the camera, then we’ll park and walk back behind the office to avoid the cameras.”

“Sounds good, let’s do this,” Jason answered, making his way to the shop. “Oh, Mark, I forgot, I have a charger in my truck that I think will fit Andrea’s phone.”

“Great, we need that too. Go in the shop and turn the light off, then climb up and get it out from the ceiling,” I said.

“But it’ll be pitch black,” he replied.

“You can do it, the camera can’t see you if the light is off,” I said, walking the bags of trash to the dumpster.

I lifted up the lid to dumpster and remembered that the last time I’d thrown garbage away there, I’d found Veronica’s bracelet. How did McGinty get the bloody charm from it and how did the bracelet end up there?

“Are you ready to go?” I heard Jason yell over as he walked toward the truck.

“You got the phone that quick?” I asked.

“Yeah, I got lucky.”

We parked just down the road from the drive-in, in the grass, and made our way into the woods. "It's just up ahead," Jason whispered as it started darkening around us.

"Why are you whispering?" I whispered back. I always found it odd how our subconscious automatically whispered when we heard someone else doing it.

"I don't know, because it's quiet out—and creepy," he said.

He was right, there was a light mist just hovering around us. It was quiet except for the faint hooting of an owl in the distance.

"Jason, are you there?" I called out, losing track of which way he went.

It was near pitch black now as Fink had the lights shut off at a certain time. I stopped to look around and all I could see was darkness. The moon was behind thick clouds also blocking a lot of the stars. I put my hand in front of my face and could barely make it out.

"Jason," I called out again quietly with no reply.

"Mark," I heard faintly.

"Hello, Jason, is that you?"

"Find me, Mark," I heard a whisper again.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I felt chills all down my body. There was a sudden eerie coldness around me just as the moon peeked out from the clouds and faintly lit up the woods. The glow of the moon revealed the back of Fink's office just up ahead. I bolted through the mist and saw Jason waiting by the door.

"Where'd you go?" Jason said.

"I got lost in the mist," I responded.

"You alright, you look scared to death?" Jason whispered.

"I'm fine but where'd the mist come from?" I questioned.

"It must have moved in off the ocean. Where's the key?"

I reached in my pockets and couldn't find it.

"I gave it to you," I said.

"Oh yeah," Jason said, reaching in his pockets.

Jason placed the key into the slot. "You ready for this?"

"Of course, let's go," I answered, pushing the door open with him.

I closed the door behind us, and he sat down at the desk, turning the monitors on.

“Know what you’re doing?” I asked him. Jason was way better with computers than I was.

“Yeah, I just have to access the footage from two nights ago and then play it,” he replied. “Just keep a lookout for Fink.”

“A lookout for what? This isn’t a movie,” I whispered trying not to laugh.

“You never know, Fink could come back at any minute. I think I got it!” he said, bringing up a video on the monitor. “Here goes...”

I walked away from the door and kneeled down next to the computer. “Fast forward it until you see their cars coming in.”

Growing more nervous by the minute, we began watching as the two cars entered the parking lot. Both parked in the back row next to each other. The position of the camera didn’t allow you to see who was in the cars, but we could see if anyone got in or out of them. After a few minutes of nothing, we could make out a truck in the top corner of the video.

“Is that you, leaving in my truck?” Jason questioned.

“Yes, I think it is. I thought I would have been out of the view of the camera. Wait, wait! Rewind it! I think I saw something.”

“What did you see?” Jason responded as he rewound the video.

“Pause!”

I leaned into the computer looking at the tree line, my eyes squinting. “Can you zoom in?”

After fiddling with the keyboard buttons, Jason finally zoomed in on the image.

“Now play it,” I told him.

As he played it, it became more apparent who it was sneaking back to one of the cars. “Ryan!”



Chapter 15



“He did kill her, we were right!” Jason said as he jumped up out of the chair.

“We don’t know that for sure,” I replied, trying to stay optimistic that she was still alive.

“Are you kidding me, Mark? Where else would he be sneaking in from? He’s shown violence with both of us before.”

Jason was right, Ryan had anger problems which he’d shown on the football field and with us. Maybe Andrea’s mom was right, maybe she had been killed. It would make sense that Ryan would kill her, to protect himself from whatever they all did to Veronica.

“So, if Ryan killed her because he didn’t want her talking, then whatever she had to say was worth being killed over,” I said.

“Yeah, I bet Andrea was going to tell you what they did.”

I wasn’t saying he’s wrong, but there were six other people there, including Charles. If Ryan did kill Veronica, was Charles a part of that?

“What was that, was that a car door?” Jason questioned, as he ran to the door.

“Close the video quick!” I said, going over to the window to open it.

I tossed the key on his desk and followed Jason out of the window. We climbed down the side of the building, jumping into a dense bush.

“Wait, stay here a minute,” I whispered to Jason as we lay beneath the thorny limbs. We watched for a few moments as the light in Fink’s office turned on.

“It’s Fink,” Jason whispered over to me.

“Be quiet!” I shrieked.

He walked over to the window and looked around outside before closing it. He stood there a while, just looking out the window in apparent fear.

“That was too close; we would’ve been done for,” Jason whispered back, starting to crawl farther into the woods.

Once we got about fifty feet from the office, we both stood up and took off running toward Jason’s truck. The adrenaline was racing through me, and I felt a huge rush of energy as we ran through the woods. Jumping off a fallen tree, I slipped and came crashing to the ground.

“Mark, Mark, get up; are you alright?” I heard Jason saying faintly.

Dizzy, everything looked as if it was in slow motion. I could just make out Jason standing over me, but his face was blurred. Something started running down my face. I wiped it but it kept coming.

“Keep your eyes open,” I heard Jason mutter as he ripped a piece of cloth from his shirt and wrapped it around me head.

Starting to come to, I felt an excruciating pain from my head. The bright light of Jason’s phone flashlight revealed what the liquid was. I looked down at my hands covered in blood, and all I could think about was whose jacket was lying next to me.

“Jason,” I said. “Jason, what is that?”

“You’re going to be alright,” Jason said as he was checking out my head.

“Jason!” I demanded.

“What is it? I’m right here, you hit your head on a rock,” he replied.

“Whose jacket is that?” I asked him, noticing blood on it.

Jason stopped and shone his light over at the jacket, getting a closer look. It was the same jacket Andrea was wearing at school the day she went missing.

“This is her jacket, Mark,” Jason mumbled.

A flash of light shone right by us as we heard someone yell, “who is there?”

“Turn your light out!” I whispered to Jason as I tried to stand up.

I could barely put one foot in front of the other as Jason helped me up.

“We have to go now,” Jason said as he pulled me through the woods.

Everything was in a blurry slow motion; my eyes kept opening and closing as time seemed to stop around me. Through the thin trail of the mist still around us, I saw something standing not too far away... something standing in the mist, watching.

“You there, stop!” we heard someone yelling through the woods as the bright light illuminated around us. Just as I thought we were going to get caught, we broke through the tree line and Jason threw me in the truck.

The light disappeared behind us as Jason sped down the road.

“Who was that?” I screamed, reaching at my head.

“Don’t touch it, Mark. It’s bad, really bad, we need to get you to a hospital.”

“No, what am I going to tell them? They will know I’m lying,” I called out as the pain began to radiate down my body.

“Hold on,” Jason said, reaching over to put my seat belt on.

I felt my body calling out for help, shutting down from the pain.

“Jas,” I tried to call out to him.



THE SUDDEN RUSH OF strength forced me to open my eyes, the sound of seagulls flying around me. I felt the wet sand beneath me, the tide changing, waves rushing higher and higher as I lay there, helpless. I tried to lift my arms but couldn’t. I was paralyzed, chained to sand. The water was rising higher and higher around me, covering most of my body. I tried to call out for help, but nothing came out as I opened my mouth.

Looking out to sea, a rock—a large rock—was just peeking out of the water. There was something sitting on it, staring right at me. I tried again to yell for help, but no words came out. Water began entering my mouth with every attempt, filling my lungs. I looked to my left and was frightened in terror as Veronica’s body was lying there, being eaten by crabs. I looked to my right and Andrea’s body was lying in the sand, covered in blood.

Waves getting higher, I could taste the salt on my lips. Water now covering my ears, *this is it, I'm going to die right here next to the two people I'd been fighting for.*

The blur on the rock was gone, covered in the high tide of the roaring ocean waves. I opened my mouth to take one last deep breath as the water covered our bodies. Trying so hard to move my body, I finally gave up, stopped fighting it. Maybe I deserved this for leaving Veronica alone that night, for pushing Andrea too far to tell me the truth?

I opened my mouth, accepting my fate, and let the oxygen flow out of my body. The burning sensation in my lungs was followed by a tranquil calming and I felt at peace. Just as I was about to close my eyes for the last time, I saw something swimming toward me. It swam right up to my face and the terror took over as the sight of this devilish mermaid creature hovering over me forced me to close my eyes.



Chapter 16



“**M**ark, oh thank God,” I heard as my eyes shot open.

Blurry, I wiped them to get a better look.

“It’s us, your family, Mark, you’re okay,” my mom said, running over to me.

“You’re in a safe place now. How are you feeling son?” my dad said, walking over to the bed.

That was the worst nightmare I had ever had; it was so real. And now I was in a hospital room with my family sitting around me. It had taken me going to the hospital for us all to be in the same room for once.

“What happened?” I said.

My mom walked over and grabbed my hand. “You were in a car accident. Do you remember anything?”

I gently felt my head and a bandage wrapped around it. I remembered what had happened, like an old memory entering my mind. Jason had wrecked the truck as we were leaving the woods.

“Is Jason alright?” I asked her, looking around. Before she could answer, the door opened and in walked a man in a white coat. The first things I noticed were his bushy eyebrows and what looked like a mustard stain on his shirt.

“Mark, I see you are up. Good very good. And how are you feeling?”

“I’m doing alright I guess,” I replied as he began examining me.

“Can you tell me your full name and what year it is?” he asked.

“Mark Parker and 2017,” I answered.

“Do you remember what happened to you?” he questioned.

I paused for a moment before answering, “Jason was driving me home from work and next thing I remember was waking up here.”

I couldn’t tell them the truth, about what we’d found in the woods. The thought crossed my mind that Jason could’ve wrecked on

purpose to cover up my head wound. I remembered him putting my seatbelt on and saying to hold on.

“Okay, that is good, it will come back to you in time. Initial scans of your brain suggested you could have been in a coma, but it looks like something didn’t want you sleeping.”

“What do you mean something didn’t want me sleeping?” I asked.

“Our brains work in mysterious ways sometimes,” he said.

He turned to my parents and whispered if they could speak outside. They left the room, and a nurse came in and replaced a bag of fluids that was connected to my arm.

“What is this?” I questioned, holding up my arm.

“It is an IV drip of fluids you need,” she responded, handing me a wire with a button on it. “Now this is a pain button, push it for more medicine.”

I nodded and looked over at Charles who was staring back at me. She exited the room and Charles walked over and sat next to me.

“Did you know about Mom and Damon Miller?” I blurted out, thinking he probably already did.

“Yes, I saw them a few weeks ago and I told Dad about it, that’s why they haven’t been getting along lately.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?” I questioned.

“They were trying to work it out, but I don’t think they are going to make it. How did you find out, anyway?”

“I saw them together the night of the football game. Why would she choose to be with him of all people?” I said.

“They had a fling in high school and—I don’t know man; she didn’t tell me.”

“Does Emily know about this?”

“I doubt it, her and Mom are still friends. I don’t know if you’ve realized, but Mom and Dad haven’t been close in years, so this was bound to happen.”

“What happened to Andrea?” I asked, wanting to press him.

“She ran away, you already knew that,” he said.

“She didn’t run away, Charles, did she? Look, I’m your brother, you can trust me,” I said, grabbing my head in pain, pushing the button the nurse gave me.

“Take it easy, Mark, you’re going to make it worse. Don’t you think maybe I am protecting you by not telling you anything? If you knew what I knew, you’d be dead by now,” he whispered, staring at the door. “Please stop looking into it before something happens to you.”

Just as I was about to answer, the door flew back open. “Mark! You’re alive!” Jason said as he walked in. His arm was in a sling, and he had cuts and bandages on his face.

“Jason, are you alright?”

“Dislocated shoulder, few cuts, I’ll be fine. Charles, what’s up?”

“I’ll give you two a minute,” Charles said, leaving the room.

“What’s his problem?” Jason questioned.

“I think he’s hiding something, he’s acting weird,” I answered.

“Your parents said you’ll be fine; they seem really mad at me though.”

“You could have killed us, you idiot. What were you thinking?”

Jason sat down next to me, looking at the door and then back at me. “You said it yourself. They wouldn’t believe you if you made up a story about your head wound so I had to make it believable.”

“So, you wrecked us on purpose?”

“You should be thanking me, I told them I swerved from a deer that ran out in front of us. I put your seatbelt on and sped up and once we got a good way away from the drive-in, I slowed down a little and crashed into a tree.”

“*Thanking you?* You could have killed us! I already had a head injury!”

“I’m sorry. In the moment, it felt like a good idea. We needed an excuse for your head wound.”

I kept hitting the button but was still in immense pain.

“Did the cops talk to you about it?”

“Yeah, Sheriff Richards believed the story,” he claimed.

“What about the jacket we found, and who was following us?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that, they didn’t see us.”

The door flung open again and Jason’s mom walked in. “Mark,” she said as she started crying, “are you ok?”

“I’m fine, thank you for asking,” I said.

“Jason, let’s go,” she said, glaring over at him.

“It’s not his fault, the deer came out of nowhere.” I covered for him making sure our story stuck.

“I hope you feel better soon, Mark. We’ll see you later,” she said as she and Jason left.

“How long are you going to be mad at me for, Mom?” I heard Jason ask as the door closed.

I lay back and started to feel tired as the pain medication finally kicked in. I slowly started blinking, my eyes feeling like they were holding weights. I began blinking uncontrollably, almost drifting to sleep. I heard a noise beneath me, under the bed. Like a clunking noise, it got louder. It sounded like it was moving to the front of the bed as I tried to sit up. I was in so much pain and fear that I was unable to move.

A hand popped up over the foot of the bed. Greenish, long fingernails grabbed a hold of the blanket, pulling itself further. I wanted to reach for the call button but could not move at all. All I could do was watch as this creature crawled further and further onto the bed. My eyes widened at the sight of the hideous thing. Now just inches from my face, hovering above me, I tried to scream for help, but nothing would come.

Its black gritty hair covered its face, dangling inches from mine. It slowly raised its head. Liquid began dripping from its eyes as it opened them, revealing a dark window into its soul. Staring into them, like I was in a trance, I couldn’t take my eyes off them. An image appeared of a structure on fire in its eyes as I began feeling a burning sensation all over my body. It felt as if I was on fire, burning alive. I could smell the odor of burning flesh.

“Mark, what is it, what’s happening?” my mom said as she walked into the room.

I realized I was on the floor. I got up and brushed myself off, looking under the bed for the creature. I rushed to the bathroom, looking in the mirror; my skin was not on fire.

“Sorry, Mom, just a dream,” I said, sitting back on the bed, trying to slow my heart rate. I took a sigh of relief; the dream was too real. Was I losing my mind? I’d been seeing this thing for a while now. She walked over and covered me back up with the blanket.

“Oh, you’re burning up,” she said as she felt my skin.

“The meds should kick in soon. I’m fine, what did the doctor say?”

“He was just a little concerned, he said when you were brought to the hospital, you kept saying something about a bloody jacket and drowning, do you remember doing that?”

“No, I have no idea what that means, Mom.”

If that jacket is found, they’ll know that I knew about it. We have to go back and get rid of it.

“Get some rest, Mark,” she said as I lay back and my eyes immediately closed, slipping further and further away. I forced them back open, not wanting to fall asleep again with that thing in my head.

“I’m not that tired, Mom,” I said.

“You look like you need to sleep. You’ve been out all day, and its already nighttime. I’m going to see if they’ll give you anything to help you sleep.”

“Mom, I said I’m fine. Please just leave me alone.”

She looked hurt but left as I sat up in pain. I glanced beside me and there were a few burned holes in the sheet I was lying on. A bang at the window forced me to look over. A raven was sitting at the window, pecking the glass. I couldn’t take my eyes off it; something about it was mesmerizing. I began feeling a weakness come over me, something I couldn’t explain as my mom walked back in.

She had brought the nurse with her who walked up and injected some kind of liquid into my intravenous. Realizing I was going to have to sleep now, I lay back down.

“Mom, can you stay here until I fall asleep, please?” I asked her, closing my eyes.

I slipped away, out of consciousness, before knowing if she’d answered.



Chapter 17



The next morning, I woke up to the nurse walking in the room and fiddling with the intravenous bag.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you, but it looks like you’ll be getting out today. Now this may sting a little,” she said as she ripped the drip out of my arm, causing it to bleed.

“Ouch,” I said.

She grabbed some bandages and wrapped them around. She obviously wasn’t very good at this. “You’ll be just fine, hold it up for a little while,” she said.

I waited for her to leave before I got up to walk to the bathroom. I immediately got lightheaded and barely made it to the counter to lean on. I reached down and turned the faucet on, just staring at the water dripping into the sink. filling it up. I stuck my head in it; submerged in the water, I opened my eyes.

Now, I remembered my dream, the dream I had of drowning. Why was I seeing these dreams, was I losing my mind? I heard the murmur of a voice. Lifting my head out of the water, I couldn’t make out who it was.

“I said, nice butt,” I heard the voice say again.

I turned to face them and rubbed the water out of my eyes to see who it was. Standing in front of me was Lexi Gray. It hadn’t even occurred to me that I wasn’t wearing any clothes under this hospital gown.

“Thank you,” I gasped reaching around the back to hold it closed as I walked back into the room. I could feel my face getting hot with embarrassment as I sat back on the bed.

“How are you doing?” she asked, as she sat down beside me.

“I’m doing better now they gave me pain meds.”

“I talked a little to Jason on my way here. He said you guys were driving home from work when a deer jumped out in front of you?”

“Yeah, Jason swerved left and went off the road into a tree,” I responded.

“Really? He told me he swerved to the right and hit a tree.”

I immediately panicked and pointed at my head. “Sorry, hit my head and all.”

“You’re going to use that as an excuse a lot now, aren’t you?”

“Oh yeah, I will be.”

“So how bad is it?”

“Just a cut on my head, they said I’m getting out today.”

“Good, so you’ll be at school tomorrow?”

“We’ll see but knowing my mom, I probably will be as long as she thinks I’m good enough,”

“Speaking of the devil,” I said as she opened the door.

“The devil,” she said awkwardly.

“It’s just an expression, calm down, Mom.”

“Hi Mrs. Parker,” Lexi said as she stood up.

“Please call me Daisy. Have a seat! How are your parents and Jimmie doing?”

“They’re fine, Mom and Dad are always busy with town events and Jimmie is busy with football.”

“Joyce always was a busy one, even when we were kids, she would always be involved with school activities. I don’t mean to interrupt you guys, but Mark, go get dressed so we can go home.”

“Yeah, I should get going, I’ll see you in school, Mark,” Lexi said as she stood up to walk to the door. I got up and headed for the bathroom. As I closed the door, I heard my mom call Lexi over to her. I cracked the door and tried to listen to what they were saying.

“Do you know what’s been going on with him lately?” I heard my mom whispering.

“I think he just misses Veronica and he’s dealing with it in his own way,” Lexi replied.

Looking in the mirror, I began unraveling the bandage from my head. As I got to the end of the bandage, it was stuck to my forehead. I peeled it away and revealed the large cut with stitches in it. I raised my hand to touch the wound but stopped in fear of causing more pain.

“Hurry up, Mark!” she called from the room.

I put my clothes on and went back in. "Ready, Mom."

"Come here, the nurse gave me this smaller bandage to put over your cut."

I walked over and sat on the bed as she slowly placed the new bandage on my cut. At least it was not as noticeable as the other.

"Let's get out of here. We can stop at Barny's for lunch," she said.

Walking out of the door, we were abruptly greeted by Agent Taylor. "Mark Parker, just who I wanted to see."

My stomach felt like it shot up into my throat as I swallowed with fear that she was here to arrest me. I immediately thought about the jacket; she must have found the jacket.

"Can I speak with you, Mark, just for a moment?" she asked as Sheriff Richards walked up beside her.

"You can speak with *us*," my mom blurted, getting between us.

The last time these two were in a room together, it didn't go so well.

"I'll be fine on my own, Mom," I replied.

Richards nodded his head at my mom, and she must have trusted him, despite me telling her that he'd seen her that night of the party.

"Okay, I'll wait in the lobby," she said.

We walked back into the room and Taylor closed the door behind us.

"Take a seat, Mark," Richards said, taking a seat himself.

"Am I in trouble?" I questioned, sitting down on the bed.

"If you were in trouble, you'd be in handcuffs," Taylor claimed.

"No, Mark, you're not in trouble, we just want to talk," Richards said.

"So, Mark, pretty nasty cut on your head, the doctor told me. Jason told us about the deer and all, and I was just wondering if you could tell us your account of what happened?"

I was glad Lexi had already told me that he'd said he swerved right, or I'd be in trouble.

"We were heading home from work when a deer jumped out in front of us, and he swerved right, but yeah... it all happened so fast. We're lucky to have gotten out with just minor injuries."

She wrote something down on her notepad and walked over to the window. "I've always liked the rain. When I was a girl, I lived in this amazing small town in Alaska, and we got rain all the time."

I looked over at Richards and he shook his head and gave me a weird smile.

"Yeah, I like the rain too, it's peaceful," I replied.

"The reason we're here, Mark, is because Mr. Fink thinks someone broke into his office. He said you and Jason were the ones working that night and wanted us to check if you guys had seen anything before closing up and leaving?"

I took a sigh of relief as I thought they would ask me about the jacket. Right as I was about to answer, Taylor's phone began ringing and it hit me that Andrea's phone had been in the truck. If they found that, we'd be suspects in her disappearance. I sat there a minute, frozen in terror. They had to have found it.

"Mark, are you there?" I heard Richards ask, as Taylor stepped out of the room.

I looked over at him. "She was with Damon that night because they're having an affair."

"What are you talking about? Not here Mark: Taylor is right out there," he said.

"I guess they've been doing it for some time. I hate him for ruining Jason's life, and now destroying my family. But he's done worse, much worse."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I went to Asheville jail and talked with him; he told me everything."

"We have to go," Taylor blurted as she burst in.

"What's the rush," he asked.

"McGinty was just found dead in his cell, he killed himself," she said. I felt my jaw drop and a sense of unease came over me.

I'm the reason he is dead, if I wouldn't have turned him in, he wouldn't be dead now.

Sheriff Richards stood up and walked to the door.

"Taylor!" I called out. "Did he do it, did he kill Veronica?"

She paused for a moment and looked over at me. "No," she said before walking out.

“No,” I said out loud. If he didn’t kill her, then why did he kill himself?

I couldn’t move from the bed, frozen in that spot.

“I killed Old Man McGinty,” I said again, out loud. Why did he have that charm and pictures of her? I needed to find out more about this. I finally forced myself to stand up and walked over to the window. Staring out into nothingness, at the falling rain, I was reminded of the stories we were told as kids.

Whenever it rained, it was the mermaid atop the cliff crying for her children who had fallen to their deaths. There were many stories our parents had told us about Mermaid Cliff, to scare us as children. We were always told how we, this town, were all connected—but alone in this world. The secrets of our ancestors were to be protected and passed on.

Charles and I had always joked about these stories, but now more than ever, some of these secrets were coming to light. Pressing my hand to the window, cold to the touch, I couldn’t help but think the closer I got to finding Veronica’s killer, the worse things got.

I couldn’t be further away now; Andrea and McGinty were dead and there was a murderer still in Rockport. Damon and my mom were having an affair. This was the worst time of my life, worst time ever in the history of this town. Rockport would no longer be alone in this world. The secrets of our ancestors, of our citizens, would be revealed to the world.

“Mark, what are you doing? Let’s go!” my mom said as she burst into the room.

“What are you looking at?” she questioned.

“Nothing, just watching the rain,” I answered, turning to walk toward the door.

“How was that? Did she interrogate you again?”

“No, she just wanted to know if I saw anyone at the drive-in before I left,” I answered, walking past her to open the door. Down the hallway, all the nurses were gathered in the nurses’ station, staring at the tv.

“What’s going on?” Mom asked as we walked up to them.

“McGinty hung himself in his cell last night,” the nurse said.

We both looked past the nurse at the television and saw reporters outside Rockport police station.

“Turn it up,” my mom demanded.

“As you can see, we are standing outside Rockport police station where hours ago, the leading suspect in Veronica McBride’s murder hung himself inside his cell,” the reporter said. “There is no confirmation yet as to how he did it, but we will stay with you until we get the full story.”

“Wow,” one of the nurses gasped.

“I guess he couldn’t live with what he had done,” another said.

“He didn’t kill that girl,” my mom claimed as she walked away.

The nurses gave me a dirty look and I turned to follow Mom into the parking lot.

“Get in,” she said as she opened my door.

We didn’t talk at all as we drove down the road. She parked the car in Barney’s restaurant parking lot and reached over to lock my door.

“What is it, Mom?” I asked her.

She sat there for another moment before looking over at me, “my uncle didn’t kill that girl.”

“How do you know that?” I asked looking back at her.

“You’re right, I did lie about that night, I was with Jason’s dad.”

I couldn’t believe she was about to tell me the truth, that she was having an affair with Damon. I couldn’t let her know I knew she was with him.

“I had to tell Taylor I was with you all night, or she might think you had something to do with Veronica’s death,” she explained.

“So, what were you really doing that night?” I asked.

If she wasn’t with me all night, that meant I could’ve left the house after Jason’s mom dropped me off. If I really was drugged, then who knew where I would have gone or what I could have done?

“Before I start, you need to know that your dad and I have been going downhill for a long time and it was only a matter of time until we called it quits. He’s seeing someone else too. Why do you think he’s been going out on so many *jobs* lately?”

If she was telling the truth, then how did I miss it? Now I thought about it, we hadn’t been much of a family in a long time.

“So, you guys are getting a divorce?” I asked.

“It’s complicated, Mark,” she answered.

She turned back and stared down at her hands before continuing. “Damon called me late that night, drunk out of his mind, from the South Side bar. I was at McGinty’s boat talking to him about the family at the time, I grabbed my keys and as I backed out of the boatyard, I hit a trash can, leaving a mark on the bumper. After I picked Damon up, I couldn’t take him back to Emily, because she would just get mad and call the Sheriff. And I couldn’t take him to our house. I took him back to McGinty’s. We’ve kept in touch secretly since my mother died.”

I kept staring at her, wondering how she’d kept so many secrets all this time.

“I was with McGinty at the time Veronica was killed, so there’s no way he could have done it, and now he’s gone.”

“Mom, I had no idea, you should have talked with me,” I said.

“I wanted to keep you safe, keep you away from all of this,” she cried. “I could have given the police the information that I was his alibi but that would mean that I wouldn’t have been able to be your alibi.”

I reached over, putting my hand in hers, we sat there for a few minutes without speaking.

“The time is coming where we will need you to be strong, for the family. Just please let this Veronica go, move on, and focus on the family.”

“I want to help with the family, whatever I can do.”

“Are you hungry? Let’s get some food,” she said, changing the subject.

I got out of the car to a packed parking lot at Barny’s. Everyone must have been gossiping about McGinty.

“You sure you want to go in here, it looks pretty busy?” I asked her.

“Yeah, we’ll be fine,” she answered.

We walked to the front of the restaurant, and I opened the door for her. I walked in and immediately spotted Ryan, Jimmie, Rachel, and Katherine at a booth.

“How’s the head, Mark?” Rachel asked as we walked by them.

“Fine, thank you for asking,” I answered, knowing gossip spread like wildfire around here.

“I heard Bambi got you, Marky,” Ryan said, turning back to look at me.

I chose not to answer him as we walked to the first open table we found and sat down.

“Hello, Daisy,” Barney said as he walked up to our table. “What can I get you guys?”

“Barney, getting a lot of business these days,” she said. “I’ll just have a sweet tea and he’ll have the burger and fry combo.”

“I’ll get those right out,” he said, walking over to the next table.

Everyone was watching the tv that was on in the restaurant. The reporters were still outside Rockport police station. I guessed they were waiting for Taylor to give a speech or something.

“Daisy Parker, it’s been too long,” Joyce Gray said as she sat down across from us.

“Hi Joyce, we should catch up soon,” my mom said.

I knew my mom didn’t care for the Grays, but she didn’t want to ignore her to her face. She told me they were friends in high school and drifted over the years, but I thought something more had happened.

“It’s good to see Mark and Lexi getting closer, like how we were back in school,” she added before turning her attention to the tv.

“It’s Agent Taylor,” someone called out, pointing at the tv.

“Turn it up!” called another.

Last time I was at Barney’s, we’d found out McGinty was arrested. Barney grabbed the remote and blasted the sound just in time for Taylor to walk up to the reporters.

“Can you tell us more about the situation?” the reporter asked.

Taylor looked up at the camera. “Town local Old Man McGinty was found dead of an apparent suicide in his cell this morning. Although we had arrested Mr. McGinty in suspicion with Veronica McBride’s murder, he was later found to not be involved at all with her death.”

A loud gasp let out from everyone in the restaurant. I looked over at Ryan, they were all whispering and arguing about something.

They must have been so relieved when he was arrested, so it would take any suspicion off them.

“Mr. McGinty was at his boathouse all night with a friend, who we will not name, as this alibi checks out,” she claimed. “With that said, the case is still on, and we will find whoever did this, and they will pay for what they have done,” she grunted as she started to walk away.

“Agent, Agent Taylor,” the reporters called to her. “What happened to Andrea Ross?”

“Did McGinty leave a note behind?” one asked.

She stopped for a moment, before turning to the camera. “We found the name *Aurora* written in blood on his wall. If anyone knows what this means, please contact us immediately.”

I looked at my mom in that moment and the sight of terror on her face scared me to death. I had never seen her so frightened, so shaken, her face pale white. She glanced over at Joyce who also had a terrified look. I quickly looked away so they wouldn't catch me staring. Why would they be so scared of the name Aurora?

“Why did he kill himself if he had nothing to do with it?” someone questioned loudly.

“Maybe he is guilty of another crime, something he couldn't live with any longer,” someone else suggested.

“Like father, like son!” another called.

My mother stood up. “He killed himself because he knew you gossiping idiots would never accept him again, even if he was innocent. He was one of the oldest original members of this town, and that used to mean something.”

She put some money on the table and walked out of the restaurant. No one said a word.

I followed her to the door. “I guess psycho runs in the family,” Ryan said as I walked by.

I stopped dead in my tracks. Enough was enough, and this guy was going to get what was coming for him. I turned back around and looked him in the eyes, feeling the rage building inside. “Now they are searching for a suspect again, maybe they should come knocking on your door, Ryan.”

Everyone, silent, was now staring at me and Ryan. I could see him fuming with anger.

“That’s right, Ryan was at Mermaid Cliff with Veronica the night of the party, the night she was killed,” I said.

Jimmie was holding Ryan back from coming at me.

“Is that true, Ryan?” Deputy Butler approached from the bar.

“Mark’s just upset because his mom is having an affair,” Rachel fired back.

How did she even know about that? I figured the damage was done so I turned and left the restaurant. I didn’t regret anything I’d just said in there. It was only a matter of time before it came out anyway. Ryan had killed her and Andrea; we just needed to prove it. I heard the door open behind me so started jogging to the car.

“Mark, wait!” I heard behind me.

I got to the car and turned around. Deputy Butler was running after me.

“Was it true, what you said in there?” she asked.

“I don’t have proof, but I know Ryan killed Veronica and Andrea,” I blurted.

“Andrea Ross ran away from home; her parents filed a report.”

“Don’t you see what’s going on? Secrets are coming out, secrets that were meant to stay buried. Dig deeper,” I said as I turned back.

“This isn’t over, Mark,” she said as I opened the door.

“Drive,” I demanded, putting my seatbelt on.

“What was that all about?” Mom asked me, pulling out of the parking lot.

“Ryan Johnson, he called you a psycho and I defended you,” I told her.

“One day, that jerk will pay for how he treats you,” she replied. “Maybe sooner rather than later.”



Chapter 18



We didn't speak much on the drive home. One thing was bothering me about what Taylor had said, though.

"Mom, what did Taylor mean by *Aurora was written on McGinty's wall*?" I asked, hoping to not upset her any further.

"I have no idea, Mark; he was an old, troubled man," she answered.

I had to warn Jason of what I'd just done, accusing Ryan in front of half the town.

They tried to kill Jason before because we were looking into her murder, so what were they going to do now that I told half the town what he'd done?

"Mom, I'm going to go meet up with Jason," I said, getting out of the car.

"Alright, be safe. Your bike is in the garage," she replied.

I grabbed my bike and headed down the driveway and onto the street. I rode as fast as I could toward the police station. I got to the top of Mermaid Cliff and noticed a man wearing a long black coat and black hat standing by the cliffs' edge.

"Get off the road," I heard abruptly and quickly turned to see a car speeding by.

I looked back to the cliff and—nothing, the man was gone. It must have been a tourist; everyone wanted to see the famous Mermaid Cliff now that it had made headline news.

I started back up the road again and noticed a bunch of debris on the side of the road and a damaged tree on its side. This must have been where Jason had wrecked the truck. I dismounted my bike and immediately thought of Andrea's phone. It could still be here; it could have fallen out of the car. I ran over to the debris and start looking around for the phone. Broken glass and leaves lay everywhere; his truck must have been totaled.

“Ouch!” I burst out loud, looking at my finger. A piece of glass was sticking out of it. Pulling it free, the pain shot through my hand as blood began to drip. I wiped it on my pants and kept looking. Nothing, Taylor must have found it in the truck. Running back over to my bike, I felt a vibration from my phone.

“Hello?” I said, putting it up to my ear.

“Mark, where are you?” Jason asked.

“I went back to the crash to look for Andrea’s phone,” I said getting back on my bike.

“I have the phone, I put it in my pocket before I started driving,” he replied.

A sense of relief came over me. “Great news. I was worried there for a minute. Did you charge it yet?”

“That’s the thing, it was crushed in the crash and the screen got smashed,” he said.

We’d never know what she had on her phone.

“That sucks, man,” I said. “Make sure you put it back up in the ceiling at the drive-in. How’s your truck, is it done for? I understand now why you did what you did.”

“It’s done for. Mom’s letting me use hers when I need it,” he responded.

“Alright, I will be there soon,” I responded, hanging up.

It occurred to me that the jacket could still be in the woods behind the drive-in. If we could find it, it could have Ryan’s fingerprints on it, proving he’d killed Andrea.

I turned back and parked on the other side of the road, getting off my bike. A flashlight was lying in the grass. Was this the same one Fink was holding when he chased us out of the woods? I picked it up to get a better look before tossing it back in the brush. I followed the broken limbs deeper into the woods. My father had taught me how to track animals when we were younger.

A tingling radiated down my spine as the eerie, familiar, silence crept in around me. I looked around frantically but nothing, no one was here. I felt I was being watched but kept searching. I frantically searched everywhere but couldn’t find it.

After about ten minutes of searching, I decided the jacket was no longer there; maybe Fink had found it and taken it to Taylor. I

grabbed my bike and pedaled up the hill. Sheriff Richards truck barreled over the hill and flagged me down.

“Get in,” he said.



Chapter 19



“HELP ME,” I HEARD. I looked around and was in the middle of the woods, dark... with the moon reflecting through the growing mist.

“Who’s there?” I called out.

“Find me,” I heard a whisper again.

I walked through the woods and realized the trees were floating around me. I was underwater, in a forest filled with water. I couldn’t make sense of this. I must have been dreaming.

“Who is out there?” I called as I looked around me, not understanding how I was talking submerged.

“Aurora,” I heard someone scream from beyond the trees.

Fire burned in the distance. I walked closer and hit a wall, a wall of water. Standing at the edge of the water, I looked past the trees. Like looking through a window, I saw myself walking out of the woods toward the fire, a giant fire, roaring flames growing higher and higher.

A gathering of people stood around the fire, chanting something, a word I couldn’t make sense of. I was watching myself walking toward the fire. How was I seeing another me? I was pushed back, away from the window, back toward the dark of the forest. Trying to run, I was swimming now. The water was pulling me, like being caught in a current.



“MARK, YOU’RE HAVING a dream,” Taylor’s voice came from above me as I sat up.

I was sitting at a table in the police station across from Taylor and Richards.

“Mark, I’ve known you a long time, but there’s something going on with you,” Richards said. “I want to help you, but you need to tell us what you know.”

“I’ve been under a lot of stress lately.”

“*Aurora* was written on his wall,” Taylor said. “In Damon’s cell.”

“Who is this *Aurora*?” I asked. “How was that name written in two different cells, in two different towns?”

“We were hoping you would be able to tell us,” Richards said.

“I’ve never heard of that name until it was written on McGinty’s cell wall,” I answered.

“Do you know what *externus* means?” he asked.

“Extra what?”

“EX-TERN-US,” Richards slurred, trying to pronounce it better.

“Never heard of it.”

“It means *outsider*, in Latin, took me a while to figure it out,” he said. “I’ve been called that ever since I moved to Rockport years ago. You know I’ve only been here for a few years, and you know how small a town this is, don’t you, Mark? Well, this small town does not like its outsiders. It took me all of the years I’ve been here to gain the respect and trust of the citizens in Rockport, but as soon as I went around asking everyone who or what this *Aurora* is, all I got was a door slammed in my face. People here know what it means but won’t tell us, seeing how we’re *externus*. So, Taylor here mentioned that I should look up this *Aurora* in Latin, too. And we found that it means morning or Goddess of Dawn. Which doesn’t really make sense with this case, dead end.”

“I never heard of Latin in this town, *Aurora*, or *externus*,” I cut in.

“We were hoping you could help us with this. Taylor tells me you’ve been helping her with the case secretly,” he said.

“No, sorry, I can’t help with that. Am I under arrest, or can I go?”

“You’re not under arrest, but you’re on a short leash; if you continue on the path you are going, we won’t be able to protect you

anymore,” he answered. “And believe it or not, we are trying to protect you, Mark.”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“Listen, Mark,” Richards whispered, glancing back at the one-way mirror. “There’s something bigger going on here, this killer is among us, someone we pass on the streets every day. Someone we smile at while we shop or eat. We need your help before they strike again.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you.”

Richards sat back with a slight smile. “A wolf.”

“What?” I questioned.

“One more thing,” Taylor cut in. “Where were you the night Andrea went missing?”

“I was working the drive-in with Jason; check the footage,” I said.

“Thing is, the footage from that night is gone, erased,” she answered.

They have a picture of me standing next to Andrea’s car that night; why are they asking me this?

“Why are you asking?” I questioned.

“Another body was found, Andrea Ross’s,” Richards said.

They had just confirmed what Jason and I had been assuming for days now. Her mom knew she wouldn’t just run away from their family. She was going to tell me everything that happened that night of the party, and she was killed for it. We’d seen Ryan sneaking into the drive-in on Fink’s camera, which has now been erased, probably by Ryan.

He had to have gone to Mermaid Cliff and taken Andrea before I got there.

“Mark, are you there, did you hear us?” Taylor asked.

“Where did you find her? Do you know who did it?” I questioned.

“We found the body in the woods behind the drive-in, where you work,” Richards answered. “We have our suspects, but we’re still looking into it.”

The body was in the woods all along. Jason and I went through there, and we must have walked right by it.

“How was she killed?” I asked.

“Strangulation,” Richards responded.

I wondered if they'd found the jacket covered in blood. I began to panic. Was my blood from my head wound around there? After I'd hit that rock, it could have dripped onto or near the jacket. It didn't help my cause that I worked at the drive-in and that Fink had chased people out of the woods that night.

"Veronica McBride, McGinty, Damon Miller, and Andrea Ross," Taylor blurted. "For a town that's seen only one suicide every twenty-five years and no murders in the past hundred, this sure is unusual."

She was right, this place, these people.

"I agree, there is something strange going on; this was always a peaceful town when I was growing up," I said. "You need to find out who or what this Aurora is, maybe they are the serial killer."

"Serial killer, you're right Mark, and the more this story grows, the more attention it is getting from all around," she answered.

"The Rockport killer," Richards blurted. "The people here have too many secrets. We need to uncover what is going on here and we need your help, Mark."

"As you're not an *externus*, you could help us, talk to your neighbors and your friends' parents," Taylor suggested. "Find out what they know about the town's history and report back to us."

"Four people dead in a week, that just doesn't happen around here," Richards said. "I know you're just a kid, but we need your help."

"I'll see what I can do, we need to figure this out," I agreed. It seemed a little weird for the FBI and the sheriff to request the help of a kid, but I was close to a lot of these people who turned up dead.

"Well, you better get home, it's getting late," he said.

I still felt a little wobbly and dizzy when I stood up. Richards gave a weird look to Taylor. She smiled at him, and they both stood up.

"You still feeling out of it, you did take a hard fall?" Taylor asked. "Let me drive you home, I can borrow one of the squad cars here."

"Sure, thanks," I replied walking out of the room.

Taylor walked out from behind me and went up to a car. "We'll take this one, get in."

I grabbed my bike, surprised it was still there, and walked it to her car.

"Pop the trunk!" I called over to her as she started the car.

Putting the bike in the car, I spotted my mom driving past the station at that same exact moment. I ducked in the hopes she didn't see me. I peered around the car and watched as she continued driving away, out of sight. That was close. I couldn't have her knowing I was talking to Taylor again without her there.

"What's going on back there?" Taylor called out of the window.

I walked over and got in the passenger side of the car.

"So, what do you think this Aurora is?"

She paused for a moment, looking out the window, "I feel like I can somewhat trust you, Mark, but we have no other choice."

"I'll do whatever I can to help, to find what Aurora means."



WE PULLED UP OUTSIDE my house and I hopped out. Before I could say a word, she sped off.

Just as I walked inside, my mom called out, "Mark, is that you?"

"Yes, Mom, sorry. I got busy with Jason," I said as I walked into the living room and was shocked when I saw Jason sitting there.

I froze, caught in a lie, I quickly thought about how I would get out of this one.

"Did you hear about my dad?" Jason said, his mom sitting next to him.

"Jason was with me all day," Emily said, tears falling down her face.

"I'm so sorry, I was at Mermaid Cliff, I just needed to be alone and think."

I sat down next to my mom, and she moved a little closer to me. "You can talk to me about anything, Mark."

"They said he wrote *Aurora* on the wall in his cell, what does that mean?" Jason asked.

I looked at my mom, but she didn't answer.

"Your dad wasn't in the right frame of mind lately. When I went to see him, he was more distant than ever before."

“Something happened to him that night Veronica died. He disappeared and turned up in a police station where he later killed himself and wrote a word on the wall, the same word an old man had written earlier,” Jason said. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Suicide never makes sense, you guys should know that more than anyone,” my mom answered, looking at both of us.

“Veronica was murdered, Mom, not a suicide,” I challenged.

“How do you know that? I talked with Richards, and he told me the only reason it was ruled a homicide is because they found someone’s DNA on her and she had a ripped shirt,” she said. “With how close everyone tells me you two were, maybe you guys had sex at that party and her shirt ripped when she fell off the cliff.”

I wasn’t sure why my mom was so mad and saying this stuff in front of Jason and his mom, but it was pissing me off. I stood up. “Why would you say that stuff, Veronica wouldn’t kill herself!” I said as I stormed off, walking upstairs.

“Mark, I’m sorry,” I heard her yell.

She was probably upset because her own boyfriend had killed himself. I walked halfway up the stairs and sat there as Jason walked toward me.

“Shh,” I whispered to him as he sat next to me.

“Do you really think Veronica killed herself?” Emily asked my mom.

“No, maybe. I don’t know anymore,” my mom answered. “Mark doesn’t know where he was that night. What if he had something to do with it and doesn’t remember?”

“If he really loved her as much as Jason tells me he did, I doubt he would have hurt her,” Emily responded. “Have you talked to Charles? Wasn’t he there the night of the party?”

“Yes, he was with his friends at the party all night. He said Mark left without Veronica,” she answered. “Maybe they had some sort of fight and Veronica went out looking for him?”

I’d had enough of listening to them, so crept upstairs and into my room.

“You alright?” Jason asked as he closed the door behind him.

“Am I alright?” I asked. “You lost your father today, are *you* alright?”

“At first, I was in shock, but then I was kind of glad it was over, finally my mom can eventually be happy again,” he responded. “She’s been so depressed for years, and I think him being gone will help her in the long run. He never was a real dad to me though, you know that. The only things I don’t understand are the suicide and word he wrote. My dad had a lot of issues, but never acted suicidal.”

“We can look into it, ask around. Someone has to know what he was thinking the last few days. We’ll figure it out, we always do.”

“What do you think the word *Aurora* means, and why would my dad write that?”

“It has something to do with this place, maybe it’s the killer’s name,” I replied. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Getting better, pain meds help a lot,” he said. “My mom said I can use her car tomorrow, so I’ll pick you up with that.”

A knock at the door made us both jump. “Jason, are you ready?”

“Yeah, Mom, I’m coming,” Jason responded. “I’ll see you at school tomorrow?”

“I’ll be there,” I replied, as Jason opened the door to leave.

“Bye, Mark. I hope you feel better,” Emily said as she followed Jason down the stairs.

“Mark, can we talk a minute?” my mom asked as she walked in the room.

“Yeah, what’s up?” I asked, not wanting to argue.

“I’m sorry for what I said down there. I was just upset with everything that had been going on,” she said.

“You mean with your boyfriend dying?”

“That’s not fair, Mark.”

“I know, Mom. Who or what is *Aurora*, and don’t lie to me this time.”

She walked over and sat on the bed next to me. “I’ve never heard of that name.”

“You know a lot of history of the place, are you sure you’ve never heard it?”

“I’m sure,” she answered as she stood up. “Get to bed, it’s back to school tomorrow.”

School was the furthest thing from my mind right now. I wasn’t looking forward to seeing Ryan in school but didn’t think he would

risk doing anything else now I'd called him out in front of the town.

I heard Charles getting home pretty late that night.

"Mark, you still awake?" he whispered as he came into my room.

I rolled over and sat up in bed. "Yeah, is everything ok?"

"I just wanted to check in with you, I'm sure you heard about Andrea, so be careful out there with the killer still on the loose," he said.

I could tell he had been drinking, with his stumbling and stuttering.

"Ryan is the killer, Charles," I whispered back. "Why did you tell me *if I knew what you knew I'd be dead*. What do you know, Charles?"

"I'm warning you, Mark, stop looking into this, or you will end up like them. Don't you see I am protecting you from this?"

"So, you're admitting Ryan killed Andrea?"

"All I'm saying is, you don't understand what's going on, so stop pissing people off," he said, as he stumbled out of my room.



Chapter 20



I didn't get much sleep that night. I tossed and turned and couldn't get my mind to shut off. Why did Ryan kill Andrea and hide her in the woods behind the drive-in? I glanced out the window at the moon, a full moon, shining brightly into my window. Aurora... thinking more about it, it actually sounded familiar. Not Latin though, I'd never heard anyone speaking Latin here. Where did I know that name from?

Hours passed, couldn't sleep, thinking hard.

I remembered. A few years earlier, Cheryl Wood had written a school report about an ancient myth in Rockport. I couldn't remember much about it, but it was titled *Aurora*. I needed to talk to her. I closed my eyes, trying to get some sort of sleep.

In what felt like five minutes, my alarm went off. I reached over, knocking it off the stand. Eyes heavy, glued shut, I couldn't wake up. After almost falling back to sleep a few times, I forced myself up as the thought of Cheryl knowing more about this Aurora gave me motivation.

In the bathroom, my mother had left a clean bandage for my head. I undressed and turned the water on to the shower. I turned it as hot as it could get and stared into the mirror.

The room heated up and steam filled in around me. My eyes began to cross as I snapped out of it. I looked closer and wiped the fog from the mirror. There was something on my shoulder. I turned and saw a scratch from my shoulder all the way down my back. In fact, there were four almost perfect scratches, like a hand, in all. I must have scratched it in the car crash. I leaned under the water and jumped back as the heat burned my head.

"Ow!" I screamed. I leaned back under the hot water, burning my skin again. I held myself there, cringing with pain. I deserved this; I'd done nothing but ruined lives. Standing there longer, grunting in pain, an image of the devilish mermaid shot into my mind as I quickly

came to and jumped back out of the water, almost slipping on the damp floor.

Why do I keep thinking of that thing? I turned the water colder and slowly leaned back into it, easing my pain. The last of sleep this past week was really starting to affect me. I decided a sink bath was good enough and turned the shower off.

I wiped the mirror down and saw the cut on my head was already getting better. I walked downstairs and smelled that burnt toast and bacon aroma I loved so much.

“Mom,” I called out.

“In here, Mark,” she responded.

I was stunned to see my parents and Charles all sitting around the kitchen table.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Breakfast,” my dad answered.

I began grabbing everything on the table as my appetite increased.

“Slow down,” Charles said. “There’s enough to go around.”

“In light of everything that’s happened lately, we thought it’d be nice to sit down together,” my dad responded.

“We wanted to tell you both at the same time, so there’s no confusing it,” my mom started, looking over at my dad.

“We are getting a divorce; it’s best for both of us,” she continued. “I know you guys won’t understand it, but over time, people can grow apart.”

“Whatever makes you guys happy,” Charles said.

“Yeah, if that’s what it takes to make this family back to somewhat normal, then I’m ok with it,” I responded. “Will we still see you both a lot?”

“Of course, Mark, I’m going to be staying in town at the inn until we get this figured out and then I’ll get my own place,” he replied.

“Then you guys can come stay with me whenever you want.”

“How’s your head, Mark?” she asked me.

“It’s fine, I don’t have much pain anymore.”

“Listen, boys, you both are Parkers, which means something,” she said. “With everything going on, I don’t want you guys getting ideas in your heads. We are a family, and family comes first.”

“How about I take you out on the boat after school today, boys?” Dad suggested, changing the subject.

“I can’t, I have football,” Charles responded.

“Mark?” he turned to me.

Not wanting to upset him, I nodded and finished eating my food.

“I’ll pick you up after school then,” he said getting up from the table.

“Sounds good, see you guys later,” I replied heading for the door, still chewing.

Just as I opened the door, Jason pulled up in his mom’s car.

“I just had an awkward family breakfast,” I said, getting into the car.

“Sounds rough,” Jason said, pulling away from my house. “Do you think people will look at me weird because everyone knows my dad is gone?”

I looked out the window at the light rain falling around us.

“Honestly, probably yes, but don’t worry about what they say. Has it rained every day this week?” I asked Jason, trying to get his mind off things.

“Yeah, I think it has,” he replied. “My mom tried to get me to stay home today and *grieve*, but that sounds too depressing.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you, if you ever need anyone to talk to, I’m here.”

It began to rain harder as we pulled up to school. “Must be a storm coming in off the ocean,” I said.

“We’re going to have to run, or we’ll be late for first period,” Jason said.

“One, two, three!” I said as we got out of the car, running for the front door.

“See you later,” I said, wiping the water from my face.

I got to class right on time and sat in my usual seat in the back of the room.

“Hey, Mark,” Patrick said, sitting down next to me.

“How’d your Rockport picture project turn out?” I asked him.

“Still working on it, just need to tweak a few things,” he said.

“Crazy what’s been going on in town, huh?”

“Yeah, it is crazy,” I agreed.

“Everyone, listen up,” Mr. Grumble called out. “I just want you all to remember to use precaution when walking around town. Always travel in pairs. The killer is still out there, and you never know who could be next.”

I didn’t know if he was trying to scare us or was just really scared, but he had a slight smile, which was very creepy.

“I bet the killer goes to this school, in fact, they could be in this very classroom,” Cheryl blurted. Everyone started talking about who they thought could be the killer.

“Cheryl, I will not have that in my classroom, so keep your suspicions to yourself,” Mr. Grumble scolded. “The police are not looking at anyone in this school as a suspect.”

“Like father, like daughter,” Patrick whispered over to me.

After class, I tried to catch up to Cheryl as she made her way through the crowded halls, but I ran into Jason instead.

“Why didn’t you tell me what you did, Mark?” he asked, cutting me off from chasing Cheryl.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, losing sight of Cheryl in the distance.

“That you told Ryan you knew he was on Mermaid Cliff the night Veronica was killed,” he said.

“Jason, I’m sorry. I meant to tell you, but I got distracted after I left Barney’s,” I pleaded.

“How could you do that? You know they tried to hurt me before for knowing something.”

“They won’t do anything, trust me; they won’t risk it with the cops looking at him now.”

“You just killed us both,” he said, opening his locker.

“I promise, they won’t risk it.”

I tried convincing him that it would be ok as he unlocked his locker. As he opened it, a red liquid shot out at him, drenching his shirt. I looked in the locker and was shocked at what I seen. A pig’s head sat on his books, with a note that read, *you shouldn’t have squealed*.

“Jason, wait!” I called out as he took off running down the hall.

“Jason Miller and Mark Parker fighting! Never thought I’d see the day,” Russell blurted as he walked past me. I slammed the locker

behind me, locking it.

“Mind your own business, Russell,” I said. Heading to second period, I tried to think of a way to calm Jason. *The Seven* were pushing harder than I thought they would. With Jason losing his dad and these new threats, it was likely to push him over the edge.

“Mr. Parker, stay after class today. I need to talk with you,” Mrs. Roberts whispered to me as I entered the room. Nodding to her, I walked to the back of the room and sat down.

I had a feeling I knew what she wanted to talk about. I hadn't really been keeping my grades up lately and she probably just wanted to check in. I glanced across the room and locked eyes with Lexi. She gave me a slight smile and looked away. She was the only thing making me happy in all of this mess. I didn't know why she liked me; we hadn't talked much at all until this week. The closer I got with Lexi; the further Veronica was from my mind. Part of me felt guilty, but I knew I couldn't look at it that way.

After class, I hung around until everyone had left before I approached Mrs. Roberts. I walked up to her desk, and she began rummaging around in her drawer.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

“I just wanted to make sure everything was alright with you,” she responded. “Losing a close friend and getting in a car accident aren't things you can take lightly. I don't want you to feel alone. If you ever have bad thoughts, please talk about them with someone.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. My parents have been talking with me about stuff and I'm starting to do better,” I replied. Lying wasn't my strong suit, but lately, I'd been pretty good at it.

“I'm glad to hear that, Mark, now if you can just apply that to your schoolwork,” she said, getting up to open the door.

“I'll work on it,” I responded as I left. Later that day at lunch, I was hoping to talk with Jason about our last conversation but couldn't find him anywhere. We had eaten lunch together at school since we were little kids. It was his favorite 'class' of the day, but he wasn't there. I feared things would never be the same again around here.

I sat down at a table alone and texted him, hoping he was just late.

“Hey there, how are you feeling?” Lexi asked as she and Chloe sat across from me.

“My head?” I asked. “It’s getting better. Either of you seen Jason today?”

Lexi looked over at Chloe, thinking she would have seen him.

“I ran into him in the hallway after second period; he said he was leaving school for the day and that his mom wanted him home,” Chloe said. “He was wearing some weird shirt I’d seen in the lost and found and he was acting really odd.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” I replied, not wanting to tell them the truth. “Just hang out with him, distract him from what’s going on.”

“Did you hear Jimmie is having a party at our house tomorrow night?” Lexi asked.

“The first since Veronica,” Chloe chimed in.

Lexi looked over at Chloe and elbowed her in the side.

“No, I didn’t hear about that,” I answered. “You can talk about Veronica around me. It’s all right.”

“Do you think you and Jason would come to the party?” Lexi asked.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, with your brother and Ryan not really liking us,” I said.

“Trust me, they won’t bother us,” Lexi replied.

“I’ll talk with Jason and let you know what he thinks,” I told her.

“What are you doing sitting with this guy?” Jimmie said as he sat next to me, putting his arm around my shoulders.

“We already talked about this. Leave us alone,” Lexi said.

Jimmie took his arm off me, turned, and whispered in my ear, “you and your little pig friend are going to pay for calling out Ryan.”

I wasn’t shaken by what he said and didn’t show fear as he got up to walk away. I didn’t think they would risk any more attention toward them, but it seemed they were getting desperate to cover this up.

“Is it true, what you said about Ryan being with Veronica on Mermaid Cliff the night of the party?” Chloe asked me.

“I didn’t see it myself, but someone I don’t want to put in danger told me they saw him there,” I answered. I couldn’t tell her who else was there because Lexi’s brother was one of them.

“Now you brought that up, I remember those seven left the party together right around the time you and Veronica did,” Lexi said.

“Ryan is an impulsive guy, but I can’t see him actually killing anybody,” Chloe said.

“What if those seven picked up Veronica after the party and drove her to the cliff?” Lexi questioned.

“Then what happened?” Patrick blurted as he sat down next to me.

“Hi, Patrick,” Lexi and Chloe said at the same time.

“Hello, sorry for interrupting, but I’ve noticed weird things with those seven also,” he said.

“I don’t know what would have happened next, once they got to the cliff,” Lexi said.

“Well, it’s simple, isn’t it? They pushed her off.” Patrick suggested.

“I don’t think the other six people there would stay quiet if that happened,” Chloe challenged.

“Let’s just say, for instance, Ryan did kill Veronica that night, and the other six stayed quiet, why would Ryan then kill Andrea, and how do Old Man McGinty, Damon Miller, and this Aurora fit into this?” Patrick questioned.

“Maybe he killed Andrea because she was about to tell someone what he’d done that night,” I blurted, not sure how we all came to talk about this, but it could be helpful.

“That kind of makes sense,” Chloe agreed.

“If what you guys are saying is true, then my brother and your brother are accessories to murder,” Lexi said as she stared at me.

“We probably shouldn’t talk about this here, at school,” Chloe whispered.

“You’re right, maybe we could meet up sometime and talk this over,” Patrick replied. “Doesn’t seem like Agent Taylor is getting anywhere, and we know Sheriff Richards is a drunk.”

Lexi looked over at me and I nodded to her.

“Tomorrow night, my brother is having a party at our house, you could meet us there and we could try and figure this out,” Lexi said as Patrick’s face lit up with joy.

“Do you mean that for real?” Patrick asked.

“Yes, I mean that seriously,” she said.

I can imagine how excited Patrick was as no one ever really talked to him.

“I’ll be there,” he agreed as the bell rang.

Heading to class, Lexi walked with me. “Do you really think that could be true?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. So many secrets are coming out, anything is possible,” I answered. “I don’t want to believe Charles could have anything to do with this, but he has been acting weird since that night.”

“We’ll figure it out,” she said as she grabbed my hand. I slightly pulled away but finally grabbed it back as we walked down the hallway to class.

“Too soon?” she asked.

“No,” I answered. I wasn’t sure what to say; I had never even held hands with Veronica.



Chapter 21



After school, I waited out front until my dad picked me up. As it was lightly raining, I wasn't sure if he still wanted to go out on the water.

"Hey son, sorry I'm late, had to help your mother with something," he said as I got into the car.

"No problem, are we still going out on the boat?" I asked.

"Yes, it's just a light rain, we'll be fine," he answered.

We hadn't been boating in a long time; we used to go out and catch bass and all sorts of other fish for Mom to cook up for dinner.

"When were you on the boat last?" I asked him as we headed down the road for McGinty's boatyard.

"It's been a little while, McGinty took care of it for me," he replied.

"Who's taking over the boatyard now he's gone?" I questioned.

"Randy Morris, he was the mechanic there and knows a lot about boats," he responded. "So, how's school going, keeping your grades up, I hope?"

"I'm doing pretty good, it's tough with everything that's going on in town," I answered.

"Shame what happened to Jason's dad. That guy could never get clean long enough to give his family the attention they deserved," he said. "Plus, with this mysterious killer on the loose, the town's all out of whack."

"Yeah, it's not the quiet little town we knew it as anymore," I responded. "Do you know anything about this *Aurora* people are talking about?" I asked.

"At first, when I heard it, was on McGinty's cell. I just figured he wasn't in the right frame of mind and just wrote anything," he said. "But then when I heard it was on Damon's cell wall, it occurred to me that years ago I had heard that name."

"Really, where did you hear it from?" I asked.

“About, well, twenty-five years ago, Margaret Wood took her own life on Mermaid Cliff,” he said.

“Cheryl’s mom was the fourth suicide?” I blurted.

“Not her mom, Jack was married before Cheryl’s mom, but she committed suicide on the cliff, and Jack Wood went crazy thinking it was a conspiracy and there was something more going on. One night, he went mad and started setting fire to buildings in town, swearing he would kill all responsible. Luckily, no one got hurt, but the town voted to outcast him, and last I heard he moved outside of town on the coast.”

“Wow, I just heard he ran away because people thought he was crazy,” I replied.

“Well, the town likes to keep things quiet, you know that,” he said. “He supposedly had old documents from the town about demon worship and how our ancestors would sacrifice someone every full moon. I remember he showed a few of us the documents and I recall seeing the name Aurora in them.

“Within a few days of that, he was in a bad car accident and spent six months in a coma. There was something else in those documents. Something about two ancient cults, Syreni, and the Order of Lai, or something like that. After he woke from that coma, he never left his house that I know of. He certainly hasn’t been back to Rockport.”

“Do you believe him, his story, and do you think someone here threatened him to keep quiet?” I asked.

“That’s like asking me if I believe in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus,” he said. “I think he stumbled upon documents from a long time ago when people believed in things that weren’t true, and maybe it was a story written a long time ago. I don’t know if Cheryl knows much about this at all, she lives with her grandmother now.”

Cheryl must have gotten a hold of those documents because her school report had the name Aurora in it a few years back. I needed to talk with her and maybe with her father to find out what this Aurora is.

“Why do you think there has been one suicide every twenty-five years on Mermaid Cliff?” I asked.

“When I was a boy, about your age, I asked my father that same question. At the time, there had only been three suicides in Rockport, but it was still a big deal.”

“My father told me the only famous thing in this town was Mermaid Cliff. Our first mayor died there, so it only seemed right that people would use this as a way to go. I think it’s just a coincidence that it’s been every twenty-five years. Now, that was then. With Veronica, I believe she was murdered.”

He was making a lot of sense and I was glad he was telling me all of this information.

“Unfortunately, in today’s world, crime and murder are ever-growing, and it was only a matter of time before it spread to a little old town like Rockport; with a lot of externus living here now, I’m saddened but not surprised,” he said.

Externus. He’d just used the Latin word for outsiders that Richards had told me about.

“I didn’t know you spoke Latin,” I said.

“Our ancestors spoke Latin and some words carried through that some people in town still use,” he replied. “The reason Latin is here is because long ago a few rogue people from ancient Europe snuck on the ship that landed here. A lot of the oldest members here refuse to talk to any outsiders, that’s just how they are. When I was in school, they taught us the old language, and said we needed to carry our ancestors’ traditions.”

“Isn’t it a little strange and creepy how this town is?” I asked. “I never really thought about it until recently, but everyone is so secretive and set in their ways.”

“Growing up, we didn’t have tv’s or any communication with the outside world, you have to understand that,” he explained. “We were all raised the way our parents and their parents before them were taught.”

“It’s just all weird to me,” I said.

“Well, your generation, with all its technology and social media, will stop that trend of our little old town and start your own community,” he said. “But there will be some traditions you will need to carry on.”

“Why have I never met your family before?” I asked him.

“Well, your grandfather, William Harrington, was murdered when I was a boy. The only other family I had was a brother who abandoned me in a time of need. Never saw him again. Your mother and this town saved me.”

Pulling into the boatyard, I saw a man in ripped-up overalls and covered in grease, standing by the docks, just staring at us.

“There’s Randy,” my dad said as he waved over to him.

“Doesn’t look too friendly,” I said.

“He was McGinty’s closest friend here; if he trusted him, I do too,” he answered.

He parked over by the bait shop, and we got out of the car, heading for the boat, an old beat-up fishing boat we’d had many memories in. Untying the boat, the rain was stopping around us, skies clearing.

“Just in time,” my dad said as he got in. “Now just wish me luck with starting this thing.” He walked to the back of the boat and checked out the propeller before trying to start it. “It looks good!”

He began cranking it, but it wouldn’t start, black smoke spitting out after each attempt.

“Does it have gas?”

“Gas is good,” he replied, trying it again.

After a few attempts, it started up and he came up to the wheel to steer us out of the docks. I saw the fishing rods and bait all ready to go. Dad must have stocked it earlier that day.

“Hey there,” a voice came from the docks.

Dad stopped the boat engine and looked over to see Randy walking down toward us.

“Hey there, Randy,” my dad said looking up at him.

“Where you all headed?” Randy asked, looking in the boat.

I could see a scar that went from his eye to the other side of his cheek. I didn’t want to stare at it, but it made him look scary.

“Just out on the water, maybe a little fishing,” Dad answered.

“Sounds fun. Just wanted to let you guys know the radar shows a big storm coming in later,” Randy said.

“Thank you for letting us know, I’ll keep the radio on while we’re out there,” Dad answered.

“How’s the fish out there today?”

“There hasn’t been much coming in lately,” Randy answered, shaking his head. “The guys who go out every day haven’t had any luck this week.”

“Really, wow. I’ve been fishing here for years, and fish were always one thing this town was plentiful of, those and rumors,” dad said.

“Probably just the weather,” Randy replied. “That or something scaring away all the fish.”

“Well, we ought to be headed out before that storm comes,” Dad said, reaching to start the engine.

“Did you guys know McGinty?” he asked, putting a foot on the side of the boat, stopping it.

“Yeah, I did jobs for him sometimes,” Dad answered. “Think I saw you here a few times.”

“Alright, yeah, I think I remember you also,” Randy replied, looking my way. “You wouldn’t happen to be Mark Parker, would you?”

I hesitated for a moment; afraid he knew something. “Yes, that’s me, Mark Parker.”

“Come find me when you get back to the docks. McGinty left a box of stuff for you.”

“Are you sure?” my dad questioned with a stunned look.

“Yeah, I’m sure, he said you’d be around here sooner or later,” Randy answered.

“Alright I’ll send him over once we get back,” Dad answered, starting the boat again.

“Be careful out there, something isn’t right out on the water. This storm is disturbing the balance,” he said, kicking the boat away from the docks.

“What do you think’s in the box?” I asked as we pulled out.

“Have you seen him on your own at all?”

“Only with you, on your jobs here,” I lied. I couldn’t tell him the truth without revealing why I’d come. I couldn’t have him knowing I was looking into Veronica’s death. *What’s in the box, could it be the box I saw under his bed on the boat? Wouldn’t the cops have that box?*

“Hold on, water is a little choppy,” he urged as we went farther out.

“Where are we headed?” I asked, getting the bait ready on the hooks.

“Out by Mermaid Cliff,” he said.

I looked out over the boat as we approached the inlet. Mermaid Cliff was the highest part of the inlet, out on the farthest edge. It had always been a good spot for fishing.

“Here’s good,” he said as he stopped the engine, drifting the boat to the perfect spot.

“You remember how to cast your rod?” he said as I picked it up.

We used to go fishing a lot when Charles and I were younger so I could never forget how to cast.

“Watch and learn, old man,” I said as I threw it out on the water.

Charles never liked it out here; he got seasick pretty easily and didn’t like the waiting around for a fish to bite part.

Dad cast out on the other side of the boat and sat down. After a few minutes of silence, I looked over at him. “Why do you think McGinty hung himself?”

He looked out over the water for a few seconds before turning to me. “McGinty was quiet, he kept to himself, but he loved this town and what his ancestors meant to it.

“He couldn’t fathom the town thinking he killed someone. Whether he was found innocent or not, his reputation would have been tarnished. He was a hundred years old; maybe he was just tired, and writing *Aurora* on the wall... well, maybe he wanted to scare us.”

He had a point. If I was blamed for a murder and then found innocent, I couldn’t live in the same town anymore, especially a small town that liked to gossip.

“I guess you’re right,” I responded, reeling the line in a little.

“Why would he want to scare us though?”

“I don’t know, son, he was a troubled old man. Your mom used to talk with him, and she would tell me stories about how he was convinced people were being murdered here without anyone knowing it. It’s best to leave it alone, son, any bites?”

“No, nothing. Maybe Randy was right, about the weather scaring the fish away.”

“Maybe, could be,” he replied, reeling his rod in to check the bait.

“When I was younger, we went out all the time and always caught tons of fish,” he said. “Now I think about it, there’s been some bad storms that have come and hung around Rockport for a while. Never any this bad though, the fog alone is dangerous.”

The bait on his line was still intact, not bitten. The fog was moving in from out at sea, thick and almost as if living.

“So, what do you think about me and your mom’s situation?” he asked, setting his rod down and opening the cooler. He pulled a beer out and popped the cap off to drink. I reached in for one and he shook his head with a smirk, so I grabbed a soda instead.

“I kind of saw it coming. We haven’t really done family stuff for such a long time,” I answered, the boat rocking back and forth.

“I’m glad you and your brother are so understanding about this, it just makes sense for us.”

“Did you know Mom was already seeing someone else?” I hesitantly asked.

“Damon,” he said. “Yes, I caught them a while back. I felt bad for Emily, if anything.”

“So, she didn’t know?” I asked.

“Not that I know of, neither did Jason,” he responded.

“Mom also said you were already seeing someone else too, was she lying?” I questioned.

He said something under his breath, but I could make out a few unpleasant words in there.

“I’ve slowly been talking with some other people, yes,” he admitted.

I could tell he was getting uncomfortable, and it wasn’t the best situation I was in either, so I dropped it.

“You have to understand, kid, there’s things about your mom’s family that troubled her as a child.”

“You mean with her mom being twins with McGinty?”

“Ah, she told you about that, of course she did. Her family was pretty messed up, they had traditions they carried with them and put on her.”

“Aren’t you from Rockport too?” I asked him, thinking they both would have the same *traditions* that everyone kept talking about.

“No, I wasn’t born here, son. Your mom doesn’t like us talking about our past with you boys. I moved here after my father died.”

“She told me a little about the family. She did seem touchy about it though.”

“We both had some interesting childhoods which is why I tried to raise you boys better, get you ready for what was coming a different way. You’re coming of age son, which carries a lot of responsibility as a Parker.”

“I’m ready for it. You got any sandwiches in there?” I asked, reaching over for the cooler.

It was a tradition when we were younger for him to bring along tuna fish sandwiches. He always thought it was funny to eat fish while fishing. I didn’t find it as amusing but never turned down food, no matter what it was.

“Yes, of course,” he replied, reaching in to move stuff around.

“Any girls catch your eye? I remember when I was sixteen,” he said, leaning back along the railing.

“Well, me and Veronica were pretty close, but lately, Lexi Gray has shown some interest in me,” I answered, feeling my cheeks heating up and turning red.

“Lexi Gray, as in mayor Raymond Gray’s daughter? I don’t think you should hang around the Grays.”

“Ever since Veronica passed last week, she’s been talking to me a lot.”

“I won’t tell you not to talk to her, but listen to me, son, be careful with a Gray. I knew Joyce and Raymond when I was younger, they always had a selfish motive for everything they did.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about but felt sure it was another secret. I couldn’t handle any more secrets right now, so I let it go.

“Do you want to talk about Veronica?” he asked, taking a bite of his sandwich.

“Not really, it’s just weird that she’s gone, I’ve never known anyone that died.”

A sudden bang on the bottom of the boat lifted us up.

“Did something just hit the boat?” I asked.

“It was probably just a rogue wave.”

“How’s Jason been, with his father and all?”

“He’s been alright, he might have a girlfriend soon,” I said.

“Oh yeah, who’s that?”

“Chloe Garcia.”

“Wow, his lifelong crush.”

“That’s the one,” I said.

I couldn’t tell him Jason was mad at me because he’d interrogate me about it. Jason and I had been friends for as long as I could remember, and we’d never been in a big argument.

“He’s taking it one day at a time, he left school early to be with his mom.”

“Poor guy, next time we’ll invite him out,” he said.

A large jolt rocked the boat again, throwing me to the other side.

“Was that another wave? It didn’t feel like it,” I said.

He got up and looked around the boat, “I don’t see anything, but stay away from the sides.”

I walked to the middle of the boat as it began rocking back and forth.

“Woah, there’s something under us,” he said, scurrying over to the engine. “Come on, not now,” he said trying to get it to start up. “Reel your line in, Mark.”

The wind was picking up all of a sudden, skies turning gray. I grabbed the rod and began reeling as fast as I could until the hook got stuck on the boat.

“It’s stuck!” I called over to him. I didn’t think he heard me as it started to pour down in that moment. I decided to reach over the side and try to unhook it from the boat. Just as I released the hook, something was in the water beneath us. It was a black blur, moving closer and closer to the surface. Jumping out at me, I quickly fell back onto the floor.

I slowly moved to the edge, looking over. It was a blur just under the surface, staring up at me. A shark, or some kind of large fish. It darted deep below the water again as the clouds grew darker.

“Shark!” I screamed, falling back, scurrying to the middle. Lying there in fear at what just happened, I tried to process it. The image in

my head, a sharp-fanged, alien-like creature. No, it had to have been a shark. My mind was getting to me, the nightmares, the dreams.

“Mark, are you alright?” I heard my dad yelling as the engine started up. I tried to answer him, but nothing came out. Lying there on the floor of the boat, rain falling all around me, I stared up at the dark clouds and saw her face, Veronica.

“Mark, hold on,” I heard Dad yell again as the waves began crashing up the sides of the boat. I slowly sat up and stared at the immense storm in the distance, waves growing higher and higher.

“Can we make it back to the docks?” I screamed toward my dad. He didn’t answer as he maneuvered each wave.

I grabbed a bucket and began scooping the water out. Fearing the worst, I knew the storm was getting closer and closer. He was trying to steer us around the inlet to the docks, but the waves kept pushing us toward the cliffs. Soaked, torrential rain falling on us, I worked as fast as I could to get the water out.

The dark skies now above us, and the roaring waves, combined to push us closer and closer to the sharp rocks. I tried to yell to him again, but the wind, the rain, were too immense. He caught some luck as we barely made our way around the cliffs; I could see the docks in the distance.

“Hold on,” he screamed as a large wave nearly capsized us, knocking me to the floor, hitting my head. “Mark!” my dad screamed as I stumbled to get up. Dizzy, I looked out at the ocean and seen a blur in the crashing wave, the same blur from before.

“Hurry, Dad!” I screamed in fear that it was coming for us. Randy was waiting for us at the dock, waving his arms. Life jackets, rings, all flying off the dock, littering the water. The wind picked up even more as Dad pushed the boat to its limit.

“Throw me the rope, Mark!” Randy screamed as we approached. I stabilized myself and reached for the rope, tossing it to Randy. The boats were slamming into the docks all around us, breaking free, floating away.

“Mark!” I heard Randy scream again as my dad tossed me up onto the dock.

“Stay together!” Randy demanded as we made our way down the dock, intense wind daring to knock us into the water. The door to the

boat shop flew open and almost came unhinged as the wind tried to rip it from the wall. We rushed inside and I collapsed on the couch in disbelief at what just happened.

“Is anyone hurt?” Randy said as he forced the door shut and locked it.

“We’re fine. I thought the storm wasn’t coming in until later,” my dad said, trying to shake the water off.

“Here you go, Mr. Parker.” I heard someone else in the room. I stood up and was shocked to see Patrick handing my dad a towel.

“Patrick, what are you doing here?” I questioned.

“You guys know each other?” Randy asked him. “Patrick is my son.”

Randy Morris and Patrick Morris. I should have realized that earlier. Not many, if any, people in town shared a last name unless they were related.

“We know each other from school. Mark helped me with my photography,” Patrick replied.

“It’s nice to meet you officially, Mark,” Randy said.

“Same to you, Patrick,” my dad replied, wringing out his shirt.

Patrick threw me a towel and I dried myself as much as possible before sitting back down on the couch.

“Wicked storm out there; we barely made it,” my dad said as he and Randy walked over to the window.

“Maybe we should cover this window up until it passes,” Randy responded.

Patrick walked over and sat down on the couch across from me.

“I didn’t know your dad was a boat mechanic here,” I said.

“You never asked about my life,” he replied.

“What about your mom, is she someone I know too?” I said.

“No, my mom died when I was a baby,” he said lowering his head. “She was on a cave exploration in South America and her team got trapped, never making it out. I’ve seen pictures of her, and my dad said she always called me Pat.”

“Wow, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I am grateful to you and your dad for helping us,” I said. “So, did you know McGinty pretty well?”

“Dad didn’t talk about him that much; he worked for him, but I don’t think they were like best friends or anything,” he replied. “Are we still on for tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I haven’t spoken to Jason about it yet, but me, Lexi, and Chloe will be there,” I replied.

“Have you guys had any more issues with Ryan and Jimmie?” he questioned.

“Not too much, I called Ryan out at Barny’s, but he hasn’t done anything yet,” I responded, making sure I still had my phone in my pocket. “There was a shark out there, I think, it jumped up at me when I was leaning over the boat.”

“What kind of shark?” Patrick questioned.

“I’m not sure, but it almost bit my arm off,” I responded.

“Where were you guys’ fishing?” he asked, pulling a map out of a drawer.

“Right here, in the inlet,” I answered, pointing at the map.

“Strange, sharks don’t usually travel in this area,” he replied, making a circle with his finger around the inlet.

“Mark, come with me,” Randy said over, walking toward the back room.

My dad walked over and sat next to Patrick, nodding to me.

“I’ll be right there,” I replied, as I tried to make my way over as fast as possible. It was not easy walking in soaked jeans. I walked through the door and there were fishing rods and hooks everywhere. There was also a pungent odor of fish and guts in the air.

“Don’t mind the smell, we make the bait back here,” he said. “Here it is!”

He pulled a taped-up box out of the closet and sat it up on a table.

“Take your time,” he said as he went to the front, through the doors.

I stood there for a minute, wondering why McGinty would want to give this stuff to me, whatever it was. I had only spoken to him one time, which led to me turning him into the police. I looked around for something to cut the tape with and found a rusty knife lying on the table.

I cautiously began cutting the tape from the lid of the box, trying not to cut myself. I would get an infection from this rust. I took a deep breath and removed the top of the box and set it aside. Inside the box was a bunch of pictures, the charm from Veronica's bracelet, and a note.

I pulled the note out of the box and began reading it aloud.

"Dear Mark, I am writing this letter to let you know that I do not blame you for what you have done. After you abruptly left, I saw that my box was sticking out from under my bed. I know you saw my collection from the past hundred years.

"Please know that I will go peacefully with the police, and I do not hold any grudge against you. It must have looked very suspicious what you found, but I hope you believe me now that I had nothing to do with Veronica's death. I found that bloody charm next to her body on the rocky beach. I have been collecting pieces of evidence from Rockport deaths since I was a young boy. I was never able to piece it all together, and I am hoping you can continue it for me. I will not be able to handle the looks people will give me and the gossip about me being the killer throughout town.

"As you know, our little town likes to gossip. You need to understand what is going on. You are not safe; they are always watching. If you continue investigating this, they will kill you. Yet I am asking that you do exactly that, risk your life to save hundreds more. The world needs to know what is going on here. Maybe I have lost my mind in my old age, but I know something is going on. Don't trust anyone, uncover the truth, and save who you can.

"I am tired, Mark, I don't know how much longer I can go on. I have been thinking about ending it for a while now. I need to pay for what I did to that man on the mountain all those years ago. There is no place left for an old crazy like me, not here. Good luck and stay safe. Old Man McGinty."

I reread it a few times as parts of it didn't make sense; he was old so that was understandable. The one thing I understood fully was that I was the reason he was dead. To read that he forgave me for calling the police on him gave me some peace, but I'd have to live my life knowing my actions led to someone taking their own life.

I put the note back in the box and put the lid on. I walked back into the room and saw a trash can and hesitated for a minute. I could throw this box away and be done with it. Too many people were getting hurt, and I was responsible. I could throw this all away and be happy with Lexi, just forget it all. I held the box over the trash can but couldn't do it; something in me needed to find the truth. If any of what he said was true, there was something bigger going on here. I had something to do with this and would stop at nothing to figure it out.

"Everything alright?" my dad asked as I walked back into the front room.

"Yeah, just some pictures of fish and places around Rockport," I answered.

"I did tell him you liked fishing one time I was here on a job," he replied. "Great memory he had, I guess."

Patrick glanced over at me with a suspicious look. I wanted to change the subject. "Storm calming down?"

"Seems to be passing," Randy replied. "Some damage to the docks."

"I can help you fix it up sometime this week," my dad said, hoping to get hired for a new job. He always loved to fix things and jumped at any chance he could get.

"Maybe we should get going," I suggested to my dad.

"Yeah, you're right," he agreed, grabbing his jacket and heading for the door.

"Randy, Patrick, I want to thank you guys for helping us through that vicious storm," he said, shaking their hands.

"No problem, you would have done the same for us," Randy replied. "I'll be in touch about the dock repair."

We walked outside and got the full view of what the storm had done. Splintered wood from the docks was sticking straight up in the air. The waves were settling but still rough, as the wind slammed them ashore.

"Oh, I almost forgot; the cooler is still on the boat," my dad said as he and Randy made their way down the damaged dock. I looked past them to see that our boat had made it through unscathed.

“What was really in the box?” Patrick asked, sneaking up behind me.

“You scared me, I didn’t see you there,” I said, putting the box inside the car.

This is the point where I either trusted Patrick fully or made something up to get him off my back. With Jason upset with me, I needed someone to bounce information off.

“McGinty was collecting evidence from the deaths here,” I explained. “He gave me the box hoping I would continue investigating the truth.”

“Why would he be investigating that, did he think they were actually murders?” he asked me.

“I don’t know what he thought, I only talked to him one time,” I answered. “But there is something very odd going on in this town.”

“You can trust me, Mark, I want to find the truth just like you,” he reassured me, turning to walk back inside.

“Boys, come check this out!” Randy called from our boat.

They pointed at the side of the boat; turning to get a better look, I saw it. Four claw-like marks, jagged, down the side of the paintwork.

“Is that from the shark Mark said he saw?”

“I’ve seen some shark bites on boats, this doesn’t look like that,” Randy said. “But I don’t know what else it could be. Were you guys up on the rocks at all?”

“We did get pretty close to the cliffs,” my dad said.

“Have you ever seen anything weird around here, like something in the water?” I asked.

“I’ve lived on the water my whole life, of course I’ve seen things,” Randy said. “I’ve heard the stories sailors and fishermen tell of the things that live at sea. Maybe the legend of Mermaid Cliff is real?”

“Okay, let’s not scare the boys,” my dad said.

The scratches were fairly deep.

“Well, I don’t think we’re going fishing for a while, Mark,” my dad said. “Let’s get going before your mom gets worried.”

I walked back down the dock and looked back at Randy who was staring right at me, and he nodded as I turned away. We began heading back through town and seen how bad the storm was on

land. Tree branches everywhere, trash cans rolling around in the streets.

“That storm did a number here,” he said.

“It came out of nowhere; did they expect it to be this bad?” I questioned.

“I don’t think so; did I hear you tell Patrick you saw a shark out there today?”

“Yeah, shark or something else. It almost bit me as I leaned over the boat to unhook the rod,” I answered.

He shook his head, laughing. “Don’t tell your mother about that, she would have my head.”

“Why weren’t there any fish out there in the inlet other than a shark?” I asked him.

“Maybe it has something to do with all the storms this week, messing up their habits,” he answered. He could have been right or maybe something was out there, scaring all the fish away. Randy seemed like he wanted to tell me something, he did say he’d seen weird things at sea.

“Do you work tonight?” he asked abruptly.

“Can you drop me off there now, I have about a half hour before I’m supposed to be there,” I asked.

“Of course, lucky I asked you,” he said. “You did good out there today, on the water.”

“I did good?” I said. “*You* steered a small fishing boat through a vicious storm.”

“I did, didn’t I?” he smirked, knowing he’d be telling this story for years to come.

I texted Jason, asking if he was working tonight as well. I needed to clear things up with him and let him know about the next day. He needed to be included with me, Patrick, Chloe, and Lexi, and figure this out.



Chapter 22



Arriving at the drive-in, the tree line behind Fink's office was taped off with the same caution tape I'd seen on the beach the morning they found Veronica's body.

"That's where they found Andrea Ross, isn't it?" he asked as he parked the car.

"I think so, that's what people at school were saying," I answered.

"I want you to be careful, Mark; if there is a killer still around here, you need to always be with someone," he urged.

"I will, Dad. I meant to ask you something, have you ever heard of *the Syreni*?"

His face dropped, as his eyebrows scrunched up as if he'd just heard some devastating news.

"Dad?"

"Syreni?" he repeated. "Never heard of that before. Why, where did you hear that?"

"I just heard someone in school say it, I don't know what made me think of it right now."

He looked like he wanted to say something but stared back out the windshield.

"Okay," I said as I got out of the car.

I got the box out of the car and walked toward the concession shop. That was the first time we'd done something that was just us in a long time. I felt we were getting closer but could tell he was still hiding something.

Inside the concessions shop, Fink was frantically walking around. "What's going on?"

"Oh nothing, just worried, with someone tampering with the security footage and all," he said as I made my way to the counter. I quickly sat the box down behind the counter before he could notice it. He'd be suspicious if he saw it.

“I’ll be staying here until close with you guys now,” he added. “Until this all gets resolved.”

Fink watching over us while we worked all evening was not the best solution, but if it kept us *safe*, why not?

“That’s probably for the best,” I agreed. “Is Jason working tonight?”

“He was supposed to, but he called off an hour ago,” he replied. “With losing his dad, I figured I’d let him take a few nights off.”

Is Jason avoiding me or is he really upset about his dad? He still hasn’t texted me back and he did seem really mad at school.

“So, it’s just us then?” I asked.

“Heavens no,” he said. “I’ll be up in my office working, but I hired someone else this afternoon who should be arriving shortly.”

I’d always worked here with Jason and Veronica; we never had anyone else with us.

“Oh, and the movie tonight is a little inappropriate for what’s going on in this town, but I couldn’t resist,” he said.

The parking lot began filling up with cars. “What’s the movie?”

“It’s a classic horror movie about a small-town killer,” he responded.

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “Looks like I’ll be busy tonight.”

After about twenty minutes of nonstop serving customers, the door opened behind me.

“About time, I’m getting overrun in here,” I said, continuing to butter popcorn and fill cups.

“Sorry. I got here as soon as I could,” the voice came from across the room.

It hit me immediately who it was as I turned. “Cheryl, so you’re the new employee?”

“That’s me,” she said as she started helping the customers beside me.

About ten minutes later, the movie began, and the line was all but gone.

“This is one of my favorite movies,” she said. “A killer clown terrorizing a band of teens that go by ‘The Loser’s Club’, what could be better?”

"I've been trying to get a hold of you," I said, helping the last customer.

"Really, why what's up?" she asked. "Can we eat this food?" she said, reaching for a handful of popcorn.

"Just don't let Fink see you taking any," I said, sitting down behind the counter. I looked around outside to make sure no one was headed this way before looking over at Cheryl. "A few years ago, you wrote a story in school, for a book project or something."

"You have to be a little more specific Mark; I write all the time."

Again, I was looking out the window, making sure no one was around. "It was a story about someone, or something named Aurora."

"Good memory, Mark," she answered. "I was hoping no one would remember that."

"Why, what does it mean? Why did Old Man McGinty and Damon Miller write it on their cell walls before committing suicide?"

"It was eighth grade; the project was to write a short fiction story, anything we wanted," she explained. "My dad had told me hundreds of stories growing up and I was drawing a blank, so I went to his house and took one of his and used it. The teacher stopped me halfway through the story and burned it in front of the class."

"I remember that now," I blurted. "She threw it in the trash can and lit it on fire and told us not to tell anyone what we heard or saw that day."

"Later, I confessed to my dad what I had done, stealing his story. He said it was a story he made up to scare the citizens of Rockport."

"My dad told me about that, that your dad really believed something was corrupt here and tried to warn people," I replied.

"My dad has had a hard life; he's come a long way with the help of doctors and therapists. He doesn't believe any of that anymore."

"So, what did he say about this Aurora?" I asked.

"The story went that long ago, before they named this place Rockport, there was an ancient evil that slumbered in the caves beneath what is now Mermaid Cliff. This evil needed to feed, so the village would sacrifice someone to it so they would be safe for a little while longer."

“What, that’s crazy,” I blurted, laughing at the thought of anyone believing this.

“Aurora was supposedly the first person sacrificed to this evil, so my dad and others thought this evil needed to feed every twenty-five years and that’s what these “suicides” were. They investigated further and apparently, found that more and more people were missing in Rockport which means someone was covering it up. No one ever reported them missing, but they were just gone. My dad thought that the evil needed to feed more, like every full moon, and the suicides were just a cover up for what was really going on.”

“So, why did your dad believe this, what evidence did he have to support this?”

“He burned every box, every piece of paper he had on the murders and disappearances. Although I did read in one of his diaries that there was a special section in the basement of the town’s library where they kept the oldest books and diaries about the place. He was there researching this town, anything he could, to find out why his first wife would take her own life on that cliff.”

“I heard about that, I didn’t know before, I’m sorry,” I blurted.

“Thank you, Mark, he truly believed she’d never ever commit suicide and thought that she had to have been murdered and the town covered it up. For years, he researched everything he could and that’s when he found this section in the library. Apparently, in this section, there are written events and logs of this evil existing. He found reports there of how the bodies were all found missing all their blood like they’d been drained. I think that’s when it all went to his head, and he started going crazy.”

“Wouldn’t the cops and coroner have seen the bodies drained of blood?”

“He believed the coroner hid the information to protect it, and no one else ever saw the bodies. Remember, he thought people were being murdered and no one was reporting it.”

“That’s when he set fire to buildings?” I asked.

“He only set fire to one building. In the woods on Mermaid Cliff, there was a house he believed was the gateway to evil or something like that. It was previously burned down a long time ago and then they tried rebuilding it when my dad burned it down again.”

“I’ve never seen a building there,” I replied.

“Because he burned it down, Mark, pay attention,” she said.

“So, where is your mom at, and why do you live with your grandmother?”

“After my dad was cast out of Rockport, he took it pretty hard, but about eight years after that, he started going out in public again. My grandmother said that was when he finally overcame this crazy theory and started acting normal. He won’t talk about it, but my grandmother said he met this beautiful woman from out of town and they were together for a few months. After they had me, she apparently found out about my dad’s past and left me with my grandmother and disappeared. There’s a lot of holes in the stories I’ve been told over the years, but I just try to move forward.”

“I see you guys are having a deep conversation over there, but can I get some popcorn?” A voice came from the counter.

I jumped up and walked over to the counter. “Sorry about that. How’s the movie going?” I asked him, filling up his popcorn bucket.

“It’s a horror, kind of weird you guys would play it with what’s going on, but hey, it’s still a good movie,” he said, taking the popcorn from me and putting money on the counter.

“Want your change?” I said as he walked away.

“Keep it!” he called back.

“Do you think he heard us talking?” Cheryl asked, walking up beside me.

“I doubt it,” I answered, putting the money in the register.

“I’ve never told anyone any of that, I doubt any of the kids at school even know about it. All of our parents here try to keep the past hidden.”

“So, why would Damon and McGinty write that on the wall?” I asked again.

“I heard that back then, Old Man McGinty and my dad spent a lot of time together,” she answered. That could explain why Damon wrote it too. My mom said she and Damon were there the night of the party. Maybe McGinty told them about it?

“So, McGinty and Damon wrote the name of the first supposed sacrifice on their cell walls, hundreds of years after it happened?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t make any sense, unless they were both looking into it. McGinty probably lost his mind, and Damon, well we all know about his addictions,” she said.

“You don’t really believe that some ancient evil lives in a cave around here, do you?” I questioned.

“Of course not, like I said, my dad went through a bad time in his life, but he’s better now. We shouldn’t talk about this anymore here, there are a lot of people in who wouldn’t want us to know about the legends.”

“Tomorrow night, there’s a party at the Grays’ mansion, you should come,” I said.

“Why would I go there? Last time they had a party, someone got killed,” she responded.

I knew Cheryl liked to get the scoop for her stories, but I felt like I could trust her. She did say I was the only person she told about her parents.

“Me, Chloe, Lexi, and Patrick are getting together there and we’re going to try to figure this all out, whatever it takes,” I answered.

She took a step back and started laughing. “You think us teenagers can track down a serial killer?”

“Come on Cheryl, can you imagine how finding a killer would look on your writing resume?”

She stood there for a moment, taking it all in. “You’re right, but why Lexi and Chloe?”

“We can trust them, I know it seems weird, but they’re with us.”

“If you say so, Mark,” she said, filling up a cup with popcorn.

“Did you ever think the killer could be one of us, someone that goes to Rockport High?” I said to her quietly.

“It never really crossed my mind. I kind of thought it was a drifter or even Damon Miller.”

“Just think about it; we’ll all be there if you decide, and we could really use your help.”

“What about Jason, will he be there?”

“I don’t know yet, he hasn’t answered.”

“Alright, I’ll think about it, but if Jason doesn’t want to be a part of this, then I don’t think we should. He’s always willing to do anything, so if he’s scared, we should be too,” she answered. “I heard about

you calling out Ryan and Rachel in the diner, what was that all about?"

Walking over to get a drink from the dispenser, I looked over at her, "I couldn't hold it in anymore."

"Do you really think they killed Veronica? You said you saw Ryan that night," she asked.

"I didn't see him; I just think he had something to do with it."

"He's not really the kind of person you want to start a fight with," she suggested. "Remember when he beat that new kid into a coma two years ago?"

She was talking about a fight on the football field. Ryan didn't get into trouble because Jimmie's dad threatened to stop funding the program.

"He did something, I know it," I responded.

"Well, when you're ready to tell me real information about why you feel that way, I'm all ears," she said. "Why didn't Veronica's parents have a funeral for her?"

"I don't know, that's a good question," I answered.

"Maybe they're waiting for the killer to be caught?" she asked. "Same with Andrea, now I think about it."

"They just found her body, it might still be evidence or something," I replied.

"What if the bodies were drained of blood, so they don't want a funeral where we'd be able to see the body?" she said.

"I guess if you believe your dad's story, it's possible."

A loud scream came from the parking lot.

"What was that!" Cheryl gasped.

I grabbed the flashlight and ran out to the cars.

"What are you looking at, loser?" I turned to see Jimmie and Katherine staring at me from the hood of their car.

"It's a scary movie, there's going to be screams," he responded.

"I was just making sure everyone was alright."

"Mark!" He called as I turned to walk back to the concessions shop. I turned around and walked back over to him, expecting him to threaten me or make a rude comment.

"What do you want?"

“Tomorrow, party at my house, my sister wants you there so you’re coming,” he demanded. “But Mark, hurt her, and I’ll kill you.” Jimmie must have a soft spot for his sister.

I was surprised he’d invite me to his house after everything that’d happened this week.

“Look, whatever is going on with you and Ryan, we know you didn’t kill Veronica,” Katherine said. “Just stop playing detective.”

“Alright, see you guys’ tomorrow,” I responded.

That conversation actually made me extremely worried. If they knew I didn’t kill Veronica, that just made them look guiltier. What else would they have been doing with Veronica on the cliff that night? I started heading back to the shop, noticing Cheryl having trouble with the popcorn maker.

“Need some help?” I said walking inside.

“Yeah, I could use some guidance here,” she replied. “This thing has a mind of its own.”

I walked over, showing her how to work it. “Just like this.”

“Anyone in trouble out there?” she said.

“No, it was just Jimmie and Katherine, they officially invited me to their party tomorrow.”

“That’s sketchy; why would they want their enemy there?” She said again.

What if it’s an ambush—like they are tricking you into coming so they can do something to you?”

“I highly doubt that, but if it is, at least I’ll have you guys there,” I replied.

“So, are you and Lexi like a thing now?”

“I wouldn’t say we’re like boyfriend and girlfriend but we’re friends,” I answered.

“I don’t know, Mark, she could be playing you too.”

“Cheryl, you’re reading into it too much.”

“Sorry, it’s in my nature to think the worst,” she said, helping me to clean up.

“Were you here the night Andrea’s body was found over there?” she asked, pointing to the taped-off woods behind the drive-in.

“I worked the night before they found her. Do you know how they found her? I mean it’s not the most common place to walk in town,” I

questioned.

“I heard they had an anonymous tip about it, but I can’t say for sure,” she answered.

The rest of the night was pretty boring, just refilling popcorn and drinks. After the movie, the cars left one by one as we finished cleaning up inside and around the lot.

“You guys all done? I’m going to head out,” Fink said as he came down from his office.

“Yeah, I just have to take this garbage to the dumpster and then we’re done for the night,” I responded.

“See you guys later,” Cheryl said as she clocked out, walking to her car.

Fink followed her to the parking lot as I walked to the dumpster. Now was my chance to put the box up in the ceiling. I remembered the one camera could partly see in the shop, so I needed to turn the lights off. Heading back inside, I turned the lights off and with just enough light from the streetlamp, I maneuvered my way onto the counter. I carefully pushed up on the ceiling panel above the candy counter and felt around for the bracelet and phone. They were right where we left them; luckily, Jason had put the phone back.

I reached down and grabbed the box and put it up in the ceiling.

Sometime soon, I was going to need to go through this box. McGinty believed he was on the right track to figuring out the town secrets and I was going to continue his legacy.

Putting the panel back in place, I hopped down off the counter and made my way out the door, locking it behind me. I realized I didn’t bring my bike, leaving me with no other way home but to walk. I could call Cheryl to come back and pick me up.

I got out my phone and looked for her number. It rang about four times before she picked up. “Hello, Mark, is that you?”

“Hey Cheryl, you’re going to think I’m an idiot, but I don’t have a way home, would you mind coming back for me?” I said nervously.

“Sure, I’m turning around now,” she said, without hesitating.

Standing there in the empty lot, the streetlights were shut off, leaving me in darkness. Only the light of the moon shone on me as I walked closer to the road, away from the woods.

It was incredibly silent out, not even a cricket or an owl making a noise. Silent and dark, this must have been what death was like. A sudden chill radiated down my neck as I shook it off. The temperature seemed like it was dropping as a light fog moved in from the woods. I started to get freaked out and could just make out headlights in the distance. I waited on the side of the road as the car rolled to a stop about twenty feet from me.

I was blinded by the high beam headlights and couldn't tell if it was her. The passenger door opened slowly, and I took a step toward it. Squinting, I still couldn't tell for sure it was her, but it had to be. Walking closer my phone began to vibrate as I pulled it out, answering it.

"Hello, Mom, I'm on my way home don't worry," I said making my way to the car.

"Mark, this is Cheryl, but you can call me Mom if it makes you feel better," she said. "I'm coming down the street now. I had to stop to call my grandmother back, but I should be there in about a minute."

I was frozen in terror as I slowly looked up at the car in front of me. Staring harder, I could just make out the tinted windows. *Who is this in front of me, could this be the Rockport killer?*



Chapter 23



I tried with everything in me to move, to run, but I couldn't. I couldn't move from that spot, heart racing faster and faster. I was no longer in control of my body, starting to feel nauseous.

"Mark, are you there, can you hear me?" Cheryl questioned from the phone as I stared intensely at the mysterious car in front. The car began revving its engine as if taunting me to make a move. The door closed and they backed up before driving away, disappearing into the dark. I tried to make out the license plate but couldn't

I let out a long sigh of relief as I fell to my knees, dropping my phone. I sat there for what felt like an eternity trying to figure it out, who was in that car. As I looked up, I was blinded again by headlights and I fell back, trying to scoot away, out of sight.

"Get in, Mark," Cheryl called out of the driver's side window. "What are you doing on the ground?"

I got up, grabbing my phone off the ground before rushing over to the passenger side door. I took a deep breath and looked around before opening the door, getting inside.

"Are you ok? You look like you just ran a marathon and ended up in a graveyard full of zombies," she said.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I just got a little spooked," I answered, putting my seatbelt on.

"Right, I can see why, with Andrea's body being right over there and all," she responded, starting to drive again. "You know they say a lot of killers return to the scene of the crime, maybe he or she was there tonight."

"That's not funny Cheryl, this is real. With the cops not getting any closer to a suspect, it seems more dangerous now than ever before," I argued.

"Okay, Mark, I'm sorry, are you sure nothing happened back there?"

"I'm fine," I answered not wanting to get into it.

We sat in silence for the rest of the ride until she pulled in front of my house.

“Cheryl, back there, did you see a car drive past you on the way back to get me?” I asked her hesitantly.

“No, there wasn’t anyone on the road, why?”

“I’ve had a long day,” I answered getting out of the car. “Thanks for the ride, I hope to see you tomorrow.”

Walking up the driveway, I was overcome with fatigue; from the storm at sea to the mysterious car, I was beat.

“Who was that? Jason’s new car?” my mom asked, walking out of the front door.

“No, he didn’t work tonight, that was Cheryl Wood giving me a ride home,” I answered, sitting down next to her on the porch swing.

“Cheryl Wood, what are you doing with her at this hour?” she asked.

“She just started working at the drive-in, tonight was her first day on the job,” I answered her, taking my phone out to see if Jason had texted back. He usually always texted me back right away, he must really have been mad at me about the diner thing. I texted him again asking why he wasn’t answering.

“Do I need to have the talk with you again?”

“Mom, no, with Cheryl? I’m not interested in her like that, she was just driving me home.”

“I haven’t seen Cheryl in a while, how is she doing?”

“She’s Cheryl,” I said.

“Your dad told me he told you about her father today. He also told me about your fishing disaster,” she said. “Your father never was good with picking a clear day to go out on the boat.”

“It came out of nowhere, Mom, he did really good though in getting us back to the docks.” I defended him as she scooted closer to me, putting her arms around me.

“I know it’s been a really rough week for you, something no sixteen-year-old kid should go through, but I want you to know, I am here for you,” she confided, squeezing me closer.

“Thank you, Mom, it has been tough. I just wish Agent Taylor and Sheriff Richards would catch this guy so things can go back to normal,” I answered, hugging her back.

“What makes you think the killer is a guy?” she said. “He also told me McGinty left a box of pictures for you, what was that all about?”

“Yeah, just some fishing spots around the coast,” I answered.

“Don’t lie to me, Mark. I know what he was doing, looking into the suicides.”

“You caught me,” I said, sitting back with her. “I spoke to him before he was arrested, Richards said McGinty was on the beach when they found Veronica, so I wanted to see what he knew.”

“So, he told you about how he tracked all the suicides over the years and all the weird stuff going on?” she questioned.

“Pretty much, he wanted me to continue his legacy and find out the truth. Why would he kill himself, why would Damon kill himself?”

“Mark, you need to let it go, move on, stop getting in the middle of it.”

“Just answer my question, Mom.”

“McGinty was this town, he lived his life as a great figure in Rockport, and he couldn’t continue living if people thought he disgraced it in any way. Old Man McGinty and Damon Miller actually spent a lot of time together. They would discuss the suicides and other things about the town. I think in the end, Damon was in a bad place in his life and just wanted the pain to stop,” she said with tears forming in her eyes.

Although I didn’t understand her weird relationship with Damon, I did feel bad that she’d lost him.

“It was that bad that he had to take his own life?” I asked her further.

“He told me one night that a few years ago, he had done something so horrible he didn’t deserve to live,” she said.

He must have been talking about the night he killed Taylor’s family in that car crash. He must have been living with that weighing on him for so long, which explained a lot about his actions recently.

“Do you know what it is, that he did?” I asked her, already knowing the answer.

“He refused to tell me. He said I would never look at him the same again.”

We paused for a few moments, just swinging in the dark, the wind starting to pick up. The faint flicker of Mrs. Huber’s porch light

made her house an eerie sight in the dark.

“Are you sure you don’t know what Aurora means?” I asked her again.

“I don’t want you getting too involved with this stuff,” she said. “I will tell you what it means, but that’s it, then you stop looking into it.”

I nodded at her awaiting an answer.

“According to the old documents, Aurora was a little girl who lived here before Rockport was even established. It’s said she was burned atop a large wooden structure as a sacrifice, to protect the townspeople. You have to remember, it was a very long time ago, people weren’t civilized, they believed someone needed to be sacrificed so they could live in peace.”

“So, there have been murders here, not just Veronica?” I asked her.

“Official records only date back to 1917, but these old documents show a gruesome story of before it was a civilized town, none of which can be proven.”

“Where are these documents, how have you seen them?” I asked her further.

“My mother showed me them when I was very young, I have no idea where they are today. It was horror stories parents would tell their kids to keep them from going up on those dangerous cliffs,” she explained.

“What about Jack Wood’s first wife, was she murdered?” I questioned.

“That was a suicide, this death every twenty-five-year thing is just a coincidence,” she demanded.

She had a point, the coroner ruled them all suicides until Veronica’s death. Then again, how did they determine it a murder or suicide without any evidence? They ruled Veronica’s death a homicide because she’d had sex that night. That didn’t make much sense, I might have needed to talk with the coroner to find out more.

“One more question about this; what was the burned house up on Mermaid Cliff used for?” I asked her, having not even seen it yet myself.

She didn’t answer immediately, just stared across the street at that flickering light.

“When I was a kid, my friends and I would sneak out and go up to that house and hang out,” she explained. “All the kids from school would go there to just get away from our parents. I think it was a groundskeeper house a long time ago, but it was abandoned before we started going there. One night, we had a party and somehow it got lit on fire and burned down.”

“Did everyone make it out ok?”

She took a deep breath, still staring across the street. “Did I ever tell you Mrs. Huber once had a daughter?”

“No, you never told me that, I always thought she was just a lonely old lady,” I answered, not wanting to sound too mean, but she’d always seemed strange and creepy to me.

One-time, Jason and I were walking around the neighborhood and as we passed her house, there were a bunch of candles burning in her window. We walked up to the window to get a better look and she was sitting nude in a circle drawn on the floor. Just sitting there with her eyes closed as the candles burned around her. Her eyes shot open and stared in our direction just as we ducked and ran away, out of sight.

I didn’t think she’d seen us, but we never went back to her window again.

“When I was about your age, Mrs. Huber’s daughter and I went to school together. Her name was Rebecca. One night, we all went up to the house on Mermaid Cliff to hang out, like we always did.”

“To drink?” I cut in laughing.

She gave me a look and continued, “Rebecca wasn’t the most popular kid at school and after a few drinks, some of the guys began harassing her. She was pretty drunk, so we tried to get her to go home and sleep it off, but she wouldn’t leave. So, she went upstairs and next thing we see is smoke filling up the house. We immediately thought it was a fire, so all ran outside just before the windows burst open, covered in flames.”

“Wow, luckily you made it out,” I replied.

“We were standing outside in amazement at the flames as they soared higher and higher. I remember thinking we needed to get out of there. We headed to our cars, back through the woods, when we heard this piercing screech. I remember looking around and it hit me

that Rebecca had gone upstairs. The flames were just too high, it spread too fast, and there was nothing we could do. So, we left. None of us came clean about it to anyone, in fact, you're the only person I've ever told.

"Mrs. Huber, from that point, hated every kid in town and swore we were all a part of a demon worship cult. So, to answer your question, yes. That house was an abandoned house that was burned down, later rebuilt, and burned down again by Cheryl's father."

Why was she telling me all this?

"Did they ever find out what caused the first fire?"

"That's the weird part; upstairs, there was a single wall still standing. They found melted wax all around it and written on the wall was the word Aurora."

A chill shot down my spine as I felt my jaw drop.

"I had that same look on my face when I found out too. After Jack burned it down for the second time, we just kind of forgot about it."

"So, you all just left and never talked about it again? Did the police find her body? What do you think happened up there?"

"That's a lot of questions, Mark, they never found a body. I try not to think about it, I'm not even sure why I just told you," she answered, slowly standing up, shaking her head. "I shouldn't have told you that, I'm sorry," she said again, heading inside.

I don't know what that was all about, did she know she was talking to me? Mrs. Huber must have gone crazy after her daughter died. If they never found the body, that means they couldn't rule it a murder. I couldn't bring it up again to my mom after how distraught she was on telling me.

The more I thought about it, there'd only ever been four suicides and one murder in this godforsaken place. So, how had I never heard about this Rebecca's death? Did my mom make up that story for some reason? Did the town cover it up, and if so, what else had they concealed?

I sat on the swing for a few minutes longer, just thinking to myself. I finally stood up to walk inside but looked back over at Mrs. Huber's house once more. I was caught off guard when I realized

she was staring straight back at me. I turned and walked inside, double locking the door behind me.

“Hey, Mark,” Charles said from the kitchen as I entered the room.

“How was your football practice?”

“It was good, but Ryan got into it again with someone on the team.”

“Doesn’t surprise me, what’s that guy’s problem?”

“He’s changed for the worst lately. Don’t know, I think something’s wrong at home. I heard about your fishing trip, by the way. Sorry I wasn’t there to help out.”

“No worries, Dad handled the boat pretty well. Is Ryan still mad at me about the whole diner thing?” I asked him, reaching for a glass from the cupboard.

“He was extremely mad that you called him out in front of the town, but I convinced him not to do anything stupid, not to show the town he could be a suspect. Stay away from him, Mark. Like I said, he’s changed, and I don’t know how far he would go,” he said, leaving the room.

Ryan had already killed Andrea, and at least had something to do with Veronica’s death. Pouring myself a glass of milk, I was reminded of a memory from last year.

It was during lunch at school, Jason and I were sitting with Veronica at a table. She put her food tray down and went to the bathroom. Jason always played pranks on her, and he decided to switch her orange juice with milk. Well, Veronica hated milk. When she came back from the bathroom, she sat down, not noticing her drink had been changed and went to drink it. She took a huge gulp and immediately went to spit it out, so violently it came out of her nose. She was so mad at Jason; she didn’t speak to him for a week after that.

Was that how it was going to be? Every time I did something Veronica and I used to do; I’d think of her? I stared at the glass of milk for a while, thinking how Veronica would never grow up, never get pranked into drinking another class of this stuff. I grabbed the glass and poured its contents down the sink, leaving the room.

Heading upstairs, I couldn’t help but wonder if this town did used to sacrifice people to a creature, the creature from my dreams? If

there really were documents on it, I needed to find them. Cheryl said her dad told her all this stuff about it, so I needed to speak with him. She said he was different now, changed, but I needed his help.

I checked my phone to see if Jason texted back, but nothing. I hoped he'd be at the party tomorrow, as we needed to discuss what was going on. I was nervous about going to the Grays' party, even if Jimmie did invite me. It'd only been a week since I'd been at the party with Veronica.

Lying in bed, tossing and turning, I couldn't sleep, thinking of everything, all of the town's history and secrets, what did it all mean? How did my life go from only worrying about school to investigating a town's history?



Chapter 24



“**M**ark,” I heard. I sat up and realized it was still dark out; my clock was flashing 12:00 over and over. I looked at my phone, but it must not have charged because it wasn’t turning on.

I got out of bed and walked toward the window, eyes still burning from being exhausted. It must have been in the middle of the night. Flipping the light switch in the bathroom, the light flickered a few times before staying on. I closed and locked the door.

I stared at myself in the mirror, turning the faucet on. Leaning over, I began splashing cold water on my face, the sink filling up. I let it fill just to the brim and submerged my head in the water, letting out all of my air and just standing there for a second. Starting to feel my chest tightening, I tried to lift my head out, but couldn’t. It was almost like someone was holding my head down. I couldn’t move. Struggling, kicking, swinging my arms. *This is it, I’m going to die right here, in my bathroom sink.* Fighting for a few seconds longer, I stopped. I relaxed all my muscles. I felt the heavy pressure on the top of my head subside as I pulled my head free, gasping for air.

I looked around the room; no one was there, the door was still locked. I gasped for air. The lights began to flicker again. Blood began to drain out of my nose. The lights turned off, pitch black, and I felt trapped in place once more.

Tingling began to radiate down my spine as the hairs on my neck stood up. The feeling someone was standing right behind came over me. Still looking forward into the darkness of the mirror, I heard, *find me.* Just then, the lights turned on, and in the mirror, the mermaid creature screamed from behind. I opened my eyes as I sat up in bed letting out with my own scream.



MY DOOR FLEW OPEN, “Mark, it’s okay, it was just a dream,” my mom called, running over.

I realized I was still in my bed. All this talk of sacrifices and dark history was getting to me. “Just a nightmare,” I said, still catching my breath.

“Is everything alright with you?” she asked, feeling my forehead. “You’re soaking wet.”

I looked down and she was right; it was as if someone had poured buckets of water on me.

“Yes, Mom, I’m fine,” I answered, sitting up in bed further.

“You’ve been having a lot of these dreams lately. Mark, your dad and I were talking, and we think you should go talk to someone, you’ve been through so much and it’s not healthy.”

I began to get angry. “I’m not a nutcase, Mom, I’ll be fine dealing with it in my own way.”

“You’ve been having more nightmares and I can tell there’s something not right with you, at least try it, for us.”

Not wanting to upset her, I nodded, getting out of bed.

“Alright, well it’s time to get up for school anyway,” she said, leaving the room.

Walking into the bathroom, I couldn’t get the terrifying image out of my mind. I closed the door and paused, before opening it as wide as possible. I flicked the lights on and off a few times to make sure they worked fully. I stood in front of the mirror and saw something on my upper lip, just under my nose. It was dry blood... but it couldn’t be! In my dream, my nose had been bleeding. I wiped it off and left the room. Somehow, I’d had a nosebleed in the middle of sleeping. This town was starting to consume me, drain the life from me.

As I walked down the stairs, everyone was sitting at the kitchen table again.

“Hi guys,” I said, joining them at the table.

“Mom said you had a nightmare, was it about the storm yesterday?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, it must have been that, pretty scary,” I said, not wanting to tell him the truth.

“Dad already told me three times about being a hero out there,” Charles said.

"I did, alright," Dad agreed.

"So, what was with the fishing grounds being deserted?" Charles asked.

"I've heard around that the recent storms may be driving the fish out of the inlet," my dad answered.

"Or it could be the sharks," I added.

"Yeah, right," Charles grunted.

"I actually went over to the docks early this morning to see what work needed doing. Randy was there, he said they'd seen a few more sharks in the area."

"It's like the whole ecosystem is out of whack," I answered.

"Enough talk about that, I heard the Grays are having a party tonight," my mom blurted.

"I don't know anything about that," Charles said.

"Relax, Joyce said it was just to give you kids something to do, there will be no alcohol there," she answered.

"Oh, well in that case, yeah, there's a get-together there tonight," Charles said.

Her eyes turned to my direction. "And will you be there also?"

"I was thinking about it. I might," I answered, getting up from the table.

"Charles, go get ready for school," she said. "Sit down Mark," she demanded as I stood up.

After Charles left the room, she turned and looked at me again. "There's no easy way of saying this; your dad and I don't approve of you and Lexi seeing each other, romantically."

"I never said we were, like, a thing, but why not?"

"You've been through a traumatic event, and you don't need that stress in your life already."

"I can handle it, Mom. She's the only person who gets me right now."

"There's things about the Grays, about Joyce that you don't understand. In the light of everything going on, our family doesn't need to be involved with theirs."

"What are you talking about? I know Mayor Raymond and Joyce are arrogant and Jimmie is a jerk, but Lexi is nothing like them," I explained.

“I think what your mother is trying to say is that we think it would be best for you to slow down for a while,” my dad said.

“We set up an appointment with Emily Miller for right after school,” she said.

“Jason’s mom?” I grunted. “Why would you do that, she’s going to think I’m a psycho now.”

“She’s the only therapist in town we trust, Mark, she will understand and help you,” she explained. “You’re not well, you don’t sleep at night.”

I heard Jason pull up to the front of the house and honk his horn. Instead of pointlessly arguing with them, I decided to walk out of the room.

“We love you,” my dad called as I opened and slammed the door behind me.

Where did they get the nerve to assume I was some crazy person and needed help? I tossed my bike in the back and noticed Mrs. Huber staring at me again from the window. That lady was crazy, she was the one that needed help, not me.

“What’s up with your neighbor? She’s been staring over here since I pulled up,” Jason said.

“She’s a psychopath, I don’t know,” I said.

“Look, I’m sorry about how I acted and for not texting you back, I was just worried Ryan was going to do something to me again,” he said.

“He’s going to get what’s coming, we need to stick together. How’s your shoulder?”

“It’s getting better, how’s your head?”

“Getting there, you missed a lot yesterday, Cheryl Wood works at the drive-in now, she gave me a lot of useful information on the town’s past. Her dad believed the town would sacrifice people to some ancient evil, so that the town would remain safe. That’s apparently why he went psycho because he found out this stuff and no one believed him. They cast him out of the town for bringing it to light.”

“You believe him?”

“No, of course not, but he said there’s proof of it, and it’s in a special section at the library,” I added. “His first wife was one of the

suicides in Rockport, but he believed she was murdered so he went crazy.”

“I see you’ve been doing some digging. When’s it going to end, Mark?”

“What do you mean? We said we would find justice for Veronica, whatever it takes.”

“Yes, I did agree to that, I did not agree to uncovering the town’s secrets, true or not. If they cast him out because he found some old information, what would they do to us for bringing it to light again? I know you’ve been careless lately, but I’m not ready to die, Mark.”

I turned and looked out the window, at the rain, falling again, all around us.

“Four people have died in the past week and you want to quit now?” I argued.

“We’re teenagers, man, we’re not cops,” he argued back.

“Listen, me, Lexi, Chole, Cheryl, and Patrick are meeting up at the Grays’ mansion tonight to try and figure this out, we want you there.”

“So, they’re in on it too?”

“Yes, I trust them, even Patrick, he’s with us. They all want to find out what is really going on, we’re tired of sitting around waiting to see which of us is the next victim.”

“You’re having this secretive get-together in enemy territory, the last people to see Veronica alive will be right near us.”

“Which makes it less obvious that we’re looking into it. I know you’re scared, man, and believe me, I am too. But there’s something wrong here, I don’t know how to explain it, I just feel it inside me.”

We sat in silence for the rest of the way there before parking in the school parking lot.

“I’ll come tonight, but promise me, if I say it doesn’t feel right, you’ll end this once and for all. If we find nothing tonight, if I get a weird vibe from the others, it’s over,” he said, getting out of the car. “I can see it in your eyes, this thing is taking over you. You need to help yourself before you can help others.”

“I will, and I promise, if we find nothing tonight, I’ll go back to video games and talking girls with you.”

His mom must have told him about our appointment after school. I hated my parents for thinking there was something wrong with me. One of my friends died, that didn't mean I was going to turn into a psycho.

Walking into school, that image, my dreams, kept entering my mind. I tried to think positive, but my mind kept going back to what I'd been seeing all week. Maybe I was going crazy. I could end up like Cheryl's father, the town crazy, outcast for showing them he knew what they were doing.

Or maybe he *was* just that crazy, maybe this was where this started? Bad thoughts, the nightmares, maybe there was nothing wrong. Maybe the only corrupt thing here, was me?

Maybe the night of the party, I did come back out; I couldn't remember for sure. Maybe I met Veronica on that cliff after *the Seven* left her there.

I could be the killer I was so intent on finding.

I snapped out of it, and realized I was still in Jason's truck. I grabbed my bag and rushed inside the school. I didn't understand why Jason was acting like this; he did lose his father, but he'd always been on my side. Tonight, we needed to convince him to join us, to figure this out once and for all. Richards and Taylor were getting nowhere. It'd be up to us to find and prove who the killer was. But Jason was right, if I continued on this path for much longer, I'd not be able to snap out of it.

"Mark, got a second?" Russell asked as I passed him in the hallway.

"What can I do for you Russell?" I asked, walking over to him.

"I just wanted to say, between you and me, I'm glad you called out Ryan in front of the town. I don't think he killed anyone, but he has sure changed for the worse. That night of the party was pretty crazy, they were doing all kinds of drugs and drinking a lot. Last time I saw Veronica, she was leaving the party right after you left. I do have a question though, and I hope this all will stay between us."

"What is it?" I asked.

"How do you know Ryan was on the cliff the night Veronica was killed?"

I looked around thinking what to say. I couldn't put Jason in any more danger than I already had.

"I can't say right now, I don't want to endanger anyone."

"This is important, Mark, who saw him there?"

"Russell, I can't say," I replied, walking away.

"Who saw us there, you freak!" he said, pulling back, pushing me up against the lockers.

I stood there a few seconds, both of us realizing what he had just said at the same time.

"Us?" I asked. "I never said you were with Ryan on the cliff."

He looked around and leaned back in closer to me. "You tell anyone about that and I will kill you myself. You have no idea what you're getting into, messing with us. My life isn't going to be ruined by some loser like you."

I stood there a while longer as he walked past me, down the hall. He now knew that I knew. Things were heating up around here. We needed to prove it was them before they could do anything to us. This was the first time I actually started feeling scared. They could hurt us, or worse, they'd already done it.

I walked by a door to the outside, hesitating, I decided to keep on walking and just leave.

Just as I pulled on the door handle, I heard a voice, "Mark, what are you doing?" I nearly jumped out of my shoes as I turned to see Mr. Grimm standing behind me.

"I was just making sure the door was closed, can't be too safe," I said nervously.

"Get to class, young man," he demanded, locking the door. I walked into Mr. Grumble's class, and everyone's eyes were on me.

"Almost late again, Mr. Parker," he grunted.

"Sorry, Sir, it won't happen again," I responded, heading to the back of the room.

I sat down at the only seat left, which happened to be right next to Rachel. I glanced over at her, and she just smiled in a devilish kind of way. We'd always had a rocky relationship, and she'd never really liked me, but lately, it seemed she was warming up to me. After I'd called out her boyfriend, I couldn't imagine she'd ever want

to talk to me again. I wondered if she knew Ryan killed Andrea, and maybe Veronica. Or, maybe she had more to do with it.

Halfway through class, I felt my eyes getting extremely heavy, burning. I was ready to put my head down and take a quick nap when Rachel handed me something. I quickly grabbed it from her, a note, folded up. As I began to unfold it, I watched Mr. Grumble carefully. I didn't want him reading whatever this was.

I unfolded it all the way and saw one word that was written in red lipstick. KILLER.

An arrow pointed down, directly at me. I looked over at Rachel and she just smiled, I think she may have gone crazy, like Ryan. I folded the note back up and put it in my pocket as Mr. Grumble wrote something on the chalkboard.

"Before you guys leave class, I was instructed to tell you about a change in town," he said.

The chalkboard just said "7 p.m."

"Agent Taylor is enforcing a new curfew for the town. No one is to be outside without a parent after 7 p.m., which is subject to change and effective immediately," he added.

The class let out with a huge gasp with mixed emotions.

"That's bull," Rachel called out.

"No, that's bull-SHIT!" Jimmie cut in as Mr. Grumble slammed his fists down on the desk.

"Listen, there is a serial killer on the loose and he or she could still be in Rockport," he said. "This curfew is necessary."

Just then, the bell rang, and everyone scattered out of the class, ignoring Mr. Grumble. I took the note out of my pocket and tossed it in the trash. Ryan and Katherine were walking just out of sight of the hallway. I peered over the stair railing at the two of them below as I crept downstairs.

"Nobody suspects anything, don't worry," Katherine said.

"They heard what Mark said in the diner, I don't understand why you won't let me deal with him," Ryan said.

"There's too much going on in the town, we have to lay low," she responded.

"If they do anything else, I'm doing it my way," he challenged.

"Just so you know, they'll be at the party tonight," she said.

“What!” Ryan said, pushing Katherine up against the wall.

“Lexi invited them, Jimmie doesn’t want her knowing what we did, so he couldn’t tell her no,” Katherine replied.

Ryan put his hands on her throat and leaned in closer. “If they so much as look at me, I’ll kill them, and then I’m coming for the rest of you.”

“You’re hurting me, Ryan,” Katherine pleaded.

I wanted to help out but hesitated. I couldn’t move. The sight of pure terror on her face must have been the same look Andrea had when he’d strangled her.

“You see what happened to Andrea when she went against us? We need to stick together until the cops pin these murders on Mark and Jason,” he replied, squeezing harder as she began gasping for air. She grabbed his hand and started coughing harder as if choking the air out of her.

“We’re with you, trust me,” Katherine whispered, as he loosened his grip.

He let go of her throat and pulled her shirt collar down, exposing her upper chest. He leaned in and pressed his tongue on her bare chest, licking up to her face. She pulled his face to hers and began kissing him, as they backed into an empty room behind them. I had never seen anything so bizarre in my life. Did Rachel even know what was going on with them?

I hopped up and walked down the hall toward my next class, which was gym today, instead of English. I wished I would have had a video camera ready to record that disgusting exchange.

He’d just admitted to killing Andrea, and to the other five knowing about it. Charles must have known about it too. Why did Katherine kiss him? I doubted Rachel knew about their betrayal. I could use this information against them but needed to be smart about it.



“LET’S GO, GUYS; TODAY, we’re doing touch football,” Coach Meyer called. He was the head coach of the Rockport Seadogs and

also our gym teacher, insisting that everyone call him Coach.

We headed outside and a few guys were shivering as it was pretty cold out. The sun was barely peeking through the fog.

“Jason, you able to play?” Coach Meyer asked, noticing Jason’s arm still in a sling.

“Yes, I can throw with my other arm,” Jason suggested.

“Patrick, Jimmie, Russell against Mark, Jason, and Colby,” Coach Meyer called out. “You six take that part of the field over there.” He pointed to the corner of the football field, farthest from the school.

“Let’s do this, ladies,” Jimmie said, jogging over for the football.

“Mark, Jason, you guys ready for this?” Colby asked, following us over to the field.

“We got this,” Jason answered, slapping him on the back.

“How’s your sister doing?” I asked Colby. “Must be tough being a sheriff’s deputy in this town right now.”

“She’s been working a lot this week, helping out on the case,” he responded. “She actually told me they found some new evidence, but they are waiting for Agent Taylor to pull the trigger before acting on it.”

“What kind of evidence, did she tell you?” I questioned further.

“You can’t tell anyone, but they found blood on Andrea’s jacket that isn’t hers.”

I stopped dead in my tracks as my worst fear came true. The blood had to be mine; when I hit my head on the rock, it must have gotten on the jacket. How was I going to explain this? They were coming for me now.

“Let’s do this. Mark, you ready?” Jason asked as we all lined up.

I’d just found out the cops were looking for me, and Jason wanted me to play football?

“Hike!” I heard Jason yell out as he snapped the ball. I stood there for another second, trying to relax. I ran and looked back to see Jason throwing it in my direction.

I saw a man in a long black coat and black hat standing on the side of the field. A sharp pain in my head knocked me to the ground. I closed my eyes in pain, as an instant headache came over me.

“Mark, are you alright?” I heard around me. Jimmie and Russell stood over me, laughing at the me for getting hit in the head with the

ball.

"I'm fine, just lost the ball in the sun," I said.

I couldn't find the man on the sidelines anymore.

"Did you guys see a guy over there in a black coat?"

"No, I didn't see anyone," Russell answered.

"Why don't you take a break?" Jimmie called over.

"Yeah, I'll sit out as well, you guys can do two on two," Patrick suggested.

"Did you really see a guy in a black coat?" Patrick sat down on the ground next to me.

"Yeah, I've seen him before, up on the cliff," I answered.

"Did he have a black hat?" he asked.

I turned over to him and he had a terrified look. "Yes, you've seen him too?"

"A few days ago, I was taking pictures of the sunset on Mermaid Cliff. I was waiting until the sun just disappeared behind the edge of the ocean before taking the picture. As I was taking the pictures, I happened to look over the edge of the cliff, down on the beach, and I nearly fell off at the sight. Staring up at me was a man in a long black coat and black hat."

"Just staring at you?" I asked.

"Yes, it was pretty terrifying. The weirdest part was, he was standing right where they found Veronica's body."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"No, I packed up my stuff and left, I thought it might have been the killer."

"Did you tell Agent Taylor or Richards?"

"No, he saw my face. If I told the cops, he would come for me."

"When I first saw him, I figured he was a visitor," I told him.

"Yeah, I still think Ryan killed her, but that guy I saw, I just got a bad feeling about it."

"Parker Morris, what are you guys doing sitting on the ground?" Coach Meyer called over, walking in our direction.

"Sorry, Sir, Mark got hit in the head, so we were taking a break," Patrick answered.

"Is that so?" Coach questioned. "Parker, hit the showers and then go to the nurse. Morris, get your you-know-what back on the field!"

“I’m fine, Coach, just needed a breather,” I insisted.

He just stood there staring at me until I got up and started walking to the door. Inside the locker room, the smell of sweat hit me in the face. In the shower stall, I turned the water on, taking my clothes off. Letting the warm water hit my face, I closed my eyes, leaning back. Feeling the hot water run down my neck and back, I felt tired. I tried to open my eyes but couldn’t.

The screech of someone screaming forced my eyes open, as I frantically looked around. Nothing, no one was there, the room still empty. I must have dozed off for a moment, standing up. I tried to turn the water off, but it just kept turning as the water continued to pour out. The lights began to flicker as all of the shower heads turned on. The room began filling with steam from the hot water.

I ran to the entrance of the showers and slipped on the wet floors, falling. The water was turning red. The back of my head stung with pain, my hand, covered in blood. I tried to sit up but couldn’t move, eyes still blurry. Something was there in the steam, standing by the entrance.

“Coach, is that you?” I called out.

The mysterious object moved closer, enough for me to see something.

“Veronica?” I said, as she walked over, standing above me.

“Hello, Mark.”

“How is this possible, what is going on?”

“Why did you kill me, Mark? Everyone is going to die because of you.”

“Veronica, I loved you, I didn’t hurt you. What is going on?”

She started laughing uncontrollably, as she began ripping at the skin on her face. Shedding the skin piece by piece, she revealed what was hiding inside of her—a creature, greenish scaly skin, long black hair, eyes like black holes. I pushed as hard as I could, forcing myself to the back corner of the shower. The thing slowly crawled toward me, opening its mouth, revealing its jagged teeth.

“Stay away from me!” I screamed as it jumped on top of me.



Chapter 25



“**M**ark, what is going on in here?” I heard a voice yell out. I saw everyone standing at the shower entrance, staring at me.

“You freak!” Jimmie said as the rest of them said.

“Where is it, where did it go?” I called out.

“Woah, cover that thing up Mark!” Russel blurted, shielding his eyes.

I was still naked. I walked over for my towel, which was no longer there. Everyone’s eyes were still on me, so I covered myself with my hands and walked out of the shower.

“Here, Mark,” Jason called, throwing me a towel.

“I heard you were a freak, Mark, but I didn’t know it was this bad,” Jimmie said.

“Break it up!” Coach Meyer called, walking over to me. “What’s going on here?”

“I just fell asleep in the shower, Coach, I’m sorry.”

He put his hand on the back of my head and showed the blood to me. “You have a cut back here, go to the nurse.”

I was stunned. I had fallen in my dream and hit my head but then how did I have the cut? I rushed to get dressed and walked out of the locker room.

“Mark, what’s going on with you?” Jason questioned, following me down the hallway.

“I’m just tired, Jason, that’s all, I’ll catch up with you later.”

Down the hallway, Veronica’s mom was turning the corner, heading in my direction.

“Mark, I was hoping to see you here, how are you?” she asked, walking up to me.

“I’m fine, is everything ok?” I replied.

“Yes, taking it one day at a time, the school had a few more things of Veronica’s they wanted me to come and pick up. I’m sorry

for the other night, I wasn't being myself."

I glanced down at her purse, and it was open, she had a pill bottle right on top. She must have been on something for what she was dealing with.

"No worries, I know you and Mr. McBride are going through a lot, I wish I had more answers for you."

"You know, when we moved here, it was to get away from all the chaos in the city. We wanted Veronica to grow up in a small town and not have to worry about all the drama. Eric's always loved Washington, his dad used to bring him here as a kid, so it was easy for him to pick here. Who would have guessed a small town like this would have so much horror and death in one week?"

"There is certainly a lot going on here, this town has a lot of secrets. Why didn't you guys have a funeral for Veronica?"

She shook her head before answering. "The coroner won't release the bodies of anyone who died this week, they say the bodies are still very important to the case."

"All of the bodies, like McGinty, Andrea, and Damon too?" I questioned.

"Apparently, they are all connected somehow," she replied. "I better get going, stay safe, Mark." She walked past me toward the door. If I could get into the coroner's office, I might be able to find out why they weren't releasing the bodies.

I continued walking toward the nurse's office and just as I was about to grab the doorknob, the bell rang. I hesitated for a moment, thinking if I should just leave or not. The door opened as I let go of the knob.

"Oh, hi, Mark," Patty said. "You scared me there for a second, come on in."

"Sorry, nurse Patty," I said nervously, walking inside.

"Take a seat on the bed. What seems to be the problem?"

I looked around to make sure we were alone. "I just hit my head, and Coach wanted me to check in with you."

"That idiot pushes you kids too far," she said, checking out my head. "Oh yes, you have a small cut right here."

She grabbed some gauzes and pressed them to my head.

“So, how’s everything going, despite the obvious?” she asked, holding the bandages on my head.

“Good, I just hope they find this killer soon so everything can go back to normal.”

“Yes, it has been a few days since they’ve said anything new,” she complained. “When they said it was McGinty, I couldn’t believe it. He was this town, them arresting him is what killed him. I think the killers will never be found, actually. The FBI and news companies should leave us alone, we can deal with matters ourselves. We are a united small town and want to be left that way.”

“What about the killer? If they leave, he or she may strike again.”

“I know you’re not an adult yet Mark, but this town can handle itself, we always have.”

“You said *killers*; so, you think it’s more than one person.”

Her eyes widened, as she pressed harder on my head. “Don’t listen to me, I’m just an old lady. What would I know?”

I pulled away a little, as she was hurting me.

“You’ll be fine, just take these pain meds and head back to class.”

I grabbed the pills from her and tossed them in my mouth, leaving the room. I looked back to make sure she wasn’t following before spitting them out in the trash can. I didn’t know what her deal was, but I didn’t think I could trust her. It seemed like she was hiding something.



AFTER SCHOOL, I QUICKLY left the doors and headed for Jason’s car.

“Mark, I heard about your freak out in gym class,” Rachel said as she walked by me.

“I bet you did.”

“I also heard about your *little* problem,” she said, looking down at my groin area.

“You know, one day your little group is going to pay for what you’ve done.”

“Yeah, whatever, Mark, good luck with that. See you tonight, loser.”

Walking to Jason’s truck, it hit me, I had an appointment with the therapist today. It was going to be so awkward having to open up to my best friend’s mom. I wished they would have set me up with a different therapist, or none at all. Just as I got to the car, I saw Jason standing there with Chloe.

“Hey guys,” I said.

“Mark, how’s the head?” Jason said.

“Real funny, I don’t know why Coach made me go to the nurse,” I said.

“We still on for tonight, Mark?” Chloe asked.

I looked at Jason and he nodded at me. “Yes, we’re going to figure this out.”

“You don’t think Lexi’s mom will cancel the party because of the curfew, do you?” Jason asked.

“Joyce runs this town, she’s not going to care what Taylor says,” Chloe said.

She was not wrong. When Joyce Gray wanted something, she got it. Raymond Gray was the mayor because of her.

“Why does she want everyone at this party anyway?” I asked.

“Lexi said she wanted to give the youth a safe place to hang out,” Chloe said.

I glanced down and noticed Jason and Chloe holding hands. I was so happy for him; he’d had such a tough life already and finally was getting a break.

“You alright driving me to that place?” I asked Jason, trying to keep it between us.

Jason winked or tried to. “I’ll be right there.”

“See you tonight, Chloe,” I said before walking to Jason’s car to wait for him. I looked out the back window and caught a glimpse of their awkward hug and Chloe clearly waiting for Jason to kiss him. I couldn’t help but laugh out loud to myself. Neither of us had really ever had any practice with the opposite sex. Charles used to laugh at us for playing video games instead of going to parties.

Honestly, we were never invited to parties and weren’t really popular in school. I wished I had known Veronica liked me as more

than a friend before she'd died. Maybe part of me did know that, but I was too much of a coward to act on those feelings. With Lexi it would be different, I wouldn't be scared to act on my feelings toward her.

Watching Jason walk to the car, I could see how upset he was. I tried to contain myself as he got in the car. He must have been able to tell I wanted to laugh because he turned and punched me in the shoulder. I just burst out laughing uncontrollably, shaking my head.

"I'm sorry, Jason," I said, trying to stop myself.

"I couldn't do it, I couldn't kiss her," he said, starting the car. "Have you kissed Lexi yet?"

"No, we're just getting to know each other," I answered.

"You're as nervous about it as I am, you're just hiding it," he said.

"I'll decide in that moment if it's right or not," I said. "At least I didn't awkwardly hug her and walk away."

"It was that noticeable?" he asked, pulling out of the parking lot.

"A little. A girl like Chloe won't wait around forever, man," I answered.

I think right there he told himself he would do it next time. He had a more confident look.

"I know we never really got into sports, but it's not that hard to catch a football," he said, punching me in the arm again.

"Knock it off, I was distracted by something," I answered, punching him back.

"I still don't like that we're talking to Patrick Morris now," he said.

"We can trust him, he trusts me."

"I hope you're right but if he screws us, it's your fault."

"The same can be said about Lexi and Chloe. Before this week they never said more than four words to us, at least Patrick is kind of like us."

"We're not losers, we just choose not to get involved at school," he said. "Maybe they felt bad for us that we lost a really good friend and ended up liking us."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night. Just don't get blinded by love; remember what we're trying to do," I said.

"I know you're going through stuff right now, but you can be a real ass sometimes, Mark. I told you, I'm only doing this for Veronica," he said.

“I’m sorry, just a lot on my mind.”

A part of me thought Jason had had a crush on Veronica, which was why I’d never made a move. He was hard to read at times, but with Chloe, he was already committed to her. After his dad, I didn’t think he could handle another devastating blow.

“How’s your mom doing? I guess she’s staying distracted with work?” I asked, changing the subject.

“She’s fine, ask her when you get there,” he said. “We’re taking it a day at a time. But as you know, my dad was never really around anyway.”

“I know, I still can’t believe he died that way. The few times I was around him, he never gave off that feeling,” I said.

“They never do. You never know what people are truly struggling with inside,” he responded. “After we found out that he hung himself, I was glad he was gone. He couldn’t hurt us anymore. I know how messed up that sounds, but it’s true. Do you remember about four years ago, when he moved back, and he and my mom were finally doing good? My dad had finally gone back to rehab and quit the Crusaders.”

“Yeah, that’s when he took us backpacking for the weekend,” I responded.

“Yeah, and then like six months later, he came home from a business trip in California, and he was different,” he added. “Back doing drugs and riding his bike again. One night after he got back, he got into it pretty bad with my mom and he walked back to the bedroom,” he said. “She left, so I went back into the bedroom to check on him, make sure he was okay even though I hated him so much. He was sitting on the bed with a half-empty bottle of alcohol and a gun sitting next to him. I just stood there for a minute or so before he realized I was there.

“He looked up at me and said, ‘I don’t deserve you guys, I’ve killed innocent people.’ I figured he was so drunk, he was just talking, but I kept staring at him as he picked up the gun, pointing it at his head. He kind of stared at me like wanting me to stop him. Everything in me wanted him to pull that trigger but I couldn’t allow him to go out like that. I walked over and took the gun from him and tucked him in. I buried it in the woods, and we never talked about it.”

“Wow, that’s heavy, why have you never told me?”

“I guess I didn’t want you to think any worse of him than you already did.”

“I never thought bad of him, I just didn’t want him to hurt you guys like he always had.”

“I was always jealous of your family,” he said.

“We aren’t as close as it seemed, you know that,” I said.

“Well at least we got each other,” he said, punching me in the shoulder again.

“That we do, and I’m sorry for putting you in danger by calling out Ryan. We need to protect each other right now; they are against us.”

“I overreacted. He is a terrible person, but I don’t think he will risk doing any more with the cops on him now,” he said.

“If he’s at this party tonight, just avoid him,” I added.

“Here we are,” he said, as we pulled up outside of his mom’s office. “I’m sorry I’m laughing at you, it’s just weird dropping you off at a therapist who happens to be my mom.”

“I know but my mom only trusts yours,” I said, opening the door.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” Jason asked as I got out of the car.

“Of course,” I answered, closing the door.



“HI MARK, HOW IS YOUR mom doing?” the front desk receptionist asked immediately as I walked inside. The problem with a small town was that everyone knew everyone and this news of me going to a therapist was going to spread fast.

“She’s doing great,” I answered.

“That’s good to hear. I referred my cousin Denny to her, he needs a good lawyer,” she said.

“Well, I’m sure she’ll help him out, I’m actually here to see Mrs. Miller,” I blurted.

“Of course, let me just go tell her you’re here, take a seat.”

I sat down and looked around and noticed a stack of magazines next to me on a table. One was an older map book titled *Old Rockport*. I flipped through the pages; it showed all the locations in Rockport from 1950. On the page called *Mermaid Cliff*, it looked exactly the same as today. Getting a closer look, it even showed the burned-down house my mom told me was actually an old lighthouse.

"She's ready for you, Mark," the receptionist said as I hopped up from my seat.

I carried the book over to her and showed it to her. "Do you know what happened to this lighthouse?"

"That burned down when I was a kid," she said.

"Do you know how it happened?" I asked further. I was surprised at how unprofessional this session became.

"I think teenagers had a party there and caught it on fire," she explained. "Or maybe Jack Wood burned it?"

"Did you know Rebecca Huber?" I asked her, figuring she was about my mom's age.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Huber's daughter, Rebecca."

"Mrs. Huber never had a daughter, her husband died in the war, and she never remarried. Why do you ask, Mark?"

Pausing for a moment, I was taken aback by what she said. My own mom had said Rebecca died in that fire, but if Mrs. Huber never had a daughter, then how did she manage to die?

"I was just learning about incidents that happened in our town and must have confused the information," I replied.

She leaned in closer to me. "Be careful with that, you might not like what you find. Now get going, Emily is waiting for you."

What did she mean by that?

Jason mom's was sitting up at her desk, waiting for me. I walked over to the couch. "Am I supposed to lie down?"

"If you want to, but you don't have to," she answered. "Look, I know this is weird for you, and it's weird for me too, but I'm just here to listen and help with anything I can. Anything you say here stays between us. I can lose my job if I tell anyone else."

"Anything?" I asked.

“As long as it isn’t about hurting yourself or anyone else, then I’d have to tell the authorities. I don’t want you to think of me as Jason’s mom,” she said in her very calm voice. “You can trust me, Mark.”

“Well, where should I start?” I questioned.

“How about at home, how is it there?”

“Well, we never really do anything as a family. Mom and Dad work a lot and Charles and I have never really been close.”

“Does it bother you that Mom and Dad work all the time?”

“Not really, it’s been like that for a while,” I answered.

“What about you and Charles, do you wish you two were closer?”

“Again, not really, we have each other’s backs when we need it, but we’re just two different people.”

She opened a notebook and began writing something down.

“What are you writing, did I say something wrong?”

“There aren’t any right or wrong answers here, Mark. I am taking notes to get a better understanding. Let’s talk about your parents’ relationship, how are they?”

I realized she was going to want me to open up a lot in these meetings.

“They were going through a bit of a rough patch, but lately they’ve been spending more time together,” I explained, not wanting to give too much information about Damon.

“When they were going through this rough patch, how did it make you feel?”

“Sad, I guess, but I just wanted them to be happy, whether that was together or apart.”

“Do you know why they weren’t getting along?”

This was starting to get awkward, as I knew why they weren’t getting along, but I couldn’t tell Emily my mom was having an affair with her husband.

“I guess working too much,” I answered.

“Okay, and how does it make you feel now about them starting to work it out?”

“Happy, like I said. Either way, I just want them to be happy.”

“Okay. So, let’s talk about Veronica. Were you guys’ friends?”

“Yeah, we knew each other from school and worked at the drive-in,” I replied, realizing this was what she’d wanted to talk about all

along. My mom had probably told her I was devastated when she died.

“Were you guys more than friends?”

“I think we both had feelings for each other, but neither of us made a move.”

“So, how did it make you feel when you found out what happened to her?”

“Upset, I didn’t understand why someone would murder an amazing girl like her.”

“Have you been depressed lately?”

“No, I mean me and Jason are still in shock about it, but we’re not going to hurt ourselves because of it if that’s what you really want to know.”

“I never said that. It’s normal to be depressed after something tragic happens in your life.”

“I’m sorry about what happened to Mr. Miller. I know we’re here to talk about me, but I wish that didn’t happen to you guys.”

“Thank you for saying that. Does Jason seem okay, is he doing good in school?”

“Yeah, I mean as good as he can be,” I answered.

“This town is such a mess right now; I hope that FBI agent finds the killer soon so we can all go back to our own little lives.”

“Yes, I agree,” I answered.

“So, tell me about you and Lexi. I heard you two are becoming a *thing*,” she giggled. “Is that the right term? I mean, you get what I’m saying?”

“Yes. It’s a *thing*... yeah, makes sense. Well, I like her. I mean, I felt bad for Veronica, like I’m leaving her behind,” I replied.

“That is a normal feeling, it’ll take time to realize she’s truly gone, but you need to be happy and it’s okay to be happy. It might not seem like it now, but every day it will get a little easier until one day you wake up and it doesn’t hurt anymore. She might be gone physically, but she will always be with you in your heart.”

“That is true, thank you for saying that.”

“So, are you and Lexi romantically involved?”

“What does that mean, dating?”

“Well, it doesn’t have to be dating, are you guys having sex?”

“Oh no, I’m not ready for that. Well, I would but... It’s complicated,” I said. My face heated up in embarrassment.

“If I can say one thing to you about Lexi, just be careful with her. Her mom isn’t the most trusting person in town.”

That was like the second or third time someone had told me something bad about Joyce.

“Did you go to school with my mom and Joyce?”

“Yes, and Damon, I don’t know if your mom ever told you but she and Damon were actually high school sweethearts,” she said.

“No, she never told me that,” I said, lying to her face.

Her face quickly went from laughing to a weird look like she’d just remembered a bad memory.

“So, what’s up with this Aurora and *externus* thing?” I asked, changing the subject.

She paused for a moment, scratching her neck. “Our older town citizens do not like visitors here, they claim it makes our town less pure or something. They still use some old Latin words around here, *externus* being one of them. And Aurora... well, she was actually a girl who used to live here.”

“So, you do know about Aurora?”

“Yes, my father told me about her when I was a child, the town supposedly sacrificed her; they thought it would keep them safe. I shouldn’t be scaring you with these bedtime stories. Our parents just used them to try to scare us as kids.”

“What if it’s true though?” I questioned.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but it would make for a good movie,” she said. “Why do you ask about this stuff?”

“I’ve just been wondering what it all means, why would McGinty and Damon write it on their cell walls?”

“I doubt you know this, but my husband and McGinty were very close, and McGinty was a crazy old man who must have told Damon about everything he believed, including the story about Aurora,” she explained. “Mix that with the drugs he was doing and he would have believed anything.”

“How much did you know about McGinty?” I asked.

“Is this an interview, why are you asking me these questions?”

“Sorry, I just wanted to know, I’m very interested in this town,” I answered.

She closed her notebook and sat up.

“For as long as I can remember, McGinty had been investigating the suicides on Mermaid Cliff,” she said. “His father was the very first suicide, back in 1917, so I guess he just wanted to know why his dad did that.

“He told us stories his mother told him about a mermaid, a siren creature, who would terrorize the town hundreds of years ago before it was even an official town. He said this creature demanded a sacrifice in exchange for keeping the town safe. He convinced Jack Wood of this—and look what happened to his wife! He convinced my husband of this too and look what happened to him.”

“So, who made up this story about a mermaid killing people?” I asked.

“I don’t know, it’s just something we were told as kids to be afraid of going out at night,” she answered. “If you look back at the four suicides since 1917, you will see they all had connections with this town on a deeper level, so it makes sense they would choose the cliff to end their lives. That, and it’s the highest point in town. Other than Veronica, of course, but then again, she was murdered. I’ll admit it is weird how it’s been every twenty-five years, but if you look at them individually, it makes sense.”

“It sounds like you’ve looked into this before,” I said.

“Damon tried to convince me of the patterns, that there were murders being covered up, but I could see right through it,” she said.

“Who were the other two suicides?” I asked her.

“Well in 1917, Old Man McGinty’s father, Willie McGinty, was the first. In some of the diaries from back then, the townspeople wrote about how he suffered with a lot of mental problems. In 1942, a student at Rockport High took his own life after being bullied in school. I am not sure of his name as I haven’t looked into this in a long time. In 1967, it was another student at Rockport High who was apparently playing on the cliff and fell off. Then in 1992, Jack Woods’ first wife, Margaret, took her own life on the cliff after emotional abuse from Jack.”

“What if Damon was right though. What if there have been other murders and they were covering it up?”

“I think we would know if our friends and neighbors were being sacrificed to the devil, Mark,” she said.

“I see. Where do you find all of this information?” I asked.

“It was all public knowledge at the town library about twenty years ago, I haven’t looked for it since,” she answered.

She turned and looked up at the clock, “Wow, we have really gotten off track. Do me a favor and don’t tell your mom we talked about this. People around town don’t like the past being brought up, especially the suicides. And besides, I’m getting paid to see you, and it wasn’t to talk about all this.”

“I won’t say anything, you can trust me. But just one more question about it! Are you sure Veronica was the only murder ever in this town?”

She hesitated and fumbled around with her notebook for a moment before leaning in closer. “Okay, I never told anyone, but when I was in school, a lot of kids started going missing. The teachers said they transferred to another town, but I never truly believed it. Our town was so isolated back then that no one would ever know what truly happened.”

“What do you think happened to them?”

“I was a kid, you know? So, my imagination ran wild. I do believe they were transferred now. We really should stop talking about this, Mark.”

“Thank you for telling me, and again I won’t say a word to anyone,” I reassured.

“Are you sleeping at night, Mark?”

I sat there a few moments, thinking about how she’d said she couldn’t tell anyone what we talked about. “I’ve been seeing things; I don’t know if they are in my dreams or reality. It happens when I sleep and sometimes during the day.”

“Seeing what things?”

“Death, people burning, dying at the hand of the devil. I have glimpses at night and during the day of this evil thing that haunts me. When I come to, I have a mark on me, like it happened in real life.”

She sat there, staring at me. “Now, Mark, you need to listen to me; it’s all in your head. If you continue to believe what you saw, it will consume you. I think that’s enough for today, but next time we’ll need to talk about you more, deal?”

“Deal,” I agreed, getting up from my chair and heading to the door.

“Tell Jason I said hi and be careful tonight at the Grays’ place,” she said. “Oh, and Mark?”

“Yes?” I asked, turning back to her.

“If you continue to look into this, talking to people about this creature thing, I don’t know how the town will react. You’re coming of age now and that means something. You know... before, they could just say, *well, he’s just a kid*. Now, they’ll start thinking, *this is a man who is obviously disturbed*. Right?”

I nodded to her and left her office, feeling someone was watching me, staring. I turned and noticed the receptionist giving me this look that put me on edge.

“Have a good day,” I said, making my way to the door.

“Be safe out there,” she said, almost in a threatening way.



Chapter 26



Walking outside, I saw Jason across the street at Barny's. Making my way over, I was confronted by a car almost running me over.

"What's your problem!" I called as I turned to look at the car. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up immediately when I saw the tinted windows, the same car from the drive-in. This had to be the same one, and this time, I wasn't going to cower.

Standing there, three feet from the car—three feet from possibly the Rockport Killer—he began revving the engine as if to antagonize me. The passenger door popped open again as I looked around, no one. I made my way over to the door; I was going to confront this guy once and for all.

"Mark, what are you doing? You, ok?" Jason called from Barny's front door.

The car door closed, and the car sped off down the road. I once again tried to get the license plate number but it had been taken off.

"See that?" I called over to Jason as I walked toward him.

"Yeah, who was it?" he asked, opening the door for me to come inside. I sat down at the table and looked right at Joyce Gray who was sitting in her usual seat.

"That car tried to get me last night," I whispered to him, trying not to let anyone else hear.

"What?" Jason asked.

"Shh," I said, kicking him in the knee.

"Ouch," he gasped.

Joyce must have heard him because she looked over and smiled at us. "I hope you boys are coming tonight, I know Lexi and Chloe are excited."

"Yes ma'am, we're excited too, and thank you for having us," Jason answered.

"What about Taylor's curfew, is the party still on?" I asked.

"I have spoken with Taylor and assured her that parents will be at the party, so yes, it is still on, Mark," she replied. She got up from her table and walked over to ours, placing a twenty-dollar bill on our table. "Dinner is on me, boys."

"Thank you, you didn't have to do that," Jason said, as she walked toward the door.

"See you guys tonight," she smiled back at us.

"Why were you so nice to her, she's not a good person," I asked him.

"She's never done anything to me, we've only heard stories," he argued. "So, what was with this car?"

"Last night, I was waiting for Cheryl to pick me up from the drive-in and that car drove up to me and tried to get me to come inside."

"The car is alive?" Jason said.

"No, you idiot, the car is not alive," I said. "I couldn't see who was driving it, I think it might have something to do with that guy in the long black coat," I told him.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I can see why your parents wanted you to see a therapist," he replied. I sat there for a moment, getting angry, wanting to punch him in the face for saying that.

"What can I get you guys to eat?" Katherine asked.

"Burger basket and a soda," Jason said.

"Yeah, I'll have the same."

"Coming right up," she said, walking away.

"At school today, I saw Ryan and Katherine making out," I whispered to Jason.

"No way, are you serious?"

"Yes, and they were talking about laying low for a while, I think they want to pin it on us."

"Do you think Rachel knows about that? They can't pin it on us, we did nothing wrong."

"I doubt it, we could use that to pin them against each other," I suggested.

"She'll never believe us, she hates us."

He was right, it seemed like the more this week went by, the more enemies we somehow created. "How's your shoulder doing?" I asked.

“Good, luckily it’s the arm I don’t use to throw footballs with,” he said.

“I almost forgot to tell you, Colby Butler told me that Deputy Butler found blood on Andrea’s jacket in the woods,” I whispered.

“Well, I guess she got some on it when she was killed,” he said.

“I don’t know man, what if when I fell and hit my head, some of mine got on her jacket?”

He paused for a moment, looking around. “Even if it is your blood, they would need a sample from you to match it.”

“Well, if I’m a suspect can’t they get one from me?”

“Yeah, but why would you be a suspect?”

“I was at the Sheriff’s station a few days ago and there was a box of files on me,” I told him.

“I’m sure Taylor has a file on every kid at Rockport,” he responded.

“I guess I’m just paranoid; the further we get into Veronica’s death, the worse everything gets,” I said.

“Exactly, that is why I said we should move on, but you keep insisting we get justice for her,” he argued.

“Two burger baskets and drinks,” Katherine said, putting our food down on the table. “Why were you at the Sheriff’s station, anyway?”

Hesitating, I acted like I was finishing chewing. “Taylor needed another interview with me, about the night of the party.”

He must have bought it because he started eating his food. “I just have a bad feeling something is going to happen to us.”

“We’ll be fine Jason, trust me.”

“Think the coroner would tell us anything if we asked him about her death?” I asked him. “Veronica’s mom said he won’t release anyone’s body, that it’s all crucial to the investigation.”

“He wouldn’t be allowed to tell you anything, especially with them still investigating,” he replied. “That reminds me, I was talking with my mom about the coroner, Mr. Pulmer, and she said his family has always worked there.”

“So, they could have been covering up the murders since 1917,” I said.

“It’s possible, but then why did he rule Veronica’s death a murder and not a suicide?”

“I don’t know, maybe because Sheriff Richards was the first to the scene, and he’s not a local,” I said.

“Why would it matter that he’s not a local?”

“Externus.”

“What, are you casting a spell or something?” he said.

“It’s Latin for *outsider*. Richards said the townspeople called him that ever since he moved here. Remember when we were on the cliff with Richards and he said the Grays wanted to rule it a suicide, but he released it to the public as a homicide?”

“Yeah, so that makes it seem like the Grays got to decide, not the coroner,” he agreed.

“They didn’t want any attention on the town, that’s what Richards said.”

“If that’s true, and it’s a big stretch, then what else have they covered up?”

I nodded, finishing my burger.

“What time are we heading over there tonight?”

“Probably in an hour or so,” I replied, looking at the time and seeing it was five o’clock.

“What do you want to do until then, or do you have to go home?”

“We could sneak into the coroner’s office and get a closer look,” I suggested.

He started laughing, guessing I was joking, I wasn’t.

“To do what, look at the bodies? You know, my dad is in there. They won’t release his body yet, either.”

“We could look at the files. I don’t know, something has to be going on there.”

“Why can’t we just play video games like normal teenagers?”

“Because we’re not normal teenagers anymore, we’re involved in a bunch of murders in a corrupted town,” I argued. “I’m sorry, it’s just been tough lately.”

“It hasn’t exactly been easy for me either you know,” he said.

“I know. Sorry, really Jas. Alright, well, we have an hour so whatever you want to do we can do.”

Just then my phone started vibrating. It was a text from Lexi.

“Who is it?” Jason asked.

“It’s Lexi,” I answered, reading the text. “She wants to know if we can pick up some drinks for us tonight.”

“Drinks?” Jason questioned. “Like punch?”

“No,” I said. “Like alcohol.”

“Where are we going to get alcohol?” Jason questioned.

We’d only drunk a few times when my parents weren’t home. Charles had a fake ID and would go over to Asheville to buy the beer.

“Maybe we can get Charles to buy it for us,” I suggested.

“Last minute like this, he’s going to want something in return,” he replied.

Last time he’d bought it for us, we had to do his chores for a week.

“If we show up without it, the girls are going to think we’re losers,” he added. “Call him and see what he says.”

I decided to call Charles to see if he can help us out.

I heard him laughing for a moment before answering, “I already got beer for me and the guys tonight, but dad has a few six packs in the refrigerator downstairs if you want to take a chance he won’t notice.”

“I didn’t think anyone would be drinking there tonight with Mrs. Gray being there,” I said.

“It’s a high school party, of course there will be drinking,” he said. “Last time she was there, she was upstairs on business calls all night.”

“Alright; thanks, Charles, see you later.”

I heard someone in the background yelling for Charles to get off the phone. It sounded like Ryan.

“Later,” he said, hanging up.

“Charles said my dad has some in the refrigerator at my house,” I told Jason, putting my phone in my pocket.

“Let’s go,” he said, reaching over to eat the rest of my fries.

As we headed out of the restaurant, my phone began vibrating again. It was Agent Taylor. “Go ahead, it’s my mom. I’ll meet you at the car in a minute.”

I walked beside the building and answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Mark, can you talk?”

“Yes, what’s up?”

“Found anything that can help us?”

I paused for a moment. “Aurora.”

“What about it?”

“It’s a person, she was a girl here who was murdered, and the town covered it up.”

“Same thing they tried to do with Veronica,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I may have interrogated the coroner, it’s not admissible in court, but I convinced him to tell me information on her death.”

My heart began racing, I sat down along the wall of Barny’s.

“Joyce Gray tried to pay the coroner to rule her death a suicide, but Veronica’s family called every news outlet in the country. So, he was unable to alter the records,” she told me. “That’s not all, the coroner told me his family has altered death records for many generations in this town.”

“Why would they do that?” I asked.

“They wanted to keep this town, their secrets, hidden from the rest of the world. He told me there’d been many more deaths, murders, that they kept secret. We just busted this whole thing wide open. You need to stay safe out there until we arrest the people responsible. You’re not safe, you’re in too deep. I realize you might not be able to answer right now, but you need to go home and stay there. Do not leave your house, I can’t explain everything right now, but I will soon.”

Starting to panic, I got up and began walking to Jason’s car. I turned the corner of the building and ran right into someone and fell to the ground.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, standing up to see who it was. “Mrs. Gray,” I gasped, jumping back.

“No problem, Mark, you look like you just saw a ghost,” Joyce said, picking up my phone off the ground.

I grabbed it and put it up to my ear. “Go home, Mark, you’re not safe,” Agent Taylor said before hanging up.

“I’m just embarrassed for running into you,” I said, putting my phone in my pocket.

“I had to come back; I forgot my own phone. Be careful out here, Mark, there’s a storm coming tonight,” she winked, walking by me.

Running now, I saw Jason’s car in the distance.

“What was that!” Jason squealed as I got inside the car.

Trying to catch my breath, I closed the door. “Drive! I have to tell you something. I tried to keep you out of this because I know you don’t want to get too involved.”

“What is it Mark, you’re scaring me.”

“I’ve been working with Agent Taylor to find out what is going on in this town.”

“What does that even mean?”

“There’s certain things I was able to find out that she wasn’t. We both want the same thing, justice. I thought she was a bad person after I went to Asheville jail the other day, but I trust her, Jason. She just called and told me Joyce Gray paid the coroner to rule Veronica’s death a suicide, but he wasn’t able to because Veronica’s family was all over it, with the media.”

“Mark.”

“The coroner also told her there’ve been several disappearances over the years that they covered up.”

“Mark!” Jason called.

“What?” I asked.

“What do you mean you were at Asheville the other day?”

I froze, trying to remember exactly what I said.

“She had me come into interview.”

“Did you see my dad there?”

“No, I didn’t know they had him there.”

“You’d tell me the truth, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course, Jason.”

He seemed satisfied with that as he started driving. I’d never lied to Jason so much in my life, I felt like a terrible person.

“What did Joyce say when you ran into her?”

“She said to be careful, that a storm is coming.”

“Is it supposed to rain?” he asked, turning the radio station.

“I don’t know man; I think she knows I know something. Let’s just get this alcohol and get to the party.”

“So, if what you’re saying is true, then you were right about everything,” Jason said, shaking his head.

I got another text, now from Cheryl. She wanted to know if we were still on for tonight. I texted her back that we’d meet there soon, then texted Patrick to make sure he was going to be there for sure too. We were running out of time, with Taylor hot on Joyce’s trail, and we needed to help her find some evidence. Pulling up to my house, I was relieved to see my parents’ cars were gone.

“Coast is clear,” Jason said as we pulled up.

I got out of the car and ran toward the house. I went inside. A crumpled-up piece of paper was sticking out from under the table where we kept our coats.

I turned back and reached under the table for the paper. It was a parking ticket from Asheville, dated the same day Damon had been found dead. Not thinking much of it, I tossed it in the trash and rushed down the stairs to the refrigerator. It held a few six packs of beer. Grabbing two, I headed back upstairs.

I heard a car door and glanced out the window. I was my dad over at Jason’s car. I grabbed my book bag and put the beer inside and headed upstairs. I stopped and took a deep breath before opening the door. I made my way down the driveway and opened the backdoor of the car, setting my bag inside before he could see it.

“Hi Dad,” I said, getting in the car.

“Jason was just telling me you were changing your clothes before heading to the party.”

“Are you and Mom doing anything tonight?”

“Yeah, we are going to dinner, just call us if you need anything. That goes for you too, Jason.”

“Yes, Sir, we’ll do that, have a great dinner with Mrs. Parker,” Jason said, starting the car.

“That was way too close,” I said.

“Get the beer?”

Reaching in the back, I grabbed my bag and unzipped it for Jason to see inside. “Yes, sir.”

“Was that your phone? I heard a vibrate,” Jason said.

I had gotten a text from Patrick. “I’ll be there.”

“So, this is our new group now?” Jason said. “Two cheerleaders, one lonely photographer, one wannabe writer with a psycho dad, and two losers trying to make it in high school.”

I felt Veronica calling out to me as we passed Mermaid Cliff. There were still so many questions, but I felt like we were getting so close.

“Crazy week, man,” Jason mumbled, looking over at the cliff.

I began to feel overwhelmed as we turned into the long driveway of the Gray’s mansion. This was the first time I’d been here since the night Veronica was killed and it was all coming back to me. My heart began to pump harder and harder as I remembered leaving the party that night. Why was Veronica chasing me out of the party, and how did no one see *the Seven* picking her up?



Chapter 27



“You alright?” Jason asked, pulling up to the gate.
“I think I’m having a panic attack,” I said, making a fist with my hands, squeezing tighter and tighter.

“Come on in,” a voice from the intercom said as the gates opened.

“Deep breaths, man, remember why we’re here. Think of her, Veronica, deep breaths.”

Breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, I began to feel my heart slow down. I pictured Veronica’s face in my head and thought about how happy her mom would be when we found the person responsible for inflicting pain upon her daughter. Releasing my fists, I turned my hands over and noticed fingernail marks in them, starting to bleed. Wiping them off, I looked up to see Lexi and Chloe waiting by the front door for us.

“Are you sure the session with my mom was good?” Jason asked, glancing over at my palms.

I quickly covered them and grabbed my bag from the back seat before opening the door to get out, then turning back to Jason. “I’ll be fine.”

“Hey girls!” Jason called over as they walked toward us.

“Hi guys, we can go in through the side gate, my mom’s inside and she’ll just try to talk too much,” Lexi said.

I stood in the porch where Lexi and I must have talked the night of the party. I thought being there might bring back some memories. We walked into the backyard where a DJ and caterers were setting up.

“Your mom sure knows how to throw a party,” Jason said, patting his stomach.

“We’re going to hang out down here, by the lake,” Chloe said.

“Yeah, it’s more private, and there’s a fire pit,” Lexi said.

“Sounds great, I’m sure Patrick and Cheryl will be here soon,” I chimed in.

“This lake is amazing; does it go out into the ocean?” Jason asked, walking up to the water’s edge.

“Yes, just past the trees over on the other side is the ocean,” Lexi pointed.

“The view here is beautiful,” I said.

“Yeah, it really is,” Chloe agreed.

“We’re going to be able to see the sunset here soon too, it’s really nice to see, disappearing behind the trees,” Lexi added.

It was starting to get darker. I glanced at my phone to see if Patrick or Cheryl had texted. I heard a loud scream and a splash as our heads all whipped in the direction of the house. Charles, Ryan, Katherine, and Rachel were jumping into the pool.

“They’re here. Let’s hope they don’t come over to us,” Jason said.

“I told Jimmie to leave us alone and he said he would,” Lexi reassured.

Sitting down, I reached inside my bag and pulled out the beer. “Anyone want one?”

“Let’s get this party started,” Chloe said, taking two for her and Lexi.

I tossed one to Jason as we all sat down and opened them.

Taking a sip, bitter-tasting, I tried to act cool when really, I wanted to spit it out. Why couldn’t Dad buy something half-decent for a change? I looked forward to when I’d be able to go in a shop and just buy my own.

“Anyone know how to make a fire?” Chloe asked.

Jason jumped up and began assembling wood in the pit. Jason and I had gone camping several times and he’d become pretty good at making fires. Plus, anything he could do to impress Chloe, he’d do it. Glancing out over the water, I saw the sun begin to set over the trees, as the darkness crept in around us.

“Can someone shine their phone down here?” Jason asked, scrambling to start the fire.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Lexi said.

“Watch and learn!”

Reaching in my pocket, I grabbed my phone and lit it up. "Jason is an expert."

"Thanks, Mark."

"No problem."

"There it goes," Lexi said, looking out over the water at the sun disappearing behind the trees.

I heard a loud *woof* as I looked back at the fire pit. Jason tossed a couple more logs in as the flames roared higher.

"Don't burn the woods down, Jason," Patrick said as he and Cheryl walked over to us.

"Hey guys, grab a beer and a chair," Lexi said.

Just then, the music at the house started and a bunch of people from school walked out to the pool area.

"Is it just me or are we a bunch of misfits?" Patrick said.

Jason elbowed me as he had said that earlier. I grabbed two more beers out of my bag and tossed them over.

"We're here for a reason, doesn't matter who we are," I replied. "Anything you know, anything any of us has heard, now is the time to put it all out there."

"I'm not even a sip into my beer yet Mark," Cheryl said.

"I just want our town back to the way it was, if the cops aren't going to do anything about it, then we have to," Chloe demanded.

"We have to get justice for the ones we lost," Lexi said, smiling at me.

I smiled back at her, knowing why she'd said that. She knew Veronica and I had been really close and wanted to do right by her. I looked down at the lively flames, listened to the crackling of the burnt wood, smelled the aroma of the burning embers. Could these five people help me in finally uncovering the town's mysteries?

"Why don't you start, Mark, tell us everything you know," Patrick suggested.

Everyone nodded in agreement with Patrick, so I began. "Jeez, where do I start? Right after Veronica's body was discovered, me and Jason agreed to find out who did this to her. After talking with several people about the deaths here, we had a bunch of puzzle pieces. They found a drug substance in Veronica's body, meaning she was drugged the night of the party."

I paused and took a deep breath before continuing. "They also found someone's DNA on her, meaning she was assaulted before being murdered."

Everyone let out a gasp before looking around, puzzled.

"No offense Mark, but you two were pretty close, are you sure you didn't hook up with her?" Cheryl asked. "You two were pretty drunk at the party, and there was a moment when you guys went upstairs also."

A memory shot into my head of the night of the party. We were in the kitchen talking about something when Veronica took my hand and led me to the stairs.

"That's the thing, Mark was also drugged at the party," Jason said.

"I don't remember most of it," I said.

"So, it could have been you though, you guys could have had done it that night," Patrick cut in.

I glanced over at Lexi, as this was becoming awkward. Luckily, it was dark because I could feel my cheeks heating up, turning red. I took a large sip of my beer and looked around at everyone, "I guess it's possible, if Cheryl saw us going upstairs, I just wish I remembered."

"Can't they test it, to see whose it is?" Chloe asked.

"I think they have to have a DNA sample of the person to compare it to," Cheryl answered.

"Okay, so we'll put a pin in that for now," I said. "That is why they ruled it a homicide and not a suicide."

I set my drink down and just stared at the fire. The flames mesmerizing, I couldn't take my eyes off them. Maybe *the Seven* did drive her to the cliff, maybe they'd dropped her off and told her to jump before leaving. With her being on drugs and alcohol, maybe she did.

I scanned everyone's judging faces to see if they believed anything I said. "Keep going," Jason said.

"Sheriff Richards said they found pieces of her shirt at the top of the cliff, like someone pushed her, ripping her shirt. One of the biggest pieces of evidence we have is Jason."

"What is it, Jason?" Lexi asked.

“The night of the party, I was making a run for the Crusaders. I’m not a part of them, but my dad was missing, and they needed help,” Jason started. “Anyway, as I was making the run, I passed Mermaid Cliff. Lexi, you might not like to hear this, but I saw *the Seven* getting out of two cars with Veronica.”

“Who is *the Seven*?” Cheryl cut in.

“Oh sorry, *the Seven* is a name Mark and I gave them,” Jason explained. “Ryan, Jimmie, Charles, Rachel, Andrea, Katherine, and Russell. Right after Veronica’s death, we started paying more attention to them and realized how close and weird they were acting.”

“So, if you saw them with Veronica on the cliff that night, why didn’t you call the cops?” Cheryl asked.

“I... that’s a good question and now I wish I would have; I have to live with this for the rest of my life. I was going to intervene, but I got a call from my mom that Mark needed help. She picked him up on the side of the road; he was drunk and drugged and was walking down the street. On my way there, she said she dropped him off at home with his mom, and she made me come home with her. I didn’t sleep at all that night, wondering what they were doing on that cliff. There’s never any murders here, and I had no idea what they were going to do to her.”

“No one is blaming you, Jason, it’s hard to say what any of us would have done in that situation,” I said, realizing he was getting really upset about it.

“I know what I would have done, I would have killed them to save her,” Patrick cut in.

That was not the first time he’d said something like that. I really hoped we could trust Patrick not to go crazy.

“So, we think *the Seven* murdered Veronica?” Chloe asked. “Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know, we can only guess, but the fact is, they were the last to see her alive,” I answered. “Plus, they have been acting really weird ever since that night.”

“So, who would have drugged you two? It had to have been planned; they wanted neither of you to remember that night,” Lexi said. “My brother can be a jerk at times, but he’s not a killer.”

“The only two that are violent in that group are Ryan and Rachel,” Chloe said.

“Fear,” Jason blurted. “Ryan or Rachel killed Veronica that night and made the rest of the group stay quiet or they would be killed too.”

“The night before Andrea’s body was found, we had plans to meet up, and she was going to confess everything,” I added. “She never showed up there, and then they found her dead. Ryan must have found out she was going to turn on him and killed her too.”

I turned and looked toward the house at the exact moment Ryan was staring down at us. My eyes widened and a tingle on my neck radiated down my spine. He looked away as I did, it was like he knew we were talking about him.

“Why haven’t we gone to the cops about this yet?” Chloe said.

“Keep going, Mark,” Jason said.

“I’ve been secretly working with Agent Taylor; they just haven’t found any hard evidence yet.”

“You’re a spy?” Patrick said. “Who knew in this stupid small town, we’d have so much death and drama all of a sudden?”

“None of this is funny, Patrick,” Lexi said. “So, what did Taylor say?”

“The townspeople won’t work with her because she’s an externus, an outsider,” I answered.

“Latin,” Cheryl cut in. “Before this town was called Rockport, there were villages of people who came from Europe to live here. They carried some of the words through the generations. My dad wrote a book on it.”

“My mom always told me the place had a dark history,” Lexi said.

“I feel like there’s a lot more going on here than we realize,” I said. “The fish have left the inlet, and this is the first time in a long time that has happened. There are storms and fogs that continue to hit us all of a sudden, this week. The townspeople refused to speak with outsiders, I’ve heard stories from the past. Maybe I haven’t been getting enough sleep, maybe it was the nightmares I’ve been having about this devilish creature, but I am starting to believe everything goes beyond one violent student murdering two classmates.”

“I’m going to need another beer. Pass them around, Jason,” Patrick said.

I started shaking my head as we were getting nowhere with this. It was just creating more questions. I reached into my bag, passing beer around the group.

“Did you say a creature?” Cheryl asked. “In your dreams, this creature, it isn’t a mermaid, is it?”

I froze, chills covered my body. I looked up at Cheryl. “Yes.”

“I thought he was crazy,” Cheryl said.

“It is called Mermaid Cliff after all; maybe your brain just manifested that into a creature,” Patrick suggested, cracking open his can of beer.

“No, there’s old books, diaries, from the townspeople that explained in detail this mermaid or siren creature that would feed on sailors and local citizens,” Cheryl explained.

I cringed at the thought this creature I saw in my nightmares could be real.

“You guys aren’t believing this thing exists, are you?” Patrick questioned.

“Where are these books at?” Lexi asked.

“My father told me they’re hidden somewhere in the Rockport library. Over the years, they tried to make the town forget what really happened,” Cheryl answered.

“This is starting to turn weird,” Patrick said.

“There is another theory,” Cheryl said. “My father, when he was investigating this, thought he figured everything out. He refuses to talk about any of it anymore, but one day, I found his writings. Apparently, there were hundreds of children that went missing from Rockport over the past several hundred years. This twenty-five-years-apart suicide thing was just a cover-up for something even more sinister.”

“What are you talking about, wasn’t your dad crazy?” Jason asked.

“He was, that’s why I’ve never told anyone what I read in his office, until now,” she answered. “He’s since burned all of his writings and refuses to have anything to do with this town.”

“So, according to him, this creature would murder people in town, and they covered it up?” I asked. “Every twenty-five years, they would have a suicide on Mermaid Cliff for what reason?”

“Distraction?” Lexi suggested.

“I don’t know, but there’s one more thing I read that night in his office,” Cheryl said. “He’d obtained pictures of his first wife after she jumped off the cliff and all of the blood had been drained out of her, her body was so decayed but preserved. It was an eerie sight.”

“Doesn’t it take years for them to decompose?” Patrick asked.

“Exactly,” Cheryl agreed. “I looked into it a little more. I asked my grandmother about the funerals she’d gone to over the years. She said this town has never had an open casket, so the coroner at least knew about the bodies rotting so fast but wanted to hide it.”

“This is starting to freak me out,” Lexi said, moving her chair over to mine.

She was shivering so I took my sweatshirt off and gave it to her. She put it on and reached back to grab my hand. The warmth of her hand in mine gave me a sense of calm and happiness.

“So, let me sum this up for us; either *the Seven*, now six, murdered Veronica and Andrea, or we have a creature from hell on the loose,” Patrick said.

“Pretty much,” Jason agreed.

“Lately, I’ve been having nightmares too, not a creature but just scary stuff,” Chloe said.

“Has anyone else had any nightmares or seen stuff that didn’t make sense?” I asked “I don’t know if this is anything but a few days ago I was collecting seashells on the beach and saw this man in a long black coat standing at the water’s edge just staring at me. I didn’t think much about it,” Lexi said. “I looked over at him and he was just staring out over the water.”

I looked over at Jason as his eyes widened.

“We’ve seen him too,” Jason said.

“I’ve seen him too, he was at school,” Patrick said.

“Same,” Chloe and Cheryl said at the same time.

“Okay, now I’m getting freaked out too,” Jason said, sliding his chair over to Chloe.

“I guess it’s me and you,” Patrick said, moving his chair toward Cheryl.

“This guy, could he be another detective?” Cheryl questioned., stopping Patrick from getting too close.

I shrugged.

“We need to find this special section of the library,” I suggested. “If Cheryl’s dad is right, we’ll find our answers there.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time in that library, there is no special hidden section in that place,” Patrick said.

“There is one place we can try,” I said. “My mom told me about this house on Mermaid Cliff that was burned down when she was a kid. They found the name Aurora written in melted wax on one of the walls. There could be something there, some clue or message.”

“I’ve never seen a house up there,” Patrick said.

“The woods cover what’s left of the house,” I said.

“We should go now!” Lexi said. “Any other night, we’ll have to sneak out of our houses because of the curfew, it’s our last chance.”

“Hello children,” a voice drifted through the trees.

We all jumped up in our seats, scared to death. Jason dropped his beer in the fire creating a small explosion of flames.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you guys,” Joyce said, walking closer to us.

“Mom, you can’t just sneak up on people like that,” Lexi grunted, letting go of my hand.

“Oh Lexi, stop being a drama queen. Why don’t you guys come up to the house and mingle?”

“We’ll be up there in a minute, Mom.”

“You guys should be careful being this close to the woods at night,” Joyce said.

“That scared me to death,” Jason said as she walked back toward the house.

“Your mom is like a ninja,” Patrick said.

“She’s going to keep nagging until we go up there,” Lexi said.

“We could go up there, hang out for a little and then leave once she’s distracted with something else,” Chloe suggested.

“Sounds good with me,” Cheryl agreed.

Everyone nodded in hopes that we would find something helpful at the house on the cliff. We sat there for another ten minutes or so, just enjoying our last bit of freedom. With the curfew in effect, it was going to be a lot harder for us to get together after school. Staring at the red dancing flames, I felt Lexi lay her head on my shoulder.

“We need a name,” Jason suggested. “If we’re really going to take down *The Seven*, or uncover a demon from Hell, it’s going to take us all sticking together. So, we need a name.”

“The Six?” Chloe chimed in.

“The underdogs,” Patrick said.

“The loser’s club,” Cheryl laughed, suggesting a name from one of her favorite horror movies.

“I got it,” I said. “The Chosen Ones.”

“Perfect,” Jason agreed.

I felt a slight smile come on my face as I glanced over at Jason. Through the flickering of the fire, I saw him smiling back, holding hands with Chloe. I wished we could live in this moment forever, both of us happy and friends, but I knew this was just an illusion. There was more work to be done, I could feel something growing stronger. It was on us, me rather, to put this to an end.

“We should probably put that fire out,” Patrick said.

“I’ll take care of it,” Jason said.

Jason stood up and I heard the jingling of his belt buckle as he unzipped his pants.

“No!” I said as Lexi, and I jumped up to move away from the fire.

“Sorry guys, when you got to go, you got to go,” Jason said, emptying his bladder on the dying flames.

“You’re a sick man,” Patrick said.

Chloe reached over and smacked Jason on the arm.

“Stay sharp guys, we leave in twenty,” I demanded.



Chapter 28



Walking up toward the house, I shifted near to Lexi and leaned over to her. “I know we have a lot on our minds right now, but why did you drop my hand when your mom walked over?”

“I’m sorry, she’s just really weird about dating, I guess I just got nervous,” she whispered, grabbing my hand again.

“Here we go guys, see you all in twenty,” Jason said as we went into the party.

“Come with me, Mark,” Lexi said as she pulled me out to the dancing area.

I am no dancer; I have no rhythm in my body. I couldn’t tell her no though, as she was not the type to date someone who wouldn’t at least try something. Standing out there with her, I prayed a slow song would come on, as I could at least slow dance. During our middle school dance, I’d slow-danced with Katherine. Her mom always felt bad for me and made her do it.

It was pretty awkward, but it was good practice. Just as I was about to grab Lexi in the slow dance position, an upbeat song came on.

“I don’t know how to dance to this,” I whispered to her.

She grabbed me closer and began swaying my body, showing me how. As the music got faster, I let my instincts take over as she danced up against me. I had seen her at school dances before, plus she was a cheerleader. I saw Jimmie staring right at us, and I stepped back a little. Lexi turned and pulled me in closer, putting my hands around her waist. She grabbed my face unexpectedly and leaned in, kissing me. I was reluctant at first, but the urge took over as I pulled her in closer still.

“Come with me,” she whispered, as she grabbed my hand.

She walked me through the crowds of dancers and classmates as we headed inside the house. It was obvious the alcohol was

kicking in on everyone, and Mrs. Gray was nowhere in sight. Lexi pulled me up the stairs.

“Where are we going?” I questioned, having an idea of what we were about to do.

“Shh,” she whispered, as we passed her mother’s room.

I glanced through the cracked door. I could see several burning lights, silk sheets hanging over the bed. I could just make out her silhouette through the sheets.

We walked into her bedroom, and she closed the door behind us. She walked over to me and pushed me on the bed. She jumped on top of me and pressed her lips to mine.

“Lexi,” I said, trying to get her attention. It was not that I didn’t want to do this, but it didn’t feel right here. She ignored me and began kissing my neck, lifting me up to rip my shirt off. She sat up, removing her shirt, tossing it to the floor. I flipped her onto the bed and got on top of her, kissing her again. I moved my hands down her body, feeling her soft, perfect skin. She unbuttoned my pants as I did hers. Pulling them down, I tossed them to the side and began kissing her neck. She wrapped her legs around my waist, squeezing me hard.

“Are you sure?” I asked her, pausing for a moment.

“Yes,” she whispered, biting my ear.

A pink teddy bear was sitting on her dresser. A memory entered my mind of Veronica, the night of the party. I remembered kissing her in this bed, joking about the pink teddy bear staring at us. I remembered feeling the soft skin of Veronica’s body, having sex for the first time that night.

“What’s wrong?” Lexi asked as I paused, sat up on the bed.

“I’m sorry, Veronica,” I said.

“What? I’m not Veronica.”

It suddenly made sense to me; Veronica was crying after we hooked up that night. I thought I had done something wrong, so I left the party. She tried to chase after me and that must have been when *the Seven* took her. So, it was my fault she was taken. She wasn’t assaulted, it was me who’d been with her that night.

I snapped out of it as Lexi was putting her shirt back on.

“I’m sorry, Lexi,” I said as I grabbed her arm. She pulled away and began crying. I’d done it again; I’d only been with two girls and somehow made them both cry.

“Lexi, being in here, it brought back a memory of Veronica. I remembered hooking up with her,” I explained. She began to calm down as she grabbed my hand.

“I think the alcohol got to me; maybe we should take this relationship slower,” she said. “I’m glad you remembered what happened, but it’s weird that you did it in my room.”

“Yeah, I guess that is kind of weird,” I said. I turned and grabbed her hand. “Once this is over, and we finally put Veronica to rest, I will give you my full attention.”

She grabbed my face and kissed my cheek.

“We should probably get back down there, make sure everyone else is staying out of trouble,” she said. I couldn’t help but feel like she was upset with me because of this. I wouldn’t blame her if she was I wouldn’t have sex with her because of another girl. She walked out of the room as I stood up to put my clothes back on. I looked over at the pink bear, big eyes staring right back at me. I couldn’t help but wonder if I just ruined this relationship with Lexi. Who was going to want to be with someone as broken as me?

Getting up to head downstairs, my phone dropped off the bed. I reached down. Something was hanging out under her mattress. I pulled it. It was a very small wooden box with a red wax stamp on the front. *Syreni*.

I looked back at the door to make sure she wasn’t there before opening it. Inside was an old-looking key tied on a chain. Maybe it was some kind of antique necklace her family passed down to her?

“Mark?” I heard from outside the room. I shoved it back under the mattress before running out of the room.

“Jason,” I called, seeing who it was.

“No way, I had to see for myself,” he said.

“See what?” I questioned.

“You got laid, man!” he said, punching my arm in excitement.

“We didn’t do anything Jason. I remembered being here that night. I remembered hooking up with Veronica the night of the party.”

“What!?” he said.

“What if she really did kill herself?”

“You knew her just as much as I did, she would never do that,” he consoled.

“Is everyone ready?” I asked, walking toward the stairs.

“Yeah, everyone’s out front, we’re taking Lexi’s car,” Jason answered.

I walked past Joyce’s room and noticed the lights were off. Several candles burned, creating a dim light. It gave off a dungeon feeling. Heading downstairs, everyone was in full party mode. The smell of smoke almost gagged me; people were dancing all over the place. Smoking, making out, and drinking, it had turned into chaos.

“Freaks!” I heard as we walked toward the front door.

Turning around, I saw Ryan stumbling toward us.

“Not now, Ryan, you look like you’ve had a little too much to drink,” Jason said.

“What did you say, loser?”

I got in between them as Ryan walked closer to Jason.

“Seriously, you don’t look too good.”

“What are you going to do, kill me?” Jason asked. “Like how you killed Veronica and Andrea.”

“Jason, stop, don’t do this here,” I demanded.

“What are you talking about, freak?”

“I saw you that night, then we saw you on the camera footage after you killed Andrea.”

Ryan shoved me out of the way and swung at Jason, hitting him in the eye. Instinct took over. I tackled Ryan to the ground and started swinging. I didn’t know what came over me, but just kept swinging, left, right, left, right. I guessed I had a lot of frustration built up, and just took it out on him. Seeing the blood coming out of his nose and mouth, I continued hitting him. “Why’d you do it; you killed them!” I screamed.

I was pulled off him and realized what I had done.

“You could have killed him, Mark!” Charles called, pulling me back.

My fists were covered in blood. Everyone stood around staring at me and what I had done.

“I didn’t mean to hit him. He was going to hurt Jason,” I said.

“Just go, before this gets any worse,” Charles demanded.

“Psycho!” someone in the crowd called.

“Loser!” another one chanted.

“Let’s go,” Jason said, pulling my arm out the door.

“What the hell was that?” he asked.

“I don’t know, something just came over me. You shouldn’t have provoked him though.”

“Maybe Patrick was right; if the cops aren’t going to arrest him, maybe we should take matters into our own hands,” Jason suggested.

“We’re not murderers,” I answered, looking down at my bloody fists.

“You almost beat him to death with your fists!”

Wiping my hands on my pants, I felt the ripped flesh on my knuckles.

“Let’s not bring this up to the rest of them; we need to focus on finding evidence,” Jason said.

Walking to Lexi’s car, I couldn’t understand why I’d snapped like that in front of everyone.

“Took you guys long enough,” Cheryl said as we all crammed in the car.

“I had to use the bathroom,” Jason replied.

“I brought along a few flashlights,” Lexi said, pointing under my seat.

It was still a little awkward after what had happened in the bedroom. Luckily, no one but Lexi and Jason knew.

Making our way through town to the cliff, I stared out the window at the now full moon. There weren’t many lights out this way, and we just relied on the light from the moon and stars. I began thinking about the box I’d found under Lexi’s bed. Who gave someone an old key as a family heirloom? What did the key open? What was the stamp on the front? I couldn’t be sure, but I thought it was in Latin. Syreni... the same name I had heard a few times now. Maybe Cheryl knew what it meant, as she seemed to know some Latin.

“No way,” Patrick gasped.

“What is it?” Lexi said.

I looked back and Patrick was on his phone. My stomach dropped as he turned the phone and replayed a video that he'd watched. It was me on top of Ryan, hitting him. I felt my jaw drop as this was going to look horrible to a lot of people.

"What the hell, Mark?" Lexi grunted.

"It wasn't his fault; Ryan was antagonizing me, and Mark stepped in."

"Where did you get that?" I asked Patrick.

"Colby sent it to me. He said Rachel recorded the video and has been sending it to everyone in school."

"That's not the whole story!" I said. "She's not showing the whole video. Ryan hit Jason first, look at his eye."

"Ouch, it's swollen," Chloe said.

"This looks really bad, Mark," Lexi said.

"He deserved it. I'm glad you stood up for yourself and for Jason," Cheryl added.

I could tell Lexi was really mad about it while the others seemed to appreciate that I'd stood up for myself. It surprised me that Lexi wouldn't be more understanding. Why would she be so upset that I'd hit Ryan?

"I'm sorry, Lexi, I was just caught up in the moment."

"That's a wicked right hook you got there," Patrick said.

"Let's focus on what we're doing right now," Lexi scolded. "We're here."

"Lead the way, Mark," Jason said, getting out of the car.

I walked toward the woods as it began lightly raining as an eerie mist moved in around us.

"Turn your flashlights on," I said, breaking the tree line.

With the lights shining, I could make my way through the dense brush. After a few feet of getting pricked by thorns and walking through spider webs, I could finally see something.

"Shine it there," I pointed just ahead.

"I see it!" Chloe said.

Up ahead was a half burned-down wooden and stone-looking building. Making my way up the few stairs, a sense of unease came over me.

"Did you guys just feel that?" Cheryl asked.

“Goosebumps?” Jason questioned.

“I think that’s just fear,” Patrick said.

I walked around inside and there were tree roots and moss covering what walls were left.

“It’s just ruins,” Lexi added.

“Keep looking, for anything,” I said.

The stairs were so badly crushed that you couldn’t even go up them. I began to grow concerned that we wouldn’t find anything.

“Anyone finding anything?” Chloe asked.

“I think there’s a door behind these rocks!” Patrick said.

We all rushed over and shone our lights on what looked like a badly burned door behind a stack of rocks.

“Help us out,” Jason said, moving the stones one at a time from the pile.

“Is it just me or do these rocks look like they were placed here on purpose?” Cheryl asked.

It did seem as though they were stacked to block the door.

“If you look at the way the building has fallen in, it doesn’t make sense why a single pile of rocks would be up against this wall,” Patrick said. “The rest of the rocks are scattered.”

“You’re right,” Lexi agreed, looking around.

Jason, Patrick, and I worked fast and moved the rocks out from in front of the door.

We paused when we had finished, and I shined the light on the door.

“You guys ready for this?” Jason asked.

“I don’t really know what we’re looking for, but I’m ready,” Chloe said.

“Well, we are the Chosen Ones, aren’t we?” Patrick asked.

I approached the door; rain began coming down harder. Reaching for the doorknob, I hesitated for a moment, several emotions coming over me. This could be the answer to whatever was going on. Turning the knob, it wouldn’t budge.

“I think it’s locked, guys.”

“Try this,” Jason said, handing me a rock.

I raised the rock over my head and brought it down, striking the knob right off the door. I pushed the burned door open wide as

everyone crowded around me.

“Shine the light,” Cheryl said.

Grabbing the light from Lexi, I shone it into the darkness, revealing a stairwell.

“Let’s get out of this rain,” Chloe said, pushing us onto the stairs.

Walking down the seemingly never-ending spiral stairs, I began to get nervous about what we might find at the bottom.

“How far do these go?” Jason asked.

“Probably to the bottom of the cliff,” Patrick said.

“This is starting to freak me out,” Chloe whispered.

“Did your mom say anything about this when she told you about the house?” Cheryl questioned.

“No, she didn’t say anything about a basement or staircase.”

Feeling something vibrate, I stopped and pulled my phone out. It was a text from Charles. *Where did you go?* I tried to text him back but couldn’t get a signal down there. I walked back up the stairs a little and got one bar of service. I texted him and told him I’d be home soon, to cover for me with Mom. The walls were covered with small drawings of creatures and children. I shone my light closer to get a better look.

There was a large drawing of a structure around several people, no faces on any of them. Far under them, it looked like a drawing of four-legged creatures as if they were underground. Circles, or maybe caves of some sort were drawn around the creatures. Several animals were drawn around the people with swords. It looked like a depiction of two sides fighting each other.

Some weird stuff went on here, these must be the earliest settlers’ drawings!

The number 6060 was written everywhere.

“I think we’re almost at the bottom,” Jason said from below.

I walked down the last few steps and joined the rest of the group.

“Everything alright?” Cheryl asked.

“Yeah, just thought I was getting a call and tried to find a signal.”

“What is this place?” Chloe questioned.

Shining the light around, it looked like an old chamber of some sort.

“Maybe they captured people and chained them up down here,” Patrick said.

“That’s not funny,” Lexi responded.

I walked around the room and noticed more of the same drawings from the walls in the stairwell. Barrels and old tools littered the area.

“Anyone finding anything useful?”

“Not really, just a bunch of useless things down here,” Jason replied.

“Dead end, we should get out of here,” Lexi suggested.

A rat went scurrying across the room and everyone let out a yelp of terror. Hearing rocks shifting, I looked over and noticed Chloe up against a wall. The wall suddenly moved inward, revealing a hidden path.

“What the…” Jason gasped.

I walked over to Chloe and looked past her at a long dark hallway.

“I must’ve pushed the wall open when I jumped back,” she said.

“It’s a secret passage,” Patrick said, pointing at the loose rock in the wall.

“Okay, this is getting really weird now,” Lexi said.

“Someone must have built this for a reason,” Cheryl added.

“Do we go through it?” Chloe questioned.

Making my way past everyone, I entered the darkness of the hallway. This had to lead somewhere important. Shining the light down the hallway, it seemed to go on forever, like an endless river, never arriving at a destination. We walked in silence for a long time. The room was no longer viewable from behind us.

“This is an underground cave network,” Patrick said. “They must be carved all under the town.”

“What are they used for?” Chloe asked.

“Before the town came to be Rockport, the people could have used these for passageways,” Cheryl suggested.

The cave walls looked damp, so I wiped them with my finger and felt the cool mist that covered them. I licked my finger to taste the dampness.

“Gross, Mark,” Lexi said.

“Saltwater,” I replied, wiping my hand off on my pants. “Water from the ocean must flow through these caves at times.”

“Well, we don’t want to be in here when that happens,” Jason said.

“Let’s keep going.”

“Guys, I don’t have a signal in here, people could be looking for us,” Lexi said.

“We haven’t been here too long, I’m sure people are still at the party,” Jason answered, following me through the creepy cave.

We went around a turn and the walls narrowed. I didn’t tell the rest of the group in case anyone was claustrophobic. Just up ahead, I could see an opening to the left and the right.

“Which way do we go?” Patrick asked, walking up beside me.

“Does anyone have a coin we could flip?” Jason said.

“I think we should turn back,” Lexi argued. “I was all for finding clues, but this is getting dangerous.”

Ignoring her, I turned right and continued walking through the cave.

“What the hell is that?” Patrick gasped.

I shined my light over towards him and on the cave, wall was a rock that resembled a human skull.

“Is that a skull?” Cheryl asked.

“I think it’s a rock carved like a skull,” Patrick said.

I reached up to it and felt it, knocking it to the floor. Everyone took a step back as the girls and Jason let out a screech.

“You alright Jason?” Patrick said.

I realized that it was a real skull.

“It’s real, isn’t it?” Lexi said.

“I think this is bone.”

“Why is there a human skull in here?” Chloe screamed.

I looked back at Lexi and Chloe, a sight of terror on their faces.

“Okay, look, I know some of you are scared and if you want to turn back, no one is going to blame you. I feel something telling me to keep going. I need to do this.”

“We started this together; we either turn back together or continue together,” Patrick said.

“Okay, let’s vote,” Chloe said, holding onto Lexi’s arm.

“Whoever wants to turn back, raise your hand,” I said. Shining my light, Lexi, and Chloe raised their hands.

“Whoever wants to keep going, raise your hand.” I raised my hand as Cheryl and Patrick agreed with me.

“Jason, you didn’t pick one,” Lexi said.

Looking around, Jason shook his head and slowly pointed in front of us. Chloe and Lexi gasped in rage as Jason decided in favor of continuing.

“That settles it, we keep going.”

“No!” Patrick said.

His flashlight was dying, flickering on and off. I turned back and kept going, holding our last flashlight.

“Use your phones,” Chloe suggested.

Everyone pulled their phones out, lighting up the cave.

Out of nowhere, Chloe took off running in the opposite direction, disappearing into the darkness.

“Wait!” Lexi called, running after her.

“Don’t go back, they’ll be fine, we have to keep moving,” I said, feeling connected to this place. I had to keep pushing.

“They’ll be fine, as long as they remember to turn left,” Cheryl said.

“Let’s go,” I said, turning to continue through the cave.

Just up ahead, we came to an opening. Shining our lights, it revealed a room.

“There’s torches here,” Patrick said, pulling out his lighter, lighting the torches.

The room lit up as the fiery torches gave it life. Several words were written on the walls.

“Latin,” Cheryl said.

Syreni was written there—and I remembered seeing that on Lexi’s key box.

“*Syreni*, Cheryl what does it mean?”

She stared at it for a little while, trying to figure it out.

“It’s pronounced like SIGH-REN-E, and it translates to mermaid.”

“What does that mean?” Patrick questioned.

“Are you sure that’s what it says?” Jason asked.

Cheryl turned back to Jason. "It could be like a sect devoted to a mermaid?"

"Sect!" Patrick said. "Like a cult?"

"We need to get out of here," Jason said.

"A mermaid cult?" I said, wondering why that would be on the wooden box under Lexi's bed.

"I've seen those words before, on a box I found in Lexi's bedroom."

"Are you serious?" Cheryl blurted.

"Lexi is part of a cult that worships a mermaid?" Jason questioned.

"That doesn't make any sense," I argued.

There were trails of what looked like blood around the room.

"Hey guys, is that fresh blood?"

Kneeling down, Patrick put his finger in it. "That's blood alright."

"Okay, let's get out of here." I gave in. We had no choices now; we needed to tell the adults, the police, somebody about this.

I looked on the walls further, noticing more drawings. They looked like creatures rising up from below and taking over the world. I once again saw 6060 written on the walls.

"Guys, unless Ryan is an ancient assassin, I don't think he killed Veronica," Jason said, staring at the wall. For the first time, I started to believe that was true. If *the Seven* left her at the cliff, someone else must have encountered her before she fell to her death.

"Wait, guys, what is that?" Patrick blurted, shining his light in the corner of the room.

My heart dropped into my stomach. The black coat that I'd seen someone wearing around town was torn up and laying in the corner of the room.

"That was the guy's coat we all saw around town," Patrick said.

A loud clicking noise came echoing through the cave.

"Someone's coming!" Cheryl said.

They took off running through the cave. I finally caught up to them and nearly passed out in exhaustion. I looked up and was amazed at the sight of a wooden ladder. It seemed sturdy enough to climb. I shone my light up and saw a wooden door in the cave ceiling, just above the ladder.

“Go!” Jason called.

I grabbed the ladder and began climbing. The same noise, like a mighty roar, came echoing through the cave. I frantically grabbed the wooden door and pushed up.

“It’s stuck!” I whispered.

“Hurry, the noise is getting closer!” they whispered back in fear.

I pushed on it with all of my might and the door finally burst open. I pulled myself up and turned to grab Cheryl’s hand, pulling her up. The roaring sound came whooshing through; it must have been just around the corner. Jason quickly climbed the ladder as the wooden step cracked, throwing him to the ground.

“Ouch!” Jason cried out, grabbing his leg.

“He’s cut, it’s bleeding!” Patrick blurted.

“You’re going to have to lift him to us,” I demanded.

I watched as adrenaline took over Patrick’s body. He lifted Jason up just to where Cheryl and I could grab him, and we pulled him through the door.

“Climb!” I called back down to Patrick and reached for him.

He put one foot on the ladder but stopped and stared down the tunnel. I could see his body trembling, like he was looking at something horrific.

“Patrick, climb!”

“Mom?” Patrick said in a terrified voice and stepped off of the ladder.

“You’re going to catch a cold down here, Pat,” a creepy female voice came from the cave.

“Patrick, what’s going on?”

His trembling body turned up to me. I had never seen a more terrified look in my life. His face was white as a ghost. I quickly leaned down to reach for him but was pulled back up.

He stuttered as he tried to speak but could only muster one word, “run.”



Chapter 29



Before I could say another word, rushing water consumed him, filling the tunnel.

"I almost had him!" I yelled at Cheryl. "Why did you pull me back?"

"What just happened!" she said.

"The noise, it was water. Patrick's gone."

"Gone, gone where?" she questioned, tears forming in her eyes.

"He was talking to someone down there, just before the water roared through."

"Talking to who?" Jason demanded an answer.

"He said *Mom*."

"Something is wrong here," Jason said, rocking back and forth.

"That's why the walls were wet, water must flow through during storms," Cheryl explained. "It washes out into the ocean. He will be ok, guys."

Getting up, I looked around. "Where are we?"

"A basement of some sort," Jason said, ripping a piece of his shirt to wrap around his leg.

"How bad is it?"

"Not too bad, just a cut."

Turning my flashlight on, I began walking around, realizing this was some sort of old cellar.

"Is this the library?" Cheryl questioned, dusting off some old books.

Shining my light further, it hit me; this was the 'special section' of the library.

"The place your dad spoke of in the library! This is it!"

"So, there's a secret underground tunnel from Mermaid Cliff to the library?" Cheryl questioned.

"There were other turns down there; it could go all over the town."

"Guys, what are we going to do about Patrick?" Jason asked.

“We don’t even know if Lexi and Chloe made it out safe,” Cheryl added.

“We can’t worry about that right now, we need to find answers in here, this is what we came for.”

“Are we just going to ignore the fact he was somehow talking to his mom down there?” Jason grunted. “I didn’t even know he had a mom, not to mention how the hell did she get down here?”

“He lives with his dad at the docks. His mom died a long time ago in South America. I could have heard him wrong, maybe he said run when he saw the water.”

I walked over to a shelf and began reading names. Most of them were in Latin and some were random titles I’d never heard of; Bellam, The Unnamed, Magarass, Nephilim, Cambion, Folia, Atune, and Fleisium were just some of the weird names.

“Here!” Cheryl said, pulling a book off the shelf. “This is one of the books my dad was talking about.”

I took a deep breath, and we opened it together. Written on page after page were names and dates of people dating back to 1512. The very first name on the list was Aurora.

“1512!” Jason said. “Is that the date?”

“Yes, these are people who died here and what year they died in,” Cheryl answered him.

“I thought the Europeans didn’t settle on the west coast until the 18th century,” I said, remembering Mr. Grumbles history lesson on the West Coast settlements.

“There must have been a colony living here somehow, the dates don’t lie,” she challenged.

“The town wasn’t even created until 1917, how does any of this make sense?” Jason asked.

“The colony before obviously kept it secret and out of history books,” Cheryl answered. “We’ve always been told the town keeps to itself.”

We read down the list of pages and seen the staggering number of people who died here every year, way more than every twenty-five years.

“Flip to the last page,” Jason suggested.

We all gasped as we read the names. Veronica, Andrea, McGinty, and Damon were all on the list.

“Someone is still updating this,” Cheryl blurted.

“Look at all these names through the years, there’s been so many deaths here, that we never heard of,” Cheryl added.

“They didn’t want any attention on the town, they had to keep it quiet,” I explained.

“The question is why, why would they keep it quiet?” Cheryl asked.

“What is this here... it’s a calendar on full moons,” I said, pulling out a long sheet of paper.

“They are tracking the full moons every year for some reason,” Cheryl said.

“Isn’t it obvious? These deaths are murders. There’s a serial killer in this town who they are trying to protect!” Jason called out.

“We need to take this book to Taylor,” Cheryl suggested.

“This is the proof we need for them to open an even bigger investigation.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Jason said. “Our lives will never be the same.”

“If we don’t do it, more will die,” Cheryl said.

“If there are so many murders and disappearances, why haven’t we heard about it?” Jason asked.

“Don’t you understand what is going on?” Cheryl said. “Everyone is in on it, no one reports it because it’s just the way the town is and always has been. My father was right!”

“So, someone is killing people and stashing their bodies down in the caves, but why?” I asked.

“*Sacrificium*,” Cheryl whispered.

“What?”

Reaching over, she grabbed another book off the shelf. “*Sacrifice*.”

The book was all in Latin, but there were plenty of graphic pictures and drawings.

“They sacrifice these people to an ancient evil during a full moon,” she said, reading the pages.

There were images of people being murdered in all kinds of ways. I was stunned to see an image of a demon-like mermaid exactly like the one I'd seen in my dreams. The drooping, peeling skin of her face... The pure black eyes staring back at me. The drawing showed her mouth, full of razor-sharp fangs. Then, there were drawings of townspeople tying innocent children up and letting the demonic creature feed on them. The number 6060 was written all throughout.

"I can't look at these anymore."

"I can't read all of this, but there are also mentions in here about Syreni and the Order of Lai. It says, they were two ancient groups, pinned against each other for hundreds of years. The Syreni were formed to protect the demons. The Order of Lai was formed by a Chinese warrior who wanted people to be able to depend on them to save the human race. Do you think this is what's really going on?" Cheryl asked.

"I've always felt there was something strange going on here. After the events this week and seeing this room, it's looking more like it."

"I just can't believe my dad could have been right this entire time. After everyone said he was crazy, including me. Listen to this entry from 1512!

"I am writing this; on the day my daughter is to be given to the flames for the good of the colony. She has been chosen by the Syreni, and I must approve. I have heard Satan, seen Satan, met Satan. He shows himself in our dreams, in the flames, demanding our loyalty, refusing to be ignored. Manifesting as many figures, creatures, Satan is our neighbors, our friends, and our family. We must live on in this new world, abiding by the laws set forth by the sect. I can only wish Aurora's name will not be forgotten."

"What the hell is this town?" Jason said. "How did we not know about the history of this place?"

"It's modern times now, they had to hide it from the rest of the world, from us," Cheryl explained. "Listen to this other entry, *'After Aurora had been sacrificed to the demon, Adrian warned us of an ensuing war. We have begun seeing more weird creatures throughout the land. They are of all shapes and sizes. Adrian told us that they were released into this world from another. That the*

passage to their home had been cut off and he needs it reopened to reach an old friend. He swears that Aurora will one day reopen this passage so that we may reach our full destiny. It is only my hope that I will one day be a part of this."

"This has to be a dream," Jason cut in.

I opened the book titled 'Creatures of Folia'. It was filled with alien-like beings I'd never seen before. Something called a Vulps came first, like a small fox with a bushy tail, wearing clothing. Another was all blue, and one was pink. There was a lizardman thing and a rock person.

I closed the book in confusion and placed it back on the dusty shelf.

"Magarass is a prison of some sort," Cheryl said as she continued reading the books.

I looked around at all the other books on the shelves and read the titles to myself: 'Resurrection', 'Conjuring', 'Sacrifice'. I grabbed an old book off of the shelf that was titled, 'Piece 1'. I opened it, and there were drawings of a man that was split in half. I skimmed over the writings that spoke of a man whose soul had been torn into two pieces, and one of the pieces was sent to a place far away. It seemed as though they were trying to put the pieces back together.

A door slammed shut from above us, footsteps walked across the loose floorboards which forced dust to fall around us.

"Let's go!" Cheryl whispered, opening the wooden door on the floor.

"I'm not going back down there," Jason said.

I could see the water had receded some, but still flooded the caves.

"The creature could be down there, it already got Patrick," Cheryl cried.

"Who's there?" Someone questioned from above.

I pushed Cheryl and Jason into the water and jumped in after them.

"Mark, what is your problem?" Cheryl whispered.

"Shh!" Jason said.

I could touch the tip of my toes to the floor but had to swim to stay above the water.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” Jason questioned, struggling to swim.

I shone my light behind us and then in front, I turned to Jason, “I’m sure.”

We cautiously made our way through the eerie tunnels.

“We must be halfway through now,” I said.

My light dimmed, flickered, before turning off.

“Turn it back on, Mark!” Cheryl screamed, the darkness surrounding us.

“I’m trying!”

I smacked it in my hand a few times with no luck.

“Jason stop breathing on my neck!” Cheryl demanded.

“What are you talking about, I’m over here with Mark, trying to fix the flashlight.”

“There’s something behind me,” Cheryl whispered.

The light shot on and I pointed it toward Cheryl and revealed what was behind her. I froze in that moment, couldn’t move or speak. Jason must have felt the same because he wasn’t budging either. Standing behind Cheryl was the creature from my dreams, from the books, its green skin peeling off its face. Long black hair floated around it, its eyes darker than the night.

“Cheryl, don’t move,” Jason whispered.

Cheryl turned and stared the creature in the eyes. She screamed and panicked, a whirlpool of frantic attempts to get away. But there was nowhere to escape to. In an instant, she was gone, disappeared under the murky water. Gone at the hands of the creature. We stood there, frozen, watching the bubbles rise and pop, and the wild water churning past us. We stood unmoving until the water ran still.

“Do you see her anywhere?” I asked, pointing the light around the cave. “Cheryl?”

Jason had a look of terror on his face like I’d never seen before. I wanted to search for Cheryl, but we had to protect ourselves now.

“This can’t be happening,” he cried. “We were supposed to be a team.”

The light dimmed again, and we had no choice but to leave without her. I glanced back at the dark, still water. No sign of Cheryl, she was gone just like that. My stomach heaved, my breath came in

short gasps; I was chilled to the bone and full of fear, and shame, and self-loathing to have brought her down here. It was my doing, all of it! But there was no time to ponder on it all.

“I see it!” Jason said.

We climbed up into the room and both collapsed in fear and exhaustion.

“We can’t leave her down here alone!” I cried.

“It would have taken us too, Mark, we had to leave! You know that!”

“She trusted us, and we let her die! She trusted—me.”

“It’s not our fault,” he said.

“You’re right, it’s *my* fault, it was my idea to come here. I killed Cheryl and Patrick.”

“Look, we don’t even know they’re dead, maybe the water pulled them out of the cave, into the ocean.”

“You saw the thing standing behind her!” I said, catching my breath. “Did that look like water carrying her to you? There is something down there and it just killed at least two of our friends! We don’t even know what happened to Lexi and Chloe.”

“I’m sorry, Mark, I’m trying to understand how a mermaid demon has been killing people in town for five hundred years. And we’re just now finding out!”

“That’s the thing, the Syreni didn’t want anyone to know. That’s why they hid all of the murders, forged the records. It has to be our parents, they have to be the cult, man!”

“No one ever reported their children missing because they knew nothing would ever come of it,” Jason said in anger.

“People will find out now what has been going on, we’re going to expose this once and for all!”

I walked over to the entrance to the cave to see if I could see anything. My legs were weak, and I was trembling all over.

“Cheryl!” I called down the dark tunnel. “Patrick!” My voice was weak, as if I already accepted there was no point in shouting, but I did it anyway. It was what you were supposed to do, and I honestly didn’t even know why. “Please come back.”

I leaned up against the wall and it moved. I jumped back and the wall opened and locked in place.

“What just happened?”

“You must’ve leaned on the brick that activates the door,” Jason explained. “Let’s get out of here, help me up.”

I grabbed my phone and had one bar of service. I quickly dialed Agent Taylor’s number and waited.

“Are you calling Taylor?” Jason asked. “Tell her to send the army.”

After the third ring, she picked up, “Mark?”

“Agent Taylor, it’s Mark, we need your help at Mermaid Cliff!”

“Mark? What is going on, I can barely hear you?”

“Mermaid Cliff, the demon, it’s here!”

“Get out of there. Don’t be a hero, you’re not ready yet.”

My phone beeped a few times, shutting off. “No!”

“What happened, is she coming?”

“My phone died, let’s go!”

I lifted Jason up and we began our ascent up the winding stairwell. Step after step, I worried that this creature wasn’t done with us.

“Do you think Cheryl and Patrick made it out?” he questioned.

I nodded to him, and we broke through the door and entered the cold, foggy darkness of the woods.

“Remember where to go?”

“Yes, it’s just up through the woods over there.”

Walking through the woods, the rain grew still, an eerie silence passing over me. Pausing for a moment, I looked around. Nothing. The silence almost screamed to me, piercing through my ears. Breaking through the tree line, I leaned over with a sense of relief.

“We made it.”

“The car is still here but the girls must not have made it back,” Jason said, his voice in a stammer. Grabbing Jason’s arm, we slowly made our way over to the car.

“Mark!” a voice called, scaring me to my knees.

It was Charles.



Chapter 30



“Thank God you’re here, you won’t believe what we saw, Charles.”

“Lexi and Chloe called me and said you guys needed help.”

A bright spotlight from a pickup truck clicked on and shone at us, blinding me for a moment. Wiping off my eyes, adjusting to the brightness, I realized it wasn’t just Charles here.

Ryan, Rachel, Jimmie, Russell, and Katherine all stood in front of us.

“Thank you, guys, for coming to help us.”

“They’re not here to help us, Mark,” Jason grunted, sitting down to grab his leg, wincing in pain.

“What is this, Charles?”

“I’m so sorry, Mark, I tried to warn you many times about looking into this,” Charles said with a single tear dropping from his cheek.

Not understanding, I looked around, the rain picking up, lashing us harder and harder.

“What do you mean, Charles?” I called over to him, through the pouring rain.

“We didn’t mean to kill her, we just wanted to scare her.”

“Kill who, what are you talking about? You’re scaring me, Charles.”

“Just do it, Charles!” Ryan called over. “We need to finish this.”

Let Charles explain it to him first, he deserves that much,” Jimmie said.

“Veronica had been texting Ryan nonstop all summer. Rachel found out and wanted to get her back,” Charles began. “Our plan was to have Lexi drug Veronica at that party, and then drive her up here just to scare her. We were all drinking a lot, we weren’t thinking clearly. Lexi came to us that night and told us she’d slipped the drugs in both of your drinks, and we knew it was our only shot. We waited

until you guys left the party before we picked her up. We told her we just wanted to hang out, and she was okay with it.”

“Why are you saying this, Charles, it’s not true!” I pleaded.

Charles walked over and put his hand on my shoulder. “We walked her to the edge of the cliff and told her to jump. It had been raining earlier that day, and the rock was very slippery. We were going to leave, I swear Mark, we didn’t want to hurt her. She reached for us, and she tripped over herself.

“We reached for her, grabbing her shirt. She looked up at us, pleaded for us to save her. Pulling her up, her shirt ripped right through, dropping her off the cliff. I can’t get that image out of my head, Mark; you don’t know how hard it’s been this week.”

Feeling the warm drops falling down my cheeks, I realized I was crying. Crying for a girl who had deserved to live, crying for my brother who took that life from her.

“You killed her?”

“We didn’t mean to!” Russell screamed.

“Why are you telling us this?” Jason asked, trying to get to his feet.

“Lexi told us everything; we know you guys have information on us,” Jimmie answered.

“We’re not going to prison for accidentally killing a her!” Rachel said.

“Ryan is cheating on you with Katherine!” I called, trying to create conflict between them.

Rachel was laughing. “You’re pathetic, Mark.”

“What happened to Andrea?” I demanded an answer.

“She was going to confess everything. She would have brought us down with her!” Ryan said.

“So, you guys killed both of them?” I asked. “All this time, we’ve been searching for a serial killer, and it’s been you guys all along?”

“I’m sorry, Mark, I didn’t want it to be like this, I tried to warn you to stay away,” Charles said.

Jason stood up, limping toward them, then fell back to his knees. “You cowards. You’re all a bunch of cowards. None of you are going to get away with this!”

Ryan walked up to Jason and pulled something out of his pocket.

“No!” I screamed, realizing what it was. Thunder and lightning crashed down around us in that moment. I flinched on the first stab, falling over in disbelief.

Time seemed to slow way down in that minute, like a horrific scene playing in slow motion. I watched as Ryan pulled the knife out of Jason’s chest, pushing it back into his body, again, and again. Jason’s body fell over, but that didn’t stop Ryan from stabbing again, ensuring he was almost gone, Jason’s body—near lifeless—lying no more than four feet from me.

His eyes were still open, staring right at me, blood spilling out of his mouth. His chest was pulsing in and out as he tried to muster a few words.

“The Chosen Ones,” he whispered.

A single tear fell from his eye, dripping off his nose as he took his last breath. I couldn’t move, frozen, the rain seemed to stop all around me. Silence came over me as a memory of Jason and me playing in the rain as kids entered my mind.

“Cops!” Charles screamed as they ran toward the truck.

“This is where it ends for you, Mark,” Ryan called, getting in the truck.

Squinting, I saw a flashing light piercing through the trees, accompanied by the loud siren. The bright light of the truck disappeared into the night as the flashing-colored lights grew near. Reaching for Jason, his eyes still staring at me, I whispered to him. “It’s going to be alright; help is coming.” Forcing myself to my feet, I stumbled toward the flashing light, waving my hands. The car came to an abrupt stop right in front of me.

“Mark?” Taylor said, getting out of the car. “What is going on?”

Crawling over to Jason, I tripped and fell on top of him, getting his blood all over me.

Taylor ran over to me, getting a look at what had been done. “What happened?”

“*The Seven*, the mermaid” I cried, reaching over to close his eyes. “I’m sorry, Jason, you were right, we should have left it alone.”

“It’s all going to be okay now, Mark.”

Ignoring her, my mind went blank as it hit me that Jason was really gone. It was my fault, I made him help me investigate

Veronica's murder.

Taylor's body hit the ground next to me as I looked over at her. "Are you okay?"

Figuring she'd tripped over the same thing I did, I leaned over to her, shaking her.

"Move away from her, Mark," someone demanded from behind me.

I tried to scramble to my feet, falling over in fear. I was stunned to see my mother standing over me.

"Mom, what are you doing here?"

I wiped the water from my eyes and Joyce Gray, Mr. Grumble, Mr. Pulmer, Deputy Butler, Mrs. Huber, nurse Patty, and Mr. Grimm stood around her. They were all wearing black cloaks with hoods. A knife was sticking out of Taylor's back.

"I know you have a lot of questions, child, she said. "I have figured out a way to keep you safe from us and from yourself."

"Mom, what is going on!?"

"I convinced the other leaders to keep you alive, but you are going to need to take the fall for the murders in town. I'm so sorry about this. This is not the way I wanted you to find out."

"You're scaring me!"

She walked over and kneeled next to me, wiping the tears from my face.

"Over five hundred years ago, our ancestors came to this land in search of a new home. What they found was incredible. Rich soil, plenty of fish, and game. They soon found out that this perfect place came with a price. A man threatened their lives, and he only had one request. He demanded a life every full moon for his beloved creature. We work tirelessly to keep our family and town safe. Aurora was the first sacrifice to this demon, giving it a name. Every twenty-five years, we push a sacrifice over the cliff, just to show our respect to the name. The rest of the sacrifices throughout the years are kept secret. Each full moon, we choose our sacrifice and bring them down to the tunnels. Aurora must feed every full moon to remain content. She is growing in strength and—after over 500 years now—the time has almost come for her to reach her full potential. Do you understand, Mark? We do this to keep you safe!"

“Safe? Killing our friends, our family, does not keep us safe! Why don’t you just leave? How many people have you killed?” I called, as the harsh wind and rain seemed to intensify around us.

“We are a part of this town, Mark, we are the Syreni,” she said. “We had to keep the deaths hidden from the rest of the world, so whenever we chose someone, they would accept their fate and move on. Veronica’s death was not planned, and I’m so sorry it happened. When Veronica was killed, her parents contacted the media, creating this mess.”

“Externus!” the others chanted.

“Deputy Butler, how are you a part of this?” I asked.

“There are many more of us, we are all one,” my mother said. “You must understand your ancestry. It is bigger than you and me.”

“What does that mean?” I demanded an answer.

“To ensure the citizens of this town remain pure, we all remained in town, giving birth, generation after generation. You are a descendant of the Syreni, that has survived the great war. The Syreni survived this war and adapted to the new life. Our past still runs through our veins, we are more than human. There is another war coming; the evil will rise and take this world back. The barriers will be brought down by Aurora, and we will control this world again.”

I grabbed the knife and pulled it out of Taylor’s back, pointing it at my mom, “I don’t want to use this, but I will!”

“We have demon blood, flowing through our veins. As much as you are fighting it, you can’t ignore its power. One day, you’ll realize your true potential, but for now, I need to keep you somewhere I know you’ll be safe.”

“Why don’t you just kill the creature living below us?”

“Kill it? Aurora is the key to power. Taylor’s little group has tried for many centuries, failing of course. The Order of Lai will never take what is ours. Upon Aurora’s final sacrifice, you will see the true power of the Syreni.”

“What about Veronica?” I called through the wind. “Why did she have to die?”

“She wasn’t chosen as the twenty-five-year sacrifice, but the leaders decided on her after what your brother and his friends did to

her that night. If we had known the mess it would create, we wouldn't have done it to her."

"This has to be a dream, Mom. None of this is real!"

I closed my eyes and tried to wake myself from this nightmare, just like I'd come around from all the rest. My mom would never do this. My mom was good, a person I looked up to. She defended people in trouble. She made things better.

I could not wake myself.

"That night, we followed Veronica and the others to the cliff. They were pushing her around, telling her to jump. We waited in those trees, right there, for them to leave. After they left, I ran to the edge; she was holding onto roots that stuck out of the rock. I grabbed her, and I wanted to save her Mark I did. For you. But the others gave the word and I had to do it to keep you safe."

The Seven hadn't even killed Veronica. They killed Andrea and Jason for no reason. How could I have missed his all my life. How could I not have seen the signs of my mother being evil?

I leaned over and puked whatever was left in me. I could taste it in my throat. It burned my vocal cords and made me heave even more.

"What's going to happen to me?"

"You will be taken away for the murders of these people. You will be safe in custody. One day when you can forgive me, we will be reunited, and I will show you the ways of our ancestors."

"Listen to yourself, Mom, this isn't you!"

"I wish you hadn't investigated this. I knew from an early age you were special. And I need to protect my boy. I know you don't believe me now, but I do love you, son."

"I'm sorry, Mom!"

"We will be reunited one day, child."

I felt weak and closed my eyes for a moment. The group was gone, my mom vanished into the night. The trees were swaying, blowing in the wind as the storm seemed to die down.

"Mark," Taylor whispered from beside me.



Chapter 31



Frantically, I reached over, and pulled Taylor over onto my lap. “It’s going to be alright.”

“I’m dying,” she whispered. Blood was dripping from her lips.

“No, you’re not, I’ve lost too many people today, I’m not losing you!”

“There’s something you need to know before I leave. I didn’t tell you the whole story of when I lived in Alaska. There were disappearances all the time, just like here, that never got reported to the appropriate authorities. When I got captured in that cave, my brother told me everything, all about the Syreni. He knew about the half-breeds. He had been hunting them for a long time. Half demon half humans and half angels half humans. Our world is bigger than you could ever imagine. Your bloodline is the purest of the cult, and your mother and Joyce Gray are sisters.”

She began coughing up blood, trying to catch her breath.

“I don’t understand.”

“McGinty and Debra Parker were secret lovers. They had two kids, your mom—Daisy—and Joyce. They are of the purest in the cult.”

“If what you’re saying is true, then McGinty had kids with his sister. Are you saying that Lexi is my cousin?”

“That’s not what’s important right now, Mark. I just wanted you to understand how sinister your family is. You need to go now, before they can pin this on you. Go to Dracfort Alaska, find a man by the name of Josiah Lai. He will explain everything to you, protect you. I am part of an ancient organization, tasked with hunting and eliminating the Syreni. We are few and must protect our identities. We have failed time and time again to kill the creature. The time is nearing for the sacrificing to be complete. We need *the chosen one* to finally rise and win this war.”

“You’re not really an FBI agent? What is the Order of Lai?”

“That’s just my cover. I joined the FBI to find weird occurrences around the country, like here in Rockport. We tracked Aurora and the Syreni here long ago, but no one could ever find the creature. I was sent here as a last resort, to protect you. Josiah’s family started the order, to find the demon and eliminate it. He recruited me after my run-in with my brother in Alaska. I didn’t believe any of this at first, but it’s all real, Mark. The Syreni will stop at nothing to fulfil the destiny of their ancestors. They are blinded by this creature and what it will do when at full strength.”

“You can kill this thing?”

“Find Josiah, he has a scale from the creature that can kill it. Only its own skin can destroy it.”

Toward the trees, I saw another flashing lightheaded toward us; it must have been Richards.

“Did you call Richards?”

“No, maybe the Syreni did, they’re trying to pin this on you. They need this case to close so the media leaves it alone. Everyone in this town is in on this, Mark. If you fail, they will continue to murder innocent people until the demon is strong enough to destroy everything. I’m sorry you are finding all of this out now, and that your own mom is a part of this sinister cult. Some of us wanted Josiah to warn you earlier, but he insisted you learn the truth on your own. Please tell Josiah I tried my best.”

“What did you mean, I am the chosen one?”

She didn’t answer. She just closed her eyes as I reluctantly got up. Realizing I needed to run, I looked back at Taylor. “I’ll make you proud.”

I turned to run. Taylor lay taking her last breath, exhaling the life from her body. I began running toward the trees and was still running there when the car sped up right at me.

“Freeze!” Richards called, pointing his gun at me.

I hesitated for a moment. If I didn’t run my life would be over, and many would die.

“Drop the weapon!” one of the other officers called, getting out of the car.

I was still holding the knife that killed Taylor. Dropping it, I looked toward the trees; they were just too far away.

“Don’t even think about it, Mark!”

Dropping to my knees, I put my hands in the air. I needed to figure this out another way.

What did you do, Mark?” Richards questioned.

He walked over to me and grabbed my hands, handcuffing them.

“I didn’t do it!”

“Why do you have a knife then?”

“The sect, the mermaid, *the Seven!*” I called, not being able to form a sentence to explain it.

Kicking me to the ground, they checked my pockets. Laying there, staring over at Taylor and Jason, I tried to reach for them.

“Mark Parker, you’re under arrest for the murder of Jason Miller and special agent Amelia Taylor,” Richards said, reading me my rights. My mind was blank. I couldn’t form a reasonable sentence as they threw me into the back of the police car. They left me sitting there for probably an hour, just staring out at the water droplets falling. It was a never-ending storm, just falling all around us.

There’d been several out-of-town police cars, ambulances, and even a helicopter that had somehow landed on the cliff. The news vans were just now arriving, as someone must have tipped them off. This once, dark gloomy cliff, was now lit up and surrounded by at least thirty people, everyone trying to figure out why a sixteen-year-old boy would be lying dead next to an FBI agent.

I guessed I was the missing piece to that puzzle. I was not sure how I was going to get out of this one, seeing that they’d found the murder weapon in my hands. Sheriff Richards knew me, he knew I would never kill anyone. I needed to go to this Dracfort, Alaska, and find Josiah Lai. If Taylor was right, he was the only person who could help me.

If this was all true, the creature was almost finished feeding.

It was hard to believe just a week ago, I was going to school, and my only worry had been whether Veronica liked me or not. Now, sitting in this police car, I was the lead suspect in a multiple homicide case. Little did they know, a five-hundred-year-old creature was living below us, feeding on the innocent. An ancient cult, living amongst us, killing and covering up many deaths. And our parents, teachers, and even the coroner, were all a part of it.

With all that, I still couldn't understand why Lexi would drug me and Veronica at that party. I knew that her liking me had been too good to be true.

The worst part of this was that *the Seven* didn't even know about the creature or any of this. They killed Andrea and Jason, all because of a lie. If we'd never looked into this case, we never would have found the sinister secret. Jason would probably still have been alive, and I wouldn't have been sitting here in this car.

I looked out the window and scanned the tree line, my eyes stopped on something. Just inside the trees, I saw what looked like a face in the shadows. Someone was standing there watching; it could have been my mom.

"We're leaving now," Richards said, getting into the car.

"I know you won't believe me, but I have to try."

"Save it for the investigators."

"You have to hear me out; she would have wanted it that way. She didn't tell you anything about her past, or who she was?"

"Agent Taylor?" he questioned. "She's an agent who was brutally stabbed after trying to protect you, Mark."

"She was a member of a secret organization, sworn to track down and eliminate the Syreni!"

"You've gone crazy, I understand that, but please don't drag her into your lies. We knew it was you who'd killed Veronica from the beginning, but Taylor was trying to protect you, she was trying to find a way out for you."

"I didn't kill her, *the Seven* and the Syreni killed Veronica!"

"Who are *the Seven*, some secret gang or something?"

I could see why someone would think I was crazy for saying that. I needed to find another angle to get me out of here.

"I don't understand, Mark, I've known you for years, and you've never seemed like this kind of person. I guess you never really know *what lies beneath*. To kill Jason, your best friend, how could you do that? Did you kill Andrea too? Did you, Mark?"

"We just got reports of Cheryl Wood and Patrick Morris being missing also. Please tell me that wasn't you?"

"He's a demented individual. Can't reason with him," the officer said from the passenger seat.

They never made it out of the caves, the creature took them.

That was right though; the caves, I could use that in my defense. Once they went down there and saw the rooms, and found the hidden room in the library, I'd be free to go. It was a matter of a short time; soon, they'd be apologizing to me. I had that to look forward to, even if everything else was gone.

Arriving at the Rockport police station, the entire parking lot was filled with news cars, lights, and cameramen. Once I stepped out of this car, I would be branded a murderer forever. Just like Old Man McGinty, when I'd wrongfully had him arrested. Now, it was all coming back to haunt me.

"Once you step out of this car, your life is over," Richards said. "My only hope is you find peace on the inside."

Getting out, I was instantly blinded by the lights, overwhelmed by the chants.

"Murderer!"

"Coward!"

"Why'd you do it?"

"How many kills?"

I walked into the police station and was hit in the back of the head with something someone threw. Every fiber of my body wanted to fall over, just give up. I couldn't, I owed it to Taylor to see this through, to fight for everyone in this town who didn't understand what was going on.

"In here," Richards said, tossing a clean pair of clothing down on the table. "Strip and step into the shower stall."

I stood by the stall, staring at him, waiting for him to leave.

"I'm not leaving, Parker, get used to it; once you're in prison, you won't get any privacy."

I began removing my now tight, drenched clothing. Getting down to my underwear, I turned and faced the wall as I removed it.

It was so demoralizing; all my rights had been taken from me, and I was a prisoner. Putting the clean clothes on, I was moved to another room where I took a seat at the table. It was what you'd expect from an interrogation room. Two men entered and sat across from me.

"We'll take it from here, Sheriff," one said.

“Go grab the boy a drink,” the other said.

Pulling out a video camera, they set it up behind them, staring in my direction. Pushing a button, a little red light popped on.

I thought about my age, and I knew there should have been an adult present.

Maybe I was ‘of age’ for many things, but in a court of law, I was a juvenile. And the one person who should’ve been there for me, my mom, was a part of the torment, right in the center of the events that’d put me here. I felt alone and betrayed.



Chapter 32



“Hello, Mark Parker, my name is Agent Harris, and this is Agent Jackson,” the one said.

“This is a friendly environment, okay? We just want to get an understanding of what happened tonight,” Harris said.

“Where do you want me to start?”

“Let’s start at the party tonight; you were at the Grays’, right?”

“Yes, Joyce Gray threw a party tonight, for the kids of Rockport to kind of get their minds off what’s been going on in town.”

“I see, and who were you there with? You must have friends?”

“Jason Miller, Lexi Gray, Chloe Garcia, Cheryl Wood, and Patrick Morris.”

“Okay, and how close are you to them?”

“Jason is my best friend, Lexi is a girl I liked, and the others are just friends from school.”

“Thank you for clarifying that. Did anything happen at this party, anything out of the ordinary?”

“Not really, we all hung out, drank a little bit.”

“So, there was alcohol at this party, who supplied that?”

“Just a little bit, we didn’t drink much at all.”

“Who supplied it, Mark?”

“I did.”

“Thank you, continue with telling us about the night.”

“After a while, we all kind of got sick of the party so we decided to go for a drive.”

“Let me stop you right there,” Agent Jackson said, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

Pointing it toward me, he played the video. I shook my head in disbelief as the video was of me punching Ryan at the party.

“Could you explain this for me, Mark?”

“That’s a long story; that guy right there is a horrible person.”

“From this angle, it looks to us like you’re the bully.”

“That’s just the way people portray it because they all hate me. I did nothing wrong. Ryan has been terrorizing us for a long time.”

“Mark, calm down, take a breath.”

I sat back and tried to control myself. I couldn’t show too much emotion, as they would think I was a violent person.

“Where did you go after your drive?”

“We went up to Mermaid Cliff. It’s a spot we liked to hang out at, it’s where our friend was murdered.”

“That’s right, Veronica McBride?”

“Yes, she was newer to the town, but Jason and I were good friends with her.”

“Okay, let’s focus on tonight, after you arrived at the cliff.”

“We found an old burned down house in the woods and inside we discovered a hidden switch that opened a passageway.”

“A hidden switch, like a secret room behind a bookshelf, kind of thing?”

“Yes, kind of like that. We decided to go in the caves to investigate further.”

“The caves? This secret wall opened up to a cave?”

The two exchanged glances.

“We all got separated down there and when I made it back to the top I found Jason and Agent Taylor had been killed.”

I decided to lie; they would never believe me about a creature in the caves. My only hope was they go there, find the tunnels, and find the hidden room.

“Is that when you decided to try and run?”

“I was scared, yes. I didn’t know what to do, so yes I tried to run back through the trees.”

Sheriff Richards walked in and sat a drink down in front of me, before walking back out the door. Agent Jackson leaned over and whispered something into Harris’s ear.

“Lexi and Chloe did make it out of the cave,” Harris said. “We haven’t been able to find the other two yet.”

Stuttering, I looked at him. “What did Lexi and Chloe say?”

“That’s not important right now, Mark. Why don’t you save us all some time and just tell us where Patrick and Cheryl are?”

“I told you, we got split up down there.”

“Their parents are scared to death. Just tell us if they’re still alive. We can’t help you unless you let us help you.”

“I’ve told you everything I know.”

Agent Harris looked over at Jackson and nodded. Jackson walked out of the room and came back in with a box. My heart dropped into my stomach when I realized that the box was the same one McGinty had given me, the same box we’d put in the ceiling at the drive-in. He sat it down next to me and put a pair of gloves on before opening it.

“Do you know what this is?”

“No, never seen it before.”

“This is what we’ve found just in the past hour; think what we can dig up if this thing goes to trial. Just confess, Mark, confess to killing your best friend and Agent Taylor. If you do that, we won’t look any further.”

Sitting there, sweat dripping down my face, I was scared to death. If I confessed, there was no way I’d get out of there anytime soon. Just as I was about to answer, the door flung open, and someone walked in.

“This is over, my client is done answering your questions,” she demanded.

“Last chance, Mark,” Agent Harris said, staring into my eyes.

“I have nothing more to say.”

“Take your camera, give us the room,” the female said. “We need some time to talk.”

Just as the door closed behind them, she sat down across from me.

“I hope you don’t mind; I know you don’t have an attorney and one hasn’t been appointed to you yet. I took the liberty of making myself your lawyer in the hopes you’d agree. I’ve seen cases like this, where cops try to interrogate minors to force them into a confession before the lawyer even showed up.”

“Thank you, I guess. Who are you?”

Fumbling around with her briefcase, she pulled a card out of her pocket. “Janis,” she said, reaching forward to shake hands. “Janis Wolfe.”

“Why do you want to help me?”

“I’ve been following the murder of Veronica since it happened last week, and I found out a lot of stuff about it and just want to be a part of it.”

“So, you just want the spotlight, for your career?”

“No, that came out wrong, I’m sorry. Let me start again. I want to help you, Mark. I don’t like what I think I see here. It’s going to be an uphill battle, but we have a shot.”

“Okay,” I said, slightly tearful. “Thanks. What’s going to happen next? They are already trying to pin it on me.”

“First, I need to know something. Anything you say in this room stays between us. Did you kill or assist in killing anyone in this town?”

“I swear I didn’t. I am innocent.”

She stared at me for a moment, assessing whether she believed what I was saying.

“Okay, next they are going to take you to a cell for the night. It’s going to be the longest, loneliest night of your life. Tomorrow morning, a judge will come here and set your bail. For a case this high and with so much interest, I don’t think you’ll be able to afford it. After that, they will set your arraignment, where you are formally charged, and we plead either guilty or innocent. If you plead innocent, it will go to trial, and we will have a short time to get our case ready. Do you understand how serious this is?”

“Yes, I just want to do what’s right. The real killers are still out there.”

“Do you know who the real killer is?”

“Yes, it’s multiple people; there’s a huge conspiracy in this town.”

“Well, let’s see what happens at the arraignment, then we’ll go over every detail as we build our case.”

A sudden knock at the door made me jump out of my seat.

“We’re taking him to his cell now,” one of the officers said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Mark. Try to get some sleep,” Janis said, leaving the room.

Every eye was on me as I walked out of the room. I felt like the most horrible person in the world. I’d be hated by everyone for this, the biggest crime spree ever in Rockport.

“I hope you burn in hell,” the officer whispered to me as he closed the cell, locking it.

There was a stained-up, worn mattress, a grimy toilet with a broken seat, and a rusted sink. The dripping water of the sink was just enough to annoy me. Pacing back and forth, I tried to make sense of all of this.

The Syreni does exist, I am not crazy, my mother is a part of this sinister cult. Taylor told me she was tasked with bringing them down. Josiah must have a group in Alaska, to fight against this evil sect.

If I could somehow reach out to Josiah... but how, hocked in this damp, disgusting cell, for who knew how long? I was charged with killing people I loved, while those responsible went free. Jason, my best friend, had been slain at the hands of a violent psychopath who'd kill anyone in his way. Taylor, my ally in this fight, had been murdered by an evil sect that'd stop at nothing to protect this hideous creature.

Did Charles and the others even know about the cult? I was not going to be able to get the court to believe this story. I needed to come up with something else to convince them I was innocent. I sat down on the bed, cringing at the thought of who had slept here before me. I laid back and looked up at the concrete ceiling, I thought about Jason. He didn't ever want to be part of this. I'd forced him to help me, for Veronica, and in the end, it killed him.

If I would have just left it alone that day I was jogging and came across Veronica on the beach, none of this would have happened.

It occurred to me; the morning she'd been found on the beach, I'd heard someone screaming. If she had been dead for hours, who was it? I was getting that spine-tingling feeling now. Had I heard the demon scream? Or was it Veronica drawing me in?

I might never know.

The nonstop sound of the dripping sink began driving me crazy. I ripped part of my shirt and tied it over the faucet, slowing the drip. I sat down, leaning against the concrete wall and bowing my head as I felt warm tears running down my face.

This was it for me, I'd never have a real life. I could just hear Jason yelling at me, telling me to suck it up and figure it out. Wiping the tears from my cheeks, I fell over in exhaustion, closing my eyes.



MY EYES SHOT OPEN. I sat up and looked around. Darkness filled the air around me, my eyes adjusting. The moon was creeping in through the trees, creating a path. I realized I was in the forest. This must have been another dream. As I sat there, silence growing louder, there was a ringing in my ears. A familiar feeling came over me as I tried to piece together where I was. I got up and I began walking toward the light of the moon. Passing tree after tree, I began smelling burning wood, a fire. I frantically looked around but saw nothing but darkness. I began running through the dark forest, the smell intensifying.

“Mark!” I heard as I stumbled over something, falling to the ground.

“What do you want?” I screamed into the darkness.

“Help me!” a faint voice whispered around me.

I got up and continued running through the forest until I saw where the smell was coming from. Just through the tree line was a clearing.

A roaring fire sat in its center, while a tower of wood stood in the middle of the flames. Someone was tied near the top of the pyre, calling out for help. Standing around the fire, were dozens of people covered in hoods and cloaks.

“Let them down!” I screamed, trying to get their attention.

No one budged; they just stood there, staring up as the flames grew higher and higher.

“Mark!” the mysterious person at the top called down.

“You can see me?” I called out with confusion. “What should I do?”

“There’s nothing you can do for me. You need to find Josiah, stop the Syreni, and save the world.”

Walking closer, I realized the person calling down to me was a young girl. “Aurora,” I whispered out loud. Rushing forward, I grabbed hold of the first hooded person I came to, turning them

around. I fell to the ground as my mom stared straight back at me before turning back to the fire.

The group began chanting, *Syreni*, over and over again.

“Mermaid?” I questioned, grabbing onto her shoulder again.

“What mermaid? Show yourself!”

I stood watching as the wild flames grew higher, reaching Aurora, consuming her. The screams made me cringe at the sight of her being devoured alive.



Chapter 33



“Aurora!” I screamed, opening my eyes. Standing in front of me were two officers, laughing.

“He really is crazy,” the one said.

“Where am I, is this real?”

“The judge is ready for you,” the other said, standing me up and forcing me down the hallway.

“In here,” another officer demanded, pushing me through the doors.

Inside the room, I looked around. I’d never been in a courtroom before, albeit that this was a small one. My parents and Charles were sitting a few rows back, but they looked away from me. At the front of the room, Janis Wolfe sat waiting for me at the table.

“How are you doing?” she whispered, as I sat down next to her.

“Just still in shock, I guess.”

“We’ll get together after this and discuss some stuff.”

At the table beside us was an older, bald guy who was wearing a suit. He must have been the prosecutor tasked with making sure I went to prison forever.

The judge walked into the room and sat at his bench.

“Mr. Parker, I understand you’ve chosen counsel, is that correct?” The judge asked.

“Yes, your Honor.”

“Great, and Mr. Brown, you’re representing the State?”

“Yes, your Honor,” the bald man answered.

“I understand this is the preliminary bail hearing. I have reviewed a small amount of what’s happened here; well, you can’t really avoid it with it being all over the news. In terms of bail, with a case this severe and heinous, I have to take that into consideration. I have decided to set the bail at \$7,500,000.”

“Your Honor, that is outrageous!” Janis stood up, arguing the amount.

“What is outrageous, Mrs. Wolfe is that the charges against your client are a real possibility. I am also setting the arraignment for this afternoon; I’d like to move this along. The defendant will remain in this jail until after the arraignment.”

With the swing of the hammer, that was it, I was not going anywhere. I looked back and my family was leaving. My mom must have turned my dad against me too. But I still couldn’t believe Charles would turn on me, after everything we’d been through together. Janis led me to a room by ourselves.

“Take his handcuffs off; he’s not going to hurt me,” she demanded of the officer.

The officer looked over at Sheriff Richards, who nodded, before removing them from my hands. As I sat at the table, they exited the room.

“I knew it was going to be high, but wow, I didn’t think that high,” she said.

“So, I’m stuck here?”

“Unless you have a few million dollars, yes. I was hoping it wasn’t going to be Judge Wiggins. He is known to be very harsh on minors.”

“What happens at the arraignment?”

“That is where you’re formally charged with the crimes. The prosecutor will lay out the case against you. Then we will decide if we want to plead guilty or not guilty.”

“It’s not looking too good already.”

“I seen your family sitting behind the prosecutor. I haven’t been able to talk to them yet.”

“Don’t bother; they are as corrupt as this town. They are the ones pinning this on me.”

“Are you serious? Wow, the worst thing my parents ever did was send me to another state after I got lost in some mines. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be making jokes right now.”

“No, I don’t mind, it helps to ease the tension,” I replied. “No matter what happens with me, I wanted to tell you that I appreciate you sticking by me. Everyone I cared about is either dead or abandoned me.”

“I’m with you, Mark. Our biggest thing we need to find out today is if the judge is going to charge you as a minor or as an adult. As

you're sixteen and given the severity of the situation, he may charge you as an adult which could be very bad news for our defense. We just need to take this one step at a time. Why don't you start by telling me what you know?"

"Wow, where do I start? There is a group of kids at school—*the Seven*, I call them—who Jason and I believed killed Veronica McBride on the night of the party. Later, they killed one of their own, Andrea Ross, because she was going to confess everything. They killed Jason Miller on that cliff last night. They would have killed me too if Agent Taylor hadn't shown up. This is where it gets weird. I don't know if I should tell you this."

"You can trust me, Mark. If you don't tell me everything, it will weaken your case greatly. I cannot work for you properly if you keep things hidden."

"There is an ancient cult, the Syreni, that formed about 500 years ago in this town. Before it was Rockport, there were people who lived here and worshipped a mermaid demon. Apparently, they still do today, sacrificing people to this demon every full moon. I know how stupid it sounds, and I didn't believe it at first either until I saw it with my own eyes.

"My mother, my own bloodline, is a part of this whole hidden cult. *They* killed Veronica and Agent Taylor, not me. They've played me every step of the way. I'm sure they have tons of *evidence* against me, which they made up. I just found out that the girl I've been with, Lexi Gray, is actually my cousin. She played me too, got me to get close to her so I would give away information.

"Before Taylor died, she told me she was a part of some secret organization that has been hunting the Syreni for hundreds of years."

Janis' jaw dropped as she looked like she'd just seen a ghost. She remained silent for a little while longer, taking it all in.

"When I was a girl, I lived in Arizona," she said. "My father, well, we thought he'd gone crazy. He'd tell me stories about angels and demons and things that lurked below. I never believed him, even after experiencing something I couldn't explain myself. I just couldn't believe him. He even told us of a man he'd met on a trip who'd told him about a secret war. So, what is this secret organization that is trying to capture the Syreni?"

“They’re called the Order of Lai,” I answered. “Their leader, Josiah Lai, and his family have been hunting the Syreni for centuries.”

“Mark, I’ve represented some really bad people before. They’ve come up with all sorts of stories and ideas to get out of jail. You are not one of them; I don’t know what it is, but I believe you. As crazy as your story sounds, I’ve been here only a week and I’ve witnessed weird things in this town myself. The problem is, we’re not going to be able to convince the judge or jury that this is real. If we so much as mention a cult in that room, you will be done for sure. We need to see what they have on you first.”

“Thank you for believing me. I already think I’m losing my mind so it’s nice to hear that.”



AFTER ANOTHER HOUR or two of my attorney explaining how the court worked, Richards entered the room.

“It’s time for the arraignment,” he said, handcuffing me. “You know, Mark, you are the last person in this town that I’d think would do this.”

I entered the courtroom, now full of townspeople, family, and media. I was filled with nerves and barely made it to my seat.

“All rise!” the bailiff demanded, as I stood up nervously. “The court is now in session, the honorable judge Wiggins presiding.”

“Sit down,” the judge said, taking a seat at his bench. “The arraignment of Mark Parker is to begin.”

“Here we go,” Janis whispered to me.

“Mr. Brown, does the prosecution have its charges against the defendant?”

“Yes, your Honor,” he said as he stood up.

“Go ahead,” he demanded.

“Your Honor, we are charging Mr. Parker with six counts of first-degree murder.”

The room let out a loud gasp as I hung my head, jaw dropping.

“Quiet!” the judge demanded, slamming his hammer.

“Mr. Parker, please stand,” the judge continued. “Do you understand the charges against you?”

“Yes, your Honor,” I said, knees shaking as I rose.

“You’re not claiming any kind of mental illness, are you?”

“No, your Honor.”

“Have you spoken with your lawyer about your plea?”

“Yes, your Honor.”

“Then how do you plead?”

I peered around the room and thought about what I’d done that had led to Jason, Patrick, and Cheryl’s deaths. Not to mention Veronica, Andrea, Damon, and McGinty. But I was certainly no murderer.

Janis looked back at me and nodded.

“Not guilty, your Honor,” I said, loud and clear.

Again, the room let out with a gasp.

“So be it,” Judge Wiggins said. “I have reviewed the case further, albeit that there is not much crucial information to go on yet. I have decided to charge you as an adult, which I can do given the severity of the case. Do you understand?”

“Yes, your Honor,” I said, sitting down.

“Very well. I am giving the prosecution a week to create their case, at which time we will reconvene for the start of the trial. We will assemble the jury immediately. In the meantime, I am ordering that Mr. Parker be sent to county prison to await the trial.”

The slam of the hammer made me shake in my seat. The room erupted into a loud commotion as Richards pulled me out of my chair, leading me out via a side room.

“Killer!” I heard someone scream from behind me. The thought of what I was accused of killed me inside.



Chapter 34



Out from the shadows came the officers. It must have been early in the morning. The officer tugged me to my feet, escorting me through the door. Entering the courtroom, looking out at the immense gathering of people, I was faint. I locked eyes with Veronica's mom, crying. I wished I could explain to her what *the Seven* and the Syreni had done to her daughter and that it wasn't me.

Sitting down at the table, next to Janis, I saw the prosecution team ready to go.

"All rise!" the bailiff demanded. "Court is now in session, the honorable Judge Wiggins presiding."

Judge Wiggins walked to his seat and sat down. The next few minutes were a blur to me as I began to feel faint again.

"Mark, are you alright?" Janis whispered to me.

"I'm fine."

Mr. Brown stood up and approached the jury. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, my name is Samuel Brown, counsel for the state. Over the course of this trial, we will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant, Mr. Mark Parker, murdered these victims. We will show you in detail how and why the defendant committed these heinous murders.

"In the late hours of October 12th, 2017, the defendant assaulted and murdered a young girl, Veronica McBride, a girl he merely knew from school. Just days later, he would strike again, killing Andrea Ross, again from his school. Two innocent young girls with everything to look forward to, everything to live for.

"But he wouldn't stop there, ladies and gentlemen. Just eight days ago, the defendant murdered three more kids from his school: Jason Miller, Cheryl Wood, and Patrick Morris.

"Special Agent Amelia Taylor attempted to stop him that night, but she too was killed by the defendant. Not only did he plan these six

murders, but he successfully enacted them.

“We will show you how he had a history of violence and was a very jealous person. The defendant gained the victims’ trust and lured them, one by one, into his lurid trap. We will show you how his link to a local gang influenced his life in a negative way.

“You are going to hear several people’s testimonies of how the defendant behaved and acted during the week of the killings. We would ask you to bear all of this in mind throughout the trial proceedings because we know that the picture the defense will try to paint, is a very different one.

“The defense is going to paint a picture of an innocent small-town boy who could never have committed these murders. The defense is going to try and sway your attention from the real facts. The defense is going to try and confuse you to a point where you cannot see reality and treat you as if you have not the intellect to separate the heinous truths from the fiction, they will tell you in due course.

“That reality—the reality they will seek to hide—is that Mark Parker is a vicious and devious killer, and the evidence we provide to you in this room will show you how a sixteen-year-old kid was more mature and more sinister than anyone around him knew.

“You might ask yourselves why, how, would a kid such as Mark Parker plot to murder six other innocent people? The answer to that is simple: because he just wanted to kill.”

I had never felt so low as I did now. That opening statement was going to be incredibly persuasive to a jury. Mr. Brown glanced over at Janis before sitting down.

“Mrs. Wolfe,” the judge said.

I felt sure she was in a shock a little herself. But trying to compose herself, she stood up.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I am Janis Wolf, counsel for the defense. This is a case of the wrong place at the wrong time. Mark Parker, sixteen years old, was in love with Veronica McBride. He would never put her life in danger.

“The prosecution is going to try and convince you that he was jealous of the other kids at his school. I will show you, *prove* to you, that he was an ordinary kid with a good and wholesome life.

“He wasn’t bullied or abused. He was not brought up in an institution that embittered him or had to fight against a background of deviancy or poverty. He felt he lived in a secure, loving and stable household and he had a strong relationship with his sibling and his parents.

“Mark Parker, I put it to you, was an ordinary boy of this town. And it was an ordinary town. And then Mark’s high-school sweetheart wound up dead. This boy simply wanted to find out what had happened to his high-school crush; what had caused her death?

“Mark was an innocent boy, a juvenile with a clean character who got caught up in a larger mess he could never have foreseen and struggled to find a way out. He and Jason Miller searched this town over that week for clues, evidence, to uncover why Veronica had died at Mermaid Cliff. And their investigations soon pointed to a group of kids from his school. When I say kids, I mean bullies. Schoolyard bullies; every school has them. And Mark Parker uncovered a gang of them, not knowing what he was getting into.

“The prosecution will show you pieces of evidence that led to the victims being killed. They will try to say that Mark was in possession of each of these pieces of evidence. I ask that you keep an open mind and hear both sides.

“The prosecution wants you to think with no other suspects, the finger has to point to Mark. Well, I will show you over the course of this trial, that there are people trying to put this on Mark. I will show you how on the night of October 12th, 2017, Mark and Veronica were drugged so that both would forget what happened that night.

“I will show you how Mark Parker was working—diligently, I might add—alongside Agent Taylor, to find this murderer. I will end this with a question as well.

“Look at the victims of this case. By the end of the trial, you will know their relationship with Mark Parker. Then, ask yourself, why would he murder his closest friends and his allies?

“The answer: he didn’t!”

She walked over and sat next to me, taking a sigh of relief, nodding to me.

Mr. Brown stood and looked at the judge. “Your Honor, the state calls Sheriff Richards to the stand.”

Richards walked in and went right up to the stand, where he swore his oath.

Brown stood up again and walked over to him. "Could you please state your name and occupation for the purposes of the court?"

"Yes, my name is Matt Richards, I am the Sheriff of Rockport."

"Good, thank you. Let's start with the morning Veronica McBride's body was discovered on the beach. You were the first person on the scene, right?"

"Yes, well, I was off duty at the time and got a call from McGinty. He was searching the beach for mussels I believe, and he said he'd found a body on the beach. I quickly headed over and recognized the body immediately. I called Deputy Butler and the coroner, and we proceeded."

"Good, and in your term of being Sheriff of Rockport, have you ever seen a murder scene?"

"No, that's what I loved about this town. It had never had a murder until Veronica and the others."

"That's right. Your Honor, I would like to submit this form into evidence. It shows the death report for the past one hundred years of this town," Brown said, giving the papers to the bailiff. "One hundred years without a murder."

"Objection, your Honor, irrelevant to this trial," Janis blurted.

"I'll allow it," the judge answered, grabbing the papers from the bailiff.

"Yes, I have only been here a few years but when I was told about that, it blew my mind," Richards said.

"So, Sheriff, would you say this town was peaceful before the body was found?"

"Absolutely; when people died, it was of natural causes. We also had a suicide every so often, but never a violent crime as heinous as this."

"Let's bring this back to the morning Veronica was found on that beach. Can you walk us through the events of that morning?"

"Yes, after the coroner and Deputy Butler showed up, we began taking pictures and roping the area off."

"Okay, can you tell me how the body looked, as far as what you thought at the time had caused the death?"

“Well, I couldn’t say right there what caused the death, although I figured it was the fall from the cliff. She was pale white, and her eyes were open. The crabs had begun eating her body. I’m sorry if that’s too in detail. Her shirt had also been ripped.”

“Thank you, Sheriff, and did anything strange happen while you were on the beach that morning?”

He paused for a moment, thinking, staring right at me. “As we were about to take the body in for examination, Mark Parker walked up to the ropes. He approached Deputy Butler. I couldn’t hear the conversation. I just remember thinking it was weird he was there at about six in the morning.”

“Okay, let’s fast forward a little bit. Did you have any other run-ins with the defendant since then?”

“I saw him around town. He was always with Jason Miller. Agent Taylor suspected him early on, but because it was the night of the party, he ended up having an alibi. So, we kind of crossed him off the list.”

“One final question for you; as you knew the defendant, did you think he’d be capable of something this heinous?”

“Objection!” Janis called out. “Your Honor, the prosecution is trying to create confusion within the jury.”

“Sustained.”

“I’ll rephrase the question. Sheriff, has the defendant ever done anything violent in this town?”

“A video has surfaced of him hitting another student at a party.”

“No further questions, your Honor,” Brown said, sitting down.

“Your witness, Mrs. Wolfe.”

“Sheriff Richards, how long have you been living in Rockport?” Janis asked, standing up.

“Seven years.”

“Can you tell us what led you to move here, to this very small town?”

“I just needed a change in my life.”

“Okay, so you losing your family in a tragic accident had nothing to do with you moving here?”

“Objection, your Honor. What does that have to do with this trial?”

“I’ll allow it but get to your point Mrs. Wolfe.”

“Yes, I did want a fresh start after they lost their lives,” Richards responded.

“The morning Veronica’s body was found, where were you?”

“I was off duty.”

“I understand that. But where were you?”

“Objection, your Honor, badgering the witness.”

“Overruled, Sheriff, answer the question.”

“I was at a bar on the southside of town when I got the call.”

“Do you recall a conversation you had with my client and his friend Jason Miller on top of Mermaid Cliff?”

“Yes, I came across them one night after Veronica was killed, hanging out there.”

“Good, and what did you guys talk about?”

“Nothing really.”

“So, you didn’t tell my client about the coroner’s report? You didn’t tell them that you thought the Mayor of Rockport was trying to cover up the murder?”

“I don’t recall, no.”

“Is it possible you were drinking that night too, which led to you not remembering much of the conversation?”

He began sweating, stuttering. “It’s possible.”

“No further questions, your Honor.”

She walked back to the table, and I could tell she was happy about that cross-examination.

“Your Honor, I’d like to submit a few more articles of evidence,” Brown said, reaching for the box. Putting gloves on, he reached into the box, pulling out a series of bags. “Here, we have a damaged cell phone. Our team was able to decrypt the phone’s data, revealing that it belonged to Andrea Ross. I have printed out a series of texts to and from the defendant.”

“Objection, your Honor, why wasn’t the defense able to look at this evidence?”

“Your honor, it just came into our possession.”

“I’ll allow it.”

“The text was the defendant asking Andrea if she was still *up for meeting* at Mermaid Cliff. That night was the last night on which

Andrea was alive. Your honor, we also have a picture, a picture of the defendant standing next to Andrea Ross's car on Mermaid Cliff."

Janis took a deep breath, slightly shaking her head. Realizing this trial was going to be over before it started, I felt my leg shaking again.

Passing the picture and the texts around to the jury, Mr. Brown reached in the box further. "We would also like to enter this flashlight into evidence. Our experts matched the DNA on this with the defendant. This flashlight was recovered at the scene where Andreas' body was discovered.

"Next, we would like to introduce this jacket, found at the gruesome scene of Andrea Ross' body. The blood on this jacket matches the DNA of the defendant.

"If that is not enough, we would also like to introduce this bracelet; the blood on this bracelet matches that of Veronica McBride. All of this evidence was found hidden in the ceiling of a convenience shop at the Rockport drive-in, where the defendant works.

"And finally, video footage shows Mark Parker putting all this evidence up there."

The room let out a gasp at the overwhelming evidence the prosecution had just laid out.

"Quieten down!" Judge Wiggins demanded.

"Your Honor, we would also like to call Mr. Bryan Pulmer to the stand."

Mr. Pulmer walked in and straight up to the stand, swearing in.

"Mr. Pulmer, can you tell the court your name and what you do here in Rockport?"

"Certainly, my name is Bryan Pulmer. I am the coroner here in Rockport."

"Did you examine the four bodies that were recovered?"

"Yes, I examined, in detail, all of the bodies here in Rockport."

"What was your conclusion about the cause of Veronica McBride's death?"

"Well, initially I thought it was a suicide. We'd had a series of suicides from that cliff over the years. The further I went with examining and testing, the more it started to point toward a

homicide. I tested the blood for any traces of foreign material. I found traces of alcohol and flunitrazepam in the bloodstream.”

“Can you tell us what flunitrazepam is?”

“Yes, it is a strong sedative that can knock out its victim, causing them to forget what happened while they were on it.”

“Thank you, did you find anything else unusual?”

“Well, I also found small traces of someone’s DNA on her body. Her shirt had also been ripped straight through, which might have happened during the fall—but there were also scratches on her stomach, just under the ripped shirt. I determined it to be a homicide after looking at all of this information.”

“Let’s move onto Andrea Ross; what can you tell us about her examination?”

“Examining Andrea’s body was a little more simple, straightforward. She had been strangled to death, and her body moved to another location. We found marks around her neck, and these were probably caused by bare hands.”

“When you say her body was moved, what does that mean?”

“Well, where she was found, there were no broken branches or anything to suggest a struggle happened there. It’s likely she was grabbed from behind, strangled, and dumped in those woods.”

“You also examined Jason Miller and Amelia Taylor, is that correct?”

“Yes, so, Jason’s cause of death was death by stab wounds. He had been stabbed seventeen times in the chest. The size of the wounds were quite small. The knife had to be only about four inches long, two inches wide.

“Amelia Taylor, on the other hand, died from a single stab wound in the back. She was stabbed with a much larger blade, probably twelve inches long and four inches wide, but it avoided the heart and major organs. She probably would have survived the stab wound but we found tetrodotoxin on the blade. It is an extremely deadly poisonous toxin found in the blowfish. This toxin is what caused her death.”

“No further questions, your Honor.”

Janis stood up, looking around at her papers and reading her notes to herself.

“Mr. Pulmer, you said the wounds on Jason Miller could not have been from the same blade that killed Amelia Taylor, is that correct?”

“Yes, it would have to have been two separate blades, given the two distinct sizes of the wounds and the poison.”

“Was a second blade recovered at the scene?”

“Not that I am aware of, no.”

“Mr. Pulmer, how long has your family been working with the coroner’s office?”

“The coroner’s office has been in my family for a very long time. But exactly how long, I don’t know. Generations.”

“Has anyone in your family ever been asked to change documents or tamper with any evidence that you’re aware of?”

“No, of course not.”

“So, Joyce Gray never asked you to change the manner of death?”

“Absolutely not.”

“No further questions.”

“Your Honor, this is probably a good time to enter the blade that killed Amelia Taylor into evidence,” Brown said as he stood up. “It was found to have the defendant’s DNA on it as well as Taylor’s.”

The bailiff came over, grabbing the bag with the knife in it, showing it to the jury. I could see dried blood on the blade.

“Your Honor, the defense would like to call Mark Parker to the stand,” Janis said.

My head whipped in her direction, confused. Why was she sending me to the stand without telling me ahead of time? The prosecution looked just as dumbfounded. I got up out of my chair as she leaned into me. “Sorry, kid.”

I edged toward the stand, mortified, glancing over at the jury. Repeating the oath, I stumbled through it, realizing they were about to dissect me.

Janis got up and walked over to me. “Please say your name for the court.”

“Mark Parker.”

“Let’s start with Veronica. She was your crush, right?”

“Yes, I liked her, I didn’t know how much until after she was gone.”

“Were you two romantic in any way?”

“No, we didn’t do anything until that night of the party.”

“So, what did you guys do that night?”

“We had sex.”

“You remember this?”

“It came to me a few days after the party. I was also drugged that night and couldn’t remember what happened.”

“Do you know who drugged you?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell the jury who and why they did it?”

“Lexi Gray did it. She is the daughter of Joyce and Mayor Raymond Gray. Her brother, Jimmie, told her to drug Veronica and me that night.”

“Why would Jimmie want you drugged?”

“Jimmie Gray, Rachel Kelly, Russell Lewis, Ryan Johnson, Katherine Garcia, Andrea Ross, and my brother Charles Parker all hated Veronica. They hated her because Ryan started a rumor that Veronica had tried to sleep with him. Rachel and Ryan were a couple, and they didn’t want Veronica around any longer. They waited for Veronica to leave the party that night and they followed her, picked her up, drove her to the cliff, and pushed her to her death.”

“Objection. Confusing the jury!” Mr. Brown said.

“Overruled, I’ll allow the answer.”

“You mentioned Andrea Ross is one of these people?”

“Yes, Andrea wanted to come clean about all of this, that is why I was meeting her on Mermaid Cliff that day the picture was taken. The cops in this town were getting nowhere and Jason and I had to investigate on our own. One of the kids I named must have known she was going to tell me everything, so they took her before I got there.”

“What about the deaths of Jason Miller and Amelia Taylor? You were found there next to one of the murder weapons.”

“After the gang killed Miller and Taylor, those six left before Richards arrived. They would have killed me too, but Richards’ flashing lights scared them off.”

“What about Patrick Morris and Cheryl Wood?”

“I was friends with them. We all left the party to go up to Mermaid Cliff. I lost them in the woods. I honestly still don’t know what happened to them.”

“Tell me about this video of you punching another student.”

“That student I was punching, Ryan Johnson, is the piece of shit who killed Veronica, Andrea, Jason, and Taylor.”

The room filled with gasps as I realized what I’d just said.

“Order!” Judge Wiggins slammed his hammer. “Control your client, Mrs. Wolfe.”

“Listen, you people already made up your mind about me. The evidence, sure, it does seem to point to me, but that’s because I was the only person in this town trying to find the real killers. And you know what? I did find them, I found all of them.”

“Mark, take a deep breath for me. Let’s talk about the evidence the state has against you. They found most of it in a ceiling at the place you work. Tell me about that,” she said, calming me down.

“Jason and I were collecting evidence that we were going to hand over to Agent Taylor. We kept it up there to be safe. The bracelet I found in the dumpster beside the drive-in. The charm and the box of pictures were from past deaths in Rockport, McGinty gave them all to me in the hopes I’d be able to uncover the truth.

“The flashlight had my DNA because I picked it up; Jason and I were going through the woods to look at the camera footage at the drive-in, to see if Ryan Johnson snuck away from the movie the night Andrea was killed. I dropped the flashlight on our way out of the woods.

“While we were in there, though, I tripped on a rock, hitting my head next to Andrea’s body and jacket. That’s why my blood was on the jacket. The knife, on the cliff, I pulled out of Taylor’s back. That’s how my fingerprints are on that.”

“Speaking of the knife. I had my own team examine the knife. They dated it to be about five hundred years old. Have you ever seen that dagger before?”

“No, I’m sixteen; where would I have gotten an ancient dagger and put a deadly toxin on it?”

“Why did you feel you had to play detective?”

“The cops were getting nowhere; I didn’t know who I could trust. The people here wouldn’t talk to outsiders. I had to do it myself.”

“Why is that?”

“There are just a lot of corrupt things going on here.”

“In the prosecution’s opening, they said you had ties to a local gang. What did they mean by that?”

“I have no clue. My friend, Jason... his dad was a part of a biking club called the Crusaders, but I never talked to them.”

“So, you were just trying to find out what happened to Veronica. When you found the killers, you got mixed up in all of this chaos?”

“Exactly.”

“Your Honor, I’d ask that the murder charges against my client in respect of Veronica McBride, Andrea Ross, Jason Miller, Cheryl Wood, and Patrick Morris be thrown out due to insufficient evidence.”

“On what grounds?”

“Mark and Veronica were drugged the night she was murdered. He had an alibi for being at home. I have a witness who picked him up from the party and drove him home. She will testify that he was not himself. Mark was working the night Andrea was murdered. Yes, the prosecution has a photo of him next to her car, but that is because he was supposed to meet her there.

“There is no evidence to support he murdered either of those two. Cheryl and Patrick’s bodies were never recovered; therefore, we cannot speculate on what happened to them. Finally, Jason Miller, the coroner just testified that he was murdered with a small blade. A blade that was never recovered at the scene. There is no way to prove whatsoever that my client did anything to him.”

“We will take a short recess while I talk this over with both sides.”

Everyone stood up and slowly exited while I was escorted back to the side room. If Janis could get those five murder charges dropped, I would only be looking at one other charge.



Chapter 35



AFTER ABOUT AN HOUR, I was taken back into the courtroom. People were piling back in to find their chairs. Sitting there, leg shaking, I pictured Jason, Patrick, and Cheryl sitting smiling at me, trying to keep me going, keeping my confidence up. The doors behind me opened and the judge, Janis, and Brown came walking in, heading to their seats.

“Everyone, quiet down,” the judge said. “Upon further discussion with both sides, I have come to a decision. The charges will stay intact.”

The crowd roared with excitement as my jaw dropped.

“The next person who makes an outburst will be removed from my courtroom!”

Janis walked up to me, shaking her head. “No further questions.”

In that moment, I knew she’d given up on me. It was a losing case, but I was angered that she would just abandon hope.

Mr. Brown whispered with his team, before getting up to address me. “Mark Parker.”

“Yes.”

“Where are the bodies of Patrick Morris and Cheryl Wood?”

“I have no idea, Sir.”

“Their parents just want to bury their children, Mark. Won’t you just tell them?”

“I don’t know where they are. We were in the woods, and we all got separated as it was getting darker.”

“Why were you guys in the woods?”

“We thought that if we could find any evidence to use against the real killers, there had to be something up there.”

“Who was with you up there?”

“Jason, Patrick, Cheryl, Lexi, Chloe.”

“So, Cheryl and Patrick got lost. You and Jason ended up on the cliff. Where did Lexi and Chloe go?”

“You’d have to ask them. They got separated from us as well.”

“You and Veronica were close, so it must have come as a shock to you when you found out she had feelings for another guy?”

“No, she didn’t like him at all. It was just a rumor.”

“Then when you tried to get with Andrea, she ditched you too, isn’t that the truth?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Then your friends—Jason, Patrick, and Cheryl—made jokes about what happened. You were jealous when Jason got a girlfriend, weren’t you?”

“Stop it! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

I looked over at Janis, her head in her hands.

“So, you were very upset. Upset enough and jealous enough that you killed them. It was in the heat of the moment; we’ve all been there, but you acted on it. Isn’t that, right?”

I felt my blood boiling, an anger in me that I’d never felt before.

“Do you really want to know what is going on here?”

“Please, Mr. Parker, enlighten the courtroom.”

“The Syreni is a secret, ancient, cult in this town. They have been killing people here for hundreds of years. They live amongst us, our friends and family. The Order of Lai, a group of warriors, committed to saving the world, has been trying to stop them for centuries. The Syreni must be stopped, we must help the Order of Lai achieve this or we are all in danger.”

I had let all my anger out, exploding in the courtroom. The side door flew open in that moment, slammed into the wall. I felt the anger subsiding.

“That’s enough! Mr. Parker, any more of your nonsense and I will end the trial and sentence you right here!” the judge screamed as the bailiff closed the door that had mysteriously opened.

“No more questions, your Honor.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know why I said that your Honor.”

“Get him off my stand. That’s it, I think we’ve seen and heard enough on this. Mr. Brown, address the jury one more time.”

Walking to my chair, I didn’t understand.

Janis leaned in, whispering to me. “He’s on someone’s payroll; he’s been against you since the start. You never had a shot. I believe you, there is something wrong going on here. But I just can’t help you anymore.”

What did she mean? Someone had paid the judge to end the trial early?

“Your honor,” she said. “I think we can skip closing arguments.”

The judge readied himself to speak again, nodding and sitting tall and straight.

“Jury, I would ask now that you go and deliberate this for as long as you need,” the judge said. “You will not have any communication with anyone out here. If you cannot come up with a unanimous decision, we will have a retrial.”

The judge slammed his hammer down, sending shivers down my spine. Standing up to walk away, he looked back and smirked. I turned around and saw Joyce Gray in the crowd, smirking back at him. The Syreni had struck again. They had a hand in everything in this town. Janis was right, I never even had a chance in the trial.

The officers urged me to my feet and escorted me back to my cell. There, I sat and waited for the answer I already knew was coming. I then noticed that the paint on the concrete was chipping off. I began peeling it back, bigger and bigger pieces at a time. Finally, I revealed what they were covering up. Underneath were the words *Syreni Lives*, written over and over again all across the wall along, with the same number 6060. Whoever was in this cell at one time had known of the cult. The cops were in on it too; they must have known of the evil living among us. Everyone had been forced to keep quiet about them, or they’d be the next victims.

“Hey kid,” a voice whispered from the cell next to me.

I jumped in fear as I walked to the edge of the bars. “Who, me?”

“Yeah, I believe you, I know all about the Syreni and the Order of Lai. How’d your trial go?”

“What do you know about them? It went horribly, I think I’m going to prison for the rest of my life.”

“Ever get a sense someone’s watching you, kid, the hairs on your neck standing up? Or a random fog comes moving in during the night?”

“Yes, I have had those things happen to me a few times.”

“That’s her, kid. She watches us; she’s not strong enough yet to attack during the day. That is why the Syreni exists, to feed her, make her strong, until the day she can come for us all.”

“Why would the Syreni want to make her stronger?”

“They’ve worshipped her for hundreds of years; it’s all they know. They believe they’ll be spared when the devil runs free.”

“Has it happened before?”

“There’s only the legend, boy. Long ago before its slumber, there was an ancient war. A war between the Order and the Syreni. After centuries of fighting between the demons and men, the Order found out how to kill the beast. The skin could be penetrated by a piece of its own hide.

“When the settlers arrived in what is now Rockport, they began having nightmares, visions of the horror. They forged the ancient cult once more, awakening a new beast. I fear that with every passing year, this creature gains in strength. Soon, it will be strong enough to roam free, sending us into another war! Your family—you aren’t exactly human, there’s demon blood running through your veins. One day, you will be strong enough to harness its power, choose a side, and reign. Your mother thinks sending you to prison will deter you from this, controlling you for herself.”

“How do you know so much about this?”

“I grew up in Dracfort, Alaska, before moving to Rockport. We knew all about the ancient war against the evil creatures. The world is too distracted to realize or even understand what is going on here. The Syreni have been killing people for centuries. There have been many battles for hundreds of years between the two. You may be going to prison for now, but Josiah has other plans for you.”

“What, he knows about me?”

“Oh yes, Taylor wasn’t sent here to destroy the creature, she was sent here to protect you until his arrival. You are the purest bloodline of the cult, so we need you in finding the evil. The Syreni must have

uncovered her identity and had to pin it on you. You got too close, Mark; she failed you.”

“No. I failed her. I couldn’t protect her when she needed it the most. I was so blinded by trying to find a killer, that I ignored the bigger problem.”

“You’ll have another chance, kid. It might not be today or tomorrow, but sometime in your life, you’re going to lead the Order of Lai to victory. Only a purebred of the Syreni knows the location of the demon.”

“How did Josiah know I’d want to betray my family and help the Order?”

“The Order of Lai has operatives everywhere; they are tasked with hunting the creatures and finding new recruits. When you were just a boy, Josiah came across you at a park in Rockport. He said he knew instantly that one day, you would help the Order in defeating the Syreni.”

“That sounds crazy, but then again, there *is* a demon mermaid on the loose. You said *creatures*, as in more than one?”

“I understand how it all sounds, but you must accept your fate. Taylor trusted you, especially after you found her family’s killer. Yes, there’s been more than one demon roaming this world, and we try to keep them at bay.”

“How did you get in here?”

“I’ve lived in Rockport most of my life, recruited for the Order as a young boy. I’ve lived here in secrecy a long time, keeping an eye on the Syreni. I lost contact with the Order some time ago. It wasn’t until Taylor was sent here that I knew they must have found something.

“It was Veronica McBride’s parents who brought this town into the spotlight. It’s a shame you got caught in the crossfire.”

“So, am I some kind of chosen one?”

“You are special; your family is an ancient evil. Every few generations, there is good born within that cult, and it is you.”

“Quieten down!” an officer called from down the hall.

“Stay strong, kid. One day, you’ll save us all,” the mysterious man whispered.

Sitting back against the wall, I tried to make sense of this. *I am, one day, going to lead the Order of Lai against the Syreni? That’s*

crazy! Two weeks ago, I was a normal sixteen-year-old kid. If what he said is true, I must wait for the day Josiah gets me out of this place.

I began feeling my eyes getting heavy as I leaned my head back against the cold, hard wall.



I LOOKED AROUND, ANOTHER dream? I was in a field, calm, peaceful. The sun was shining brightly, wind lightly blowing the tall grass beneath me. Toward the middle of the field, something stood out, sparkling in the grass. As I picked it up, I realized it was a scale, a scale from a creature's skin. The sun disappeared as dark clouds rolled in, covering the bright sky.

The wind picked up, nearly blowing me over. I could see fire running through the trees in the distance, like torches. Breaking through the tree line, the Syreni were coming, dark cloaks and hooded people walking toward me. Hundreds, thousands of them marching toward me. I scrambled to my feet, stepping backward. They came to a halt fifty feet from me. I saw the ancient weapons they held, daggers and swords. I began hearing noises, crackling behind me. Turning, I saw people walking toward my back. These were different people though, not dark and hooded. The Order of Lai! Coming to defend me, I saw a man on a white horse; it must have been Josiah. They stopped fifty feet from me, putting me in the dead center.

The Order wielding axes, swords, and bows, I felt like a war was about to break out. A silence began growing over me, the loudness making me cringe. I looked toward the Syreni, they began moving away from the middle, creating an aisle all the way to the trees, then they kneeled down. Then, moving out of the tree line and toward me, walked a woman. The closer she got, the more I could see of her. Beautiful, naked, flawless skin. Long silver hair stretched down the front of her body, covering her breasts.

"Come back to us," she whispered, stopping a few feet from me.

“Aurora?”

“I am many people, Mark. We can protect you.”

“I will never join you,” I said, ignoring her beauty, said to lure in its victims.

Suddenly, she changed form, turning into a little girl, the real Aurora, then changing again into my mother.

“Mark, we need you to come back to us,” she said, using my mother’s voice.

She changed again, this time into Jason.

“Jason, is that you?”

“Mark, help me, they’re holding me in this place,” he cried.

It occurred to me what we’d read in those old books at the library. The creature can take many forms, turning into anything or anyone.

I pulled out the scale and held it up to the creature as it fell to the ground, changing again, this time into its true self—a large, mermaid creature, hair turning pure black, its skin turning green. Her legs changed into a tail that curved onto the ground, revealing her shiny scales. She slithered her way closer to me, as I took a step back. I fell back to the ground as she lunged at my face, screaming.



Chapter 36



“**M**ark, you’re ok!” Janis called, coming into my cell. “It’s time to go, the jury is ready.”

“I think I had a bad dream. How long was I out?”

“About six hours.”

“They needed six hours to decide?”

The officer came in and handcuffed me, leading me out of my cell. As we reached the stairs, I looked in the cell next to mine and saw no one.

“Who was in this cell?”

“No one has been in that cell in days,” the officer said.

So, who was I talking to before I fell asleep?

Walking into the courtroom, locking eyes with all the victims’ families, I was reminded of the monster I was in their eyes. Sitting down at the table, I felt incredibly nervous at what was about to happen. The jury walked back into the room, finding their seats.

“All rise,” the bailiff demanded.

“Take your seats,” Judge Wiggins said. “Jury foreman, have you all reached a verdict?”

“Yes, your Honor.” The jury member stood up.

“Hand the forms to the bailiff. I will read them first and walk you through them.”

Janis looked over at me and nodded, standing up. I stood up beside her. Palms sweaty, I wiped them on my pants.

“Members of the jury, we tried to conceal your identities, but with the magnitude of this case, I’m sure it will get out. I will do my best to make sure you are not harassed following the trial,” the judge said. He looked over the papers, a slight smile on his face.

“Now, let’s start with count one, the murder of Veronica McBride. What is the jury’s verdict?”

“We the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree.”

Soft celebrations teamed with light crying sounds emerged from behind me. Everyone must have been so relieved to finally have a killer caught. I couldn't say I felt surprised; the jury was probably being paid off too.

"Count two, the murder of Andrea Ross, what is the jury's verdict?"

"We the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree."

"Count three, the murder of Jason Miller, how does the jury answer?"

"We the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder in the second degree."

The noise was getting louder; to be found guilty of murdering my best friend was horrible, wretched, despicable. I didn't see how they'd found me guilty when the murder weapon was never discovered.

"Count four, the murder of special agent Amelia Taylor, what is the jury's verdict?"

"We the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder in the second degree."

"Count five, the murder of Cheryl Wood, how does the jury answer?"

"We the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder in the second degree."

"Count six, the murder of Patrick Morris, how does the jury answer?"

"We the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder in the second degree."

The room erupted in celebration. They didn't even have Patrick and Cheryl's body, but still found me guilty of murder.

"Quiet!" Judge Wiggins hit that hammer to his bench again. "I will not have my courtroom be made into chaos. I understand the emotional and high magnitude of this case but please control yourselves. The evidence the prosecution laid out was incredibly overwhelming against the defendant, causing this trial to be very quick. It's been the fastest murder trial I've ever been a part of. Mr.

Parker, before I get to sentencing, is there anything you'd like to say to the victims' families?"

Sitting there for a moment—just thinking to myself—I stood up. “I was just a sixteen-year-old kid in a small town. I went to a small school and didn't have many friends. I was in love with Veronica, I know that now. You know in your heart, Mrs. McBride, I had nothing to do with this. If it allows you to find some kind of peace, then blame me; that's fine.

“Mrs. Miller, Emily. You know I would never hurt Jason; we've been friends our whole lives. He protected me on that cliff, he took a knife for me, and I will be in debt to him forever.

“To the families of Andrea, Patrick, and Cheryl, I am sorry you lost your child. Andrea tried to do the right thing, she wanted to confess what *the Seven* had done to Veronica. Patrick and Cheryl tried to help Jason and me uncover the truth but got caught up in it themselves. I'm sure one day the real killers will be revealed but until then, please protect your families. This town is evil, my mother is evil, they will strike again.”

“That's enough, Mark,” the judge demanded. “I don't need to schedule a later date for sentencing. I know what needs to happen to someone like you. I tried to see you as a kid; you had your whole life in front of you. But you're not a kid anymore. You murdered six people in cold blood, for your own gratification. I have put away a lot of bad people, murderers, rapists, robbers, but you, Mark, are the worst of them all. A serial killer, jealous of his classmates, who will stand in front of the town and call his own mother evil. I have no sympathy for you.

“I am giving you the maximum of ninety-nine years for each count, making it 594 years in prison without the possibility for parole. The only reason I am not giving you the death sentence is that I want you to live as long as possible, rotting in a cell. You will spend the rest of your life in a maximum-security prison. You will sit in a six-by-eight cell for twenty-three hours a day for the rest of your life. I will be recommending that the hour you get to walk the yard each day be cut in half. You do not even deserve to walk around outside.

“While you're in there, maybe you'll finally see what you've done and tell the families of the victims where the other two bodies are.

Get him out of my courtroom!”

He slammed his hammer down one more time as the crowd stood and began cheering.

Finally, a killer had been named in the Rockport killings. This would go down in history as the biggest crime ever committed in this town. The officer walked me through the side room as I heard people yelling things at me. I sat down in my cell and Janis walked up to the bars.

“Well, that was brutal,” he said. Since I’d known her, she’d always had a sense of humor, even in the worst situations.

“Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“We can appeal, you know, try and get a retrial based on insufficient hard evidence.”

“No, I accept my fate for now. I have a feeling this world isn’t done with me yet.”

“You think the Syreni will come for you on the inside?”

“If they do, I’ll be ready. I’m not going down without a fight.”

“You gave me the proof I needed to make myself believe what I already knew. Back in my town in Arizona, the things I’d seen, they were true. I know that now. I am going to go back there and uncover the truth.”

She walked over and hugged me before leaving. I knew I might never see her again. Though that was probably true, I couldn’t help but feel the opposite was possible.

I’d never understand why she would defend me, though, knowing I wouldn’t win.



“THE BUS IS READY, LET’S go,” Sheriff Richards said, walking into my cell. “I’ve got to say, Mark, I’m still shocked that it was you this whole time.”

“One day, you’ll learn the truth, if it isn’t too late for you.”

Escorting me out the front doors, I was overwhelmed by the sight of hundreds of people.

“Make room!” Richards called. “Get back!”

“Kill him! Don’t let him get on the bus!” someone called from the angry crowd.

One of the officers pulled his gun out and fired it into the air as a riot was about to erupt.

“None of you are going to do anything stupid. Get back!” Richards called again.

Making our way through the crowd, I locked eyes with Patrick’s dad, Randy Morris. He nodded at me. I could barely read his lips, but I was sure he mouthed, “I believe you.”

He believed I didn’t kill Patrick; that made me feel a little better.

“Mark, what do you have to say to the world?” a reporter ran up to me, camera pointing in my face.

“Josiah, I’m ready,” I said before walking away.

I got onto the bus, trying to ignore the chants of *killer* and other disgusting words. Richards sat me down in a seat, by the window. Rocks pelted the side of the bus as the driver started the engine.

“Drive!” Richards demanded.

As we pulled away from the station, I locked eyes with Lexi and Chloe standing in the back of the mob. The Syreni must had kept them hidden until after the trial. Lexi had a tear drop from her eye and I couldn’t help but feel relieved she was ok even if she was against me the entire time.

We drove through town and passed the same stores and same places I had always passed on my morning jogs. I was reminded of the fond times I had around the town before all this craziness occurred.

There was the drive-in where Jason, Veronica, and I had worked. We’d had so much fun there, eating the candy, and talking about the latest drama at school.

There was Barney’s Restaurant; I’d been eating blueberry pancakes there even as a child, hanging out there with Jason. We were passing my street, then, where I was born, where I grew up.

Sure, we weren’t the perfect family, but we’d made a lot of memories in that house. We drove by Rockport High, the place I first met Veronica. I’m sure I’ll be the gossip there for a long time.

On the outskirts of town, passing Mermaid Cliff, I thought how this was where it all started. The most iconic place in town was now the deadliest. I would never forget this place, this small secretive place.

We passed by a sign that read, *Now leaving Rockport, come back and visit soon.*

I'd never been too far away from home, so Rockport was all I ever knew. I looked back one more time, and I made a promise to myself right there. One day, I'd return to this place and protect those who could not protect themselves. This was not the end of me. I would avenge the deaths of my friends. I would expose the Syreni for what they'd done in this world. The Order of Lai would be back, and *I* would be back.



Chapter 37



I watched as Richards walked to the front of the bus and hit the driver with the blunt end of his gun, knocking him out. He jumped into the driver's seat and pulled the bus to the side of the road, before walking over to me. "Josiah is expecting you."

He quickly unlocked my handcuffs and pulled me to the front of the bus. I was in shock, couldn't comprehend what was going on.

"What are you doing?" I asked, shaken.

"There's no time to talk, the *Syreni* could be anywhere. I told you; I always had your back. Now get off the bus and make your way through the woods to the coast. There, you will find a boat, take it north-west until you find an island with a statue of a man wielding an ax. Get off there, light the torch on the north side of the island—and wait. They will come for you, do you understand?"

"What about you, can't you come with me?"

"My job in Rockport isn't over yet. I need you to do one more thing. Shoot me in the leg; we have to make it look like you escaped. Do it now!"

I thought of my mother in that moment; the *Syreni*, she had lied to me my entire life. I felt the rage inside, and I knew what I had to do. I grabbed the gun and hesitated at first before I pointed it at his knee and squeezed the trigger and dropped the gun.

The loud pop echoed around us, and he grabbed his leg in pain.

"There is a whole world out there... a world of things you couldn't imagine," he winced in pain.

"What do you mean?" I questioned.

"Humans, we aren't alone in this world," he whispered, beginning to fade away. "Our world is in danger. It's time you learned the truth and finally destroyed the evil. Go now, Mark, we will meet again one day."

I left the bus, left Richards behind. I ran across the road and down a hill into the trees. I ran harder and faster than I ever had

before. I broke through the tree line and onto the beach. There was a small rowboat just ahead. I jumped in and rowed Northwest.

The harsh waves crashed into the sides of the boat. I rowed as hard as I could, frantically looking around for the statue. There it was. A rock shaped like a man wielding an ax.

I crashed the boat on land and pulled it up into the trees.

I stumbled to the north side of the island and found the torch that had been left for me. I rushed over to it, lighting it on fire with a box of matches that were sitting next to it. Flames erupted from the torch, lighting up the darkening sky around me. I fell over with exhaustion and tried to process everything that had just happened. I sat up and looked out over the water for any sign of someone coming to get me. I couldn't take my eyes off of the horizon. Maybe it was the exhaustion, but I swore I saw Veronica and Jason together in the clouds out there. I smiled at them briefly remembering how this all began-when I heard a scream while jogging on the cliff. Maybe it was Veronica somehow telling me to find the truth that day.

I could feel a power growing inside of me. An unknown, intense, feeling in my veins. The torch lit up the area around me and shined into the darkness of the night, which gave it life. This was it; this was where the start of the rest of my life would begin.

In the distance, I saw a ship moving toward me; a man was stood at the front. A large mast blew in the wind, high above the vessel. I laid back in the sand with relief and nervousness. I couldn't explain the feeling in me; it was like something wanting to surface.

All I knew was that I was destined for something greater, something more.



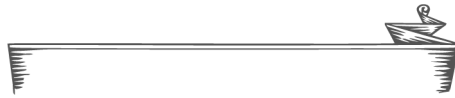
Thank You For Reading



Thank you to everyone who read the book. My goal was to allow you to escape your life for just a few hours while you entered this world I had created. I hope that you enjoyed it as much as I did writing it.

If you wouldn't mind leaving me your honest feedback of it on amazon that would help me tremendously in creating more works like this for readers to enjoy!

[Legend of Mermaid Cliff Page on Amazon](#)



About Author



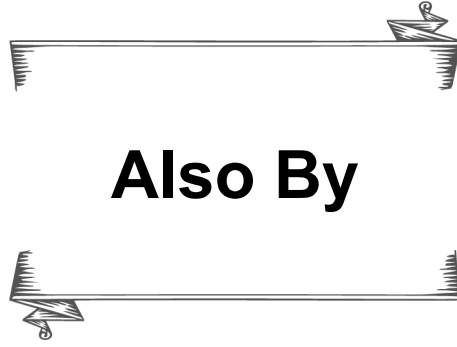
Young adult author Brand Rohrbaugh daydreamed as a child of creating his own fictitious worlds like the ones from his favorite movies. With his urban magical realism title, *Legend of Mermaid Cliff*, he achieves this by combining reality and fantasy in a way that immerses the reader in its dark world.

Writing his novels involves a lot of research to create ideas for a story. Some of his best writing happens when it's raining outside, its sound having an entrancing effect on him. Brandon believes a great book is one that captures the reader's attention, staying with them long after the book is closed. He hopes his readers feel a connection to his characters and what they experience in the book, allowing them to escape their own world for a time.

When he's not writing young adult thrillers, Brandon runs an online book resale business, likely a contributing factor in inspiring him to write his own book. He lives in Hanover, Pennsylvania, with his wife and three children and their two dogs.

Legend of Mermaid Cliff is his debut novel, the first in *The Awakening* trilogy.

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