

THE GHOSTLY SERIES

GHOSTLY CLAUS

BOOK 4

E. M.
LEYA

GHOSTLY
CLAUS

GHOSTLY CLAUS

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CHAPTER ONE

Detective Angus Young took a sip of the coffee the waitress had set in front of him and sighed. “I needed this.” He glanced at the menu, trying to decide between a burger or a BLT. Maybe a burger with bacon. That would be kind of the same if he had lettuce and tomato on the burger, right?

“You and me both. I skipped breakfast today. The power went out in my neighborhood and my phone didn’t charge. It was dead when I woke up this morning with ten minutes to get into the office. I need to invest in one of those battery-operated alarm clocks.” Franks tore the wrapper off his straw and slid it into his soda before drinking down half of it. “I’m getting the pastrami burger and fries.” He pushed the menu aside.

“What caused the power outage?” Angus decided on the burger and set his menu on top of Franks’ before refocusing on his partner. He’d worked with Franks ever since becoming a detective. While Franks was a bit older, the two of them formed an easy friendship over the years.

“Someone stealing copper from the sub-station. Idiots will risk their lives for that shit. It’s crazy.” Franks leaned back in the seat. “I usually don’t let my phone’s battery get so low, but we were out at that spot near the lake yesterday for so long, that I never had a chance to charge it. Then when I finally got home, I forgot all about it until I went to bed.”

“What’ll it be?” The waitress approached the table.

At the same moment she got to the table, gunshots rang out from outside the diner. People around them ducked into their seats or climbed under the tables, but both Franks and Angus jumped up, grabbing for their guns. Without a word, they ran toward the front of the diner, only pausing when they got to the door.

“See anything?” Franks asked.

“Nothing.” Angus had a clear look up and down the street. People were running toward them, coming from around the corner. “Go.” Angus didn’t have to say more. The moment he gave the command, Franks pushed the door open, and they slowly ran toward where the shot had come from while everyone around them ran away. They dodged groups of teens and Christmas shoppers, weaving their way through the people until they could see a group gathered around a body in the middle of the road.

“Calling it in.” Franks had his phone out and was already dialing.

Angus looked around, seeing no sign of a shooter or threat. He scanned the area, looking for any sign of an active shooter, but only saw panic in the people around him. After the first round of gunfire, it seemed the shooter had taken off. “Anyone see the shooter?” Angus ran toward what looked to be a single victim on the ground.

A lot of people commented, but none of them seemed to have seen anyone fire the shots.

As he got near, Angus’s chest tightened. Lying in the middle of the crosswalk with two women doing CPR on him was Santa Claus, or a man dressed as him. As he fell to his knees beside the victim, he noticed several young kids staring. Who the hell would shoot Santa, let alone do it where kids would see? “I have an ambulance on the way. You okay?” he asked the woman doing CPR.

“Yeah, we’ll trade off. We’re both nurses. But I’m not getting a pulse.” She gave him a hard look he understood too well. The man was dead, and it wasn’t likely any amount of CPR was going to bring him back.

“I’ve got the bleeding stopped, but…” The other woman shook her head as she pressed what looked like a sweater to the man’s neck.

Damn, there was something just wrong about staring at a man dressed as Santa Claus with his neck ripped out by a bullet. He glanced up again and yelled, “Back up and give us room. And get those kids out of here.” He glared at the man

standing with two young sons who were crying as they stared at Santa on the ground. What kind of parent would let their kids stand there and see something like this? He would have gotten the kids out of there as soon as possible. “Franks?”

“No sign of the shooter. Witnesses are saying shots came from the hotel. I’ve sent officers over there to lock the place down. As soon as others arrive, we’ll get witness statements. They’re closing off the street from both ends.”

Angus was grateful his partner was on top of everything. It wasn’t often they were first on the scene of a shooting. They usually weren’t called in until after all this had happened. This took him back to his years in uniform when he’d arrive to chaos in the streets and had to get control of things before detectives arrived. “Have them check all the stores in the area for cameras. I know the traffic light at the end of the block has one, but not sure about others.” He eyed the area. Santa had been crossing the street via the crosswalk directly in the center of the block. He didn’t see any cameras, but that didn’t mean they weren’t there.

“He’d just left my bookstore. He was there for our annual Christmas party.” An older man stood off to the side. He stared down at Santa, frowning at the body on the ground. “He was handing out candy canes ten minutes ago.”

Franks turned to the man. “Do you have his name and information?”

The older man nodded. “Gene Franklin. He’s worked with us for years doing this event. I have his number and other info back at the store.”

“It would be great if you could get us what you have.” Franks glanced up as an ambulance pulled up and a paramedic and EMT jumped out.

Angus stood, moving out of the way. He glanced at Franks and shook his head. “Doesn’t look good.”

Franks frowned. “Who the hell kills Santa?”

“Let alone in an area filled with children.” Angus noticed some parents still standing around with their children. Officers

were pushing them back, running crime scene tape around the area to help with crowd control. Still, Angus was furious at the parents who would stand there and let their kids watch this, especially the younger ones who were visibly upset about Santa being shot.

Angus noticed the paramedic shake his head and stand, glancing around as if looking for someone. “You need something?” Angus asked. “I’m Detective Young.”

The paramedic nodded solemnly. “He’s gone. We can’t do anything for him. He was probably gone the moment that bullet tore through his neck. You’re going to need the medical examiner. We had dispatch call them.”

“Thanks.” Angus sighed as he exchanged a glance with Franks. Their afternoon just got a lot busier. He looked around, glad to see officers had secured the area. He was always amazed at how fast the officers got control of a situation. “Witnesses?”

“Yeah, a few. Getting statements now. Most are saying they just heard the shot come from the direction of the hotel and then saw Santa fall. Many are saying two shots, but I swear I heard three.” Franks shrugged.

“I heard three. Sounded like a high-power rifle.” Angus glanced up at the hotel. It was one of the older hotels in the area. A simple five-story building with a history dating back to the early nineteen hundreds. He’d only been in the place a few times through the years, usually for lunch or dinner in their restaurant. He’d never been up to the rooms. “Would have been an easy shot from one of those windows.” He tried to see if any were open or if he could see any with the screen cut or torn out, but he was too far away.

“I need to call and cancel my date tonight.” Franks sighed.

“You have a date?” Angus was shocked. “With who?”

“Don’t act so shocked. I do go out from time to time. It’s just Gloria from dispatch. We get together every few weeks for dinner. It’s nothing serious. Just friends hanging out. We like to try new restaurants in the area when they open. We were

going to hit that new Korean place on Main tonight, but it'll have to wait.”

“We'll be done here by then.”

“Will we?” Franks raised a brow.

Okay, so they wouldn't be done with things completely, but they weren't expected to work through the night. Santa was dead. Once they got the scene investigated and cleaned up, the rest could wait until morning. “Go have a night off before we get caught up in all this. The media is going to be all over Santa Claus getting shot down. Take tonight to breathe a bit before we're up to our necks in this case tomorrow.”

Franks sighed. “You got plans?”

“Nope. I'll drop by Lance's if I have time, but we don't have plans. If anything comes up, I'm available. And Phil will be around if I need help.” Angus didn't expect they could do much until forensics did their job and figured out exactly where the bullet came from. All they could do right now was investigate Santa and figure out why someone wanted him dead. If he had a family, they'd need the night to grieve. They couldn't start pushing for interviews until tomorrow at the earliest. He glanced around. “Please tell me we aren't going to have to do notification.”

Franks cringed. “Probably. I'll take that over dealing with the media.” He pointed down the road where a media van was pulling up.

“Great. Just what we need.” Angus shook his head. “As if traumatizing the kids around here wasn't enough, now the news will make sure every child in the area knows Santa was shot to death.” He prayed the media had a heart and would report about the shooting without saying what the man who died did for a living or how he was dressed when he was killed. “Let's make sure we try and keep them from getting any shots of the body. The last thing we need is a dead Santa on the six o'clock news.”

Franks nodded. “I'll see if we can move some of the cruisers to block the area better and maybe move the tape back

another half a block.” He walked off.

Angus walked over to where one of the women who had been doing CPR was. She sat on the edge of an outdoor flowerbox in front of one of the stores. Someone had given her a bottle of water to drink. He noticed her hand shaking as she lifted it to her mouth. “You okay?”

“I will be. Just not what you expect to see when out Christmas shopping.” She gave him a weak smile. “I’ve seen worse. I’m an E.R. nurse. It’s just an adrenaline dump.” She glanced at the woman beside her who was using a roll of paper towels to wipe the blood from her hands. “We’d like to go clean up, but figured you’d want to speak to us first.”

“I won’t take long. I’m Detective Young.” He didn’t offer his hand. Instead, he pulled out a small notebook from his pocket. “Did you see him get shot?”

“Yeah, he was just a few steps in front of us on the crosswalk. We’d been joking with him while we waited to cross. He said he was headed to the mall for his shift there and told us to bring our kids by later.” She took another drink of water before continuing. “We were about halfway across the street when he went down. Then I heard the shot. That’s weird, right? That I’d see him get hit before I heard the sound of the gunfire?”

“Not really. Sound can travel differently sometimes. How many shots did you hear?”

She glanced at her friend and raised her brow. “Maybe two.”

“I thought I heard three.” The other woman shrugged. “But by then I saw the blood and was rushing to help him. Now that I think about it, that was stupid. I should have run for cover, but I guess my training just kicked in and when I saw blood, I had to help.” The second woman’s voice shook. “We could have been killed too.”

Angus didn’t want to think about how many innocent victims were on the street at the time who could have been shot. “Was the victim alert when you got to him?”

“No, and I never found a pulse. His neck...” She shook her head. “The bullet nearly tore his head off. I know that sounds dramatic, but it’s true. I could feel the wound as I applied pressure. It was like his head was looser on his spine than it should have been.” She shivered. “I’ve never experienced something like that in all my years of nursing. It just felt wrong.”

Angus felt bad keeping the women while they both really did need to wash. “I know you want to go clean up. If we can just get you to fill out witness statements. Make sure we have contact info for you, and then you two are free to go. Just know we may be in contact later with more questions.”

“Of course.” The first woman nodded as she watched the medical examiner’s van pull up. “It breaks my heart so many kids saw that. There were a bunch of kids outside the bookstore when it happened.”

Angus sighed. “Murder is bad enough, but murdering Santa in front of kids a few weeks before Christmas tops it all.” He tried to see who was in the M.E.’s van but couldn’t. He doubted it would be his boyfriend, Lance. He didn’t like going on calls if he didn’t have to. He’d usually get the others to go. He refocused on the women. “I’ll send someone over in a moment to get your statements. Thank you for trying to help today.”

“I just wish we could have done more.” The second woman frowned.

“You did all you could. I’m told he was probably gone before he hit the ground. Thank you again, ladies.” He gave them a nod, then headed back toward where the body was. He smiled as he saw Sam kneeling beside the body. Sam was the head medical examiner and his boyfriend’s boss. He liked the man, though he only knew him through the cases they worked on and from what Lance said about him. “Hey, Sam.”

“What the hell is going on in this town? Who the hell kills Santa?” Sam glanced up at him.

Angus stepped closer and stared at the body, noticing how much darker the blood was that stained Santa’s suit. “That’s

exactly what I hope to find out.” He glanced around, glad to see most of the onlookers had moved on. “Can you tell me anything yet?”

“Other than the obvious? No. Not till we get in there and get a good look. He’ll be on the schedule for tomorrow morning unless something bigger comes in. Looks like something ripped through the back of his neck, but you know that much. We’ll have more for you later. Whatever hit him caused a lot of damage. This is more than a single bullet hole.”

“What do you mean?” Angus moved a bit closer.

“I can’t say really. I just know this wound is bigger than what I normally see with a single gunshot wound, even from something high caliber. I’ll know more once I can get him out of this outfit and get a better look.” Sam continued working on the body. “Anyone else injured?”

“Not that we’ve found. Seems he was the only target.” Angus saw Franks walking toward them.

“We’ll get you what we can as soon as we can. Give us a call tomorrow morning and we can let you know what time we’re doing the autopsy. Lance will probably be doing this one. I have a meeting with the mayor at nine.” Sam sighed.

“More budget talks?” Angus knew the M.E.’s office had been trying to get funding to hire another examiner.

“Yeah. And probably more of the same run around that there just isn’t enough money. Then in a few weeks, we’ll see the whole mayor’s office driving new cars.” Sam sounded jaded.

“Hey, it’s the same for us. We can’t even afford a new coffee pot on our budget. Phil bought one out of his own pocket the other night when ours finally gave out.”

“Now that’s harsh working conditions if you ask me. Coffee should be a given on any city budget. We can’t do our jobs without it.”

“Right?” Angus smirked. He glanced up at Franks as he came to stand beside him. “Find anything?”

“They found casings on the roof of the hotel. They’re looking at the video from inside the hotel now.” Franks held up a finger as his phone rang and he stepped away to answer it.

Angus turned back to Sam. “Got a wallet for me?”

“If I do, it’s buried under the Santa suit. You’ll have to give me a minute.” Sam continued to do his basic examination of the body. It wouldn’t take long. The cause of death was obvious, but he understood that there were rules that had to be followed and he couldn’t rush Sam when he had a job to do. They already had the man’s name and information from the bookstore owner, but verifying it with his I.D. and trying to find out who his wife was before going to his home would be nice.

Franks turned back to them as he shoved his phone back into his pocket. “That was the captain. He wants us to finish up here, then notify the family. He’s sending Amy to the hotel to handle things there. We’ll meet up at the station later and figure out what we have so far.”

“Figured we’d end up with that.” Angus exchanged a look of dread with Franks. Telling a family their loved one wasn’t coming home was never easy. He turned back to Sam, who was staring at the body with a frown. “What’s wrong, Sam?”

“I can’t be sure until we get him on the table, but I think he was shot twice.” He turned the body slightly. “I think we have two neck wounds side-by-side.”

“Impossible.” Franks glanced up at the roof of the hotel. “Two shooters maybe?”

“Maybe.” Sam shrugged. “We’ll let you know what we find once we can see better, but I’m seeing what appears to be two bullet wounds that are less than an inch apart in the back of his neck.” He glanced up at Angus. “Got a bag? I’ve got the stuff from his pockets for you.”

Angus opened an evidence bag and let Sam drop everything into it. He needed to glove up before touching it. He handed the bag to Franks. “Thanks, Sam. We’ll get with

you tomorrow and see what you find. Good luck with the mayor in the morning.”

“Thanks, I’m going to need all the luck I can get.” Sam sighed. “Good luck with the family. As always, we’ll call them when we’re ready to release the body.” Sam turned back to his assistant and got back to work.

Angus went to stand by Franks, thinking over all they knew so far. He glanced up at the roof of the hotel. “Someone isn’t feeling jolly this Christmas.”

“Well, a lot of us aren’t, but we don’t go killing Santa Claus because of it.” Franks started walking.

Angus glanced around. Seeing everything was being handled by others on the scene, he quickly caught up with Franks. “I need to drop some money off at the diner for our drinks. I’ll meet you at the car.”

“I’ll check the I.D. and get an address for the family. Call it in and see what we can find out about them before we go in.” Franks turned for the parking lot.

Angus headed for the diner, already working through everything they’d learned. Possibly three shots, two struck the victim as he was leaving a bookstore and headed to the mall. Hopefully, they’d find something on the hotel security feed, because right now, they had nothing more than a dead Santa, a bunch of traumatized kids, and more questions than answers.

CHAPTER TWO

Angus looked out the window of the car at the older two-story home they'd just pulled up in front of. It was a nice home, but a bit run-down. It needed a fresh coat of paint, and the yard needed some work, but who was he to judge? He was here to destroy a family with the news someone had died. The last thing he should be focused on was the house. "At least there are no young kids. The report I got back says they have one son. He's a doctor living in Florida." Angus looked at the information he'd been sent on his phone. "Wife is Melissa Franklin. She's a retired schoolteacher, sixty-two years old."

"Wish the son was closer. I hate it when we have to tell them alone." Franks opened his door just as a small car pulled into the driveway.

Angus stepped out, watching as a gray-haired woman stepped from her car and narrowed her eyes at them. "Can I help you?" She looked a bit nervous as she stood by the open door of her car.

"Ma'am, I'm Detective Young and this is Detective Franks. We were hoping we could speak with you." He had his badge and I.D. out for her to see as he slowly approached her.

"About?" She reached in and grabbed her purse before slamming the door shut and locking it with her key fob.

"It's about your husband. Maybe we could go inside?" Franks nodded to where one of the neighbors was watching them from their front porch.

"Sure." She rolled her eyes at the neighbor. "That's just Edith. She's the busybody in the neighborhood." She led them up the walkway to her front door. She unlocked the door and pushed it open. "If you're looking for Gene, he's at work at the Fairway Mall until eight tonight." She walked in and set her purse next to a coat tree by the door.

“No, Ma’am. We came to speak with you.” Angus glanced around the entryway, noticing that the place probably hadn’t been updated since the seventies.

“Okay then. We can talk in here.” She led them to the living room. “Can I make you coffee or anything?”

“No, we’re good.” Angus smiled as he waited for her to sit before he took a seat across from her. Once she was settled and staring at them, Angus took a deep breath, wishing it was Franks’ turn to say the words this time. “Mrs. Franklin, we hate to inform you that there was an incident with your husband this afternoon. I’m sorry to say he died from his injuries.”

Melissa Franklin stared at them for a moment, then shook her head. “I’m sorry. Are you sure? He left for work at eleven this morning.”

“He died around one on his way from the bookstore event to the mall,” Franks told her. “I’m afraid it appears your husband was murdered.”

Melissa sank back into her seat, her mouth opening as she gasped. “Murdered?” She shook her head. “That’s not possible.”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am, but it is. He was shot as he was crossing the street.” Angus kept his hands folded in front of him, keeping a careful eye on Melissa, ready for any reaction. He’s seen people faint, others flash out in anger, and some go into an almost catatonic state for a while. He never knew what response they would get. And it wasn’t something you could guess beforehand. The calmest, most controlled people were often the ones to have the harshest reactions.

“Shot?” She stared at him. “Shot? How? By who?” She shook her head. “You’re sure it was Gene?”

“Yes, Ma’am we’re sure,” Franks told her. “We aren’t sure by who or why yet. We’re still looking into that. Can we call someone to be here with you?”

Angus hated it when people didn’t react right away. He never felt like he should leave until there had been some kind

of acceptance that what they were being told was true. He was glad Franks asked if they could call anyone.

“My son. He’s in Florida. Could you call and tell him? I don’t want to be the one to tell him.” She stared at a group of photos that hung on one wall. “He won’t believe you. Gene was too stubborn to get shot, especially in December.” She sounded almost spiteful.

“What do you mean, Ma’am?” Franks asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just that he was so focused on playing Santa that he wouldn’t let anything stop him from being there for those kids. It was all he could think about this time of year. Nothing mattered but being Santa. I doubt even a bullet could stop him.” She leaned forward, resting her hands on her knees. “You’re serious? He’s dead?”

Angus nodded. “I’m so sorry.”

She took a deep breath as she blinked back tears. “Would you mind calling my son? Maybe that receptionist of his will put you through to him. She keeps telling me he’ll call me back when I call.” She stood, wavered for a moment, then took another deep breath. “I just need to get his number from my phone.”

Franks put a hand on her shoulder. “Allow me to grab your purse for you?”

“Thank you.” She sank back down in her chair.

Angus nodded to Franks, glad he’d kept Melissa from going to get it. The way she wavered, he was sure she was going to collapse. “I’m happy to call him for you. Is there anyone else?”

She hesitated, then shook her head. “I’ll be okay. Tell me again what happened. Was there a robbery or something in the area?”

“No, it appears he was the intended victim. It looks like someone was on the roof of the Fairway Hotel and shot at him as he crossed the road. He was the only victim despite there being others around him. We’re still investigating, but it appears someone wanted to kill your husband.”

She sucked in a hard breath. “Who?”

“We were hoping you might have an idea. Is there anyone who had a problem with your husband?” He didn’t want to push a full interview right now, but if she was willing to talk, he’d get what information he could.

Franks walked back in and handed Melissa her purse.

“Thank you.” She pulled her phone out and then looked at Angus. “I can’t think of anyone. Everyone loved him. There is another guy who plays Santa that he was always complaining about. They’ve battled for events and locations for the last few years. I wouldn’t think it was bad enough he’d kill over it, but he’s the only person I ever heard Gene complain about.” She refocused on her phone. “Here’s his number. His name is Roger. Have him call me after you speak to him. If that wicked receptionist will put you through.”

Angus nodded. “Will do.” He wrote down the number she gave him and stood to make the call in the other room, hoping that while he did that, Franks would be able to get more information out of her. He was a bit shocked at how well she was taking the news. He’d expected more tears, more questions. She seemed almost too calm at learning her husband of almost forty years was dead.

He quickly dialed the number she’d given him. It took only a few seconds for a woman to answer.

“Dr. Franklin’s office, how may I help you?” The voice was young and a bit too cheerful for a simple phone call.

“Yes, my name is Detective Angus Young. It’s very urgent that I speak with Dr. Franklin immediately.”

“I can take a message and have him return your call,” she said.

He imagined her with a pen in hand, ready to take down a number so she could end the call. “Is he in the office today?”

“Yes, but he has a very busy schedule. I will let him know it’s urgent and to call you. If I could just—”

“If he’s there now, I need to speak with him now. This isn’t something that can wait. I’m calling from Texas and—”

“Oh, his parents are there. Just a moment.” Her entire tone changed as he was put on hold.

Angus rolled his eyes. Melissa hadn’t been kidding about the receptionist. At least she was smart enough to realize a call from the police in Texas probably had to do with the doctor’s parents. He paced the entryway as he waited, looking at family photos and knickknacks set around the room on older side tables.

“This is Dr. Franklin.” A deep voice came over the phone.

“Dr. Franklin, I’m Detective Young. I’m here with your mother at her house and she asked that I call you. I’m sorry to inform you that your father died this afternoon.” Angus hated doing this. There was no easy way to tell someone they’d lost a family member. It was easier just to come out and say it.

There was a long moment of silence on the phone, and then Dr. Franklin cleared his throat. “How? If a detective is involved, it wasn’t a simple heart attack.”

“He was shot,” Angus said.

“My God,” Dr. Franklin gasped. “My mother, is she okay?”

“She’s shaken up, but she wasn’t with him at the time. We’re here with her now, but she’s refused to have us call anyone to come over to be with her. She asked that I call you and have you call her once we’re done speaking.”

“Of course. I’ll call her and be on the next flight out. Do you know who shot him? How did it happen?” Dr. Franklin sounded more like a young boy than the professional who’d answered the phone just minutes ago.

“We’re not sure yet. We’re working on that now. Hopefully, we’ll have more to tell you by the time you get into town. All I can tell you now is he was walking across the street downtown when he was shot. As of now, we don’t have any suspects.” Angus thought about the fact Melissa had been out when it happened and wondered where she had been.

“I don’t understand. Was there a robbery or a shooting he got in the middle of?” Dr. Franklin cleared his throat again. “I mean, how did *my father* get shot?”

“It appears he was the target. You have to understand that this just happened a few hours ago. We’re still investigating. I wish I had more to tell you.” Angus glanced into the living room to see Melissa had finally broken down and started to cry.

“Okay, let me find a flight home. I’ll be there probably late tonight,” Dr. Franklin told him.

“We’ll drop by tomorrow sometime. Call your mother when we end this call. We need to leave, but maybe you can talk her into having someone come sit with her until you get here,” Angus suggested.

“Yeah, I will. Thank you for calling me.”

Angus hated that he had to. “You’re welcome. We’ll talk again tomorrow. Have a safe flight and I’m so sorry for your loss.” Angus ended the call and shoved his phone back into his pocket. He walked back into the living room just as Melissa’s phone rang. She quickly answered. While she spoke to her son, Angus glanced at Franks. “Son is flying in. Should be in late tonight.”

“Good. She promised to call someone to come over tonight until he gets here. I let her know we would need to ask some questions tomorrow. She seems fine with that.” Franks glanced over at Melissa. “We need to know where she was this afternoon.”

“Agreed. And that question can’t wait for tomorrow.” If she had been the one to kill her husband, they needed to figure that out quickly before she would have time to possibly leave town. His gut said she didn’t do it, but his gut had been wrong a time or two. He sat back down, waiting patiently for Melissa to end the call.

“She’s calling his parents. They live in a retirement community in Houston. He’s also got a brother, but she doesn’t know how to get hold of him. She’s hoping his parents

do. I get the impression that the brothers aren't close. I warned her the media was on the scene that she might see it on the news and that reporters may try to contact her. I told her to call us if they get to be a problem." Franks pulled out two cards from his pocket.

Angus nodded. "We'll drop by tomorrow after the son gets settled."

"Sorry about that." Melissa set the phone down and wiped tears from her eyes. "Thank you for calling him for me."

"Not a problem. I know how hard it can be to tell someone. I'm glad I could do it for you." Angus smiled at her. "We just have a quick question then we'll leave. Understand, it's something we have to ask. Where were you this afternoon during the shooting?"

Melissa's head snapped up and her eyes widened. "You can't think that I... He was shot. I don't even know how to use a gun. No, I couldn't kill my husband." She shook her head. "I was having lunch with a friend. I can get you their name and number if you need to verify that. We got takeout from the bistro on Conner Street. They can tell you we picked up our order."

Franks nodded. "Just so we cover every avenue, if you could get your friend's name and number for us, we'll pick it up when we come by tomorrow to speak to you. Your husband's body is with the medical examiner. They'll call you as soon as they are ready to release it to the mortuary of your choosing." He handed her the two cards. "My card and also the contact information for the medical examiner if you have any questions."

"Thank you." She took the cards. "Roger will be here with me tomorrow. Do I need a lawyer too?" She looked worried.

"I don't think so. You're always welcome to have one sit in with us, but our questions will be basic. We want to know about your husband. Know who his friends are and who might have had any problems with him in the past. It's something you can think about tonight and tell us tomorrow. We're so sorry for your loss." Franks stood.

Angus joined him and offered his hand to Melissa.
“Please, don’t hesitate to call us if you need anything.”

“Thank you. I’m going to call a friend over for tonight and Roger should be here in a few hours. I’ll be fine.” She sniffed.

“We’ll see ourselves out.” Franks gave her a nod, then turned.

Once back in the car, Angus glanced over at Franks.
“We’ll check out her alibi, but I’m not feeling guilt from her. She wasn’t as upset as I expected her to be, but everyone handles death differently.”

“You’d think after forty years of marriage you’d be more upset. At least I would.” Franks pulled away from the curb.
“I’m about ready to call it a day. I’m picking Gloria up in an hour.”

“I think I’ll drop by and surprise Lance. I’d sent a text saying I’d be busy, but tonight might be the only chance I get to see him for a few days as we work on this case.”

“You want to hit the autopsy in the morning or just wait for the results?” Franks asked.

“Wait. We know the cause of death and from the casings left on the roof, we have a good idea of what kind of gun was used. We’ll get a call if anything important comes up. No point in wasting our morning with that.”

“Even if it will give you time with Lance?” Franks teased.

“Not like we can talk too much during the autopsy. He’s too busy recording his findings. Besides, I think he’ll have enough on his mind. His brother’s supposed to get into town this week. He’s been pretty excited about that, but a bit nervous too.”

“Why the hell is he nervous his brother is coming to visit?” Franks asked.

Angus laughed. “Well, the last time they were together was before Lance’s accident. Way before he was seeing and talking to ghosts, let alone living with two of them.” He

thought about how the fact that Lance could see ghosts had brought them together. It felt like forever ago, though it had only been six or so months. A lot had happened during that time.

“He’s going to tell his brother about it?” Franks looked surprised.

“He says he is. Said if anyone should know it’s his family. Besides, it would be impossible to have Jackson stay with him for a few weeks while living with the ghosts. He’d have to stop communicating with them when Jackson was around, and that’s not going to happen. I don’t know enough about his brother to know how he’ll react, but I support Lance wanting to tell him.” Angus smiled. “If he calls Lance crazy, I’ll send my mom over to straighten him out.”

“Do a few tricks like you did with me and you can’t help but believe.” Franks turned into the parking lot of the police station. “I thought you were nuts, but I couldn’t deny the evidence once I saw it with my own eyes.” He pulled up next to Angus’s car. “You going in?”

“I’ll run in and file a short report on what Mrs. Franklin had to say, then head out. Go have fun on your date. Hopefully, they’ll have found something on the hotel video that will give us a lead to jump on tomorrow morning.” Angus got out of the car.

“Call if anything happens.” Franks gave him a wave, then took off.

Angus sighed as he made his way into the station. One quick report, then he was gone. He’d had a long enough day and it was looking as if tomorrow wouldn’t be any better.

CHAPTER THREE

“How many times are you going to watch that?” Lance asked as he walked out of his bedroom to find Bethany and Ray on the couch, watching *A Christmas Story*.

“How many times are they airing it?” Bethany lifted her chin as if daring him to say more.

Lance laughed and shook his head. While he enjoyed the movie, once a season was enough for him. He had no desire to sit through multiple viewings of it. He left the ghosts to watch and headed into the kitchen to find something for dinner.

He’d hoped Angus would drop by to eat with him, but he’d gotten a text earlier letting him know he’d be working late. Lance knew there was a shooting downtown and figured that was what Angus would be handling. He’d planned on watching the news but wasn’t going to bother the ghosts in the middle of their movie to turn it on. He’d catch the later edition.

Living with two ghosts was a lot like having roommates, minus the mess and clutter since ghosts didn’t need anything and couldn’t pick anything up to leave it lying around. If someone had told him a year ago that he’d be living with two ghosts and be able to communicate with them, he would have thought they were crazy. Yet, here he was, able to see and speak with the dead and allowing two of them to stay with him. It wasn’t as if they took up much space. And most of the time they kept to the back patio. The cold didn’t bother them, so they would sit outside, often listening to audiobooks that Lance would download for them. It was nice to have the company around most of the time.

Haunt followed him into the kitchen, probably hoping he’d give her a treat. They’d adopted the dog several months ago. Well, adopted wasn’t really right. The puppy had followed the ghosts home one day and they’d been unable to

locate the owners. Keeping the dog was an easy decision. Since animals could see and interact with the dead, Haunt made the perfect addition to their family. She spent most of her time during the day with the ghosts and slept with Lance at night, stealing more than her half of the bed most of the time. For such a small dog, she could sure stretch out and take up room. He bent and scratched her head. "What should we have for dinner?"

Haunt walked over and bumped the bottom cupboard with her nose. It was the one where they kept her treats.

"Okay, but just one." He opened the cupboard and got her a treat out of the bag. He gave it to her and smiled as she went to lie down under the table and enjoy it. With her taken care of, he had to find something for himself. He opened the fridge to see what leftovers he had then shut it as the doorbell rang. He quickly headed to the front door, peeked out to see who was there, and threw the door open. "Hey, I didn't expect you." He gestured Angus inside, taking in the wrinkled shirt and weary expression on his face. It didn't make him any less attractive. With the thick brown hair cut short, thick, muscular arms spattered with tattoos, and deep brown eyes that Lance never tired of staring into, he always caused Lance's heart rate to increase.

"I got done earlier than I thought." Angus brushed a kiss over Lance's lips as he walked in. "What a long day."

"I heard there was a shooting downtown." Lance led Angus through the living room. "Say hi to Ray and Bethany. They're watching TV."

"Hey, you two. Great movie." Angus nodded at the television.

"See, we're not the only ones." Bethany grinned at Lance.

"It's great the first time, and maybe once a year, but this is like the tenth time they've watched it just this week." Lance sighed as he headed into the kitchen, ignoring the ghosts.

Angus laughed. "I wish I had the time to watch any movie this week, let alone one ten times."

“You and me both.” Lance leaned against the counter. “I was just thinking about something for dinner. Want to DoorDash something? I have limited options in the fridge. I need to hit the store tomorrow before Jackson gets in.”

“I’d love something. I skipped lunch. We’d just sat down to eat when that shooting happened. I’ve got a coupon for a buy one get one at Antonio’s Pizza if you want to do that.” Angus gave him a sheepish smile. “I know we do pizza all the time, but I like it.”

“You know I don’t mind it.” Lance pulled his credit card out and tossed it to Angus. “I’ll let you order since you have the coupon.”

Angus pushed the card back toward Lance. “I’ll get it. I’ve already got my payment info in the app. You can get us next time.” He pulled out his phone.

“So tell me about this shooting. I know Sam picked up the body, but I didn’t have a chance to talk to him this afternoon. What happened?” Lance took a seat after putting his credit card back in his wallet.

“I’m not sure. Someone decided to stand on the roof of the Fairway Hotel and take out a guy dressed as Santa Claus as he walked across the street. He was the only victim, so it wasn’t as if we had a mass shooting or anything. It appears to be a targeted kill. Sam said the guy had two bullet holes in his neck.” Angus set his phone down. “Hopefully, we’ll have more to work with in the morning.”

“What are the chances of two bullets hitting so close together? You’d think the first bullet would jerk the body enough that the second would hit somewhere else. I mean, I’m not an expert with guns, but if I get shot in the chest, it’s going to force my body back so the second shot hits me somewhere different.”

“Right? Hell, even with a stationary object very few of us are good enough shooters to hit the same spot twice in a row. I was thinking maybe it’s an entrance and exit wound from one bullet.”

Lance shrugged. “Not a mistake Sam would likely make while looking over a body, but I guess it’s possible. Sam’s gone in the morning, so I’ll probably be doing the autopsy. I’ll let you know what I find.”

“Thanks. So everything else going okay? You aren’t involved with this meeting Sam has with the mayor, are you?” Angus asked.

Lance sighed. It was all anyone at work was talking about lately. They really needed the money. Unaccompanied deaths seemed to be on the rise, not to mention the increasing murder rate in the area. They really needed another medical examiner on staff. His raise was also dependent on a budget increase. “If I want any kind of raise this year, I should be. I’m already making less than average. In some areas, medical examiners are making almost double what I am. If I didn’t like living here and enjoy the people I work with, I might consider moving.” He met Angus’s gaze. “And there is a certain detective that makes sticking around worthwhile.”

“I’m glad you are considering me in that decision. I’d worry if you weren’t.” Angus shifted his chair so they were closer. “I’d hate to have to quit my job to follow you somewhere.”

Lance laughed. “I’d never ask you to do that. I have no plans of going anywhere. You’re more important than money.” He leaned in and kissed him softly. The kiss reminded him of how much he had to lose if he left Fairway and Angus. For the first time in his life, he was happy and content with his job and his life. A big part of that was because of his relationship with Angus. He’d never found anyone who understood him the way Angus did, and that wasn’t just because he accepted the fact that Lance could see ghosts, though it was a big part of things. Things with Angus were just easy. He didn’t have to try to be more than he was. Angus accepted him despite his flaws, his ability to see ghosts, and the fact that he worked cutting into the dead for a living. He’d gone on dates before where what he did for work was a deal breaker right off the bat. Some people just couldn’t handle the fact Lance worked with the dead.

Angus not only accepted it but understood it, being a homicide detective.

The sound of the doorbell had them drawing apart. Lance sighed and frowned, not wanting to end the kiss. “Too quick for pizza. Be right back.” He stood and headed to the front door.

Once at the front door, he peeked out through the peephole, and his breath caught. He quickly threw the latch and opened the door, hardly able to believe who he was seeing. “Jackson!” He stepped forward, throwing his arms around Jackson, causing his brother to grunt and drop the duffle bag he’d hand slung over his shoulder.

He’d lost track of how many years it had been since he’d seen Jackson. While they called when they could and wrote letters, being able to see him and touch him was entirely different. Not a day went by that he wasn’t worried about his brother’s safety in the Navy.

“Hey, little bro. Good to see you.” Jackson eased back and grinned at him. “You look good.”

“So do you. You’re early.” Lance fought to keep his emotions back, blinking back tears he didn’t want to let fall. “God, it’s good to see you.” He took a step back and that was when he noticed someone standing behind Jackson. He almost said hello, but noticed right before he did the man had a ghostly shimmer to his body. A shimmer that only ghosts had. Lance swallowed hard, taking in the man behind his brother. He had his hair cut just like Jackson’s in a short, military cut. Only he was blond, whereas Jackson had dark brown hair. The two were about the same height, and both wore jeans and t-shirts with NAVY written across the front. Lance forced his gaze from the ghost and back to his brother, wondering if somehow his brother had the same ability he did. Could Jackson see ghosts too? “Come on in.” Lance stepped aside. “I didn’t expect you until later in the week.”

“I managed an earlier flight.” Jackson reached down for his duffle bag, slung it over his shoulder, and walked inside.

“It’s not a problem, is it?” He bent down to pet Haunt who was sniffing Jackson’s pants.

“No, never. You’re always welcome here.” He meant every word as he narrowed his eyes at the ghost as he walked in behind Jackson.

“When did you get a dog?” Jackson asked.

“A few months ago. Her name is Haunt.”

“She’s a cute dog. Not very old.”

“Less than a year, we guess. I’ll explain how I got her later. If she gets annoying, just let her into the backyard.” Lance smiled as the dog started to jump around the ghost.

“She won’t be a problem. I think we’ll get along fine. Come on, Haunt, you can help me unpack.” Jackson smiled down at the dog.

He shut the door behind them and focused on his brother. “We just ordered pizza for dinner. It should be here soon. The guest room is ready if you want to dump your stuff in there before meeting us in the kitchen.”

“Us?” Jackson raised a brow.

Lance’s cheeks heated. “I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Your detective?” Jackson grinned. “You talk about him a lot in your letters.”

“Yeah, he dropped by after work.” Lance really hoped the two of them got along. They both meant so much to him.

“I’m looking forward to meeting him. Let me drop off my stuff and use the bathroom. I’ll be out in a minute.” Jackson headed through the living room, paying no attention to Ray and Bethany who sat on the couch.

Lance turned to the ghost who was now eyeing the other ghosts on the couch with interest.

“I had no idea Jackson’s brother could see ghosts,” the new ghost said.

“Because it’s a new thing.” Lance kept his voice low. “Jackson doesn’t know yet.” He looked at the ghost again, trying to remember if he’d met him before. He had to be someone that had been in the Navy with Jackson. Lance had only met a couple of the guys over the years but didn’t know them well. “You were on his team?”

The ghost nodded. “Kel Hunter. I was killed in Afghanistan four years ago.”

“You’ve stayed with Jackson since?” Lance was shocked.

“Most of the time.” Kel nodded. “I need you to tell him some stuff.”

Lance held up a hand. “I plan on telling him I see you, but not right away. You and I will talk more when he’s not around. For now, this is Bethany and Ray. They live here with me. They can fill you in on whatever you want to know about me.” He glanced at the two ghosts who had stood up from the couch. “You two okay with that?”

Ray nodded. “Sure, we’ll head outside while you and Jackson catch up.”

“Thanks.” Lance watched the three ghosts head through the kitchen and out into the backyard. He blew out a long breath before following them, his stomach turning nervously at the sudden appearance of a ghost with his brother. He walked into the kitchen and stared at Angus.

“What’s wrong?” Angus stood up. “It’s your brother, right?”

Lance nodded and took another deep breath, wondering how much more complicated things could get. “He’s not alone. There’s a ghost with him.”

Angus’s brow rose, then he looked around. “In here with us now?”

“No, out back with Bethany and Ray for now.” He sank down into a chair.

“Does Jackson know? Can he see them too?”

Lance shook his head. "I don't think so. Kel, the ghost, wants me to talk to Jackson for him."

"Well, you planned on telling him anyway. This might make it easier." Angus sat down beside him.

"Or make him think I'm even crazier." Lance sighed, then shook his head. "I'm not going to worry about it tonight. I'll figure it all out later. Tonight, I want to spend time with you and catch up with my brother. I'll deal with the rest of this stuff later." He met Angus's stare and laughed. "Only my life could be so insane."

"We'll get you through it. You're never alone." He leaned in and kissed him quickly. "I'll stay for dinner, then leave you two alone to catch up. You can call me in the morning and let me know how things go."

"I love you." He kissed Angus again.

"Love you too," Angus told him.

As he waited for his brother to return, he wondered what Kel needed Jackson to know, and exactly how he could convince his brother that everything he had to tell him was real.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lance stood as Jackson walked into the kitchen. “You have no idea how good it is to see you.” He hugged his brother again, then turned to where Angus had stood. “I want you to meet my boyfriend, Angus Young.” He smiled. “Angus, this is my brother, Jackson.”

“Wait, Angus Young? Like the lead singer of ACDC?” Jackson raised a brow.

Angus sighed as he straightened from petting Haunt. “Yeah, my parents aren’t completely sane.” He offered his hand to Jackson. “It’s good to finally meet you. Lance talks about you all the time.”

“Same. He’s told me all about you in the letters he’s sent. It’s good to finally meet you.” Jackson smiled. “Thanks for keeping an eye on him since I can’t be around.”

“I think he’s better at keeping an eye on me.” Angus put an arm around Lance. “So you’re staying through Christmas?”

Jackson took a seat and nodded. “Until the twenty-seventh, then I head back to Germany.”

“Want a drink while we wait for the pizza?” Lance asked.

“Sure, whatever you got,” Jackson said.

“I didn’t expect you until later in the week, so there isn’t much. I’ll hit the store tomorrow when I get off work.” Lance pulled three sodas from the fridge and handed one to each man. “Friday, I’ll cook a big meal for all of us.” He was looking forward to making the Lemonade Chicken that his brother had raved about years ago. Now that he had the original chef as a friend to help him get it right, he was looking forward to surprising his brother.

“You cook now?” Jackson looked shocked.

“I do. Not perfect, but it’s edible.” Lance smiled proudly.

“He is turning into an amazing cook. He usually cooks for a group of us on Friday nights. I haven’t complained once.” Angus took Lance’s hand in his.

Jackson laughed. “You have to say that. You’re dating him. The last time he tried to cook for me, it was pancakes and they were like rubber. You’ll have to forgive me if I’ll hold out any praise until I see this for myself.”

The comment didn’t bother Lance at all. He had been a horrible cook for most of his life. It wasn’t until he started seeing ghosts that he’d met the ghost of Chef Celeste Dupont and she helped teach him how to create things in the kitchen. With her guidance, he’d managed to make amazing meals for his friends. “I’m making that Lemonade Chicken you made years ago. We’ll see if I can do as good a job as you did.”

“This I have to see.” Jackson shook his head. “I never thought I’d see the day you looked forward to being in the kitchen. Last I remember, you were take-out king.”

“We still do a lot of that too, but it’s only because we’re so busy.” Lance shrugged as the doorbell rang. “Like tonight.”

“I got it.” Angus stood and went to get the pizza.

“He seems nice. Not as nerdy as I expected. Not your usual type.” Jackson said after Angus left the room.

“Maybe that’s why it works.” Lance thought about the men he’d dated in the past. Most of them were businessmen with no sense of adventure or focus on anything but their job. “He gets me. My work doesn’t freak him out the way it does so many others. He forces me to step out of my shell and try new things.”

“Like?”

Lance grinned. “I learned to ride a motorcycle recently. I’m using Angus’s old one right now but looking to buy my own this spring.”

“You? No way. You’re Mr. Cautious when it comes to driving a car. No way you’d put yourself on a bike.” Jackson narrowed his eyes. “You’re serious?”

“Bike is in the garage. I can show it to you later.” He pulled out his wallet and showed Jackson his motorcycle license. “Got this a few weeks ago.”

“I’m impressed. Seems like he is good for you. How come you didn’t tell me about this in your letters?” Jackson tossed the license back at him.

“I didn’t want to fail and have you know. Now that I got this...” He held up the license. “I can tell you proudly without worry I won’t be able to do it.”

“I wouldn’t have said shit if you’d failed. It’s not for everyone. Hell, you don’t worry about what I think, do you? I thought we quit that when we were teens.” Jackson sighed. “I’m proud of you. You have a job that most people couldn’t do. I think about what you do, and my stomach starts to turn. I couldn’t face what you do every day.”

Lance knew Jackson probably saw a lot worse doing what he did. At least the people he got were already dead, and rarely were they people he knew. Jackson saw things as they happened. Before death took people. He’d lost friends. Probably many of them. Yeah, he couldn’t do what Jackson did. “Thanks, but you’re the hero. You’re the one out there fighting for our country.”

“You know I don’t see it like that. I’m hardly a hero. I’m just good at what I do, and it so happens the military needs my skill set. You’ve done well for yourself. You’ve got an amazing job and a nice home. You don’t know how jealous I am sometimes that you have a place to call home.”

“You know you’re always welcome here. My home is always your home.” Lance stood as Angus walked in with two large pizzas. He pulled plates down and set them on the table. “Sorry, it’s not the big dinner I wanted to welcome you home with. We’ll make a grocery list later of whatever you want, and I’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

“Make a list and let me do the shopping. I have nothing to do all day while you’re at work. I’ll get my run out of the way and be itching for something to do. You know I can’t just lay

around the house all day.” Jackson opened one of the pizza boxes. “This is great for tonight.”

“If you’re sure. I can have Carrie pick me up in the morning so you can use my car.” Lance sat down.

“I can pick you up on my way in,” Angus offered.

Jackson held up a hand and finished chewing the bite he’d taken. Once he’d swallowed, he shook his head. “No need. I got a rental. I wanted to be able to come and go. There are some old friends I want to visit. Besides, I need to do some Christmas shopping. You going to put up a tree?”

“It was on the agenda for this weekend.” Lance reached for a slice of pizza. “Angus’s mother is coming over to help. She’s sort of become my holiday decorator.”

“This is the woman who named you Angus?” Jackson grinned.

“One and the same.” Angus nodded. “She’s a bit strange, but I think you’ll like her.”

Lance figured he had four days to figure out how to tell Jackson about his ability to see ghosts because once Angus’s mother came over, there would be no hiding it. Lizzy could see and interact with ghosts just like he could, only she didn’t hide it from anyone. She was more than willing to let people think she was crazy. Things would be a lot easier if Jackson knew what to expect beforehand. Not to mention, he doubted the ghost accompanying Jackson would be willing to wait too long before forcing some kind of conversation between them. “She’s great. A carryover from the seventies and eighties. Is obsessed with eighties hair bands. Martin is her husband. You’ll like him as well.”

“If she’s into metal, we’ll get along great. Are you going with a fresh tree or using Mom and Dad’s old artificial again?”

“We decided to get a real one this year. Honestly, I haven’t done much decorating unless you’ve come into town, so the old tree hasn’t been up since the last time you showed up for Christmas. I figured there was no point in putting it up just for me,” Lance admitted.

“That’s sad. Even we decorate a bit wherever we end up. It’s not always pretty, but at least we try to get in the spirit.” Jackson took another bite of his pizza.

“I get it. It’s hard when you have no one around. I only decorate my place when Mom and Dad are in town. If they’re going to be on vacation, I don’t bother. When I get home at seven or later and leave by eight every morning, it’s just not worth it. But now Mom’s in this decorate for every holiday phase and I won’t tell her no. She has plans on decorating my place, yours, and Franks’.” Angus sighed.

“Franks?” Jackson asked.

“My partner at work. He’s become Mom’s pet project since he bought his house. She bought him everything he needed for the inside, decorates the outside for all holidays, and is even planning on helping him get the yard up to par this spring. Once she meets you, she’ll adopt you as well,” Angus told Jackson. “It’s just the way Mom is.”

Lance nodded. “You really can’t tell her no. She’s just one of a kind.” He glanced out the back window to see the ghosts sitting at the patio table deep in conversation. He couldn’t wait to talk to Kel and find out what his story was and why he was hanging out with his brother who couldn’t see him. He just needed to find time when he could talk to the ghosts without Jackson overhearing and thinking he’d lost his mind. Maybe in the morning when Jackson did his early run. Unless the ghost ran with him. He wasn’t sure what the point would be. It wasn’t as if ghosts had to stay in shape, but it could be part of some ingrained habit Kel still had from when he was alive. God, it had to be so boring for him to hang around Jackson for four years and not being able to talk to him. They must have been good friends. He couldn’t recall Jackson ever talking about him or anyone getting killed. That made him sad. His brother should have been able to confide something like that to him. Let Lance share the pain of his loss with him. He vowed to find out more about Jackson’s teammates during the next few weeks and try and get a better understanding of Jackson’s life.

“Lance?” Angus touched his arm.

“What?” He shook his head. “Sorry, I got lost in thought. Did you say something?”

“I said I was going to head home. I’ve got a huge day tomorrow. Want to walk me out?” Angus stood.

“Oh, sure. Do you want to take some of this pizza with you?” Lance noticed they had yet to even open the second box.

“No, I’m good. I’m going to do a load of laundry and hit the bed. I’ll be okay.” Angus offered his hand to Jackson. “It was good to meet you. I’m sure we’ll get a chance to visit soon.”

“You as well.” Jackson shook his hand and smiled.

Lance followed Angus out to his car. He leaned against it as Angus fumbled with his keys. “I didn’t expect him tonight. Sorry we didn’t get more time.”

Angus touched Lance’s cheek, softly caressing it. “I’m glad he’s here and you’ll get a longer visit with him. We’ll find time later in the week for us. My head is on the case anyway. I wouldn’t be great company.” He leaned in and brushed a kiss over Lance’s mouth. “Call me tomorrow morning when you get time.”

“For sure. Maybe we can do lunch one day this week as well.” He hugged Angus tightly, inhaling his scent to help him relax. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Have a good night with your brother and let me know what’s up with that new ghost when you get a chance.”

“Yeah, that should be interesting.” Lance took a step back as Angus got in the car. “Drive safe.”

Angus gave him a wave before starting the car and pulling away from the curb.

As he watched him go, he wished they’d had one more night together before his brother showed up. Who knew how crazy things would be now and when they’d get another chance to be alone?

CHAPTER FIVE

Lance heard the screaming before he even entered the autopsy room. A loud male voice was screaming at someone. He couldn't make out the words, but from the tone, the person was furious. He hurried to finish drying his hands, then rushed into the room to save Carrie from whoever was screaming at her.

As he pushed the doors open, he paused, taking in the sight of Carrie quietly setting things up, completely oblivious to the man dressed as Santa Claus pacing the room behind her, screaming about how he'd been murdered.

Jeremy, the ghost who pretty much lived at the Medical Examiner's Office, appeared to be leaning against the counter at the far end of the room. He glanced up when Lance walked in. "The guy's lost his mind."

Lance didn't speak. While Jeremy knew Lance could see and hear him, Carrie, his very living assistant, had no clue that Lance could communicate with the dead. He preferred to keep it that way. He wasn't sure how she would take knowing that often the ghosts of those they worked on stood beside them, watching as they cut into their body.

Ghostly Santa glanced over at Lance, pausing his pacing and screaming as he stared at him.

Not wanting to deal with this now, Lance smiled at Carrie, acting as if he hadn't seen a thing. If the ghost didn't know Lance could see or hear him yet, it would make things a lot easier for the time being. It wasn't as if he could strike up a conversation with the ghost as long as Carrie was in the room. "Morning, how'd your dinner go last night?" He knew Carrie had gone to some formal dinner function with her veterinarian boyfriend.

"Hey, we had a great time. The food was amazing. Pete's clinic won an award for the friendliest clinic in the city. We

didn't get home until after eleven, but it was worth it. How was your night?"

"I thought you said he could see me." Santa stood in front of Jeremy, the anger in his voice evident.

"He can, but she can't. And she doesn't know he can. He's not going to let on he can hear you until he's sure that no one else is around to hear him talking to you. He'll look crazy if he starts talking to you and he's the only one who can see you. Just be patient. He'll make time to talk to you once he's done with your autopsy." Jeremy seemed completely unbothered by Santa's anger.

Lance had to wonder if Santa had been screaming at Jeremy all night, complaining about being killed. He glanced up at Carrie and smiled. "My brother showed up a few days earlier than I thought he would. We spent the night catching up on things. It's so good to have him back in town."

"I bet. You said it had been years since you've seen him?" Carrie asked.

"Yeah, feels like forever, but you know, he hasn't changed a bit. I noticed a few gray hairs and a few more lines around his eyes, but he's still the same. I swear he hardly ages. Soon, I'll look like I'm the older brother." Lance finished helping Carrie set up.

"He's military. I'm sure they work out all the time. They have to keep in shape." She turned and went to pull the body out for the autopsy.

"You're not kidding. He was up at five this morning to run. He'll do that every day he's here, including Christmas. I get tired walking a few blocks. Funny how brothers can be so different." Lance took in the naked body Carrie moved into place. "Even without the suit, he looks like Santa."

"What?" Carrie looked up confused.

"This guy. He was shot downtown yesterday. He plays Santa Claus. Was dressed in his red suit when he was killed. Angus told me about it last night. He was on his way to the mall to work his shift there."

“Someone shot Santa?” Carrie’s eyes went wide.

“Seems so. Angus said it was horrible. A bunch of kids saw it happen.” Lance moved into position to start work.

“Who would kill Santa?” She shook her head. “Those poor kids. How do you recover from seeing something like that? Did they catch who shot him?”

“Not yet,” Lance said

“I’ll tell you who killed me. It was Alex Mayford. He wanted my spot at the mall. He’s been a pain in my ass for years. He finally broke and killed me so he could get the high-paying jobs that I always got.” Santa’s ghost started pacing again. “The bastard wanted to win the best Santa in the city award and knew he couldn’t win the title as long as I was around.”

Lance listened to Santa, keying in on anything that he could tell Angus to help him with the investigation. He wanted to ask questions, but until Carrie was out of the room, he couldn’t do more than take mental notes.

“I’d heard about the shooting, of course, but I had no idea it was a guy dressed like Santa. How horrible. Does Angus have the case?” Carrie asked.

Lance nodded. “Yeah, but he didn’t say much about it. Sounds like they don’t have a lot to work with yet. Of course, it had only been a few hours into things when I spoke to him. Hopefully, something will break today.”

“I should have been there when they told Melissa.” Santa’s ghost sighed.

“You couldn’t have done anything,” Jeremy told him.

Lance was glad Jeremy was there. He was a young ghost who’d died of a heart attack while skateboarding. He’d decided to stick around the morgue and learn all he could. He was actually becoming a good medical examiner despite not being able to perform an actual autopsy. He’d stood over so many of them now, that he often noticed things before Lance did. Since Lance was the only one in the office who could see Jeremy, he had to be careful about communicating with him

around others, but the two had formed a friendship over the last few months. On days like today when another ghost was around, Jeremy was able to communicate with them until Lance was able to find a quiet spot where he could talk to them without witnesses thinking he was crazy and talking to himself.

“Still, she shouldn’t have been alone for that. God, she would have had to call Roger. I didn’t even think about the people she’d have to tell. My parents will be devastated.” Santa sighed, his shoulders slumping.

“They’ll be okay. You can’t worry about the living,” Jeremy told him.

“The hell I can’t. I have to make sure they’re okay. I have to make sure that Alex pays for killing me. They have to catch him. He probably jumped right into replacing me at the mall. And I bet he’s going to be next in line for that interview channel four was going to do on me. He’ll win the Best Santa contest for sure now that I’m dead. That’s ten thousand dollars the bastard will get that should have gone to me.” Santa started pacing again.

Lance continued to work on the body, looking for anything he could find that might help Angus in his investigation. “Two bullet wounds to the neck. Hell of a shot. Nearly severed the spine.”

“Do they know where the shooter was?” Carrie asked.

“On top of the Fairway Hotel. They found bullet casings on the roof.” Lance didn’t look up from where he was working, trying to dislodge one of the bullets.

“Are they sure it wasn’t just a random shooting?” Carrie asked.

“They don’t know anything right now from what I heard. But if it was random, why only take out one person? There were a ton of other people in the area. They could have killed several people if they wanted. Why only Santa?” Lance pulled one bullet free and dropped it in the metal bowl.

“I’m telling you that it had to be Alex. He’s wanted me dead for years. He just finally got the balls to do something about it. He should be who the police question first.” Santa walked over and looked down at his body. “I never thought I’d go out like this. I figured I’d have a heart attack because I eat so much junk.”

Jeremy smiled. “How do you think I feel? I was supposed to have another sixty or seventy years.”

Santa glanced up at Jeremy and nodded. “Yeah, that had to be a shock for you. At least I got sixty-three years in. Still, I shouldn’t have died like this. You have to tell him about Alex. He’s got to let the police know to question him.”

“He hears everything you’re saying. He’ll let them know. Once he’s back in his office alone, you can go in and talk to him yourself. He’s dating the lead detective. I’m sure the two of them will have all kinds of questions for you. You just have to wait until Lance is in a place where he can talk to you.” Jeremy walked over and looked down at the body on the table. “How long did it take you to grow that beard?”

“I’ve had that beard since I was forty. I trimmed it but never shaved it off. I was lucky that the hair went white and not a darker gray. It made being Santa so much easier. I hated wearing those fake beards.” Santa started to pace again.

“How many years have you played Santa?” Jeremy asked.

“I was thirty-six the first time I put on that suit. I’ve done it every year since. I’d sell insurance eleven months of the year, then take December off to do the Santa gig. I’d make a fourth of my yearly income in December alone. Playing Santa pays well.”

Lance was shocked to hear that. He’d figured it would be a cheap part-time job. He never dreamed there was good money involved. Maybe there was something to this competition he had with the other Santa. He couldn’t wait to get done with this autopsy so he could text Angus what he was learning.

Santa came to stand beside Carrie. “They know how I died. Why do they have to cut into the rest of me?”

“They have to do a full autopsy no matter how you died. They’ll put you back together. Your face is okay. If they cover your neck, you could still have an open casket,” Jeremy told him.

Santa shook his head. “No. I don’t want anyone to see me in a casket. Melissa knows that. We figured even if I wasn’t in the Santa suit, it might give kids nightmares to see me like that since I still look so much like him and almost everyone thinks of me as Santa. The kids in the neighborhood call me Santa when they see me, even when I’m wearing shorts and a t-shirt in July.”

Lance listened to them talk as he worked his way through each step of the autopsy. He wasn’t surprised that other than the bullet wounds, there wasn’t anything that would help Angus. He glanced up at Carrie. “You want to finish?”

“Sure.” She nodded. “You calling Angus?”

“Yeah, but I don’t have much to report. He’ll want the bullets, but other than that, I won’t be able to help him. I don’t think he had much hope we’d find anything anyway.” Lance stepped back, glancing over at Jeremy who still stood where he had when they’d started the autopsy several hours ago.

Jeremy nodded and looked at Santa. “He’ll wash up, then head to his office if you want to speak to him.”

“Hell yeah, I do.” Santa rushed from the room.

Jeremy sighed. “He’s a little angry.”

Lance gave Jeremy a small smile but said nothing as he turned to leave the room. He’d dealt with angry ghosts before. He just hoped this one wasn’t too angry to go through things calmly and understand they needed evidence before rushing out and accusing anyone. With another autopsy scheduled after lunch, he needed to find out what he could now. Once he spoke to Angus, hopefully, the ghost would leave and the rest of the afternoon would be quiet.

CHAPTER SIX

Lance walked into his office and sighed, seeing Santa sitting on his desk. He quietly closed the door and turned back to him. "I'm Lance, and you must be Gene. Sorry to meet this way."

The ghost stood and ran a hand over his beard. "Yeah, that's me. That other guy, Jeremy, said you could help me."

Lance went around his desk and sat down. Keeping his voice low so those in the hallway didn't hear him talking and think he was talking to himself, he nodded. "I can try. Very few people know I can see you, but two of the detectives working on your case know. I'm happy to sit down with you guys so you can tell them what you think, and they can question you about anything they might need to know."

"They need to know Alex Mayford killed me. That's all they need to know."

"They'll need to know a bit more than that to even question the guy. You have to remember that anything you tell me can't be used officially in this case. The police will need to find a reason to question Alex. They'll want to know why you think he's the one who shot you."

"But I know it was him. He's the only one who was mad enough at me." Gene rolled his eyes. "I know it was him."

"And you think the judge in the case will just accept that the ghost of the deceased told the police this guy did it, so it had to be him?" Lance stared at him, needing the ghost to understand that he couldn't be used as a witness in this case. "You're dead. No one is going to listen to anyone who says a ghost told them something. Hell, if anyone knew I was in here talking to you, they'd get me a white jacket and send me to the psych ward for observation."

"But I know he did it."

“Then you can help the detectives understand why and maybe give them some evidence that they need to talk to this guy.”

Gene rolled his eyes. “Everyone knows he wanted my job at the mall. And then there’s the contest. He was my only real competition. Ten thousand dollars is motivation enough, isn’t it?”

“Listen, I know you have a lot to say, but I’m not the one who needs to hear it. You need to tell it to the detectives. I’m willing to sit with you and be the go-between since they can’t hear you, but we can’t do this here. Let me call the detective and see if they’ll meet us for lunch or something and we can talk. There’s no point in you repeating everything.” He pulled out his phone and called Angus.

“Lunch? I can’t eat.” Gene rolled his eyes.

“But I can.” Lance glared back.

“Hey, what’s up?” Angus sounded cheerful as he answered.

Lance smiled at the sound of his voice. No matter how bad his day was, Angus could always make it better. “Just finished the autopsy on Gene Franklin. Didn’t find anything that can help you. I’ll get the report to you as soon as I get it done. Two bullets were recovered. The shooter had to be the luckiest shot I’ve ever seen. Wounds were a little over two inches apart, nearly severing the spinal cord. You sure there was only one shooter?”

“No,” Angus said. “We don’t know anything about the shooter yet. They’re still digging through video from the hotel and trying to identify everyone on the tapes, but the cameras that led up to the roof were all static when we pulled them up.”

“Well, if you’re available to meet me for lunch. I have your star witness standing in my office claiming he knows who killed him.” Lance stared at the ghost who had started pacing in front of his desk. His office was so small the ghost could only take two steps before turning back around.

“His ghost is there?” Angus sounded surprised.

“And not very happy.” Lance sighed.

“Would you be happy if someone shot you?” Gene scowled at him.

Lance ignored him. “You free for an hour? I can take an early lunch.”

“I’m meeting with the wife and son at one, but I have time before we do that. I’ll send Franks out to get us lunch. While he’s doing that, I’ll come get you. He can meet us at the park so we can talk while we eat.”

“Sounds good,” Lance said. “I’ll let Carrie know I’m leaving for an hour and watch for you out back.”

“See you in a few.” Angus ended the call.

Lance set his phone down and stood. “We’ll go with Detective Young to the park, and we’ll have lunch while we talk. You can tell them everything you know.”

“Good, then they can go arrest him.” The ghost walked through his wall, leaving Lance alone.

He sighed and pulled out a small notebook in case he needed it, shoved his phone back into his pocket, then grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. As he walked out into the hallway, he saw Jeremy headed his way. “We’re going to the park to talk if you want to tag along.” He kept his voice at a whisper so no one else could hear him.

“Sure. Not much is going on around here. Sam’s still not back from his meeting.” Jeremy fell into step with Lance.

It was just after eleven. Sam should have been back already. He wasn’t sure what it meant that he wasn’t. None of them held much hope they’d get any kind of budget increase. He didn’t respond since they were nearing the reception area. He smiled, seeing Carrie talking to Kathy at the front desk. “I’m taking an early lunch with Angus. We’ll start the next one when I get back.”

“I was just coming to ask if we could do lunch early. I need to hit the bank. Have fun and tell Angus hi.” Carrie smiled.

Lance nodded and waved as he pushed the door open and stepped outside. It was cooler than he liked, but really not that bad for being December. Temperatures were in the low fifties. Cool enough for a jacket, but not too cold to sit outside and talk. He glanced over at Jeremy as they saw Gene Franklin's ghost pacing the parking lot.

"He paces a lot. He did that most of the night while we waited for you to show up. I ended up leaving because he was driving me nuts," Jeremy said.

Lance pulled out his phone and acted as if he was talking on it. "I think he's having a problem letting go of his life. As much as I love the fact that we can talk to him to find out who might have killed him, I almost think he needs to go into the light as soon as possible."

"Yeah, I'd have to agree. Or at least get him to go home with his family." Jeremy nodded to the entrance to the parking lot. "There's Angus."

Lance shoved his phone back in his pocket and smiled as Angus pulled up to the curb. He opened the car door and smiled. "I'm looking for a hot date for lunch. You interested?"

Angus grinned and leaned over to give him a quick kiss. "I think I'm the one getting the hot date. Jump in."

Lance slid into the car and turned to make sure Jeremy and Gene had gotten into the back. He nodded to Angus. "Jeremy and Gene are here."

"You're gay?" Gene sighed. "No hanky-panky with me here, okay?"

Lance glared into the backseat. "I don't have to help you. You can move into the light and forget about finding out who killed you."

Angus's eyes went wide. "Problem?"

"He doesn't like us kissing." Lance sighed. "He's a bit worked up about everything it seems. Claims he knows who killed him. I'm just not sure at this point that I care."

"You have to arrest Alex." Gene grimaced.

“Then you have to stop being an ass.” Lance shook his head. “Let’s go meet Franks so I can be done with this.”

Angus put the car in gear and pulled out of the parking lot. Once on the road, he reached over and rested his hand on Lance’s thigh. “We’ll make it quick. Like I said on the phone, I’m meeting with his wife and son after this.”

“My son’s in town?” Gene asked.

“When did the son get in?” Lance asked.

“He flew in last night. Called this morning to set up a time to meet. We want to confirm Melissa’s alibi and see if they can maybe point us at anyone who had issues with Gene,” Angus said.

“I told you already who did it. It was Alex Mayford.” Gene growled the name.

“He claims another Santa killed him. A guy named Alex Mayford. Said they were fighting over the job at the mall and some kind of contest going on for the best Santa in town,” Lance informed him.

“His wife mentioned the other Santa. We’ll talk to him. This is the first time I’ve heard about the contest. Let’s wait until we get to the park so I can write things down. I want to make sure I get everything I can in case he goes into the light before we finish.” Angus stopped for a red light.

“I’m not going into the light until I see you arrest Alex. Then I’ll think about moving on to whatever is next.” Gene leaned forward. “If you listen to what I tell you, you can arrest him tonight.”

“We’ll talk more when we get to the park.” Lance turned around and focused his attention on the road in front of them. He really didn’t like this ghost. He’d been spoiled by the others he’d worked with. This one he wouldn’t be inviting to hang out at his house or meet the others. He hated to leave him at the morgue with Jeremy, but Jeremy had places he could escape to. He was more than welcome to come to hang out with Ray and Bethany if he needed to get away.

“How’d things go last night with Jackson?” Angus asked.

“Good, we stayed up late and caught up on everything. He felt horrible he didn’t come home when I was in the hospital, but I reminded him that I told him not to come. I was fine and there was nothing he could have done. We talked a bit about my injuries and the migraines I still get from time to time. He’s interested in learning how you heal me. He says one of his teammates gets them really badly. I told him I’d ask you or your mom to give him some pointers.”

“Mom would love to do it. I don’t mind, but Mom’s got more talent for teaching than I do. Did you talk about the ghost who showed up with him?” Angus asked.

“Not yet. I want to talk to Kel first and I didn’t get a chance last night. I need to find a time when Jackson isn’t around or have Kel leave the house with me so we can talk. He stayed out with Ray and Bethany last night.” Lance leaned his head back on the seat.

“You have a new ghost?” Jeremy asked from the back seat.

“He showed up with my brother last night. One of his old team members who was killed four years ago. That’s all I know about him for now. He was shocked I could see him, but as soon as he realized I could, he asked me to give my brother some messages from him. I’d planned on telling Jackson about my ability, but now, it’s going to be even more complicated.”

“I think it would make it easier,” Jeremy said. “I mean, Kel will know things only he and Jackson will know which you can use to prove you’re the real thing and really speaking with Kel’s spirit.”

“Maybe. I’m just nervous about Jackson’s reaction. I don’t know who Kel is or how he died. He must have been close to Jackson for him to follow him around for four years. I guess I’ll find out soon enough. I hope to talk to Jackson about everything before Friday when everyone’s at the house for dinner.” Lance glanced back at Jeremy. “I might bring Kel to work to talk if I can’t get time alone with him at home.”

“Bring him either way. I’d love to show him around.” Jeremy laughed. “Everyone wants to tour the morgue, right?”

“Yeah, especially the deceased.” Lance rolled his eyes as Angus parked beside Franks’ car. He pushed the door open and got out.

“Took you long enough. The fries are probably cold. Help me with these drinks.” Franks handed Lance a tray filled with three large drinks.

“Hi, nice to see you too.” Lance laughed.

“Sorry, I’m starving, and sitting in the car smelling the food didn’t help.” Franks headed toward the picnic table.

Lance followed, ignoring Franks’ complaints. He was always a bit gruff. Still, he was quickly becoming a good friend. He was one of very few people who knew that Lance could see ghosts, and while it still was hard for him to believe at times, enough had happened in the past few months that he couldn’t deny it was true. “Tell me you got me something with cheese.” Lance set the drinks on the table.

“Double cheeseburgers for each of us. This isn’t my first lunch with you two.” Franks started pulling food out of the bags.

Angus took a seat on the bench and Lance sat down beside him. He didn’t care if their displays of affection bothered Gene. He wasn’t going to ignore his boyfriend just to make a ghost, who he was trying to help, comfortable. He rested his head on Angus’s shoulder. “Is it Friday yet?”

“Sorry, only Wednesday. You’ve got a few more days before you get to rest.” Angus kissed the top of his head. “Eat. You’ll feel better.” He pulled out his notebook and a pen. “Okay, so let’s get what we can done before we all have to get back to work.”

Lance glanced at Gene. “He claims a man who also dresses up as Santa has been trying to get his spot at the mall. Guy’s name is Alex Mayford. They’re also both competing in a contest for the best Santa in Fairway.” Lance tried to remember what else he’d learned.

“Who’s the contest through?” Franks asked.

“I think it was the city council’s idea. All the TV and radio stations are taking part in promoting it. People are supposed to vote online for their favorite. There’s a ten-thousand-dollar prize along with a brand-new Santa suit up for grabs,” Gene told them. “Channel four was supposed to interview me yesterday afternoon for my spotlight. They interview a different Santa every Tuesday and Thursday between now and Christmas. The winner was to be announced on the twenty-eighth of this month.”

Lance shared that with the two who couldn’t hear the ghost.

“And you think he killed you so he could win?” Angus asked.

“Well, ten thousand dollars is a lot of money. Besides, they all knew I’d win. I had the best location at the mall to meet the most kids and families. I’ve also been working in this community a hell of a lot longer than any of the other guys. Alex and I are always competing for the mall spot. He was furious when I got it this year again.” Gene looked smug.

“How do they decide who to hire?” Lance asked after repeating everything for the others.

“I’m not really sure. I know they want someone who will work the most hours. They have two of us for weekends, but I’m the only one who works during the week. Alex wouldn’t work before ten or after six. I was willing to work nine to nine on weekdays. Alex claimed kids would be in bed, but that’s just stupid. I might be there mostly for the kids, but plenty of teens and adults come to see me every year. I take the morning shift on weekends, and they have another guy come in for the afternoons. Alex didn’t want to work weekends. He claimed he had to make time for his family.” Gene said this as if it was unthinkable to put his family first.

Angus listened to what Lance repeated, then made several notes. “So you were working seven days a week?”

“Just through December. It’s worth it for the pay.” Gene shrugged.

“What do Santas make?” Lance asked.

“Depends on the location. The mall pays the best. That’s why everyone fights to get it. Alex is a good Santa, but he just didn’t have the dedication needed for the job,” Gene said.

Lance noticed Gene didn’t really answer the question.

“So why do you think it’s Alex and not one of the other Santas working the area?” Franks reached for his drink.

“Because he and I had a big fight last week. He was angry that not only did I get the mall job, but I was also the first to be interviewed by channel four. He thought that gave me a head start with the votes. He’s working at the pet store and some of the other local businesses doing a few hours a day at each place. He wasn’t getting interviewed until the week before Christmas. He wasn’t happy. He even accused me of paying for favors with the TV studio. Which is insane. Anyone who knows me would tell you I don’t fork out money for anything like that. That would be a total waste of money.”

“Not if you won ten thousand dollars because of it,” Franks said after Lance relayed everything.

“Even then. I was going to win no matter what. I’m the best Santa and everyone knows it.” Gene shrugged. “The other guys are part-timers just out to make a few bucks. They don’t really care about being the best. Alex and I understand Santa and both work hard to give the community the best. The others, well, let’s just say that anyone with a fake beard didn’t look like serious competition to us.”

Angus made a few more notes. “Was there anyone else you’d fought with or who might have had reason to want you dead?”

Gene shook his head. “I’m Santa. Everyone liked me. I didn’t have any enemies. I can’t think of anyone but Alex who had any problem with me.”

“No secrets, gambling debts, affairs, or anything else going on in your life?” Franks asked.

“Nah. Nothing like that. Who has time? I’ve been happily married for forty years. I’ve got Melissa trained. I don’t have

the time or energy for another woman. I love my wife. I hate to think what she's going through right now." Gene sighed. "This is going to kill her."

"We're headed over to speak with your wife and son as soon as we leave here. We'll make sure she has the support she needs," Angus told him once Lance conveyed everything.

"Can I catch a ride over there with you?" Gene asked, then looked at Lance. "You don't need me to stay with my body, do you?"

"Nope. In fact, we'll be releasing your body to the mortuary tomorrow if the police don't have any reason for us to hold it." Lance glanced at Jeremy. "Did you two talk about funerals and moving on?"

"Yeah, we talked about everything last night while we waited for you to come in," Jeremy informed him. "He knows everything I do about the afterlife. It's up to him what he does now."

"He wants to ride over with you to see his wife if that's okay," Lance told Angus.

"Fine with us. Just remember, we can't see you. If you need to tell us something, you'll have to wait until you can get back to the morgue and speak with Lance." Angus wiped his mouth with a napkin.

Franks cleared his throat. "I just want to be clear on things. In the past few months, you haven't had any threats, or has anyone gotten upset with you even over the slightest thing?"

"Other than my wife bitching about my long work hours, no one has even raised their voice at me." Gene held up a hand. "Swear. I'd tell you if there was anything."

"And you don't think your wife would have you killed?" Lance asked.

"Melissa?" Gene laughed. "Hell no. She loves me. She might hate December with me, but not enough to want to kill me. We get along great. She just hates how much I work in December. I don't think she ever understood my fascination

with Christmas and Santa, but she wouldn't kill me over that. My wife had nothing to do with my death. I can promise you that."

"We'll check into everything you've told us." Angus set his pen down and reached for his drink. "If you think of anything else, get hold of Lance at the M.E.'s office. If he's not there, you can always tell Jeremy and he can pass it on to Lance when he gets in. Right?" He glanced at Lance.

"Yep, that's the best way. I'm there Monday through Friday, so I'm easy to find." Lance crumpled his wrapper and threw it in an empty bag. He almost felt guilty about Gene taking off with Angus and Franks, but then reminded himself that they couldn't see or hear him so if he started pacing and complaining, it wouldn't bother anyone.

"We'll do our best to find out who shot you," Angus promised Gene. "We have a lot of videos of the area to go through." He stood and looked at Franks. "You want to head back to the station? I'll drop Lance and Jeremy off, then Gene and I will swing by and pick you up so we can head over to Mrs. Franklin's place."

"Works for me." Franks stood, picking up the trash. He walked to the nearest can and dropped the garbage in.

Lance took Angus's hand as they made their way back to the car. "Thanks for lunch."

"Franks bought this time," Angus told him.

"Then thank him for me." Lance paused at the car door. "Thanks for taking the time to eat with me."

"Always." Angus leaned in to kiss him.

"Not again," Gene huffed before disappearing into the back seat.

Lance smiled but pulled away. "Okay, as much as I'd love to enjoy the afternoon with you, I have to get back to work."

"You and me both. I won't be over tonight. I'm meeting Mike for dinner, but I'll call when I get home. "

“Looking forward to it.” Lance got into the car, wishing the week was already over, that Angus’s case was closed, and that his brother already knew about the ghost following him around. The next few days were going to be long ones, but he’d made it through worse. Tonight, he’d talk to Kel, then tomorrow talk to Jackson. By Friday, hopefully, things would get back to normal. Or at least as normal as they could be for a man living with two ghosts, working in a morgue, and dating a homicide detective.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Please, have a seat. Can I get you anything?” Melissa Franklin asked as she led Angus and Franks into the living room.

“No thank you.” Franks smiled politely.

Angus followed Franks in and was surprised to find an older man sitting on the couch along with another man who sat in one of the chairs. He prayed it wasn't their lawyer and they wouldn't have to fight to get the answers they needed.

“This is my friend, Harvey Wilson. I asked him to be here for me.” Melissa took a seat beside him and didn't blink when Harvey took her hand in his and rested it on his thigh. “And this is my son, Roger.”

“Nice to meet you.” Roger stood and offered his hand to both men.

“You as well. We're sorry about your loss,” Angus told him before taking a seat in one of the other chairs. It was impossible not to wonder about how closely Melissa was sitting next to the strange man or notice the way he caressed her hand as he held it.

“Thank you. I'm still in shock. I can't believe someone shot him. Do you have any leads yet?” Roger asked.

“We're working on a few but nothing solid as of yet.” Angus decided to dive right into the questions. “Did you know of anyone who had any issues with your father or who might want him dead?”

Roger shook his head. “No, but since I live in Florida and don't make it back here as often as I'd like, I wasn't that close to my dad. He never mentioned any problems with anyone. When we did talk, the conversations were usually short and consisted of him talking about how he was preparing for the

holiday season. Dad was a bit obsessive when it came to his role as Santa.”

“You said you were with a friend at lunch when it happened, right?” Franks asked Melissa.

She glanced at Harvey and sighed. “I’m just going to be honest with you. You’ll find out anyway and I can’t see any harm in telling you since Gene is gone now. I was with Harvey that day. We’d met at his place earlier in the morning, then went out for lunch after.” Her cheeks turned pink. “You can confirm with the café that we were both there.”

Angus cringed inwardly, aware that Gene’s ghost was probably hearing this as well. It was a good thing ghosts couldn’t interact with the living physically because he was sure Gene would be trying to knock Harvey out at this moment. “So you’ve been having an affair?”

She sighed but had the decency to look a bit ashamed.

“How long has this been going on?” Franks asked.

Harvey smiled at Melissa. “A little over a year. We met at a library fundraiser shortly after my wife died. We tried to just be friends, but well, you know how things happen.”

Angus didn’t. He couldn’t ever imagine cheating on someone. He’d end the relationship long before he ever considered cheating on anyone. “And Gene never knew?”

Melissa sat up straighter. “You have to understand. My husband paid very little attention to me or anything going on around him if it didn’t have to do with Christmas or Santa Claus. He was obsessed with his job as Santa. During the rest of the year, he was working on improving his costume, networking with the businesses in the community, and memorizing historical facts about Santa so he could tell them to the kids. My husband quit being my husband nearly twenty years ago. He would look through catalogs during dinner, and watch Christmas shows at night. Work on his costume on weekends. Most nights, he’d fall asleep on the couch and never come to bed.” She sighed.

“Mom’s telling the truth. Dad was totally preoccupied with Santa and Christmas. It was almost like a mental disorder. You’d think that for a kid it would be fun for them to have a father like that, but it wasn’t. He was never around. He didn’t have time for me or my basketball games. Didn’t ask how I was doing in school or who I was dating. He wasn’t a father at all. He was more like the man who lived with us. I was so relieved to go off to college and get out of here.” Roger glanced at his mother. “Sorry, but it’s true.”

She nodded and gave him an understanding smile. “I know and I’m sorry it was that way for you. I should have left him years ago. It was just simpler to stay and do my own thing. I tried to be the best mother I could, but I know I failed you in many ways.”

Roger frowned. “No, you were great. It’s not your fault Dad was crazy.”

Angus listened, wondering if they realized they’d just booted themselves up the suspect list with what they were admitting. He still didn’t think any of them were responsible for Gene’s death, but all this information was going to have to be investigated.

“The other day when we spoke, you mentioned there was another man who plays Santa that Gene might have had an issue with. What can you tell me about him?” Franks asked.

“I don’t know his name, but Gene would complain about the man all the time. The two of them had been fighting for the mall job for the last few years. And this year, with that stupid Best Santa contest going on in town, it made it even worse. Gene was mumbling over dinner one night that he was looking for a way to sabotage the other Santa’s interview. I wasn’t really listening. I do know this Santa works at the Valley Mall in Costner. Gene was saying he was glad he didn’t have to drive to the next town over to work every day. I don’t know much more than that. Just that he grumbled about the man all the time.” Melissa sighed. “I wish I knew a name for you.”

“We can find it.” Angus made a few notes. “Did this competition between them ever get physical?”

Melissa shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

“What about his family? Were you able to contact them?”

“I called his father and told him. I don’t have a number for his brother. Gene’s parents said they’d let him know. Gene hadn’t spoken to his brother in a long time. He’s got a gambling problem from what I was told. His parents are not physically able to come to the funeral but asked me to keep them up to date on everything,” Melissa told them.

“Could we get their number from you?” Angus could look it up himself, but if she’d give it to him, it would save time.

“Of course.” She pulled out her cell phone and searched. Once she had the number, she told him.

Angus quickly wrote the number down in his notebook. “The medical examiner should be calling to release the body soon so you can make arrangements.”

“They called this morning,” Roger told them. “We’re planning to hold his funeral Monday afternoon. I’ll be staying with Mom through Christmas just to help her go through my dad’s things and figure everything out.”

Harvey handed Franks what looked like a receipt. “I figured you’ll need to confirm our story about being at lunch during the shooting. Here’s the receipt if it helps. I wasn’t sure if you’d need it or not.”

“Thank you, this does help. We’ll follow up with the café, but this will make it easier since it does have the time printed on it.” Franks folded it and put it inside his notebook. “Have you been able to think of anyone else who might have had a problem with Gene?”

Melissa shook her head. “Nobody. He didn’t have any close friends. Didn’t have any enemies that I was aware of either. He seriously just sat in his workroom, planning out the next Christmas season most of the time.”

“Could we have a look in his office?” Angus asked.

“Sure.” Melissa stood. “This way.”

She led Angus and Franks through the kitchen to a door. She opened it and flipped on a light. She then descended the stairs.

“Wow.” Franks gasped as they came to the bottom of the stairs and a large open room that looked like it had been overtaken by Christmas. Every inch of the room was covered in something that had to do with the holiday. Photos of Santa covered the walls, pieces of Santa’s suit lay on a table, and four different large, red Santa bags sat in the corner, appearing full of something. Boxes of candy canes sat piled on another table. A sewing machine sat on another table against the wall, and bolts of fabric matching Santa’s suit leaned up against the wall next to it.

“He made his own suits?” Angus asked.

Melissa nodded. “He claimed it was the only way to get a perfect fit. Years ago, I’d help, but he started doing it all himself. I never came down here other than to do laundry. I left this room to him.” She took a deep breath. “I don’t even know what to do with all of this stuff?”

“Maybe offer it to another Santa?” Franks suggested. “The candy could go to the local library or one of the schools. I’m not sure. There has to be a market for this stuff, right?” He glanced at Angus.

“There’s millions of Santas out there this time of year. I’m sure some would want this stuff. Maybe put it up on eBay or something.” Angus walked around the room, stopping at a laptop that sat on a small desk. “Do you know what he used this for?”

Melissa shook her head.

“Do you mind if we took the laptop so we can see if he’s been fighting with anyone through chat or email?” Franks asked.

“You two can do whatever you want down here. If you see something you want, take it. I don’t want any of it.” Melissa waved her hand around the room. “Do I need to stay here with

you or can I go back upstairs? This room makes me uncomfortable.”

“You can head upstairs. We won’t be long.” Angus was already unplugging the laptop from the wall.

“Thank you. Take your time. I want to know who killed him. I just can’t...” She waved her hand again.

“We understand,” Franks told her as they watched her walk back upstairs.

“This is insane. I’ve never seen so much Santa in one place.” Angus wrapped the laptop cord around the laptop.

“Tell me about it. This is Christmas overload.” Franks looked at some of the photos on the wall.

Angus came to stand beside Franks. Many were of Gene dressed in his Santa suit, many with children gathered around him or on his lap. It was easy to see how the obsession progressed over the years as the Santa suit gained more details. “I’ll never look at a Santa the same after this. I can’t imagine the work he put into this every year.”

“All year from what it sounds like.” Franks pointed to a photo. “Notice all these pictures with other families, but none of him with his own.”

“It didn’t sound like they were the happiest of families.” Angus moved back to the small desk and started to open drawers, looking for letters or anything that might have some clue as to who wanted Gene dead. He found a stack of letters that had recent postmarks all addressed to Santa. “We need to go through these as well.”

“We’ll ask if we can take them. If not, we’ll get a warrant. I don’t think she’s going to have any issue with us taking them. I get the feeling she is more than ready to move on with her life.” Franks glanced over at Angus. “Harvey was a surprise.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” He piled the letters on top of the laptop, then went back to searching drawers while Franks looked through a stack of files set on one of the tables. “I’m not seeing much that’s going to help us. Hopefully, the

computer geeks can find something on his laptop. These are all inventory lists and locations in the area that hire Santas during the season.”

“Nothing more here either. Some tax documents, but most of them are years old.” Angus shut the drawer. “I don’t think we’re going to find any answers here. If there was anything to know, we’d have been told.” He wondered if Gene was there now, watching them go through his things.

“Yeah, the laptop is our best chance, and even then, he would have told us about any emails or threats if there were any.” Franks turned in a circle once more. “This is a Christmas overload.”

“Yeah, for me as well.” Angus grabbed the laptop and letters. “Let’s get out of here.” He quickly headed upstairs, leaving Franks to turn off the light and shut the door. He made his way back through the kitchen and into the living room where everyone still sat. “We’re going to take the laptop and these letters which he recently received. Once we go through them, you’ll get them back.”

Franks wrote out a receipt for the items, then handed it to Melissa. “If you think of anything else, please give us a call.”

“So we can start getting rid of everything down there?” Roger asked.

“Yep, but if you find anything you think we need to see, please set it aside and give us a call.” Franks offered his hand. “We’ll be in touch and keep you updated.”

Angus nodded to Melissa and shook Harvey’s hand. “Thank you for stepping up and making this easier for everyone.”

Harvey nodded. “You would have found out anyway.”

Roger led them to the door and opened it. He stepped out onto the front porch with Angus and Franks and shut the door. “I know this makes Mom look guilty, but I swear she’s not. She didn’t do this or have it done.”

Angus nodded. “We don’t think she did. We’ll verify her alibi and continue looking at other leads. I wouldn’t worry.”

“Were you aware of the affair?” Franks asked.

Roger shook his head. “No, I had no clue. She told me last night after I came home to find Harvey here with her. I can’t say I blame her, but it did come as a shock. I never thought my mother would do something like that.” He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. “This is all so insane.”

Angus couldn’t imagine how he’d feel if he found out one of his parents was having an affair, but his parents were so in love that it was sickening at times. He couldn’t see either of his parents doing anything like that. “We’ll keep digging. You just take care of your mother and get your father buried.” He gripped Roger’s arm. “I’m sorry you have to go through this, especially this time of the year.”

“It’s fitting. Christmas was Dad’s thing. It seems right we celebrate his life during the holiday too.” Roger took a step back. “I’ll call if I learn anything here.”

“As will we.” Franks gave a nod and they headed to the car.

Once in the car, Angus sighed. “This might end up being one of the strangest cases I’ve ever worked on.”

“Makes me want to go home and take down all the Christmas decorations your mom put up.” Franks laughed as he pulled away from the curb.

“Yeah, doesn’t leave you in the holiday spirit, does it?” Angus shook his head. “I guess everyone has an obsession.” He leaned his head back. “Stop at Starbucks on the way. I need caffeine and something better than that sludge in the office.”

“Done.” Franks turned up the radio.

Angus closed his eyes, thankful it wasn’t Christmas music.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lance walked out of his room after a long shower and smiled at the smell of spaghetti sauce. He made his way into the kitchen, not shocked to find Jackson at the stove cooking. “That smells amazing.”

“Figured I couldn’t come visit without making my spaghetti sauce at least once.” Jackson grinned over his shoulder. “Grab a drink. Dinner will be ready in about five minutes. I let Haunt out back to play. She kept getting underfoot.”

Lance noticed a fresh salad already on the table as he moved past Kel who was sitting in one of the chairs. He gave the ghost a nod before going to the fridge. “She knows better. She can stay out there until we’re done. You want anything?”

“Grab me that pitcher of iced tea I made earlier,” Jackson said. “So how was your day?”

“You want details?” Lance teased.

“Without the details.” Jackson laughed.

“It was okay. Nothing too intense. I had the body from that murder in town. The guy who plays Santa at the mall. Then I had a younger man in his late twenties who died of a massive heart attack.” Lance set the tea on the table, then opened the can of soda he’d gotten for himself. “I’ve never seen so many young people dying from heart attacks and strokes as I’m seeing the last few months. It’s sad. Managed to catch lunch with Angus though, that was nice.”

“He seems nice. How’d you two meet?” Jackson asked.

“He was watching an autopsy I was working on. We just clicked. He dropped by one afternoon to update me on a case we’d both worked on, and he asked me out.” There was a lot more to the story, but until he found a way to tell Jackson about his ability to see ghosts, he couldn’t share that. He

glanced over at Kel, wishing he could get time alone with him to talk. "Have you been busy?"

"Non-stop it seems. I've been in Sudan for the last few weeks. It's nice to finally get home and not worry about getting called out. I did get a little time in Germany to relax, but it went by quickly." Jackson set a bowl of pasta on the table.

"You dating anyone?" Lance asked.

"Nope. There's been a few hook-ups, but nothing worth mentioning. I'm not in one place long enough to have anything serious. Women know not to expect much when I meet them. I am going out with Megan sometime next week. I ran into her at the grocery store, and we talked a little." Jackson set a huge bowl of pasta sauce on the table.

Lance inhaled the scent. He loved his brother's sauce. He'd never managed to make it the same way Jackson did. It was something he might have to get Cel to help him with some time. "Wow, I didn't know she was still in the area. I thought she'd gotten married." Lance remembered Megan from when he'd lived with Jackson long before Jackson had gone off and joined the military. Lance was sure they would have married if Jackson hadn't left town.

"She did. She's divorced and back living here. She's working for a lawyer in the area. I get the feeling her marriage was pretty bad. She didn't go into details, but I can read Megan like a book. I'll find out more when we go out." Jackson sat down. "She looks good. Seems happy."

"You two didn't keep in touch at all, did you?" Lance asked.

"No, she was really upset when I left. She never understood why I'd choose the Navy over her. I tried to tell her I wasn't choosing. I wanted to stay with her and still join, but she didn't want that life. Said she couldn't handle being a military wife. I had to respect that. It's not an easy life for a spouse."

"Ever regret joining up?" Lance asked.

“Not really. There are times I hate it. Like when you had your accident, and I couldn’t just be there for you. I hated you had to trust others to help you.” Jackson stared at the scar Lance had on the side of his face. “I wanted to jump on a plane and be here for you, but I couldn’t. The process of getting leave that quickly isn’t easy. Especially when I’m in the middle of something big like I was then.”

“I would have loved to have you here, but I didn’t need you. I got through it. Sam and Carrie were great to help me. There wasn’t much to do. I spent weeks in bed. You would have just been sitting by my bedside. I’m glad you didn’t drop everything to come home. I told you as soon as I was able not to come.”

“I know, but I’m your brother. I should have been there.” Jackson focused on his food for a long minute. “Were you dating Angus then?”

“No, I met him the first day back at work after the accident. It was a rough day and he helped me get through it.” He’d thought he’d lost his mind when he’d seen his first ghost that day.

Jackson met Lance’s stare over the table. “I’ve got another year in me I think, then I’m thinking about coming home. It’s nothing official yet, but I think I’m done. It’s time to settle down and live a normal life for a change. I’m tired.”

Lance was shocked, but excited by the news. “That’s great news. Even if you’re just thinking about it, it makes me happy to know you might be coming home to stay. You have no idea how much I’ve missed having you around. You would come back here to Fairway, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, for now. I’d probably find a place here to rent or buy.” Jackson shrugged.

“You know you’re welcome to stay with me as long as you want,” Lance offered.

“I know, but who knows if you’ll be living with Angus by then? It’s a long time still and we’ll have to see what’s going on.”

“I doubt I’ll be living with him by then, but even if I were, we’d have room for you. I promise, but I agree, we’ll see how things are when the time comes. I’m just excited that you’re even thinking about it. Any idea what you’d do?” Lance asked.

“My friend, Elliot has a security company that works high-profile events in the surrounding areas. He said I could come to work with him. He even mentioned taking me on as a partner if I was interested, but I’m not sure. I’d have to see what the cost would be and really decide if that’s the kind of work I want to be doing. I have a lot to think about. I’m going out tonight with Elliot tonight for a few beers and we’ll talk.” Jackson reached for the salad.

“Oh wow, so you’re really serious about this if you’re already talking about things. That’s great.” Lance was almost giddy with the idea of having his brother back around all of the time.

“I have a little less than a year to decide. You’ll be the first to know once I make up my mind.” Jackson smiled. “Until then, keep this between us, okay?”

Lance crossed his heart with his finger. “Mums the word.” He glanced over at Kel who had been sitting quietly listening to everything. Lance wondered how the ghost felt about it all. “So you’re headed out tonight?”

“Yeah, did you have plans for us?” Jackson looked worried.

“No, not at all. I plan on kicking my feet up and watching TV. I’m exhausted. I’m glad you’re meeting up with old friends and going out. You’re here for a few weeks, so we’ll have more than enough time together. Don’t forget I’m cooking dinner for you on Friday.”

“I have poison control already on speed dial,” Jackson teased.

“I think you’re going to be pleasantly shocked at what I can cook now.” Lance prayed Cel didn’t decide not to show. He’d cooked the chicken before and could do it again on his

own if he had to, but he loved having Cel there to make sure he didn't mess anything up. "This is amazing tonight. I've missed your spaghetti."

"You and everyone else. It's quick and easy, so I make it for the guys a lot. I'm almost sick of it."

"Well, thank you for suffering through it once more for me." Lance wiped his mouth. "And for making more than enough for me to take with me for lunch tomorrow."

"Glad to. I'll make my biscuits and gravy one weekend while I'm here too. I got everything I need at the store earlier." Jackson popped a cherry tomato into his mouth.

"Thank you for going. I'm so beat when I get off work and that's usually when the store is crowded. You saved me from suffering through it."

"I didn't mind, plus I ran into Megan, so it was all good. I just feel bad leaving you tonight."

"Don't. It's not like we have plans. I'll just relax and watch TV." Lance glanced at Kel, hoping he stayed and didn't go out with Jackson so the two of them could talk. He really needed to make sure Jackson knew about his ability before Lizzy came over on Friday night and openly talked to the ghosts around them. He wasn't sure how Jackson would take the news. He was going to think he was crazy. Hopefully, having Kel there would help. There had to be things Kel and Jackson knew that he could use to prove he wasn't making it all up. "If we can, I'd like to sit down and talk a bit tomorrow night after I get home. I have a few things to run by you."

Jackson looked up. "Like?"

"Not tonight. I'm too tired to get into a serious conversation right now. Once we finish eating, I'll clean up and you can go get ready to meet Elliot. I'll probably be in bed before you get back."

"You sure? I can tell Elliot I'll be a little later." Jackson looked worried.

"No, seriously, it's nothing major. Just some life changes I've made that I want to discuss with you. Nothing that has to

be said right now.” Lance scrapped the last of the food from his plate, then patted his stomach. “That was delicious.”

“I’m glad I haven’t lost my touch.” Jackson grinned. “I bought ice cream too if you want it for dessert later.”

“Thanks.” Lance took his plate to the sink.

“You sure you don’t mind cleaning up while I grab a shower?” Jackson asked.

“Not at all. You cooked. I’ll clean.” Lance took Jackson’s empty plate from him. “Go get ready. I’ve got this.”

“Thanks.” Jackson smiled as he hurried out of the room.

Lance glanced over at Kel and smiled. “We have to talk.” He whispered the words, afraid of drawing Jackson’s attention.

“I know. I’ll stick around here tonight. Did Ray and Bethany say anything about me?” Kel asked.

Lance shook his head. “I haven’t seen them today. No clue where they went.”

“You are going to tell Jackson about seeing me, right?” Kel stood, moving over to stand beside the counter.

“Yeah, that’s what I want to talk to him about tomorrow night. Is he going to believe me?” Lance moved to clear the leftover food from the table.

“Not at first. He’s never believed in ghosts or even an afterlife that I know of. He once told me that when we die, that’s it. There’s nothing more. He’s in for a shock. I can help you convince him, but he’s going to think you’re nuts at first.” Kel shrugged. “I’ve met one other like you who can see ghosts, but they refused to help me.”

“If we weren’t dealing with my brother, I’d refuse too. But I had planned on telling him about my ability anyway. Having you here will make it easier for me, but probably harder on him. Were you two close?” Lance asked.

“Best friends. We did everything together. He blames himself for my death.” Kel stepped out of the way as Lance

went to the fridge. “I need him to know it wasn’t his fault. It was my time.”

Lance nodded. “I’ll tell him whatever you want me to say, but I know Jackson. He’s going to resist this with everything he thinks he knows. It’s not going to be easy to convince him I’m not making shit up.”

“He knows you and I never met. He’ll have to wonder how you know so much about me if you’re making it up,” Kel said.

“Ray and Bethany filled you in on my story?” Lance asked as he continued to clean the kitchen.

“Yep, and also told me about the others you know who can see and talk to us. I have to say, I’m looking forward to having so many others to talk to. Last night was amazing just sitting and talking with Ray and Bethany. I can’t wait for Friday when I can meet others.”

“There’s always someone around here.” Lance laughed. “You’re welcome to come to work with me any day. There’s a ghost that haunts the morgue who would love to hang out.”

“Seriously? He stays at the morgue?” Kel mocked a shiver.

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly, but he enjoys being there. He’s learning to be a good medical examiner. The problem is, I’m the only one who can hear him, and he can’t do any of the hard work.” Lance put the dishes in the dishwasher. “Just don’t feel like you’re stuck here. You can hang out with any of us. Lizzy is my boyfriend’s mother. She has Betty, who is a ghost, with her almost constantly. They’re always up for company.”

“She’s the one who is coming on Friday, right?”

“Her and her husband. Though only Lizzy and I can see you.” Lance refocused on wiping things down as he heard Jackson headed back their way.

“Can I pick anything up while I’m out tonight?” Jackson asked.

“Nope, I’m good.” Lance turned to find his brother dressed in jeans and a tight t-shirt. He had to admire his brother for being so in shape. Lance just didn’t have the motivation or determination to work out as much as Jackson did, and it showed. He ran a hand over his soft stomach, unable to imagine it being as solid as Jackson’s was. They might look alike in some ways, but they were very different in others. “You look nice.”

“Thanks. I shouldn’t be too late. I’ll try not to wake you when I get home if you’re asleep.” Jackson pulled a water bottle out of the fridge.

“I sleep like the dead. You won’t wake me. Go and have fun.” He smiled, remembering when conversations like this were common. He’d loved living with Jackson while he was growing up. He’d still been in high school, but Jackson, being older, had a full social life back then, always going on dates or out with friends. It seemed so long ago. He wondered if Jackson did come home now if it would go back to the way it was then. He hoped so.

“See you in the morning then.” Jackson gave a wave as he headed out.

Lance waited until he heard Jackson’s car leave, then glanced back over at Kel. “Is it hard not going with him?”

“Only because I’m curious about this job offer he’s got. It’s not like I can talk him into taking it, but I still like to know what’s going on and what options he has to consider.” Kel was sitting at the table again.

“You want him to leave the military?” Lance asked as he took a seat across from him.

“Yeah, it’s time. The team has changed. The guys we were close to have left and new guys have come in. They’re good, but it’s different. Things don’t feel the same now. And I hate to say it, but Jackson isn’t as young as he used to be. He is as fit as ever, but the body has limits. I notice the aches and pains bother him more than they used to. He could probably pull off another four years if he wanted to, but I don’t think he does.” Kel shrugged. “He’s also lonely. He doesn’t have the bond

with the newer guys that we all used to have. They've got his back, but it's not the same as it used to be."

"I sense his restlessness as well. He's never talked about staying home. The Navy has been his life. I have to admit I was shocked to hear he might be ready to step back." Lance stared out the back window for a moment, then took a deep breath. "So, is telling him you're still hanging around going to fuck him up?"

Kel shrugged again. "I honestly don't know. If we can get him to believe you, it's going to bring back a lot of painful memories and emotions. He's never let go of the guilt. As hard as it might be to face me, even through you, he needs to. He has to know I don't hold him responsible for what happened. He didn't cause it. I expect he'll get angry and deny all of this is possible, but he'll come around. I know enough of his secrets that I can convince him I'm really here."

"So you want to clear the air, then go into the light?" Lance asked. He knew there was a light the dead could go into, but he had no idea where it led. He'd been told it was comforting and was hard to ignore the pull to step into it. Most of the dead went directly into it after dying. The few who stayed implied that it still tempted them all the time, but the longer they resisted, the easier it got to stay.

"I'm not sure. The light is tempting for sure, but I don't know that I'm ready to move on. Talking to Ray has made me think about all the things I have yet to see. I'm not sure if I move on if I'll lose my chance to see them. I wish we knew what came next." Kel stood and moved to stand against the counter. "I've met other ghosts the last four years, but never really talked much to them. We'd visit for a few, then go our own way. Last night was the first time I've ever really sat down and seriously discussed everything with another ghost who's been around for years."

Lance nodded. "I love listening to Ray share his adventures."

"It's just nice to relax with other ghosts. I almost feel like I have friends again. Ones who can see me. It's been lonely the

last few years.” Kel looked sad as he spoke, and Lance had to wonder if he’d seen others around him die in war and if he talked to them before they stepped into the light.

“I imagine. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you like, even after Jackson goes back if you want.” Lance didn’t mind the ghosts around but had to wonder how many would be too many to allow the use of his home. At what point did his house really become a haunted house?

“Thanks, but if I stay, I’m sticking with Jackson. We were a team before I died, and we’ll stay a team until I move on.” Kel smiled.

“He never mentioned you. Never told me he’d lost someone.” Lance wondered what else Jackson had been through he never spoke of.

“He protects you. We all do. We don’t let our families in on a lot of things. It’s easier if you don’t always know what we face, what we go through. I think keeping the two worlds separate might give us a way to escape one or the other. When Jackson comes home, he can try and let go of the other world he lives in. I know having you talk to him for me is going to combine those worlds, and I hate that, but it’s the only way.”

“I wish he’d let me in. Let me help him when he needs someone to lean on. Your death had to be hell for him.” Lance tried to remember if he’d noticed a difference in Jackson four years ago, but nothing came to mind. It wasn’t like they talked a lot, but he’d like to think he could tell when something bothered his brother.

“It was hell for the whole team, but mostly for Jackson. We were as close as brothers, no offense to you.”

“None taken. I’ve always known the bond he had with some of his team was stronger than what we shared. You guys face a lot together. I think it’s how it should be. I’m not jealous. I just feel a little left out that he doesn’t talk to me about some things.” Lance stood and went to get a water bottle from the fridge. He twisted the cap and took a long drink as he sat back down at the table. “Tomorrow night, we’ll sit down with him, and I’ll start by explaining that after my accident I

started to see ghosts. Then we'll see how he reacts. If he doesn't have me committed in the first few minutes, I'll let him know you're here and want to talk to him. We'll go from there. If he doesn't believe me, we can have Lizzy try, but I know how stubborn Jackson can be. He might just close us out."

"I'll make sure he can't deny I'm here. I know things." Kel smiled. "Thank you for this. I've waited a long time to be able to do this. I thought I'd have to wait until he died."

"I'm glad to help." Lance meant it. He wanted to give Jackson the closure he obviously needed.

"So, how weird is it being a medical examiner and seeing ghosts?" Kel asked.

Lance laughed. "Not as bad as you might think. Most have moved on before they get to me. The few who remain usually just need a little guidance. Then there are a few who want justice. Those are the ones I try to help if I can. We've closed three cases recently because of my ability to talk to the victims after they've died. In fact, the case Angus is working on now, the ghost has stuck around and is trying to help us. It's hard since we obviously can't use anything I learn in court, but it helps give Angus leads to work on."

"And it's his mom who sees ghosts too, right?"

"Yep, and she doesn't hide the fact, which is why I need Jackson to know about my ability before Lizzy gets here on Friday and lets the cat out of the bag. She won't care if Jackson thinks she's nuts. She'll hold conversations with you no matter who's around. You're going to love her." Lance owed his sanity to Angus and Lizzy for helping guide him through his first ghostly contact earlier in the year.

"I'm looking forward to meeting her." Kel stood. "Thanks for helping with all of this. I hope it doesn't become a problem for you if Jackson doesn't believe us. Either way, I really appreciate your willingness to speak to him for me."

"I'm glad to help. I'll admit I'm nervous, but I think he'll come around." Lance finished off his water bottle. "I'm just

going to go watch TV. You're welcome to join me."

"I think I'll let you enjoy a quiet evening. I'm going to head out back with Haunt for a bit." Kel smiled. "I really like that dog."

"You and me both." Lance stood and tossed his bottle into the trash. "Come in if you get bored." He watched as Kel swept through the wall. Turning for the living room, he figured he'd take tonight to relax, because starting tomorrow night, he had no idea what to expect. He had to be ready for anything.

CHAPTER NINE

Angus glanced at the older home and nodded. “This is it.”

“For some reason, I’m not shocked to learn Santa lives here,” Franks commented as he climbed out of the car.

“Me, neither.” Angus took in the huge yard, decorated to the hilt with different Christmas decorations. Streams of lights covered nearly every branch on every tree, and only a small walkway up the center of the yard was free of decorations. Christmas music played softly through outdoor speakers, not loud enough to be a nuisance to neighbors, but loud enough to be heard by anyone standing near the yard. “Don’t let my mom see this. She’ll take it as a challenge.”

Franks snorted. “Have to admit that this would probably look amazing at night. I might have to drive back over after dark.”

“Yeah, this is definitely going on the list for Christmas light viewing.” As he said it, Angus wondered if Lance would enjoy going out and driving around to take in the lights around the area.

The door to the home opened before they had a chance to knock and an older man with a long white beard and large belly smiled at them. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.” Angus grinned. “Quite a place you have here.”

“I love Christmas. It really is the most wonderful time of the year,” Alex Mayford told them. “You’re the detectives looking into Gene’s murder?”

“Yes, I’m Detective Young and this is Detective Franks.” Angus offered his hand. “Thanks for agreeing to meet with us.”

“Of course. I was horrified to hear what happened to Gene. The world lost an amazing Santa when he died.” Alex

stepped back. "Please come in. My wife is out, and the kids are in school, so we won't be interrupted." He gestured them to the kitchen. "Can I get you anything?"

"We're good, but thanks." Franks pulled out a chair at the large kitchen table.

Angus sat too, noticing that the inside of the house was nearly as decorated as the outside. Even the dish towels in the kitchen had Santa on them. He couldn't imagine embracing the holiday like this. He was lucky to get his tree up, let alone worry about little things like the snowmen salt and pepper shakers on the table.

"So, how can I help you?" Alex asked as he sat down.

"We've been told by others that you and Gene had a sort of competition going on every year about who could get the position at the Fairway Mall. Is this true?" Franks asked as he pulled out his notebook.

"It is. We both worked hard to secure that place. It's the busiest, and it also pays better than other places. Gene and I aren't the only ones who try to get the lead Santa position there. Several others do as well." Alex folded his hands on the table. "It's long hours though. Most places do part-time Santas who split the shifts, but the mall hires one full-time Santa with others to fill in part-time as needed. Gene was willing to put in more hours than I was. He got the job this year."

"Were you upset about that?" Franks asked.

"I wasn't happy, but I wasn't angry. Are you thinking I killed him because of a job at the mall? No. If that's where your mind is going, you can stop thinking that right now. I could have had the job if I'd been willing to spend twelve hours a day there, but I wasn't. I have a family and a life outside of playing Santa. Besides, dealing with crying children for that many hours would drive anyone insane. Believe me, I've done it. I'm happy with the shorter hours with breaks in between shifts. It's a tough job. You get peed on, spit on, have to deal with crazy parents who want the perfect picture, or force their petrified child to sit on my lap and try to smile. It's not a job for the weak. There is plenty of work around the area

for all of us Santas. No reason to kill anyone off because they got the mall spot.” Alex narrowed his eyes. “Do you think it was another Santa who killed him?”

Angus shrugged. “We don’t know right now. All we did know was that your name came up as someone that Gene might have been fighting with. We had to investigate.”

“You can investigate all you want, but I was at work when he was shot. I’m sure hundreds of people saw me, along with the security cameras in the pet store, and the employees who were there with me. I got there at nine and didn’t leave until two.” Alex sat back. “As for fighting between Gene and I, well, I wouldn’t call it fighting. I considered us friends. We bickered and fought for position at certain locations, but we never really fought. I mean, it’s kind of nice to know others who get you. Gene understood my passion for Christmas. He was someone I could call and talk to about new ideas or costume adjustments. We weren’t besties by any means, but we were friendly.”

“When was the last time you spoke to Gene?” Angus asked.

“About a week ago. We were talking about the Christmas contest. Oh, I guess I should explain.” Alex laughed. “There’s a contest this year...”

“The one the media is running?” Franks interrupted.

“Yes, you heard about it?” Alex asked.

“We did. You were both entered. I know they were supposed to interview Gene the afternoon he was killed. Have you had your interview yet?”

“No, not yet. I’m scheduled for later in the month. That was what we were discussing. I admit I didn’t like my interview going out so late. I was trying to get Gene to swap me interviews since he already was getting so much attention by working at the mall. He refused. Said it wasn’t up to him when people got interviewed and to take it up with the news station. I just let it go, but I admit to being a bit upset when we last talked. But no matter how upset I was, I’d never kill him.

We were friends. I'm actually quite upset about his death.” Alex sighed. “You really don't realize how big a part of your life someone is until they're gone. I can't just call him up to talk about a new item or compare our suit to whatever is popular this year or next. I'm going to miss him.”

Angus wondered if Gene had tagged along with them for this interview, and if so, how he felt hearing those words. “Do you know of anyone he had a problem with, or better yet, who might have had a problem with him?”

Alex shook his head. “No, not off hand. The others who work as Santa don't take this nearly as seriously as Gene and I do. They are happy with part-time hours and just handing out a few candy canes here and there. I doubt any of them would try to kill him. I didn't know him personally well enough to know about his family and friends.”

“Do you know who will be covering his shifts at the mall now that he's dead?” Franks asked.

“Several of us have agreed to pick up his hours. I already have commitments with other locations, but I picked up a few shifts where I could. Kevin Kotter took most of the shifts. He's new to the area, but a great Santa. He's usually a part-timer, but he's single and doesn't have a family to worry about, so he took most of the hours.” Alex reached over and pulled a paper from a small notebook he had sitting on the table. “Here's the new schedule. They emailed it to me last night.”

Angus unfolded the schedule and read over the names. He wrote them down in his notebook just in case they had to contact any of these people later. “Thank you.” He passed it back once he was done.

“Have you or any of the other Santas you might talk to noticed anyone aggressive this season? Maybe someone who hates what you do? Someone who might want to harm Santa?” Franks asked.

“No more than usual. There are always a few people who complain and cause minor problems because they think we're lying to kids about Santa being real. We get them every year. I don't recall anyone this year that's worse than usual. Most just

write angry letters. Threaten to stop coming to the mall or business that has Santa working there. So far, I'd say this year has been better than most when it comes to that." Alex tapped his finger on the table. "If I remember right, the mall keeps track of any threats they get. You might check with them. I'm sure they get stuff we never see."

"We'll look into that." Franks made a note. "Is there anything else you have thought about that might help lead us in the right direction? Something we've overlooked or failed to ask?"

Alex seemed to think about that for a moment. "I don't think so. The only thing different this year is the contest, but even that isn't anything most of us are making a huge deal about. I mean, we'd all love to win and are improving our game when it comes to appearances and entertaining the crowds. I don't think any of us would kill to win."

"Then I think that's about all we have to ask you today. If we think of anything else, we'll give you a call." Angus closed his notebook and shoved it in his pocket.

"Do I need to do anything to prove my alibi? Get you anything from the pet store I was working at during that time?" Alex asked.

"We'll swing by and talk to the manager there, but I don't think there's going to be any problems. We'll be in touch if there is. Thank you for giving us a bit of your time today. We know how busy you are."

Alex smiled and shook Angus's hand. "I'm happy to help. I just hate this happened to Gene. He's going to be missed. Have you heard when the funeral will be?"

"The family mentioned possibly Monday afternoon." Franks shook his hand. "They were still working out details."

Alex sighed. "And of course, I'm working. I'll see if I can change shifts with someone. A few of us would like to show up in costume to pay a final tribute to him."

Angus nodded. "Again, thank you for your time. Let us know if you think of anything else that might be important."

“I will.” Alex led them out, quietly closing the door behind them.

As they descended the porch and weaved their way down the path through the Christmas decorations, Angus was trying to think what to do next. Every lead they had was coming up empty. Someone had shot Gene Franklin. They just had to figure out who and why. But with their suspect list dwindling, he wasn't sure where to turn next.

“Now what?” Franks asked as they pulled away from the house.

“I'm not sure. I guess we go back to the crime scene. We need to go through the videos, work through witness statements, and see if there was anything we missed. We're missing something. This wasn't random. Someone wanted Gene dead. We need to verify Melissa and Harvey's alibi, but I'm sure that will pan out. Same with Alex's. So, who are we missing?”

“One of the other Santas?” Franks rolled down his window a crack.

“Maybe, but why? From everything we've heard, I don't get the feeling any of them were in the running to win the contest. It looked to be between Alex and Gene, though we should check out the others. I just can't see this as a reason to kill someone in the middle of town. Why not get them at home or somewhere where you're less likely to be seen?” Angus pulled his notebook out and read through his notes, hoping to find something he missed before.

“I agree. Nothing about this makes any sense. We have two ways of looking at this. Someone hated Gene and wanted him dead, or someone hates Santa and wanted to make a point by killing one.” Franks glanced over at him.

“Or maybe it was a random killing, but again, why?” Angus sighed, frustrated that they couldn't even find a simple thread to pull. “There has to be something we're missing. From what Lance has told me, Gene isn't a very personable guy. He had to have enemies, right?”

“It doesn’t sound as if he got out enough to make enemies. If what Melissa said is true, he held up in the house until December. No one has mentioned friends or golfing buddies or anything like you’d usually expect a man his age to have. I just don’t know. Hopefully, we find something in the hotel surveillance or on his computer.” Franks turned in to the parking lot of the police station.

“Hopefully, I.T. has found something useful.” Angus climbed out of the car as soon as Franks parked, dreading the next few hours staring at a computer screen looking for a killer he couldn’t identify. Just once, he wished the ghost could see and know their killer. It would make his job much easier.

CHAPTER TEN

“She’s cheating on me.” Gene paced the area around the autopsy table as Lance tried to ignore him. He was raging mad about his wife. He’d been screaming about his wife for nearly an hour now, and Lance could do nothing to stop him.

“We need a sample of that for the lab,” Lance told Carrie as he tried to find the cause of death of the man on the table in front of him.

“Dude, just chill. There’s nothing anyone can do about it. You’re dead. Go into the light and move on.” Jeremy was doing his best to talk Gene down, but he was having none of it.

This was the last thing Lance needed today. He was already on edge, worried about the conversation with Jackson tonight. He was nervous his brother would think he’d lost his mind. If he couldn’t prove to Jackson he was telling the truth, who knew what his brother might do? If anyone could get Lance locked up in a psych unit for evaluation, his brother could. He had to have faith that Kel and the other ghosts would help him through this. And if anything went bad, one of them would find a way to get to Lizzy so she and Angus could help somehow.

“My wife is cheating on me. Don’t you get it?” Gene screamed at Jeremy.

Jeremy just sighed. “She was cheating on you. She isn’t any longer. Remember, it’s until death do us part. Hate to tell you, you’re dead, buddy. Your wife is now free to date who she wants.”

Lance groaned inwardly as he listened. Jeremy was just making it worse. Everything he said was true, but it wasn’t going to calm Gene down any. “I’m not seeing anything yet. Let’s get a better look at the heart.” Lance tried to focus on his job and not the angry ghost behind him.

“She was cheating on me. For over a year. And now she gets everything I own. She’ll probably move him in with her and let him use everything I paid good money for.” Gene swung a fist at one of the tables, but his hand went right through it. It was a good thing because with the way he’d been ranting and raving, the room would be destroyed by now if he had any solid form to him.

“What can anyone do? It’s not like your wife knew you were standing there when she told the cops about her affair. She thinks you’re gone. Dead means dead to most of the living. Your wife doesn’t think about you haunting her. She figures you moved on to wherever it is Santas go when they die.” Jeremy appeared to be leaning against the far counter.

Lance hid a smile as he thought about some far-off place crowded with all the men who have played Santa over the years.

“I need Lance to tell her I’m here. I need to confront her.” Gene now stood beside Lance, glaring down at him.

Lance didn’t respond. He kept his head down, trying his hardest to focus on the human heart in front of him. Even knowing that Gene couldn’t touch him or interfere with what he was doing, it was intimidating having the ghost stand so close, and the fact he was dead didn’t stop him from being loud.

“I already told you that he won’t talk to her for you. He doesn’t do that. Even if he did, your wife would just look at him like he was crazy. Lance isn’t going to confront her for you. You have to forget about this and move on. There are probably wonderful things in the light. Go and find out what comes next for you,” Jeremy pleaded.

If there was a way other than words to thank Jeremy for all he was doing, Lance would do it. If he got Gene to cross over, he’d find a way to reward him, even if it was just throwing him a party where everyone got together to celebrate. Lizzy had warned him about annoying ghosts, but he really hadn’t experienced one until now.

“How is it having your brother in town?” Carrie asked.
“Good to catch up?”

Lance smiled, though his stomach twisted as he again thought about the conversation they’d be having tonight. “It’s great to see him again. We sat up late the other night talking for hours. I didn’t realize how much I really missed him. It’s going to be hard to watch him leave again.”

“Has he met Angus?” Carrie asked.

“Yeah, the night he got in. We’re having dinner tomorrow night together so they can get to know each other better.”
Lance tried to ignore Gene’s fist as it appeared to pound on the autopsy table.

“Don’t ignore me. I need your help,” Gene bellowed.
“You’ve got to talk to my wife. I have a lot to tell her.”

“More like yell at her.” Jeremy sighed. “Lance isn’t ignoring you. Hell, I’m sure he hears you just fine since you’re nearly standing on top of him. He can’t talk to you when others are around. Carrie can’t see you, remember?”

Lance wondered if he could keep someone with him the rest of the afternoon. He did not want to have to be alone with Gene and forced to talk to him. He was done with this ghost. He would give anything for him to go into the light and be gone.

“Besides, what do you think confronting your wife is going to do now? Do you think she’s going to end her relationship with this new guy because her dead husband’s ghost wants her to? She can’t see you. She’s happy with the guy here in the physical realm. She’s not going to stay single just to make you happy when you can’t give her what she needs.”

“I want her to know that I know,” Gene argued.

“Why? It’s done and over. You move on and start a new life wherever it is that light leads. You might find a nice Mrs. Claus on the other side. Wouldn’t you rather find someone you can interact with instead of sticking around here and haunting people who don’t even know you’re around them?” Jeremy

met Lance's gaze for a moment. "I'm sorry, Lance. I'm trying to keep him from bothering you, but he isn't listening to a thing I say."

Lance smiled briefly, then got back to work. He was tired, and oddly his feet ached today. He was more than used to standing for hours on end, but today, he just wanted to go home, take a hot shower, and forget about Gene and the murder investigation. As long as Gene was focused on his wife's infidelity, he wasn't going to be any help solving the case. The text he'd gotten from Angus earlier had told him they had no leads and the guy Gene claimed had killed him had a solid alibi.

"If he can see me, there have to be others who can, right?" Gene asked Jeremy.

Jeremy shrugged. "Probably."

Lance sighed.

"Then I'll find them. They'll help me talk to Melissa." Gene turned and was gone.

Lance glanced at Jeremy who shrugged.

"I knew it was a blood clot," Carrie exclaimed.

Lance refocused, returning his attention to the autopsy. Relief swept through him, not because they'd found the cause of death, but because Gene was gone and that meant that he might be able to get through the rest of the afternoon without Gene screaming in his ear and driving him crazy. "I knew it had to be there." Lance smiled at Carrie. "Quite the clot in someone so young."

"What is he, forty?" Carrie sighed. "This job makes you realize that you might not have as long as you hoped."

"That's for sure." Lance continued to work.

"Sam told me the guy dropped during his wedding reception. He'd only been married an hour." Carrie shook her head. "Can you imagine what that poor bride is going through right now?"

"Seriously?" Lance glanced up. "That's horrible."

“Yeah, I guess she’s a paramedic and so were a bunch of others that were there for the wedding, but despite trying everything they could, they couldn’t bring him back.” Carrie took another sample for the lab.

“And stuff like that is why I let Sam go pick up the bodies whenever I can. I don’t want to walk into something like that. I can’t imagine the chaos.” Lance had enough of his hands dealing with ghosts now. He didn’t need to be dealing with grieving families as well.

“I kind of enjoy going out with Sam. I like seeing where the death happened and hearing what was going on when they died. I think it helps me here because I feel more invested in finding the cause of death for those loved ones.” Carrie shrugged. “To each their own. I can understand your view. It’s not easy when you’ve got people hysterical around you when you’re trying to figure out a time of death and all that.”

“Since we’re talking weddings, how are things going with Pete? You two ready to tie the knot yet?” Lance hadn’t met her boyfriend, but he’d heard enough about him to feel as if he had. They’d been dating for nearly as long as he had been seeing Angus.

“Not yet. We both agree we should take our time. We both know we’ll get to that point, but we aren’t rushing it.” She grinned at him. “You and Angus talking about it?”

Lance was surprised by the question. “No, not even a little bit. We’re both taking this very slowly. We’re good where we are for now.” He liked the thought that they might get married one day, but they were hardly there yet. He didn’t know if they would get to that point. What they had was comfortable for now. Marriage felt like such a huge step. Still, he had to wonder if Angus had thought about it. Did he want something more long-term and permanent? The two of them hardly dated, let alone thought about marriage. Maybe they should date more often. Go out to eat together, do things that couples did. Right now, their relationship consisted of meeting for meals and cuddling on the couch together more than doing anything like a date. When they did take the motorcycles out for an afternoon, he didn’t see it as a date. More like two friends just

going out and having fun. Maybe he needed to plan something romantic for them to show Angus that he was invested in their relationship more than just the occasional meals and sex.

Carrie laughed. “That got you into deep thought.”

“I just realized how little we actually date. We get together for dinner or lunch all the time, but we really don’t go out together. Not like you would expect when dating. I mean, we’re both tired after long days working, but maybe I need to be better about taking him out. Get him out of the house and do something fun.” It was something he’d have to give more thought to. They could go bowling or play miniature golf or something. Neither of them was into the club scene so that was out.

“There’s all kinds of Christmas concerts and stuff going on right now. Pete and I are going to one tonight at the park. It’s some local choir who will be singing Christmas Carols and serving hot chocolate. It’s free,” Carrie told him.

“Tonight’s out of the question, but I’ll look for other things like that. It could be fun. Just something to get us out of the house and away from things for a while. Some time to just focus on the two of us. We don’t do that enough. We’re always around others.”

“You went to Galveston, right?” Carrie asked.

“A while ago. I think that was the last time we really spent any time alone, focusing on just us. I mean, we have nights where we just watch TV, but it’s not the same.” Lance kept working as they talked. An hour later, he was leaving Carrie to finish up and still wondering what he could do to show Angus how much he cared and show him that he mattered to him. Not just because he believed him when he said he saw ghosts. Not just because he enjoyed helping with the cases Angus had. But because he loved who he was around Angus. He liked the way Angus made him feel. It was time to step up and be the boyfriend Angus deserved and not just the easy, laidback guy he’d become. It was something he’d have to give more thought to.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lance sat facing his brother on the couch, trying to figure out how to begin this conversation. He'd played it through his mind a million times but still didn't know how to tell him that he could see ghosts. If he just blurted it out, Jackson would think he was nuts. Hell, no matter how he said it, his brother was going to think he was crazy.

Across the room, Ray and Bethany sat on the love seat and Kel sat in one of the recliners. They were quiet, waiting to see how things would go. Lance knew they all had his back, but it didn't make this any easier. If there was one person in his life he needed to believe him, it was his brother.

"What's up? Why do you look like you're about to tell me you're dying or something?" Jackson wrinkled his brow. "Are you okay? You're not dying, right? You don't have cancer or something?"

Lance blew out a hard breath. "No, no, it's nothing like that. Sorry. I'm probably freaking you out. This is just hard to tell you and you're probably not going to believe any of it, but please just hear me out before you go off and call me insane."

"Okay. I'm listening." Jackson pulled a knee up on the couch and turned so he was facing Lance. "You know you can tell me anything."

"I know, but this is a bit unbelievable for anyone." Lance glanced at Kel, then back to Jackson. "So, you know I was in that car accident about a year ago."

"Yeah." Jackson nodded.

"Well, after I recovered, I found out that I could do something I hadn't been able to do before it. I'm not sure if it was something triggered by my head injury, or maybe a near-death experience, or what it was, but I have a new ability." He sighed. He was already sounding crazy. Nothing he was saying had to make sense.

“Like what? I’ve heard cases where people wake up from a coma and can speak a foreign language they never knew before and stuff, is it like that?” Jackson asked.

“Sort of. I can see things I wasn’t able to see before.”

“Like visions?”

Lance shook his head. It was best to just put it out there and get everything out in the open and deal with the fallout afterward. They didn’t need to play a guessing game. “Like ghosts. I can see the dead who haven’t crossed into the light yet.”

Jackson stared at him for a moment in stunned silence, then broke out in laughter. “Okay, good joke. Now why don’t you tell me what’s really going on with you?”

Lance sighed. “It’s the truth. I see ghosts.”

“Right. Seriously, enough with the games. Something’s been bothering you. What is it?” Jackson reached for his water bottle on the coffee table and took a drink. “It’s okay, you can tell me anything.”

“I know, which is why I’m telling you this. I knew you wouldn’t believe me, but you’re my brother, and you, more than anyone, should know the truth. My first day back at work after recovering, I saw a ghost and I’ve been seeing them ever since.”

“So, you see like faint shadows or something you think are ghosts? Have you had your vision checked? Maybe something happened in the accident to cause you to see shadows.” Jackson looked worried.

“No, it’s not shadows. I see and communicate with ghosts. I can talk to them. The first one I saw told me how his wife killed him and helped me through his autopsy so I could find the proof. Others have led me to their bodies so they can get closure. They’re real, not a shadow or figment of my imagination. For me, they are as real as you and I are.” He glanced at Kel, wondering when the perfect time would be to bring him into the conversation.

“That’s insane. It’s impossible. Ghosts aren’t real. When we die, we die. There’s nothing more.” Jackson shook his head. “Have you talked to someone about this?”

“You mean like a psychologist or something? No, but Angus and a few others know.”

“And they didn’t make you get help?” Jackson’s eyes widened.

“No, because Angus’s mother can see them as well. She’s the one who helped me to understand what was going on. At first, I thought I was going crazy too. I thought I was hallucinating, but I wasn’t. This is real. I seriously can see ghosts and talk to them.” Lance sighed. “I know it’s hard to believe, but it doesn’t make it any less true. You know I’ve never been a religious guy. I didn’t know what came next if anything when we died, but I know now. At least a little. We don’t just die. We live on in another form. I’ve met a few others who can see them too. There’s a doctor who works in town, she sees them, and Lizzy has a friend who is an artist who can see them. I don’t know why I can suddenly see them after my accident, but I can.”

Jackson crumpled his empty water bottle in his hands and tossed it back on the coffee table. “Do you hear how insane you sound?”

“I know, but insane or not, it’s all true.” Lance glanced at Ray and Bethany, wishing they could speak to Jackson and tell him the truth. “You want to know how I’ve learned to cook? That chef you used to watch on TV, Celeste Dupont, is teaching me. She died of a heart attack but is still hanging around. She’s been giving me cooking lessons for a few months now.”

“You’re making shit up.”

“I’m not. Back in October, a young girl led me to her body. Angus managed to find her killer all because of the stuff she told me. And before that, Bethany led me to where she was in a mass grave and helped us to catch a mass murderer. I get you think I’m crazy. I thought the same thing at first too, but I’m not. This is real. There are ghosts around. Not a ton.

Most move on to wherever it is ghosts go, but a few choose to stick around. I have no idea why I can see them or why Angus's mother can see them, and you can't, but it doesn't make it any less real. I have two ghosts who are staying here at the house with me. They spend most of their time in the backyard. There's another who stays at the morgue and hangs out there." Lance sighed, realizing he was sounding crazier by the minute. "I'm not lying. I can suddenly see ghosts."

Jackson ran his hand over his short-cropped hair. "So, you want me to believe there are two ghosts in this house right now?"

"Actually, right now, there are three." Lance glanced at Kel. "You had one with you when you got back to town. He says he's with you most of the time."

Jackson snorted. "Right. Because a ghost would have nothing better to do than follow me around."

Lance sighed.

"Tell him who I am," Kel told Lance.

Lance didn't know if it would help or make things worse, but he had nothing to lose at this point. "The ghost with you says his name is Kel."

Jackson froze, then sucked in a hard breath. "How do you know that name?"

"The ghost told me it when he showed up with you. He's sitting in the recliner to the left of you right now." Lance bit his lip.

"I never told you about Kel," Jackson whispered.

"No, you never tell me about any of the guys on your team. Kel's ghost has been with you for around four years." Lance glanced at Kel. "Right?"

Kel nodded.

"You had to have read about his death. You found out somehow that I had a teammate die." Jackson stood.

“No, I didn’t know anything until the day you showed up. I promised you I wouldn’t go digging into anything to try and find out where you were or what you were doing. I kept that promise. Kel is right there.” Lance pointed to the ghost. “He’s got blond hair, green eyes. He’s about the same height as you are.”

Kel held up his arm. “Tell him about the scar on my arm.”

Lance noticed a deep scar that traveled all the way from his wrist to the elbow. “He’s got a long scar on his arm. On the top. It goes from his wrist to his elbow.”

Jackson just stared at him.

“I’m not lying to you. I wouldn’t joke about something like this. I’d planned on telling you already, but when Kel came here with you, it became even more important that you know.” Lance closed his eyes, wishing this was easier.

“Stop it with this shit about Kel. He died years ago. I know because I was there. I saw it happen. I saw his body. I don’t know how you found out about him or even linked him to me, but it’s bullshit that you’d use his death against me to try and convince me of something as insane as you seeing ghosts.”

“Tell him Kimber Johansen,” Kel said softly.

Lance swallowed hard, then met Jackson’s hard stare. “Kel said Kimber Johansen.”

Jackson took a step back. “How do you know about her?”

“I don’t. I’m just repeating what Kel is telling me to say.” Lance wanted to go to his brother, grab him by the shoulders, and shake him. Instead, he stayed where he was, hoping that whatever that woman’s name meant, it meant something enough to make Jackson believe him.

“No. It’s not possible. You found out about her as well.” Jackson held up a hand.

“I have no clue who she is or what she has to do with your life. That’s the first time I’ve heard her name.” Lance was curious who she was, but now wasn’t the time to ask. There

was so much about his brother's life he didn't know. "Ask me anything only Kel will know. Something there's no way I'd know."

Jackson shook his head. "I'm not playing games."

"Neither am I." Lance stared up at the ceiling, hating the pain in his brother's voice. He looked back at Jackson. "I'm trying to show you I'm not crazy. This is real." He tossed a notebook and pen onto the couch beside where Jackson was standing. "Walk across the room and write something down on that. The ghosts will see what it is and tell me."

"Parlor games." Jackson ignored the notepad.

"Seriously? How would I even know how to do that?" Lance was getting frustrated.

"Tell him Fireball in Germany, a flash flood in Italy, and a snake falling from a tree in Florida." Kel stood and went to Jackson's side. "I can go on all night with things like this."

Lance repeated everything Kel said, having no clue of the meaning behind any of it. He didn't care. All he wanted was for his brother to believe him. As he said each thing, he saw Jackson's eyes widen and his face pale.

"How?" Jackson shook his head. "It's not possible."

"I don't know how, but it's all true. Kel is standing right beside you now. He said he could go on all night throwing out information like that." Lance finally stood. "I don't know if something changed in my head, or if I had come so close to dying that I'm now able to see things most of the living can't, but I'm not lying about any of this. I see ghosts. Kel is here, and on the loveseat so are Ray and Bethany. Kel's waited a long time for someone like me who can see him so that he can talk to you."

Jackson shook his head and took another step back. "This is insane. There's no way. But I don't know how you would know about those things. No one knows about some of it except Kel." Jackson looked around him as if looking for the ghosts. He shook his head again. "I can't. I just can't." He took

a deep breath. “I need some fresh air. I’m going for a run.” He quickly headed out of the living room and down the hall.

Lance heard Jackson’s bedroom door close and sighed. “I tried. I’ll talk to him later and try again. It might be just too much for him to believe. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m going with him when he goes running. Give him some time to clear his head. This is a lot to accept. Especially for someone who has always thought of death as the final stage. He’ll work through it. Some of the stuff I said he won’t be able to ignore. It’s stuff you couldn’t have read about or found out. Let’s just give him some time.” Kel gave Lance a weak smile. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I knew it wouldn’t be easy. I hoped he’d understand, but if I was in his shoes, I’d probably be just like him. Hell, I thought I’d lost my mind at first too. I just don’t want him mad or to leave. If he thinks I’m playing around with him—”

“He won’t. He’ll be okay. Let him run. It’s when he works through things. He’ll be back in an hour or two and ready to talk more.” Kel’s clothes suddenly switched from jeans and a t-shirt to sweats and running shoes.

“I’ll never get used to that.” Lance laughed.

“I’m pretty much just floating along with him, but it feels like I’m participating more if I dress for the occasion.” Kel looked up as Jackson walked out.

“I’ll be back. We can talk more then.” Jackson didn’t look at Lance as he hurried out the door.

Kel waved and followed him out.

Lance sighed and slumped back down on the couch. He glanced at Ray and Bethany and shrugged. “It went about as well as I expected.”

“It’s a lot to take in, especially since we really don’t know how close he was to Kel. This might be more about Kel than it is about you seeing ghosts. Kel’s right. Give him time and he’ll come around. If he doesn’t, Lizzy will have a go at him

tomorrow night. Maybe he'll be more prone to believe her since she isn't family."

"Maybe." Lance pushed up. "I'm going to go call Angus. Do you guys want the TV on or an audio book playing?"

"We're good. I think we'll head over and visit with Cel for a bit and prepare her for what she's walking into tomorrow." Ray glanced at Bethany who nodded.

"Shit, I have to get the chicken marinating." Lance headed to the kitchen. "Thanks for the reminder."

"Want company?" Bethany asked.

"No, I'm good. I'll do this then go relax. Tell Cel hello and I'm looking forward to tomorrow," he called over his shoulder as he started to gather everything he needed to prepare dinner for tomorrow. Left to his own thoughts, he wondered if his life could get any more complicated. He knew it would be hard for Jackson to accept, but he'd hoped he'd at least listen and give him a chance to prove things. Trying hard not to be let down, he quickly finished everything he needed to, then headed to his room to call Angus.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lance heard his brother come in just after midnight, but he didn't get up to talk to him. He figured it was better to let Jackson come to him. He'd tossed and turned most of the night, playing everything through his mind, wondering how he could have done a better job at explaining.

He thought back to when they'd told Franks. It wasn't too hard. Franks had struggled a bit with the truth, but they'd easily convinced him what they were saying was true and that the ghosts were real. Why wasn't it like that with Jackson? Was it because his whole life he'd believed there was nothing after death? Lance could understand that would be a shock. Still, he wished his brother had tried to understand and not acted as if Lance would lie to him. That hurt more than anything.

"Hey, you okay?" Carrie asked as she stood in the doorway to his office.

"Yeah, just lost in thought. I'm good. What's up?" He pushed thoughts of Jackson from his mind.

"I'm going out to lunch but might be a bit late getting back. I wanted to let you know since I'm working with you this afternoon."

"It's all good. Sam's taking the last case today. It's slow and we have nothing scheduled. I was just planning on catching up on paperwork. Go and have fun. Take as much time as you need." He'd debated cutting out early himself.

"Thanks. I'll talk to you later then." She waved as she rushed off.

Lance tried to refocus on what he was writing, but his head was so clouded with other thoughts that he was deleting more than he was saving. When his phone rang, he was glad to look away from the computer. "Hello?"

“Hey, I was hoping my boyfriend might be able to sneak away for lunch today.” Angus sounded happy.

“With you? Of course, I can. Want me to pick you up or do you want to come get me?” He clicked out of the program he was working on and turned off his computer.

“I’m in the parking lot right now waiting for you,” Angus told him. “If you’d said no, I was going to go get something and bring it in to eat in your office.”

“You’re the best. I’ll be out in five.” He quickly headed for his locker and pulled out his jacket. He’d talked to Angus last night after Jackson had left. He’d told him how Jackson had reacted to everything, but talking hadn’t been enough. He’d wished Angus had been there to hold him and tell him it would all work out. Lunch with him was just what he needed to get through the day because he was really worried about what would happen tonight when everyone showed up for dinner, accepting that the ghosts were around and Jackson thought they were all crazy.

He hurried out to the parking lot and saw Angus parked up front by the curb. He rushed over and got into the car, happy to see him. He leaned in and gave him a light kiss.

“Hi.” Angus grinned.

“You have no idea how much I needed this today.” Lance latched his seatbelt.

“I had a bit of an idea. I could hear it in your voice last night when we talked. I wish I could do something more than be there for you, but I’m not sure what.” Angus pulled the car away from the curb.

“Just knowing you’re here helps. It makes it easier that you know I see ghosts and don’t think I’m crazy. It was hard having my own brother call me nuts last night. As if I’d use something like Kel’s death to play a prank on him or something. I get how hard it must be for people to believe me, but I hoped my own brother would at least try.” Lance sighed. “Where we going?”

“I thought we’d hit that Italian place down the street. I need something different than fast food or burgers. Are you in a hurry?”

“No, in fact, I can take as much time as we want. I don’t have any autopsies this afternoon and even though I shouldn’t put it off, the paperwork can wait.”

Angus glanced in the rearview mirror. “Are we completely alone today?”

Lance laughed. “You mean are there any ghosts tagging along? No, we’re alone. Jeremy was watching Sam do his autopsy and I haven’t seen Gene since yesterday when he was throwing a fit because his wife is cheating on him. He was pissed off.”

“I imagined he would be. I have to admit finding Harvey there with Melissa was a bit of a shock, but I’m glad they came forward with the information and didn’t force us to go digging for it. Their alibi is solid. We have witnesses who saw them at the time of the murder having lunch and video of them from a neighbor’s security cameras coming and going from Harvey’s home exactly when they said they did.”

“And there’s no chance this other Santa that Gene swears killed him did it?”

“Nope, he was working at the time. I have twenty customers with pictures of him with their pets during the time and store cameras and staff that all say he was there the whole time. Right now, we have no suspects.”

“That’s frustrating.”

“Tell me about it,” Angus groaned. “Franks and I have been going through video from the area all day and we’re trying to identify everyone on the tapes. So far, we’re about halfway through the process. We’re trying to contact everyone who was booked at the hotel that day, but we’re having problems identifying or tracking down several of them.”

“What about the other Santas in the area or friends and other family?” Lance asked.

“We’re weeding through Santas now, but so far, they all have alibis. As for friends, we have yet to find any. His parents are in a retirement home in Houston. They’re around ninety and won’t even be traveling back for the funeral. He’s got a brother, but I’m not even sure the parents know how to contact him. His son was in Florida at the time of the murder, so he’s in the clear.” Angus found a parking spot and shut off the car. “It’s one dead-end after another.”

Lance pushed the door open and got out. He met Angus at the front of the car and linked their hands. “I wish I could help. I don’t think Gene’s going to be any help. He was convinced that other guy did it. And now, all he seems focused on is finding someone to talk to his wife for him. At this point, I’ll be happy if I don’t have to see him again.”

“That bad?” Angus asked as they walked inside.

“The worst. If he had form and could move things, the morgue would have been trashed. He was screaming and trying to punch things while trying to get me to respond during an autopsy. Jeremy tried to calm him down, but Gene wasn’t listening to anyone. With Carrie in the room, all I could do was bite my tongue and wish he’d leave.” Lance sighed. “I’m glad I didn’t let this ghost know where I live or invite him to meet the others.”

“Me too. But enough about Gene and the case. How are you holding up? Have you heard anything from Jackson?”

It had been Angus who had finally gotten Lance to relax enough that he could sleep the night before. They’d talked for nearly an hour on the phone before Lance was able to calm down and quit wanting to go out and find Jackson and force him to talk to him. He waited until they were seated before picking up the conversation. “No, I haven’t heard a word from Jackson. I’m a little worried he’ll be gone when I get back home. Or worst case, have someone there to haul me away in a straitjacket.”

“He’s not going to have you hauled away.” Angus reached over and covered Lance’s hand with his. “He just needs time to think. The stuff you said about Kel will have him looking

for more answers. I'm sure while you're stressing on this, Kel is also thinking about other ways to help convince Jackson that everything you're saying is true."

"I hope you're right. I just hate this wasn't cleared up before everyone gets to my place tonight for dinner. Now if he's even there, everyone is going to be acting normal and he's going to think we're all crazy. Well, at least your mom and me since we'll be conversing with what appears to be thin air." Lance ran his fingers through his hair with one hand while turning his other hand over to lace his fingers with Angus. "What the hell am I supposed to do? I mean, Franks wasn't too hard to convince. You'd think with Kel's help, Jackson would come around easier." His gut ached with worry that his brother would leave and they'd never get to talk about this more. He couldn't handle losing contact with Jackson because his brother thought he was crazy.

"Maybe this isn't all just about you talking to ghosts, but more about the fact that one of those ghosts is Kel. What do you know about the two of them?" Angus asked.

"Very little. They served together years ago and from what I've gathered were good friends. Kel's comments hinted that they'd been through a lot together. Kel said Jackson blames himself for Kel's death. That he felt guilty for his death."

"Then that could be a lot of the issue." Angus gave Lance's hand a squeeze. "Suddenly he's getting messages from a guy he's grieving. You said Kel was telling you things that only he and Jackson would know, right? That had to freak Jackson out just as much, if not more than you seeing ghosts."

"Maybe. But how do I fix that? How do I help Jackson understand it all?" It helped to realize that maybe Jackson didn't think Lance was crazy, but it opened the door to other issues if his reaction had been about Kel being there.

"You just have to sit down and talk it through. He's either going to listen or shut you down and refuse to even acknowledge it. There's no way of knowing how things will go. Having everyone around tonight will help. He'll see you're

not the only one who talks to ghosts, and that the rest of us don't think you're crazy. It's going to be up to Jackson whether he's willing to believe it all or call us all crazy." Angus pulled his hand back as the waitress came over to take their order.

Once they'd ordered, Lance got back to their conversation. "Do you think I was wrong to bring Kel into the conversation right away? Should I have tried to tell him without bringing up Kel?"

"I don't think so. Talking about Kel was the most obvious way to get him to believe you. It seems like Kel knows your brother almost better than you do, and he didn't think it was a bad idea. We can't know what Jackson is feeling or thinking. I'd go home tonight, hope Jackson is there, and just see where things go. Let Jackson come to you and if he wants to know more, he'll ask. If not, then he'll watch you and my mom talking to the ghosts all night and think you're both crazy. I know that's not what you want, but honestly, you can't make someone believe. I get it. It's hard to believe in something you can't see. If I wasn't raised around it, I'd probably have fought believing it too." Angus reached for his water. "Franks and I will both be there. So will Dad. We've all been in Jackson's shoes before. We understand how hard it is to believe in something you can't see. Something society thinks is a fairytale. We'll help you through this the best we can."

"Thanks." Lance sat back. "I guess a part of me hoped Jackson would just believe me because I'm his brother and never lie to him."

"Probably part of what he had to remind himself last night when he went to clear his head." Angus smiled. "You'll get through this. Jackson isn't going to disown you because of this. He just needs time."

"I hope so." Lance reached for one of the breadsticks the waitress had placed on the table. "Tonight should be interesting either way."

"I'm just excited for that chicken again."

“Me too. I’m hoping I don’t mess it up. My mind is on other things right now.”

“Cel will guide you through it.” Angus smiled. “So other than the issue last night with Jackson, how has it been having him back in town?”

“Great. He’s thinking about coming home permanently in a year or so. He’s even got a lead on a job and is talking to his ex-girlfriend again. I know a lot can happen in a year, but I love the idea of him being back home. He’s been gone so long I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to have him around all the time.” Lance wanted to reconnect and see if they could rebuild the relationship they’d shared growing up. He wanted family dinners, barbecues, and all the stuff that went along with living close to family. But most of all, he wanted to be able to quit worrying that he was going to have someone show up at his door in the middle of the night, telling him Jackson had been killed.

“That’s great news.” Angus grinned. “I hope it happens. I know how badly you’ve missed him. While you know you always have my family around if you need them, I know it’s not the same.”

“Your family is amazing. I can’t thank you enough for sharing them with me. Especially your mom. Lizzy has been a lifesaver in helping me to understand things over the last few months. If you hadn’t brought her to my home that night, I’m not sure what would have happened. I was sure I was losing my mind.” Lance thought back to the first ghost he’d seen and how he’d been sure it was a side effect of his head injury.

“She’s happy to have someone else around who has the same ability as she does. She says only those that see ghosts can fully understand.”

“It’s true. I can try to explain it to you a million different ways, but until you experience it, you just can’t understand it. I can’t walk into a building now without scanning the people around so I can be sure they are living. I worry all the time that I’ll start talking to someone and not realize they’re a ghost and everyone will be looking at me as if I’ve lost my mind.”

Angus nodded. “I think that’s why Mom finally just gave up trying to hide it. She would start talking to Betty and everyone would be staring at her like she was nuts.”

“Makes you second guess all the people you see walking down the streets, talking to themselves. Maybe they aren’t as crazy as we thought they were.”

“Exactly, and it’s also changed the way I deal with the dead. I’m always respectful, but now I always have it in the back of my mind that the person’s ghost might be standing there listening and watching everything I do. I watch my comments and don’t joke around at the scene the way others might.” Angus reached for a breadstick. “I cringe when someone else makes an inappropriate joke about the cause of death or the body.”

“I guess at least I can be thankful I know when the dead are around.” Lance sat back as their salads arrived. “This was the best idea. I know we’ll have a big meal tonight, but I really needed this.”

“Me too. I wanted more than a quick burger. We haven’t had much time alone the last week.” Angus popped a cherry tomato into his mouth.

“A few more weeks and things will be back to normal.” Lance stabbed a slice of lettuce with his fork.

Angus laughed. “Things are never normal for us.”

Lance agreed. Normal was the last word he could use to describe his life, but oddly, he wouldn’t change a thing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lance heard the voices as he made his way from his room to the kitchen. He was showered and feeling refreshed after a long day, but he'd been upset to find Jackson gone when he'd gotten home. Ray and Bethany said they hadn't seen either Jackson or Kel all day. Lance had been so worried his brother had left for good that he'd had to check the guest room to make sure his brother's things were still there. Thankfully, they were.

"You should go with them," Bethany was saying. "You'll have fun. Think of all the rides you can take and not have to wait in line."

"I don't know. I never was much for amusement park rides." Cel's voice carried down the hall.

Lance grinned, glad to hear Cel was there. He hadn't seen her in two weeks and missed her. She'd canceled last Friday's dinner due to a sick grandchild she'd wanted to stay home and watch. He didn't blame her. Even if the kids didn't know she was there and she could do nothing physically to help them, he knew she still longed to care for them and feel like part of the family.

"Cel, I'm so glad you're here," Lance said just as he walked into the kitchen. "How's your son feeling?" He paused as he stepped into the room and saw Jackson sitting at the kitchen table with the ghosts standing around the kitchen.

"What?" Jackson looked up, confused.

Lance dropped his hand to pet Haunt as she ran up to greet him. He let his fingers run through her fur as he swallowed hard. "Hey, sorry, I didn't realize you were home." He stepped farther into the room.

"Then who were you talking to?" Jackson asked.

Lance glanced at Cel, then back to his brother. "I'm not sure you'll believe me if I tell you."

Kel stood against the sink. "He's not."

"You trying to tell me there's a ghost in here with us?" Jackson rolled his eyes.

"Four of them actually." Lance gripped the back of one of the kitchen chairs so tightly his knuckles went white.

Jackson shook his head.

"What reason would I have to lie to you about this? Of all things for me to make up, this would make no sense. I don't know how to convince you, but it's all true. Kel is standing by the sink, Bethany and Ray are over by the sliding glass door, and Cel is by the fridge."

"Can you prove it?" Jackson's voice was hostile.

"Not that they're standing there, but I can prove they're real." Lance turned and pulled a notepad out of the junk drawer he had. He grabbed a pen and tossed both on the table in front of Jackson. "Write something down. I'll stand across the room. The ghosts will tell me what you write." Lance moved to the farthest point in the room from Jackson.

Jackson quirked a brow but wrote something quickly.

"He wrote the words, fuck this," Ray told him.

Lance sighed. "Crude, but I get your point. You wrote, fuck this."

Jackson narrowed his eyes and wrote something else, this time holding the pad at a different angle as if trying to make sure Lance couldn't see from the distance he was standing.

"He wrote, insane," Cel said.

"I can see why you'd think I'm insane. I thought I was at first too. I'm fully aware of how crazy I sound, but I assure you, I'm not insane." Lance stared at his brother.

"You're guessing," Jackson grunted.

“Then ask me something only Kel would know.” Lance watched as Kel moved closer to Jackson so he could see the notepad.

Jackson wrote something.

“He asked what my full name is.” Kel smiled. “Kelson Aaron Hunter, but he calls me Kelpie.”

Lance laughed. “Really?”

Kel nodded. “It’s my nickname.”

“Does Jackson have one too?” Lance asked, curious what nickname his brother would earn.

“Yeah, but I’m not sharing it. That’s up to him.”

“Fine.” Lance sighed, then refocused on Jackson who was looking almost angry that Lance was talking randomly to thin air. “His name is Kelson Aaron Hunter, but you call him Kelpie.”

Jackson’s face paled. “How did you know that?”

“Kel just told me.” Lance shrugged.

“Where’s he from?” Jackson asked.

“Pocatello, Idaho,” Kel answered.

“Really? I hear Idaho is beautiful.” Lance smiled.

Jackson stood up. “This can’t be real.”

“I know, but it is.”

“Okay, this one you can’t know. There’s no way you could look it up or find out. No one knows but Kel.” Jackson took a deep breath. “What happened in Germany and what city did it happen in?”

Lance listened to the answers from Kel, then looked at Jackson. “Mia happened and it was in Essen, Germany.”

Jackson’s eyes widened.

“Who’s Mia?” Lance asked Kel.

Kel laughed. “Nope, that’s a story I’m not telling.”

“Oh, come on. You can’t leave me wondering.” Lance smiled at Kel. “Is this someone Jackson hooked up with?”

Kel just laughed more.

“Are you talking to me?” Jackson asked.

“No, to Kel. He’s refusing to tell me anything about Mia.”

“Good, he shouldn’t.” Jackson started to pace.

“So you finally believe me that he’s here?” Lance asked, unable to read his brother’s reaction.

“I don’t know. But there is no way you could have found out about Mia.” Jackson looked around the room. “He’s really here?”

Lance nodded. “He’s standing by the stove right now.”

“What’s he wearing?” Jackson asked.

“Wait, I know why he’s asking this.” Kel’s clothes suddenly changed from the dark blue shirt he was wearing to a bright pink one.

“Black jeans and a bright pink t-shirt.” Lance moved closer to the table. If Jackson wasn’t going to believe him now, there wasn’t much more he could do to convince him.

“Holy shit.” Jackson sank back down into his chair.

Lance walked over, pulled two bottles of water from the fridge, and set one in front of Jackson before he took a seat beside him. “I know this is all hard to believe, but I’m not making it up. In a few minutes, Angus will show up with his mother who can also see ghosts. She helped me understand what was going on when I started to see them. I have no idea why I see them, but it’s real.” He glanced over at Bethany and Ray, then at Cel. “Cel is a friend I met one day at the park. You might remember her cooking show. You used to watch it all the time. Celeste Dupont. She died of a heart attack while filming her show. She’s been teaching me to cook. Then there’s Ray. I met him at lunch one day. He’s been dead for around a hundred years. And Bethany is here. She was murdered recently and helped lead Angus and Franks to her killer.” He twisted the cap on his water bottle open. “Lizzy and

I are the only ones who see the ghosts, but everyone else who will be here tonight knows we see them and will at times interact with them through Lizzy or me.”

Jackson shook his head. “It’s not possible.”

Lance didn’t say anything. He just glanced up at Cel who was staring down at Jackson with a sympathetic look in her eyes.

“Give him time. He’ll talk when he’s ready.” Cel smiled. “It’s shocking to have everything you’ve believed be different than you thought.”

Haunt barked at the sound of the front door opening. The dog ran off to welcome whoever it was. A few moments later Haunt returned, followed by Angus, Franks, Lizzy, and Martin.

“You must be Jackson.” Lizzy walked up to Lance’s brother and offered her hand. “I’m Lizzy, and this is my husband, Martin.” She grinned. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Lance has told us so much about you.”

“The pleasure is mine.” Jackson took her hand, then Martin’s. He still looked uncomfortable and that look only got worse as Lizzy turned to Kel.

“You must be Kel. I’m so glad you came with Jackson.” She grinned at Kel. “I’m looking forward to hearing your story later tonight.”

“Where’s Betty?” Lance asked, noticing the ghost that usually tagged along with Lizzy wasn’t there.

“She’ll be by later. She had some friends visiting and is at our place. They’re heading out of town in a few hours, then she’ll be here.” Martin took a seat at the table, laughing as Haunt jumped up with her paws on his knees. “How’s my favorite furry friend?”

Jackson stared over at Lance, confusion in his eyes.

Lance smiled. “It’s a lot to take in. Give yourself time, then we’ll talk. I know Kel has a lot he wants to talk to you about. We’ll get to all that later. Right now, Cel and I are going

to get dinner going while the rest of you visit.” He stood, went to Angus, and leaned into him, giving him a small kiss. “Glad you made it.”

“Almost didn’t. Franks wanted to keep working.” Angus laughed.

“Me?” Franks shook his head. “Liar. I was glad to get out of there. You’re the one who said we should stay. I had to drag you out of the office.”

“Still searching for Santa’s killer?” Martin asked.

“Yeah, and we’ve only got two more people to identify from the hotel. I was hoping to get that done tonight, but Franks insisted we finish up tomorrow,” Angus told his father.

“If we haven’t found their identity by now, it’s not going to come easy. I wasn’t missing out on one of Cel’s meals to stare at a computer for the next few hours.” Franks pulled out a chair and sat, smiling as Haunt ran to him for more scratches. “Hey, girl, did you miss me?”

“You ready to do this?” Lance asked Cel.

“Sure am. But we need to clear them all out of our kitchen first.” Cel nodded to the group around the kitchen table.

“Cel and I need room. Take this to the living room or out back.” He figured it might be too cold outside for the still living right now. They’d had a sudden cold front move in over the afternoon and temperatures were plummeting.

“Living room. I’m too old for this cold.” Lizzy stood. “Kel can tell me what he’s been up to since he died.”

Jackson paled.

“And I’ll help Jackson get used to the fact his brother sees ghosts.” Angus gripped Jackson’s shoulder. “Come on. We’ve all been in your shoes. We know what you’re going through.”

Franks nodded. “I thought they were all crazy when I found out.”

“Yeah, I’m still struggling to believe this isn’t some big prank.” Jackson stood.

“Franks, grab us each a beer.” Angus looked at Jackson. “It’s not a prank. It’s all true. We’ll help you understand. I grew up around it. Doesn’t mean your brother’s not crazy, but just not about ghosts.”

Lance laughed. “Love you too.”

Angus grinned over his shoulder as he led Jackson from the room.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“This is really good,” Jackson said after swallowing a bite of his chicken. “I have to admit, I’m shocked. The last time you tried to cook dinner for me, you burned the pasta for spaghetti.”

Pride swelled in Lance’s chest. Despite the fact that everyone else had told him he’d done a great job with dinner, hearing it from his brother meant even more. “Thanks. I couldn’t have done it without Cel.” Lance glanced out the window to where all the ghosts were talking in the backyard.

Jackson still hadn’t seemed to accept the fact that the ghosts were around. After their conversation earlier, he hadn’t brought it up again and seemed to be ignoring the fact that Lance and Lizzy had been talking to the unseen spirits throughout the night. “You guys eat this good all the time?”

“Almost every Friday.” Franks patted his stomach.

Lance nodded. “Cel picks a menu, then tells me what to shop for. I’ve learned a lot over the last few months. I never thought I’d enjoy cooking, but I do.”

“God, I remember when you would live off cereal and frozen dinners just to avoid having to cook anything.” Jackson shook his head. “You’ve grown up well, little brother.”

“Thank you.” Lance grinned, unable to hide the happiness he was feeling.

Martin glanced over at Jackson. “I hear you used to watch Cel’s cooking show as well.”

“I did. I loved that she chose things that were different. It wasn’t just pot roast, it was a brandy flavored pot roast, or like tonight, not just chicken, but lemonade chicken. But most of all, I loved her desserts.”

“Then you’re in for a treat. I made her cherry shortcake earlier today and brought it over for everyone to enjoy,”

Martin told them. "It's one of my favorites."

"That sounds amazing. I must have missed that episode. I didn't even find out that she'd died until a friend's mother mentioned it when we were visiting them. I used to look forward to coming home and watching her show and cooking whatever she made that week." Jackson reached for his drink.

"Well, now you can have her in your kitchen and help you cook as long as either Lance or I'm around to help you know what she's telling you to do. She's come over to our place a few times over the last few weeks to help Martin cook. I have to say, I've never eaten better." Lizzy gave her husband a sweet smile.

"I'd move Cel in if she'd let me," Martin teased.

"As if you don't have enough going on with Lizzy and Betty." Angus set his fork down and sat back.

"I hardly notice them anymore." Martin winked.

Lance laughed, pretty sure that he was more than aware of what Lizzy and her ghostly BFF got up to.

Jackson sighed. "You really believe they see ghosts?"

Martin nodded. "I can't deny it. I've seen so much happen that I couldn't explain it any other way. It wasn't always easy to believe. When I met Lizzy, she was upfront about her ability from day one. On our first date, she was speaking with a ghost at the restaurant. It was the original owner of the place who was hoping she'd pass a message to her son who wasn't running things the way they liked."

"Did she give them the message?" Jackson asked.

"No, Lizzy has a rule not to give messages to people unless it's very important. It leads to too many questions about her ability. If she gave in to one ghost, others would come around begging for the same." Martin glanced at Lizzy. "She's only done it a few times."

Lizzy nodded. "I may hint at something if a ghost gives me information for a family member. Like if I'm told the

diamond ring is hidden somewhere, I might hint to the family to look in that location for something, but I keep it vague.”

“We have a ghost right now, the Santa who was murdered, he wants someone to confront his wife about the fact she was cheating on him. We won’t do that. For one, he’s dead. It really doesn’t matter now, and for two, it would just freak the wife out and make us look crazy. I’m sure there are some who can see ghosts who will do such things, but Lizzy and me, we both agree to avoid talking to family because it only causes problems. Most wouldn’t believe us anyway.” Lance met Jackson’s gaze. “If my own brother has trouble believing, imagine how much harder it is for strangers.”

Jackson sighed. “I’m trying to take you seriously. I admit, I can’t figure out how you know so much about Kel. They’re things that no one would know but him. It’s just so crazy. My entire life I’ve believed that when we die, that’s it. I never thought of Heaven or Hell as being real. I figured we just faded out and everything would go black.”

“I’m not trying to tell you Heaven or Hell are real. I don’t know that. Even the ghosts don’t know that. What I know is they don’t just fade out. They are suddenly right there by their body when they die, and they tell me there’s a bright light that they are drawn to. They tell me it’s hard to resist, and that most ghosts walk directly into it as soon as they die, but a few, like Kel, have some reason for sticking around. For Bethany, it was to help find her killer. Ray just wanted to explore and said he wasn’t ready to go into the light. Kel has his own reasons for sticking around that I’m sure he’ll have me explain if you’re ever ready to sit down and let him say whatever it is he needs to say.”

Jackson paled. “Kel is really here with us right now?”

“He’s out in the backyard with the other ghosts. They went out there while we ate. He’s been with you almost the whole time you’ve been back. He goes on runs with you every morning. I’m guessing he’s been with you and your team since he died,” Lance explained.

“But why? It makes no sense. If what you say is true, why wouldn’t he move on?” Jackson ran his fingers over his short hair.

“That’s something you’ll have to ask him.” Lance wasn’t about to get into Kel’s reasons while everyone was sitting around the table with them.

“How can we help you believe?” Lizzy asked.

Jackson shrugged. “I’m not sure. It sounds so insane.”

“Did you do the trick with the notepad like you did with me?” Franks asked.

“I did.” Lance laughed. “Kel’s given me things to tell him that only Kel and Jackson could know. I was hoping that by seeing you all accept it for truth, it would help him understand it’s not so farfetched, but it hasn’t seemed to help.”

“It has. I think.” Jackson sighed. “I keep going back and forth in my mind, talking myself out of believing it’s possible.” He stared at Lance. “I mean, why you? Why would you be allowed to see them and not anyone else?”

Lance shrugged.

“I’ve asked myself that same question for most of my life.” Lizzy buttered a roll as she spoke. “I’ve met only a handful of others who can see them. It’s a rare gift. One that I have no answers as to why only a select few receive. I wish you could all see them. Lance is the only one I’ve met who gained the ability later in life. Everyone else I’ve met has been able to see them from birth.”

“What do they look like?” Jackson asked.

“Just like you or I do, only they have a slight shimmer around them. It’s hard to explain. From a distance, it’s hard to tell who is alive and who’s a ghost, but when you get closer, there’s a fuzziness around them. It can take time to get used to looking for the difference. And I don’t want you thinking ghosts are everywhere. They really aren’t. I can go days without seeing a ghost when I go out. Then suddenly there will be one. I’d guess ninety-nine percent go directly into the light and never consider staying. I bet most never know they could

stay.” Lizzy smiled. “It seems more common since we can see them, and they tend to hang around us.”

“And everyone here believes you?” Jackson asked.

Everyone around the table nodded.

“It still freaks me out, but I’ve seen too much happen not to believe. And they can touch you. That really freaked me out.” Franks gave a dramatic shake.

“They touch you?” Jackson’s eyes went wide.

“It’s not the same feeling as if I were to touch you.” Lance smiled. “It’s more like an electrical shock or brush of electricity. It’s hard to explain. Kind of like when you get a chill. I’m sure Kel will be happy to show you when he comes in.”

Jackson just stared at him.

“Give it time. You’ll start to see that we can’t be making up everything.” Lizzy smiled. “I know it can be hard to change something you’ve believed your entire life, but once you open your mind to the idea, it’s not so strange.”

Jackson nodded. “I hope so.”

Angus, who was sitting beside Jackson, gave his shoulder a squeeze. “We’ve all been in your shoes.”

“So speaking of ghosts, have we heard from our Santa?” Franks asked Lance.

“Not since he left the morgue to try and find someone to confront his wife about her affair. I’ve never seen a ghost so angry.” Lance leaned back in his chair. “I get it had to be a horrible shock, but he was mad enough that if he had a way to kill, he just might be a danger to her.”

“Thankfully, that’s not possible.” Lizzy sighed. “Be careful he doesn’t take it out on you. While he can’t do anything physically to you, he can be a nuisance.”

“I haven’t seen him since, but I’ll keep an eye out. I was going to ask if you need me for his funeral?” Lance asked.

“I don’t think so. We’ll go, but I doubt our killer will make an appearance. And even if he does, we won’t know it. We don’t have enough leads to work with on this case. If our victim sees anyone that he thinks might be guilty, he’ll let you know. It’s not worth you taking time away from work to go with us.” Angus smiled. “Unless you want time away.”

“Not for this one. I’m happy to let you guys deal with this. Unlike the other ghosts I’ve met on the job, this one I have no desire to help. The sooner he’s gone, the better.” Lance hated any idea that had him dealing with Gene again.

“Will he move on once you solve his murder?” Jackson asked.

“There’s no way to know. That’s totally up to him. I hope so, but he might choose to stick around. He’s going to freak when his son and wife start getting rid of all his Christmas and Santa stuff. The entire basement is full of his gear.” Angus rolled his eyes. “Seriously, there is enough down there to decorate the neighborhood.”

“Speaking of decorating, I’ll be working on it this weekend if anyone wants to join me,” Lizzy looked around the room.

“I’m free all weekend,” Lance offered.

“Franks and I have some work to do, but I’ll help when I can,” Angus said.

“Same.” Franks smiled. “I love what you’ve done to my place.”

“Thanks. Betty and I have had fun planning what we want to do.” Lizzy put a hand on her husband’s arm. “Martin has been a great help too.”

“I’m free all weekend if you need help,” Jackson offered.

“Thank you. I’ll plan on being here around eleven tomorrow morning. We’ll get Lance’s tree up and decorated, then move outside. Once we finish here, we’ll see if we have time to get to Angus’s. If not, we’ll do that on Sunday,” Lizzy said.

“Feel free to use whatever I have stored here, but also make sure I get a bill for anything you buy. Don’t try and pay for it yourself like you did on Halloween,” Lance warned Lizzy.

“If I buy it all, I can use it all again next year and split it up differently throughout the houses,” Lizzy argued.

“It’s not like we won’t share, Mom. You know we’d be fine with you mixing stuff up. I agree with Lance, make sure we pay our share of this.” Angus looked at his dad. “If she doesn’t, you do it.”

Martin nodded. “I’ll do whatever Lizzy needs me to.”

Lance laughed, knowing that was Martin’s way of saying he’d do whatever Lizzy told him to and if she told him not to charge anyone, he wouldn’t.

“Help me clear these dishes so we can all enjoy some cherry shortcake.” Lizzy stood, putting an end to the discussion.

Lance helped clear the table and put things away. As he did, he thought about how great it would be to have his brother here all the time for their Friday get-togethers. He smiled, thinking about how he might have to get a larger table to fit everyone eventually. He’d missed his brother so much, and nights like this were a hard reminder of how hard it was not seeing him for months or even years at a time.

He helped Martin and Lizzy serve the shortcake then took a seat again, ready to taste something new. He hadn’t tried this recipe before and looked forward to trying it. He was about to take his first bite when Jackson gently touched his arm. He glanced over at his brother, unsure what he saw in his eyes.

“Can we talk tonight when everyone leaves? Somewhere alone with just you, me, and Kel?” Jackson’s voice was barely a whisper.

“Of course. I’ll let Ray and Bethany know we need space. They’ll understand.” He hoped his brother was ready to take the step and believe. Just the fact he was including Kel in their conversation was a good sign. It showed he was at least trying

to believe. It was a step in the right direction. Lance smiled at his brother, then nodded to the shortcake. "Try it."

As he took his own bite of dessert and watched and listened to the reaction of the others trying it, he thought about how much this group meant to him. He might not have a huge family of his own anymore, but he had his brother, and the men and women around him were like family. His life was good. If he could just get his brother's acceptance, everything would be perfect.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The house was finally quiet as Lance took a seat in the living room. Jackson relaxed back at the other end of the couch, looking a bit nervous. Kel appeared to be sitting in a large recliner, close to Jackson. Lance glanced at Jackson and sighed. “You don’t need to look so nervous.”

“I just can’t wrap my head around this. I start to think I believe what you’re saying then I talk myself out of it. It’s too crazy. Too impossible.” Jackson ran his hand over his head then slumped back against the couch. “Is he here?”

“Kel?” Lance asked.

Jackson nodded.

“He’s in the blue recliner beside you.” Lance smiled at the ghost.

Jackson stared at the spot, narrowing his eyes as if that would suddenly make it possible to see Kel.

“Tell him what I’m wearing,” Kel said.

“I’m supposed to tell you he’s wearing a pair of black sweatpants, a white t-shirt with pink print that says, ‘real men wear pink’, and bright pink socks.” Lance wondered what was up with all the pink.

Jackson laughed. “He always wore something pink. It was his favorite color. We used to give him so much shit about it. He loved it when they started selling pink camo print on things.” He continued to stare at the spot. “If he’s really here, why? You said he could have gone into a light?”

“I couldn’t leave the team. I couldn’t leave you. I saw how messed up you were when I died. How you blamed yourself. I couldn’t leave knowing that you blamed yourself for my death. It wasn’t your fault.” Kel spoke directly to Jackson, despite Jackson not being able to hear him.

Lance repeated everything, not adding his own thoughts because he knew this was too serious of a conversation.

Jackson sucked in a breath. “But it was my fault. If I hadn’t stopped. You told me you had a bad feeling. If I’d just listened to you. I’m the one who stopped to talk to that kid when he ran up to us. I thought he just wanted a piece of candy. I should have listened to you and gotten our asses out of there.” Jackson closed his eyes for a long moment. “You died because I ignored your warning.”

“You know that’s not true. You just noticed the kid before I did. I would have stopped. We thought the village was safe. None of us could have known that was going to happen. The only person to blame for my death is the asshole who shot me. You have to stop feeling like you caused it. You didn’t.” Kel glanced at Lance. “Tell him.”

Lance did, ignoring all the questions he had. He wanted to know what happened, how Kel had been killed, but he kept just to the conversation.

Jackson blinked hard, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “It should have been me. I should have died. You had Casey and Shani to support and go home to.”

“Shani and Casey are fine. She’s engaged to a great guy who will be a wonderful stepfather to Casey. Sure, I miss them, and it was hard at first, but they got through it. They’re happy now. I’m okay with things. I need you to be okay too.” Kel leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

Lance tried not to let the emotions of the conversation get to him as he repeated Kel’s words. He also tried not to be angry that Jackson didn’t consider how he would feel if he died. Maybe a wife and kid were a bit different than brothers, but the pain would have been just as hard and just as real for him if it had been Jackson who’d been shot.

Jackson turned, facing where Kel sat despite it appearing empty to him. “But why did you stay?”

Kel shrugged. “I didn’t have anything better to do. I wasn’t ready to move on. What if I don’t like whatever is

next? My family is here. You and the team are here. I wasn't ready to leave you guys. I still want to be a part of the team."

Jackson fought hard to hold back his tears as Lance told him what Kel was saying. Lance wondered if Jackson would tell the other members of his team about this. They'd think he was crazy, just like Jackson had thought he was at first. At least it looked as if Jackson was starting to believe him. The fact he was talking to the empty space where Kel sat had to mean something.

"You've been with us all this time?" Jackson asked.

"Almost all of it. I've gone home to check on Casey and Shani, but once I knew they'd be okay, I've been with you. I almost didn't come here with you, figuring you'd want privacy here, but I'm glad I did. I had no idea your brother could see ghosts." Kel smiled at Lance and waited for Lance to repeat everything.

"I didn't know either." Jackson glared at Lance. "I'm still struggling to believe it's possible. My mind is looking for any way he could know all these things."

"Yet you're now talking directly to where Kel sits and not to me. I take that as progress." Lance smiled smugly.

Jackson looked shocked, then sighed. "I guess I am. It's hard not to believe. Kel and I were best friends. I guess there's a part of me that wants to believe. A part of me that has always felt him with me." He glanced at Lance. "Someone mentioned earlier they can touch us?"

"Yeah, but it's faint and hard to recognize if you don't know what to expect. Do you want to try?" Lance asked.

"Yeah, I'd like to know." Jackson took a deep breath. "What do I do?"

"Just hold out your arm. When Kel touches you, you'll feel a soft electric current brush over your skin. It might be like a chill running through you, but you'll feel the electricity caress over the area he's touching," Lance explained.

Jackson held out his hand and Lance watched as Kel got up and moved to stand beside him. He gently touched

Jackson's arm, running his fingers gently over his skin.

Jackson jerked back, then looked at Lance in shock. "Was that him?"

Lance nodded.

Jackson grinned. "Can he hug me?"

Lance glanced at Kel.

Kel shrugged. "I've never tried it. I didn't want to freak someone out by doing it, but I can."

"He can, but you might be overwhelmed by the feeling," Lance warned.

"I want to try." Jackson stood. "Kel, if you're really there, give me a hug."

Lance watched as Kel embraced Jackson. He saw the moment Jackson felt it because he stiffened, and his eyes went wide. He slowly brought his arms up, closing them around the area where he thought Kel was. To Lance, it looked like Jackson's arms struck through Kel's body. He was off by a couple of inches if Kel had been solid.

"My God, he's really here." Jackson released his hold. "I can feel his arms around me."

Lance smiled. "I tried to tell you."

"I know, but you have to admit you sound crazy." Jackson stared at the spot where Kel stood. "I wish I could see him."

"I wish you could too, but I'll speak for him any time you two want to talk while you're here." It was all Lance could offer. He wished he didn't have to be involved. Didn't have to hear their conversations, but there was no other way.

Jackson turned to face Lance. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

"It's okay. I never expected you to accept this at my word. I knew you'd struggle. Having Kel here with you actually made it easier. I always planned on telling you, but it would have been harder without Kel." Lance smiled at the ghost. "I'm glad you came."

“So am I.” Kel sat back down in the chair. “Though you might regret offering to talk for me. I have a lot to say. A lot of catching up to do.”

“Then it’s a good thing it’s Friday and I don’t have to work in the morning.” Lance glanced at Jackson. “Kel wants to talk more. How about I go get us some more of that shortcake Martin left for us and we get comfortable?”

“You really don’t mind?” Jackson asked.

“As long as you don’t mind me knowing all your and Kel’s secrets,” he teased.

Jackson glanced over at the area Kel was sitting. “We won’t tell him everything, but there’s a ton I want to talk about.” He refocused on Lance. “I’ll help.”

Lance headed for the kitchen, relieved things had gone so well. He still wasn’t sure Jackson fully believed, but it was clear he couldn’t explain away what was happening. Hopefully, by the time they got done talking tonight, there would be no more doubts. He pulled the shortcake out of the fridge and handed it to Jackson, then pulled out the tub of whipped cream. “I’m just taking this in with us. I know whatever we put on now won’t be enough.”

Jackson laughed. “Remember that Thanksgiving when we stole the whole tub of whipped cream from the fridge and Mom had none to use with dessert that night?”

Lance laughed, remembering Jackson and him hiding in his bedroom closet with two spoons. They’d eaten the whole thing of whipped cream, then hid everything at the bottom of his bedroom trash can, including the spoons. His mother had been furious, but she’d never been able to prove they were behind the theft. It was a secret they’d both kept to this day.

“Please tell me Mom and Dad aren’t ghosts still hanging around and she heard that,” Jackson whispered.

Lance shook his head. “I would have told you if they were around. I wish they were. I’d love the chance to talk to them again.”

“Have you seen anyone we know?” Jackson asked.

“Nope. Like I said, most go directly into the light. I’ve only been seeing ghosts for a few months. I’m sure in time there will be people I know.” He wasn’t sure if that would help with any grieving he might do or not. It was something he wondered about often. This was still all so new to him. Maybe it was something he’d talk to Lizzy about. Surely, she’d lost friends and family over the years who stuck around to give her a final message.

“This has to be so crazy for you. Especially with your job,” Jackson said, forcing Lance to refocus on the conversation.

“It hasn’t been too bad at work really. A few ghosts, but not as many as you’d think.” Lance grabbed two bottles of water to take with him, then started for the living room.

“They aren’t dangerous at all, are they?”

“No.” Lance set everything he was carrying on the coffee table. “They can’t hurt me. Just scream a lot and distract me. So far, they’ve all been decent except the Santa ghost we’re dealing with now. He’s a bit angry and upset, but still not a danger.”

“I’d like to go to work with you one day while we’re here and see what you do.” Kel still sat in the recliner since he couldn’t help carry anything.

“Sure, you’re welcome anytime. Jeremy would love to have some company. He’s a twenty-four-year-old ghost who stays around the morgue. He’s learning to be a medical examiner, but I’m not sure why since he can’t do anything with the knowledge since he’s a ghost.” Lance handed the whipped cream to Jackson after heaping a ton on his cake.

“I get it. I still train with the team and learn everything I can. I have to keep my mind busy, or I will go nuts thinking about everything.” Kel shook his head at Jackson. “You both have sweet teeth.”

“Always have. Used to drive our parents crazy because we’d sneak in and steal anything sweet we could find.” Lance grinned.

“I hate I can’t hear both sides of this conversation.”
Jackson leaned back on the couch.

“Sorry, I sometimes forget I need to repeat what’s being said. Okay, I’m yours for the next few hours. What’s on your mind?” Lance asked as he took a bite of his cake, and readied himself for a long night of relaying conversation so Jackson could catch up with his best friend.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Angus walked slowly as he took in the array of photos that had been set up in the lobby of the small church. Each photo was of Gene dressed as Santa Claus at different locations. They seemed to be displayed by age, the first showing a much younger Gene, wearing a fake beard and a cheaper-looking costume. But as the photos progressed, so had Gene and his costume until the pictures were of a well-adorned costume and Gene with a thick white beard of his own. Angus had to wonder if Gene did something for his hair to go so white instead of the dull gray that most people got as they aged.

“Can you imagine how many kids he must have seen over the years?” Franks whispered beside him.

“Thousands. I wonder what the oddest request he ever got was.” Angus paused in front of one of the larger images. He had no clue if Gene’s ghost was around. He’d decided not to have Lance come with them. If Gene saw someone at the funeral who he thought might be suspicious, he’d tell Lance later. From the reports of how Gene had been acting, the less Lance had to interact with him the better.

“Big turnout. I wonder if he knew all these people or if they’d just visited him as Santa during Christmas?” Franks glanced around.

Angus turned and looked at the crowd, watching people’s reactions to the photos they’d been looking at. “I’m betting most are fans, or whatever you call them for Santa.” He shook his head. “I swear I’ll never look at a Santa the same after this.”

“You and me both.” Franks shook his head. “I had nightmares about Christmas after being in his basement.”

Angus laughed, but completely understood. It had been way too much. “Let’s get in there and find a spot in the back.”

He fidgeted with his tie, longing to pull it free. He prayed the funeral would go quickly so he could shed the tie and jacket. He wasn't one to dress up and only did it when he was forced to. Court dates, an occasional friend's wedding, and always for the funerals. He'd been to more funerals than he could count because of his job. A detective could read a lot from how people grieved, and more than once it was something that happened at a funeral that gave them the lead they needed to close a case.

As they sat, Franks leaned in close. "At least they aren't playing Christmas music."

Angus cringed. "Something tells me Gene would have wanted them to." He took in the Christmas wreath that lay over the casket. While there were a few normal floral arrays around the room, most everything displayed was Christmassy. Wreaths were placed in several locations, including on the podium. Christmas garland wrapped around the casket and also decorated the rows of seats where mourners sat. As others started to sit, Angus noticed a man sitting with the family he didn't know but could swear he'd seen before. "Do you know the man sitting beside the son?"

Franks leaned to see, then shook his head. "Doesn't look familiar. You?"

"I've seen him somewhere but can't place where." He tried to recall places he might have seen the man but kept coming up blank. "I want to say it was recent. Hell, we see so many people every day it could be from anywhere."

"It'll come to you. Probably at two in the morning when you're trying to sleep," Franks teased.

"No kidding. Isn't that how it always happens?" Angus continued to watch the man, trying to place where he'd seen him. He was sixty or seventy years old, with salt and pepper hair. His face was pot-marked, and the red flush on his cheeks had Angus thinking he was a drinker. He wore an ill-fitting dark suit without a tie. Unlike the rest of the family, he didn't speak with others and acted as if he didn't know anyone there other than Gene's wife and son.

“Could be his brother. They were going to try and contact him,” Franks whispered.

Angus nodded, trying to see if they looked anything alike, but if they were brothers, he couldn't see any resemblance. Neither Roger nor Melissa seemed to give the man much attention despite the fact he was sitting on the front row right beside them. He was definitely someone they needed to identify. Maybe once he had a name, it would remind him where he'd seen the man before.

Franks pulled out his cell phone and while appearing to look as if he was reading a message, Angus watched him take several photos of the family and the stranger with them. He mentally smacked himself for not thinking about doing that himself.

“We can run it through the database when we get back.” Franks shoved his phone back in his pocket as a hush came over the gathered crowd and a man walked up to speak to the podium.

Angus nodded, then turned his focus on the speaker. As the funeral went on and one speaker after another shared their memories of Gene, Angus watched the crowd, looking for anyone who didn't belong or might show a reaction to positive stories being told. A simple look of disgust or disagreement could go a long way in helping him find a suspect, but there wasn't anyone who caught his attention.

By the time the funeral was over, he wasn't any closer to finding out who'd killed Gene. Had not having Lance join them been a mistake? Was Gene there and if so, had he found someone that they needed to look into? Angus sighed. He was becoming too dependent on ghosts giving him leads and information. He had to remind himself that good detective work took time and just because the leads weren't falling into his lap like they had with his last few cases didn't mean they wouldn't show up in time. He just had to focus on what evidence they had and do the work like he'd used to before he'd met Lance and had the assistance of ghosts to help him gain information.

“Are we sticking around?” Franks asked as everyone started to leave.

Angus shook his head. “I’ll call Roger and find out who that was sitting with them. No need to bother the family right now. I don’t see any point in going to the cemetery.”

“Neither do I.” Franks stood. “Let’s get back so I can run that photo through the system and see if we get a hit. I also want to head over to the hotel later tonight and walk the scene again. If our shooter was targeting Santa, how did he know where he’d be? And if he wasn’t, why did he decide to take out Santa and none of the others around? What reason would he have to just take out one person? It had to be targeted, but I just can’t wrap my head around why Santa. I get the guy wasn’t the nicest of people, but as Santa, everyone seemed to love him.”

Angus nodded. He’s had the same thoughts as well. Whoever shot Gene could have done it when he was out of costume. He had to know that kids were around and obviously didn’t care about the trauma it could cause. His gut clenched each time he thought about the kids who had witnessed the murder. It made him even more determined to find this killer and lock him up. He needed to pay for what he did to those kids just as much if not more than for killing Gene. “While you’re at the hotel, I’m going to see if we’ve got ballistics back on the bullets and find out if anyone’s had a chance to go through Gene’s laptop yet.”

“I’m starting to agree with Lance and noticing how the State is spending money on cars and other things when we could use it to hire more help. It’s not just the Medical Examiner’s Office that is waiting days for information to come in. We are as well. It shouldn’t take this long to get ballistics or go through a laptop. You’re probably not going to have ballistics back for a few weeks.” Franks unlocked the car as they approached it.

Angus climbed in and sighed as he clicked his seat belt into place. “I’m going to call Lance later and find out if Gene’s been around the morgue. Find out if he was at the funeral and if he noticed anything or anyone out of place. Last I heard,

Lance hadn't seen him in a while. For all I know, he moved on."

"I doubt that. From what I've heard, Gene was too angry to move on. He won't go until he knows who killed him, and even then, he might still hang around." Franks started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. "I have to wonder if the ghost was to just move on, would they find out who killed them? Would they just suddenly know or be able to see everything? You know how people say their life plays out before them? Hell, I'm more confused about death now that I know about ghosts than I was before."

Angus laughed. "Yeah, it makes you wonder. I know I've never heard of a ghost seeing their lives flash before their eyes, so maybe it's when they move on, but then how would people who have near-death experiences know about that? They obviously didn't cross over all the way if they live to tell about it. But I've wondered that as well. It would make sense that once you cross over, you'd have all the answers, but then again, maybe at that point it just doesn't matter anymore."

"What do you think is there? Heaven like many believe?"

"I don't have a clue. I like to think it's something Heaven like. I hope it's not just another continuation of what we do here. I hope there's something peaceful and restful where we can be without pain and suffering." Angus shrugged. "I'm just happy to know we don't end. Knowing the spirit separates from the body after death is enough for me to know for now. I'll decide when it's my time if I go into the light or hang out for a bit longer. A lot of that will depend on who's still living when I die. If my mom or Lance is still around, I'll stay at least long enough to talk to them before moving on. Mom would never forgive me if I didn't at least say goodbye."

"I think Lance might as well. I'm not sure I'd want to stay, and pausing to talk to Lance or your mom would make it harder to move on. It would tempt me to stay here. I might just rush into the light and be done with this place." Franks smiled over at Angus. "But neither of us are going to die any time soon, so it won't matter. Hopefully, we have another sixty or seventy years to go before we have to deal with that choice."

“You want to live to be a hundred?” Angus shook his head. “Nope. Not unless I’m in perfect health. I don’t want to end up in some nursing home with someone having to wipe my ass every day. If I can’t take care of myself, it’s time to get out of here.”

“I agree, but at that point, there isn’t much we can do about it. I think I’d rather go out in spray of bullets than end up bound to a bed for years.” Franks turned in to the station’s parking lot.

“You and me both.” Angus needed to talk to Lance about his desires. While his mom and dad would handle things, they were getting older. If things kept going good with Lance, he’d end up being the one to handle things if anything happened. He needed to make sure Lance knew his wishes and desires. Even if his parents were still around, he didn’t want Lance arguing with his mother to keep him alive if there really wasn’t any quality to his life. He sighed again, not wanting to go down that road right now. It was too depressing. He climbed out of the car and followed Franks inside.

“I’ve got to hit the john. I’ll meet you in the office.” Franks turned for the bathroom.

Angus nodded and headed into his desk. He wasn’t shocked to find the office empty. They had several murders currently being investigated. He sank down into his chair and turned on his computer, trying to think of any leads they’d missed or something that might give them a break in the case. Maybe it was because of the kids who witnessed the murder, but he needed to close this case. He needed to find out why someone would kill Santa Claus in the middle of a public street with kids watching. He wanted answers and it was frustrating that he wasn’t finding any.

He picked up the phone and sent a quick text to Lance asking if he’d seen Gene, but he didn’t have much hope he would have. With the funeral going on, Gene was probably with his family, cursing his wife and her lover. Knowing Lance would get back to him when he could, Angus went through the witness statements again, searching for anything he might have missed. Someone had to have seen something.

No one moved around a city this size without someone noticing. There had to be answers. He just needed to find them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Would you have told me about your ability to talk to ghosts if Kel hadn’t been with me when I showed up?” Jackson asked Lance as they watched Haunt run around the backyard, chasing a large ball.

“I’d planned on it. I never thought about hiding it from you. It made me more determined to talk to you about it because Kel is here with you, but I would have gotten around to telling you before you went home.” It was cooler outside than Lance liked, but when he’d seen Jackson sitting at the patio table alone, he decided to join him. He had no idea where Kel had gone. He’d been gone when Lance had gotten home from work. “Are you still struggling to believe me?”

Jackson laughed. “At times. I mean, you’ve told me enough stuff that only Kel would know to convince me something is going on, but the rational side of my brain gets thinking about it all and I want to deny it’s all possible. I’ve tried to think about how you could get all this information, but there is no possible way. You’ve talked about stuff that only Kel would know. Stuff that happened minutes before he died that no other person in this world could know about. I have to believe you. I watched your other friend talk to the air as if someone was there, and it seemed as if she was having a full conversation with someone. And I highly doubt you got all your friends to pull a prank like this on me. I’m struggling with it, but I have to believe it. Kel was my best friend. It’s hard to think he’s been hanging around all this time and I didn’t feel him there.”

“If you believed in ghosts before this, you might have felt him. I bet now that you know, you’ll feel him around. He’ll let you know he’s there when you need him. Will you tell the other guys in your group?” Lance asked.

“I don’t think so. I’m not sure they’d believe me and the last thing I want is for them to think I’m losing my mind or going crazy. We went through hell when we lost Kel. I don’t

want to reopen old wounds. It's going to be strange knowing he's there with me and I can't talk to him." Jackson reached for his drink.

"You can talk to him. You just won't be able to hear his answer. I'm sure he'll love having you talk to him, even if it is one-sided. When you come back to visit, I'll be happy to sit down again and go over whatever you two need to say to each other." Lance really hoped that time would be soon and that his brother didn't decide to give the military more time.

"I wonder if Kel will move on if I come home for good or if he'd stay with the guys?" Jackson wondered.

"Perhaps he'll come back here with you. He was your best friend, right?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean he's ready to leave the others. I doubt he stuck around just for me. I guess it's something I'll ask him later." Jackson smiled as Haunt ran over and laid down at his feet. "She's a great dog."

"The best. I'm glad we decided to keep her. It helps that she can see Bethany and Ray. They entertain her when I'm at work or busy." Lance grinned as Haunt rested her head on Jackson's tennis shoe. "She seems taken with you."

"She makes me want to get a dog. Maybe when I settle down, she can help me pick one out. I'd like to come home to a dog every night. Have someone to go hiking and camping with. The longer I'm here, the more I think it's time to retire. I'm tired. I've lost too many good friends, seen too much. It's time to refocus and settle into a simpler life." Jackson ran his hand over his short hair. "I want what you have. Friends coming to dinner, someone to date and go out with, a normal life where I know where I'm going to be one day to the next. I always thought I'd get bored sitting around home with nothing to do, but maybe I've reached the age where that's just what I need."

"You talk as if you're sixty, not pushing forty." Lance laughed.

“I know, but I want to enjoy some of my younger years before I end up old and unable to do anything.” He met Lance’s gaze. “Or worse, dead like Kel and unable to live any kind of life.”

“I won’t argue that point. I’d rather you alive and kicking.” Lance had spent way too many nights worrying about his brother. He liked the idea of Jackson safe and sound in a home somewhere close to his. “But I also don’t think Kel has stopped living. Maybe in the physical sense, but he’s still around, going on those jogs with you every morning and running drills with you and your team. He hasn’t stopped learning and experiencing things. He just does it in a different way now.”

“I guess that’s true. Ray was talking about how he’s traveled the world to see things since he died. I kind of like that idea. No lines to wait in, no cost to travel, no deadlines to keep. Not that I’m looking to die any time soon, but I can see the advantages of it.” Jackson shrugged. “It’s given me a lot to think about.”

“Me too. I know I’ll probably stick around a bit, but I’m also curious what else is out there for us. Where do we go once we walk into that light? What new adventures are out there for us and is Ray missing out on something even more amazing by sticking around all these years?”

“Good questions,” Jackson agreed. “So, tell me more about you and Angus. Is it serious?”

Lance grinned. “We’re taking things very slowly, but I think they are serious. I’ve never dated anyone like him. It makes it easier that he understands about the ghosts, that’s for sure. I worry about his job, but I’m used to that because I’ve worried about yours for years. Things with Angus are just so easygoing and simple. He gets me. He accepts I’m just a boring medical examiner with a dull life. I don’t have to play things up to try and impress him. We’re happy just hanging out around the house or watching TV. I don’t have to force myself to go out to clubs or other places like I did with other guys I’ve dated.”

“So you think he’s the one?”

“I think he could be.”

“I like him. He’s good for you. His family seems to have adopted you as well, which eases my mind. I’ve always worried about you here alone while I’m gone. I’m glad to see you’ve finally got a good group of friends around. I wish you’d had them when you were in your accident. I know the people you work with were there for you, but I hated you didn’t have family or anyone close at your bedside.”

“I was unconscious for a lot of it, and once I was awake, I was in therapy and sleeping a lot. You would have been bored by my side. Once they knew I’d survive, there was no point in you coming home. You couldn’t have done anything. I was in pain and bitched a lot. We would have fought. I’m glad you listened and didn’t rush back.” Lance had little memory of the days after the accident. And the stuff he did remember he tried not to. It hadn’t been good.

“You’re okay now?” Jackson asked.

“Other than a few new scars and an occasional migraine, I am. Angus and Lizzy both are trained in this odd massage that helps my migraines. They work on my ears, hands, and feet to stimulate pressure points. It’s amazing how well it works. I haven’t had a migraine in a while now. I’m hoping they’ve gone away.” He touched the scar on the side of his head. “I was lucky. It could have been a lot worse.”

“I freaked when I found out. By the time I called to find out how you were, they’d gotten you stable, and they assured me you’d pull through, but it took them days to get hold of me. Had they gotten to me sooner, I would have come home.”

“Then I’m glad they didn’t. The worst was once I was home and recovering and couldn’t do much of anything. My arm was in a cast, the headaches were bad, and I was bored. I’d watched so much TV I wanted to throw the thing out the window after a while.” Lance narrowed his eyes at Jackson. “What about you? Any new injuries you haven’t told me about?”

“Actually, no. I sprained my ankle in Germany, but other than that, I’ve been lucky. Had a few close calls, but you know I won’t tell you about those. You only need to know about the hits, not the misses.” Jackson finished off his drink. “My team’s had a good few months. We’ve been busy, but everyone has come out alive.”

“Good, because I’d have to hurt you if you kept something serious from me,” Lance teased.

Jackson laughed. “I’m in one piece. That’s all that matters. So do you think I should come home to stay?”

“I want you to, but it’s not my choice. I want you happy. If coming home will make you happy, then I want you here. You’re welcome to stay with me while you look for a place or even permanently if you want. I have the room.”

Jackson held up a hand. “Not going to live with you. I might take you up on staying while I house hunt, but I want my own space. I don’t want to drive you nuts with my routines. Besides, I’d like to see if I can find a good woman to settle down with at some point. And who knows what will happen between you and Angus. You might be married by the time I get home.”

“I doubt that, but maybe. I won’t deny I like the thought, but I don’t see it happening anytime soon. We’ve only been together a few months. I’m not in any hurry to rush things. We’ll see where things go.” Lance paused as his phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and smiled as he saw Angus’s name. “Speak of the devil.” He stood as he answered. “Hey, you.”

“Hey, yourself. How was your day?”

“Typical. Nothing exciting. How about yours? How was the funeral?” He walked across the yard as he talked.

“There was a good crowd but didn’t see anyone of interest. There’s one guy we’re looking at, but I think it was Gene’s brother. He sat with the family. I’ll find out later once I can call Roger and ask about him. Have you seen Gene?” Angus asked.

“No, he hasn’t been around at all. In fact, I haven’t seen a ghost all day. Everyone’s gone from here except Jackson and me. I don’t know if they all went out on a ghostly outing or what they’re up to. Even Jeremy was gone today.”

“That’s strange. Maybe there was some ghost convention they all went to,” Angus joked. “Well, if you happen to see Gene, ask if he was at the funeral, and if so, if he noticed anything that might interest us. Franks got a picture of the guy with the family but didn’t get any hits in the system when we ran his photo. It’s probably just his brother, but I can’t get rid of the sense that I’ve seen the guy before somewhere. He looked familiar, but I can’t place why.”

“Did he look like Gene?”

“No, not at all, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“True. Well, if I see him, I’ll ask, but I haven’t seen him since he tried to get me to confront his wife about her affair. He was pissed off and left angry. I’m not sure he’ll be back around.” And that was more than okay with Lance. He didn’t want to see Gene again. That was one ghost he wouldn’t mind having go into the light.

“My guess is he’s trying to figure out a way to haunt his wife and make her life miserable. Still, if he’s around, I need to ask him some things. If you don’t want to deal with him, I can ask Mom to try and—”

“No, don’t make your mom have to deal with him. I’ll be around. Besides, if he’s going to show up, it will be at the morgue where he knows I can see him. He has no clue your mom can see ghosts and we need to keep it that way. He’ll bother her to talk to his wife, and we both know how that will go over with Lizzy.”

“She’d lay into him, and Betty would help. The guy wouldn’t know what hit him.” Angus laughed. “Perhaps we should let Mom have a go at him.”

“As fun as that might be to watch, I’d still rather keep your mother out of this case. The last thing she needs is Gene following her around, harassing her to speak to his wife.

Hopefully, he'll move on soon and none of us will have to deal with him. After the fit he threw at the morgue, I don't really care if you find out who killed him." Lance was frustrated.

"I get that, but whoever killed him did it in front of a bunch of children. If for no other reason, I want the asshole arrested for that," Angus pointed out.

Lance sighed. "You're right. I'm just angry he would throw a fit like he did and try and interrupt my work when all we've done is try to help him. I wouldn't be shocked if Jeremy decided to stay away from the morgue just to avoid dealing with him again."

"I'm trying to get this all wrapped up, but that's still no guarantee that Gene will leave you alone. He could stick around."

Lance shook his head despite Angus not being able to see him. "Don't jinx me that way."

Angus laughed. "You doing okay? Things with Jackson stable?"

"I was just talking to him. Things are good. We're just sitting here talking since we have the house to ourselves tonight. I really have to wonder where everyone went off to."

"Bethany probably dragged them to some line dancing thing. You know how much she loves those things. Kel is probably excited to be around other ghosts who can see and talk to him. Let Ray and Bethany show him around. If your brother moves back home, he might be around a while."

"I sure hope that happens." Lance glanced at his brother. "I'm going to hate letting him leave, even if I know he's coming back to stay next time."

"I'll help get you through it," Angus promised.

"I don't know how I would have made it through the last few months without you. You've kept me from losing my mind." Lance couldn't imagine facing everything without Angus and Lizzy helping him get through it and learn about his ability. It was because of them that he was able to deal with ghosts without having a nervous breakdown.

“That’s what boyfriends are for.” Angus sighed. “Just wish I had more time to come over this week.”

“Me too. Hopefully, things slow down as we get closer to Christmas.”

“At least I have three days off during Christmas as long as nothing major happens. I’m still on call. I plan on spending most of the time with you, but I’ve promised Mom we’ll come by for dinner on Christmas Eve. She said we’re to bring Jackson with us.”

“I’ll let him know. I plan on cooking a ham Christmas day if they want to drop by later in the day. I’m not doing anything formal, but I figure we can just pick at the ham and be lazy.” Lance had thought about doing a big meal, but one of his favorite things about Christmas was sitting on the couch and watching all the Christmas movies. He didn’t want to end up stuck in the kitchen all day.

“Sounds good to me. I’ll pick up some of those rolls from that bakery near my place. We’ll figure out a menu as it gets closer. For now, I need to get back to work. The last thing I want is for this case to break wide open during Christmas. I’ll call you later tonight once I’m home. I love you.”

“Love you too. Be safe.” Lance ended the call. As he walked back over to sit with his brother, he smiled, thinking how perfect the holiday was with everyone he loved and cared about close. If only all of them could be like this.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lance sighed as he tried hard not to focus on Gene as he walked into the room. Keeping his focus on the body in front of him, Lance hoped Gene would stick around long enough so he could ask him some questions and hopefully set up a time to meet with Angus and Franks. Right now, with Carrie standing beside him, Lance couldn't say anything to Gene.

"My wife is selling off all my stuff." Gene walked directly through the table where Lance was working on the body. "Everything. She's not keeping a single thing. And she's underpricing it all. Even giving some of it away."

Lance glanced up at the ghost, but then quickly got back to work.

"She worked out some kind of bulk deal with Alex Mayford. I swear he better take care of all my stuff, or I'll haunt the guy until he dies." Gene paced the space behind Lance.

Lance fought rolling his eyes. He lived with ghosts. There was no haunting Gene could do. At most, he could send a chill through Alex by walking through him, but it wasn't as if Gene could do anything physically to disrupt anyone's life. The sooner they got this ghost to move on, the sooner he'd be free of the headache of dealing with him. "So what did you get Pete for Christmas?" Lance asked Carrie, trying to keep his mind off Gene being in the room.

"Tickets for us to go to New York. He's never been there and has always wanted to go. I've been there a couple of times and love it there. I got us plane tickets, hotel rooms, and tickets to several shows." Carrie's smile showed how excited she was about it. "We don't go until May, but we both want to be there when it's warm enough that we can go running while we're there. He'll need time to make sure he's got his patients covered at work as well."

“That’s a huge gift. I guess that means things are going well?” Lance grinned up at her before refocusing on grabbing the tissue sample he needed.

“I’m going to marry that man. I have no doubt about that. It’s just a matter of us both being ready to take the step of merging our lives and homes.” Carrie smiled. “I’m thinking he might propose on Christmas, but then a part of me thinks he’ll wait until Valentine’s Day.”

“That’s great news. I’m so happy for you.” Lance meant it. Carrie was one of his best friends. They shared a lot together while working over bodies every day at the morgue. She knew him better than almost anyone. She’d been the one by his side through his recovery and dropped by his home every night to check on him once he’d gone home to recuperate on his own.

“Don’t do it. He’ll just cheat on you the way my wife did,” Gene mumbled behind them. “You almost done with this? I need to talk to you.”

Lance gave a slight nod, hoping it was enough for Gene to see. He wished Jeremy was around to keep Gene busy, but he still hadn’t seen Jeremy around the morgue in a few days. He was starting to wonder if he’d decided to move on. He just couldn’t see Jeremy doing that without saying goodbye first. The fact that he hadn’t even come by the house to visit was strange.

“Thanks, I’m happier than I could ever imagine. It sucks when he’s called in to work for an emergency, but I guess you know how that is since Angus gets called in at all hours of the night too.” Carrie labeled the sample and set it aside.

“It sucks that his phone only seems to ring when we’re in the middle of something.” Lance had been left alone in bed more than once when work had called Angus away. “But I figure it could be worse. If Sam ever decided to trade off going to scenes, then I’d be doing the same thing to him. I’m lucky he likes going on the calls.”

“True. I don’t mind them. It’s always interesting to see things in person.” Carrie shrugged.

“It’s dealing with the family members that I hate. There is nothing worse than showing up with the family freaking out because their father died, or even worse, a parent grieving a child. One of my first callouts was for a SIDS case. The child died in his sleep. Was only six weeks old. Usually, those end up at the hospital and we don’t have to deal with them, but this one they didn’t transfer. The parents were a mess, rightfully so, but they didn’t want to give up. Kept swearing if we’d just keep working on him, he’d come back. By the time we left with the body, the mother was being treated and taken to the hospital and the father was at risk of being arrested. It was a mess. After that, I decided to avoid going to the scene unless I had to.” Lance dreaded the times Sam was on vacation or needed them to cover going out to pick up bodies.

“All sad and everything, but I really need to talk to you. Less talk and more work.” Gene moved to stand beside Lance. “You figured out what killed him yet?” He pointed to the body on the table. “If so, close him up and let’s get busy working on figuring out who killed me.”

Lance bit his tongue to keep from saying anything. Gene’s words made him want to pull out the next body and work on it and make him wait until the end of the day before they talked. It was only the fact that Angus was waiting on information from Gene that made Lance finish up what he was doing without any procrastination. “You able to close? I’m going to see if Angus can meet for lunch.” He glanced up at Carrie.

“Sure, I have a doctor’s appointment at one, so I may be a few minutes late getting back from lunch break.”

“Everything okay?” Lance gave Carrie a worried look.

“Fine. I’m just making sure Pete and I aren’t going to start a family before we get married. It’s my annual check-up. Nothing major.”

“Good. Glad it’s nothing serious.” Lance stepped back and let Carrie take over closing the body. “I’ll see you when you get back. If we have to stay a little late today, that’s okay. I think my brother is going out anyway. He’s hooked up with some old friends and even started talking to an old girlfriend.”

“That’s great news. Let’s hope they help get him home to stay.” Carrie didn’t look up as she worked.

“That’s the hope.” Lance smiled. “Thanks, Carrie.”

“Anytime.” She waved her free hand quickly before getting back to work.

Lance walked out of the room and started taking off his protective gear. He glanced up at Gene as he followed him. “Meet me in my office. I’ve got to wash up.”

“Hurry,” Gene grunted then disappeared.

Lance sighed as he took off his gloves and gown, tossing them in the bin. Gene was going to drive him mad. Hopefully, he had news that would break the case open. If not, Lance wasn’t sure he could handle dealing with the ghost much longer. He was a total asshole. He dried his hands after washing them, then headed to his office. He walked in and closed the door, not surprised at all to find Gene standing behind his desk, looking down at the file Lance had left open on his desk. “You have news?”

Gene glanced up. “No, I was hoping you did. You and your boyfriend are the ones who need to figure out who killed me.”

“Angus is working on it. He’d like to talk to you.”

“I’m here now.” Gene held up his hands as if he expected Angus to be there too.

“Let me call Angus and see if he can meet for lunch.” Lance pulled his phone out and quickly called. He ignored the way Gene went back to reading the stuff on his desk. It wasn’t as if Gene could do anything with the information there.

“Hey, what’s up?” Angus sounded cheerful.

“You able to meet for lunch? Gene’s here.” Lance kept it simple, not wanting to say anything to piss off Gene.

“He say anything that will help?” Angus asked.

“He’s hoping you’ll have information.”

“Well, he’s about to be let down. I’ll swing by and pick you up. I don’t have long, but we can grab burgers and eat in the car while we talk. Franks is out talking to mall security, going through video there to see if there was anyone hanging around Gene when he was working,” Angus told him. “I’ll be there in ten.”

“See you then.” He ended the call before glancing up at Gene. “He’ll pick us up in ten minutes. He doesn’t have a lot of time, but enough we can talk a bit.”

“He should have a suspect by now,” Gene huffed.

“Some cases take time. Have you come up with anything new?” Lance shoved his phone in his pocket, then turned to leave the office so he could get his jacket out of the locker.

“Other than my wife sleeping with another man?” Gene was directly behind him now.

Lance glanced around, making sure they were alone. “I’d be upset about her cheating as well, but you’re dead now. It’s time to let her go.”

“It’s not right. She cheats on me and then profits from all my stuff. She’s even talking about selling the house and moving in with him.” Gene threw a fist into one of the lockers, but being he had no solid form, his fist just went through the metal door.

“Stop that,” Lance said in a hushed whisper. “I’m not going to work with you if you don’t control your temper. It’s not my fault all this is happening. I’m trying to help.” Gene was lucky that Lance could see him. Most of the ghosts went years without finding someone living who could see them. This was one time he wished he hadn’t let the ghost know he was able to see and talk to them.

“It’s just taking so long.” Gene followed Lance outside.

Taking out his phone to appear like he was on a call, Lance said, “Angus is doing the best he can. It’s not like there is a list of people who wanted you dead. Are you sure there isn’t anyone you were fighting with or pissed off at?”

“Other than Alex? No. I’ve tried to think of anyone I even had a small argument with, but there wasn’t anyone. Maybe my wife. She seems happier with her new man. Maybe she wanted me gone.”

“She has an alibi. So does Alex.” Lance looked across the lot, hoping Angus hurried. “Did you see anyone at the funeral that was acting funny or looked pleased you were dead?”

“Other than my wife?” Gene paced the sidewalk, not even bothering to move when people walked through him on their way inside. A woman tightened her coat around her after Gene floated through her.

“Would you stand still?” Lance gripped his phone tighter.

“Why? Only you can see me.” Gene kept pacing.

Lance sighed. “So if you don’t have anything new, what are you hoping for during this meeting?”

“I’m hoping your boyfriend will have news for me. He’s had more than enough time to figure this out.” Gene paused beside Lance.

“He’s working on it, but not every murder is solved.” Lance was relieved when he saw Angus pulling into the lot. He shoved his phone in his pocket and stepped forward. He quickly got into the car the second Angus pulled to the curb in front of him.

“Long day?” Angus leaned over and kissed him.

“Beginning to feel that way.” Lance rolled his eyes toward the backseat. “Someone is demanding answers.”

“Wouldn’t you want to know who killed you if our roles were reversed?” Gene said from the backseat.

“Of course, I’d want to know, but I wouldn’t be a grouch about it. I wouldn’t make everyone around me suffer while they worked to find out.” Lance latched his seatbelt.

“Burgers okay?” Angus pulled the car away from the curb.

“Perfect.” Lance was starving.

“So did Gene see anyone at the funeral who looked like they were guilty?” Angus asked.

“He said no.” Lance focused out the window, not looking back at Gene.

“I said other than my wife I didn’t think anyone wanted me dead,” Gene corrected.

“Your wife didn’t kill you. Neither did her boyfriend.” Lance sighed.

“Who was the guy sitting with your wife and son?” Angus asked.

“That was my brother. I was shocked his lazy-no-good ass showed up. I’m not sure how he found out I was dead. I don’t think even my parents talk to him anymore.” Gene shrugged. “He looked like hell.”

Lance repeated every word, wanting Angus to understand the relationship between Gene and his brother.

“Lance, can you take notes for me while I drive?” Angus asked, passing him his notebook and pen from his shirt pocket.

“Sure.” Lance opened the notebook and waited.

“What’s your brother’s name?” Angus glanced in the rearview mirror as if he could see Gene.

“Gerald. He’s four years older than me, but he looks like he’s eighty. He’s sure drank himself into a mess. Hard to believe he used to be an Olympic athlete.”

Lance again repeated Gene’s words.

“He was? What sport?” Angus glanced at Lance. “The guy looked like he crawled out of a bottle right before coming to the funeral.”

“Shooting, men’s double trap. He made the team when he was seventeen. Got a silver medal. Then once he did that, he started drinking and gambling. Got so bad my parents just washed their hands of him. They tried to help, but he was in too deep. Gerald and I never got along. Fought like crazy when we were young. Probably would still fight now if we

saw each other. I was stunned that he showed up at my funeral.”

Lance’s eyes widened as he listened, then repeated everything for Angus. Whoever had killed Gene had been an expert marksman, or lucky as hell. Lance didn’t think it was luck. He watched Angus’s eyes widen at the news and knew they’d finally gotten a lead.

“How long has your brother been in town?” Angus asked.

“Hell, I don’t know. I saw him at the funeral, then he went back to the house with Roger and Melissa. He walked around the house looking at everything. Probably was hoping he’d find something he could pawn. He stayed long enough to take advantage of the free food, then left. I haven’t seen him since,” Gene said.

Angus nodded as Lance told him what was said. “So he wasn’t here before the shooting?”

“Not that I know of. I don’t think he’s ever visited here. We had a huge fight nearly thirty-plus years ago and haven’t spoken since. I was shocked to see him at the funeral. My parents all but disowned him years ago as well. Last I heard, he was down around New Orleans running some kind of scam. Like I said, he got drinking and doing God knows what. Lost everything.” Gene glanced at Lance. “You don’t think my brother killed me? Hell, what reason would he have to want me dead?”

Lance shrugged. “I don’t know. Did you leave him in your will?”

“Hell no. Everything I have goes to Melissa. Though now that she’s got that boyfriend, I wish I’d left it all to Roger. She better not spend all my hard-earned money on that loser she’s with.” Gene’s cheeks went red with anger.

“So you haven’t spoken to him since that fight thirty years ago?” Angus asked.

“Not a word. I don’t think my parents have spoken to him in ten years or more.”

Lance watched Angus and could see the wheels turning in his mind. “Would Gerald have anything to gain from your death?”

“Not that I know of. If he was going to kill me, he would have done it years ago when we were fighting. Not now. I can’t imagine how he’d even heard I’d died unless my parents somehow found him and told him.” Gene stared out the car’s window as Angus pulled into the Joe’s Burger’s lot.

Lance stayed quiet as Angus ordered their food. He smiled at the fact Angus knew what to order for him without even asking. They’d reached the point in their relationship where they knew each other that well, and he liked that. The silence continued until they had their food and Angus was once again on the road.

“I’ll pull into the park, and we can eat in the car. It’s too cold to get out,” Angus told him.

“Sounds good.” The weather had taken a turn and temperatures were lower than the normal seasonal average for the area. Lance was just fine staying in the car with the heat blowing against his face.

“I’m going to give your parents a call and find out if they told Gerald about your death. When I saw him at the funeral, I felt as if I’d seen him before, but you say he’s never been to Fairway before?” Angus pulled into the park’s parking lot.

“Not that I’m aware of.” Gene stared at the bag with the food. “I miss eating.”

Lance smiled. “I hear that from a lot of new ghosts.”

“Maybe you can eat stuff once you go into the light.” Angus parked the car.

“Maybe, but I’m not leaving until I know who killed me and why.” Gene folded his arms over his chest.

Lance pulled out the food and handed Angus his burger. “You don’t remember where you think you saw him?”

“No, but I feel like it was recently. Could have been someone that looked a lot like him, but my gut has that

feeling.” Angus unwrapped his burger and took a bite.

“I’d check arrest records. If Gerald is around, he’s doing something illegal. That’s a given. He was into money schemes for a while. Where he’d talk people into investing in something and steal all their money. He was arrested in Georgia for something or other. I heard that from my mother.” Gene watched them eat with yearning in his eyes.

“I’ll run a background check on him when I get back to the office. I’m also going to call your parents and find out when they last talked to him. I know your wife said she had no way of contacting him.” Angus wiped his mouth.

“Hell, Roger’s never even met Gerald. He knows he has an uncle, but as far as I know, the funeral was the first time they’d seen each other,” Gene said.

“I’ll dig and see what I can find. Do you know if he was still shooting for fun or kept up his skills?”

Gene shook his head. “I wouldn’t know.”

Lance repeated everything between eating, hoping this lead turned into something. Not that he wanted Gene’s killer to be his own brother, but for now, it was the only lead they had. It at least gave them something to investigate. Well, it gave Angus something to look into. Other than speaking to Gene, Lance’s part in the investigation ended with the autopsy.

“Was Gerald cut off from all family members? Would there be aunts or cousins who might have told him about your death?” Angus asked.

“From what I know, they all washed their hands of him when my parents did, but it’s always possible.” Gene shrugged. “You really think he might be my killer, don’t you?”

“You have to admit that he’s got the skill to shoot you from the hotel’s roof. The question I have is how would he know you’d be there at that time?”

“That’s easy enough. My website features a list of appearances. Anyone could look and see that I was at the bookstore that morning, then heading to the mall directly after. It wouldn’t take much to figure out that I’d cross that road at

some point when I left. He just had to sit and wait for me to make my exit.” Gene leaned forward. “I’m going to go back to the house and see if I can find out if he’s left town already. If he’s here, I need to know where he’s staying.” Gene floated from the car and hurried down the sidewalk.

“He just up and left saying he was going to find out if his brother was still in town.” Lance sighed.

“Hopefully, he’ll come tell you what he finds out.” Angus reached for his drink. “He being any nicer?”

“A bit. He’s still angry and insistent, but not rampaging. I just wish he’d cross over and let you handle things. I cringe every time he comes into the morgue. I never know what to expect.” Lance tossed his wrapper in the bag. “Do you think it was Gerald?”

“It’s the best lead we have so far. But why show up at the funeral after killing someone? Wouldn’t you leave town as quietly as you could?” Angus asked.

“Probably, unless I wanted to talk to the family for some reason. Maybe he thought he might be in the will or that Gene might have left him something?”

“After thirty years?” Angus shook his head.

“True.” Lance leaned his head back on the seat. “So what do you do now?”

“I find out if he’s still in town and bring him in so I can question him. I want to know how long he’s been here, where he’s been staying, and to find out how he found out about Gene’s death. If I could just remember where I’d seen him before.”

Lance rested his hand on Angus’s thigh. “Anything I can do to help?”

“You’re doing your part by dealing with Gene. Again, if it wasn’t for your ability to talk to ghosts, we wouldn’t have this lead. I imagine he’ll be by later to tell you what he finds. I’d planned on dropping by your place tonight, but if this lead pans out, I’ll be stuck in the office.”

“That’s okay. You know I understand.” Lance hated when they didn’t get time together, but work came first. Besides, with his brother in town, they didn’t get much time alone.

“You’re still coming to the Christmas party this weekend, right?” Angus asked.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it.” He’d been looking forward to seeing how the local police celebrated Christmas. If it was anything like the annual Halloween party, it would be fun. “Saturday night, right?”

“Yep, I’ll pick you up at six.” Angus tossed his trash into the sack and clasped his seat belt. “I need a damn vacation.”

Lance laughed. “We’ll plan another weekend away once things settle. Sam’s on vacation for a week over New Year’s so I can’t do anything until he gets back.”

“Nice, that means I might get to see your face more often.”

“I’m hoping you don’t. That would mean more murders if you’re showing up at the morgue.”

“True.” Angus started the car. “But you’re a lot sexier to look at than Sam.”

“Thanks.” Lance grinned as he thought about places they could escape to once they both had the time. Being alone with Angus was definitely on his Christmas wish list.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Angus smiled at the computer screen, hating that he had to involve the elderly couple in his investigation. “Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I’m so sorry about the loss of your son.” He wondered if Gene was in the room with him and Franks as they spoke to Gene’s parents.

“Thank you, Detective. We’re glad to help however we can. Forgive us if we do something wrong. This is our first time using a video system like this.” Mrs. Franklin smiled. “Quite the setup.”

Franks laughed. “Technology is making many things easier.”

Angus nodded. He’d had to work with one of the staff members of the retirement community to get the laptop set up so they could talk, but it hadn’t been too hard an effort to get done. “We won’t keep you long. We only have a few questions. Were you able to contact your son, Gerald about Gene’s death?”

Lois Franklin sighed. “No, I’m afraid not. We haven’t spoken with Gerald in several months. We asked him to leave and not come back.”

“We had to have security remove him from our apartment and had him put on a list of people not allowed inside.” Bill Franklin took his wife’s hand.

“May I ask why?” Lois asked. “I thought this was about Gene’s death.”

“I’m just curious. I was under the impression from Melissa Franklin that Gene hadn’t spoken to Gerald in many years, yet he showed up at the funeral. I’m just curious how he found out about it,” Angus explained.

“It wasn’t from us. Gerald came here demanding we give him money. When we refused, he got upset. You have to

understand, we've bailed Gerald out too many times. This time we put our foot down. He got nasty and we had him leave." Lois shook her head. "I love my son, but he's got to learn. He wanted nearly two hundred thousand dollars. There was no way we'd hand that to him to pay off his gambling debts."

"Is that what he wanted it for?" Franks asked.

"He didn't say. He just said he had bills to pay, but he's always had a gambling problem. This is nothing new. We'd cut him off years ago. He had to have been desperate to show up this time and beg for more. He had to know we wouldn't give it to him." Bill reached for a glass of water beside him. "As far as we know, Gene hadn't talked to him at all. I couldn't tell you how Gerald found out about Gene's death unless another relative is still speaking with him. I wouldn't know of any who have kept contact with him."

"Do you know where Gerald lives? Have any contact information for him?" Angus already knew where Gerald was living, but he wanted to see if his parents had the same information.

"No, I'm sorry, Detective. Last I heard he was in Georgia, but he moves around a lot. My guess would be somewhere where gambling is legal. Casinos, horse races, card games, you name it. Gerald loved it all." Bill looked at his wife, then back at the camera. "I wish we could help you, but once we told Gerald that we'd changed our will and that we weren't leaving anything for him to squander away, I suspected he won't be coming around again. He only showed up in hopes he could get money. If the well's dry, he won't come back for more. My guess is he somehow found out about Gene's death and showed up hoping Gene had left him something. But he's a fool to think that. Gene hated his brother. There was no love between them. Hadn't been for years."

Angus made notes as they talked, seeing more pieces fall into place. He just had to put them all together now. He clicked the pen with anticipation, though his heart ached for the elderly couple on the screen in front of him. It had to be heartbreaking to lose one son to death and have the other be so greedy you didn't want them around.

“When you told Gerald you were changing your will, how did he react?” Franks asked.

“He was furious. That’s when we had to get security in here to escort him out. He scared Lois, and we’re both too old and weak to deal with his outbursts. They walked him out and that’s the last we heard from him,” Bill said.

“It breaks our heart to turn our backs on him, but we’ve given him all we can. We have to worry about our own needs. We may not have many more years, but we have to have some security. What if one of us gets sick?” Lois seemed to tighten her hold on Bill’s hand.

“I don’t blame you. And if your son has a gambling problem, giving him money will just make things worse. You did the right thing.” Franks gave them a sympathetic smile.

“Why all the questions about Gerald?” Bill asked. “What does he have to do with the investigation into Gene’s murder?”

Angus didn’t speak for a moment as he tried to figure out how much to tell them. Gerald was still their son, even if he was a mess. And hinting that Gene’s death might have been caused by Gerald would upset them, but facts were facts, and he knew the couple in front of him were smart enough to figure it out. “Gerald showed up at Gene’s funeral. We’re trying to figure out how he found out about it, and if he might have been in town during the murder.”

Bill’s eyes widened and he looked over at his wife before glancing back at the computer screen. “You think Gerald might have something to do with Gene’s death?”

“We’re looking into all possibilities,” Angus told them.

Lois closed her eyes, then sighed as she opened them. “Gerald knows guns.”

Bill seemed to stiffen in his chair. “Shit, that’s what this is about, isn’t it, Detective? Roger told us Gene was shot from a distance. You think Gerald would be someone who could make that shot.”

“As I said, we are looking at all possibilities right now. That is one of them.” Angus hated the pain he saw in the older

couple's eyes.

“Do you think Gerald would be capable of killing?”
Franks asked bluntly.

There was a moment of silence, then Bill shrugged. “We honestly don't know Gerald any longer. He's not the son we raised. As much as it pains me to say it, anything is possible.”

“We don't know anything for sure. This is just one possibility we are looking into,” Franks told them. “Do you know how to contact Gerald? Do you have a phone number or anything?”

Lois shook her head. “He didn't give us one when he was here. We have no idea where he's living. I wouldn't even know who to contact to get the information.”

“That's okay. We'll figure it out. We aren't even sure he's left town yet after the funeral. He hasn't contacted Melissa or Roger since the funeral, but he could very well still be around.” Angus made a quick note. “I think that's all the questions we have for you.”

“If Gerald is responsible for Gene's death, I hope you throw the book at him. That boy has gotten away with too much throughout his life. It's time he pay for his sins. I will always love both my sons, but I don't even know the man Gerald's become. Please get hold of us if you have any other questions or information you can share with us.” Lois's shoulders slumped and she looked tired.

“We will. Again, I'm sorry for your loss. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. If you have questions, feel free to call anytime.” Angus wished he could give more comfort than words, but this was his job. He had to follow the facts and information, no matter how hard it was or who might be hurt by his questions.

“Thank you, Detective.” Bill smiled, then a young man appeared on the screen and ended the connection.

Angus relaxed back in his chair and dropped his pen on the table. “I hate where this case is going.”

“You and me both. It’s bad enough that couple lost one son, but if Gerald is guilty, they’ll lose the other. Though it sounds as if they lost him a long time ago. They had to be so proud of Gerald at one point. Olympic medalist to murderer, is it possible?” Franks took a drink of his coffee.

“We both know it is. It’s not the first time a good boy’s gone bad.” Angus looked at his notes. “We have no record of Gerald flying in or out of the airports in the area, so he’s either driving or he’s using another identity. I still say I’ve seen him before. I just can’t remember where. I’m going to go through all the crime scene photos again and see if I missed something.”

“Roger and Melissa were going in tomorrow for the reading of the will, but they don’t expect any surprises. Melissa said they made their wills together and they were pretty basic. The surviving spouse got everything and if they both died, it all goes to Roger.” Franks looked at a stack of papers in front of him. “Gerald has a nice little arrest record, but they’re mostly minor things, drunk and disorderly, a few fights, and a couple driving under the influence. His driver’s license is currently suspended. His last known residence was in Georgia, but his last arrest was in New Orleans.”

“Have we checked to see if he’s recently bought any firearms?” Angus asked.

“No, but we will now.” Franks made a note at the bottom of one of the papers. “I’ll also run his prints with all those taken from the scene and see if we get a hit.”

“I’m not holding my breath. Anyone who took the time to make sure he wasn’t seen on cameras would also be smart enough to wear gloves, but it’s worth a try.” Angus stood. “You coming to the Christmas party tomorrow night?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Franks gathered his stuff in a neat pile.

“Bringing a date?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?” Angus wanted Franks to find someone to settle down with. “What about Gloria?”

Franks shook his head. “We just do the dinner thing. We aren’t dating. I’m good on my own. I don’t need a date. Just because you’re two steps from taking the plunge doesn’t mean I need to be.”

“I’m not taking the plunge.” Angus laughed. “At least not any time soon. Lance and I both agree we’re taking things slow. Neither one of us is ready to get married. We’ve only been dating a few months.”

“Yet you act like an old married couple,” Franks smirked. “Stop giving me shit about dating and I’ll stop harassing you about marriage.”

“Fine, but these department parties are a lot more fun with a date. If you don’t have someone with you, it’s no different than an afternoon here around the coffee pot.” Angus made sure the computer was off before he headed for the door. He held it open for Franks who had his hands full with files and an empty coffee cup.

“Maybe I like keeping things simple.” Franks led the way down the hall. “I take it you’re bringing Lance?”

“I am. We haven’t had much time together lately. With this case and his brother in town, we’ve both been distracted.” Angus followed Franks into their office and set his things on the desk before taking a seat.

“Does the Medical Examiner’s Office do a Christmas party?” Franks slumped into his own chair.

“Not that Lance has mentioned. They might do something during the day. I know Lance was trying to figure out a gift for everyone there. Speaking of, I still need to figure out what to get Lance and my parents.” Angus sighed. “Mom’s the hardest.”

“Can’t you get her some classic records or something from her favorite bands?” Franks asked.

“If I can find them. They aren’t cheap and she’s already got so many. I have to get Dad to go through her stuff to make

sure she doesn't already have the album. I've been looking for concerts around the country she might like. I can get her and Dad tickets. I need to get Lance and Betty alone so I can find out if Betty has any ideas. She knows Mom better than anyone."

"I'm glad my family has agreed on no gifts. I call home, wish everyone a Merry Christmas, and call it good. Saves a lot of money and stress." Franks turned on his computer. "I'll do a search for gun sales and see if Gerald's bought anything recently."

"And I'll run his prints against those we collected and start going through pictures and video of the scene again. I know I've seen Gerald before, and it had to be recently. Maybe he was standing around watching after Gene got shot." It was common for criminals to hang around and watch the scene after the fact if they felt it was safe to do so. It was one of the main reasons they always took photos of the crowds gawking at the scene. He pulled up the file and started looking through the photos, hoping he could get this case closed by Christmas so he could focus on his friends and family and try to forget someone killed Santa during what was said to be the most wonderful time of the year.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lance raised a brow at his brother as Jackson walked out in a suit. “I didn’t know you even owned a suit.”

“I didn’t. I bought it yesterday. Usually, I wear my uniform for anything formal.”

“What’s the occasion?”

Jackson flushed. “Megan invited me to her family’s Christmas party. It’s a formal dinner party at the Fairway Hotel.”

“Wasn’t her father some kind of politician?”

“He’s a state senator. It’s her mother who comes from money though. She owns Majestic Minerals, that store that sells all those holistic beauty products that are the big rage right now.” Jackson messed with his tie. “Is it straight?”

“Yes, and you look great. I don’t think I’ve seen you in a suit since...” He trailed off.

“The last funeral?” Jackson finished for him.

“Yeah.” Lance hated remembering his parents’ funerals. Things were so hard for them back then. He didn’t want to go there tonight. Not when they both had parties to go to. “Have you met her parents?”

“Years ago, when we were dating, but I haven’t seen them since we broke up and I joined the military. I’m hoping they’ll forgive me for breaking Megan’s heart. She warned me that after her divorce, her mother’s been very protective. I’m more worried about her two brothers.” Jackson poured himself a glass of water and downed it.

“Call me if you need backup. I’ll be at the police department’s Christmas party just down the street. I can bring the calvary with me,” Lance told him.

“Good to know. I might just need you if her brothers haven’t forgiven me. I might be late. I’ll try to be quiet when I come in.” Jackson checked his pockets, then took a deep breath.

“No worries. I’m not sure if we’ll come back here or go to Angus’s after. Kel, Bethany, and Ray are in the backyard. The sliding door is open a bit to let Haunt come and go.” Lance glanced out the kitchen window at the ghosts.

“So Kel isn’t with me all the time?” Jackson asked.

“I don’t think so. He probably figures dates are something private. The ghosts respect our privacy. You don’t want them there watching as you make out with Megan later tonight. He seems happy to have other ghosts around to talk to. Did you want to talk to him before you go?”

Jackson shook his head. “No, I’m just not used to all this ghost stuff. Now that I know he’s there, I wonder if he’s with me all the time.”

“He goes running with you every morning, and works out in the backyard with you, but other than that, he’s usually not right with you.” Lance smiled. “You can always ask him to touch your arm and let you know if he’s there or not. In time, you’ll get used to what his touch feels like and can use it to ask yes or no questions to him. It’s a simple way to communicate. Angus has had to do that a few times when his mom or me aren’t around.”

Jackson’s eyes went wide. “I hadn’t thought of that. So when I go back to the team and he’s with me, I can still talk to him?”

“If you ask simple questions he can answer with a touch. Like touch me twice for yes, or use right arm touches for yes and left arm for no. You’ll work it out.” Lance liked the excitement he saw in Jackson’s eyes. “Knowing that, will you tell the others on your team about him?”

“I’m not sure. I need to talk to Kel about that. And you of course, because if I tell the team about Kel, I’ll have to explain about you.” Jackson grabbed his car keys from his pocket.

“I don’t mind if you tell them. I’m not open to everyone about my ability, but I’m okay with you telling your team. You trust them, so I do too.” Lance meant that despite having never met any of them. He knew they were as close as brothers to Jackson.

“Thanks, that will make it easier if I decide to tell them. I’ll have you sit down with Kel and me at some point to figure out what he wants to do. This is all still so strange to me. I still question if it’s all real. I know it has to be, but it’s just so against everything I’ve ever believed. We’ll talk tomorrow. I’ve got to run or I’ll be late picking Megan up. Have fun tonight.”

“You too.” Lance grinned as he watched his brother leave. It was almost like old times with Jackson going out on a date while he sat home trying to get through his homework. They weren’t as close as they once were, but at times like this, Lance could still feel the bond they shared.

A glance at the clock on the stove told him he needed to be ready. Angus was picking him up in ten minutes. Lance rushed to his room and double-checked his reflection in the mirror. He needed a haircut soon. Why was it that his hair seemed to grow faster in the colder months? He sighed as he gathered his wallet and made sure he had his phone. The party tonight was casual, and he wore a simple pair of jeans and a button-up shirt he found comfortable. If this party was like others he’d been to with Angus, there might be some dancing, possibly even some bad karaoke, but for sure a lot of drinking. He enjoyed getting to know the people Angus worked with and seeing them in a more relaxed environment than he did when they were at crime scenes or waiting for autopsy results.

Once he was sure he was ready, he wandered out back to where the ghosts were all sitting. The air was cold, but the ghosts didn’t seem to be bothered by it. The weather never seemed to bother them. “I’m about to leave and Jackson’s already gone. You guys need anything before I go?”

Ray shook his head. “We’re good. Have fun tonight. You coming home later?”

“I’m not sure where we’re staying yet. We’re closer to Angus’s so I’m betting we’ll end up there. He’s supposed to have the weekend off, but he’ll probably end up going in at some point.” Lance didn’t blame Angus for wanting to get this case figured out before Christmas. “You know where to find me if there’s a problem.”

“There won’t be. Just make sure Haunt has water and food before you go. We’ll keep an eye on her. She’ll probably end up in your room, on your bed before too long.” Bethany ran her fingers over the dog at her feet.

“Have fun.” Kel waved as Lance headed back inside.

“I will.” He was looking forward to the night out. Even if they just had dinner, drank a few beers, and talked with the others, it was better than a night at home in front of the TV. He’d be with Angus, and that meant no matter what they did, it would be enjoyable.

He saw the headlights of Angus’s car as he pulled into the driveway and hurried out the door. He pulled open the passenger door of the car and got in. “Thanks for picking me up.” He leaned over and gave Angus a kiss.

“Not a problem. How was your day?” Angus pulled back out of the driveway.

“Long. I got a suspected elder abuse case today. I hate those almost as much as a child abuse case. This poor woman had to have been suffering for years. Evidence of broken bones that were never set. She weighed seventy pounds when she died. There were bruises all over her, not to mention the head trauma that killed her.”

“Did they make an arrest?” Angus asked. “I hadn’t heard about this case.”

“Detective Burns is handling it, but we couldn’t hand it over to homicide until I’d looked over the body. I handed all the information over to her around four thirty this afternoon. She was going to head out and make an arrest.” Lance watched the Christmas lights around them as Angus drove.

“Family member?” Angus asked.

“The daughter and son-in-law. Though from what Sam says, when he picked up the body, the woman looked just as bruised and beaten as her mother did. I’m guessing the son-in-law will be going down for murder. Makes me sick to think how many cases of this might be going on that we never find out about.” Lance sighed. “I wish those ghosts stuck around so you could interview them and find out exactly what went on.”

“They’re probably so happy to be free that they rush into the light to escape the hell they’ve had to live through. Amy will figure it out and make sure this guy pays if he’s guilty. She has no patience for abuse. She’ll see it all the way through court and make sure the guy gets what’s coming to him, and make sure the wife, if she’s been abused too, gets the help she needs. Amy is really good at this stuff. It’s half the reason the Feds are trying to steal her from us.”

“They still trying to get her to come work for them?”

“Yeah, but she would have to move to a bigger city where there is an FBI office. She doesn’t want to do that. I think we’ll get to keep her, but that’s a hell of a career move to pass up.” Angus turned in to the parking lot of one of the local bars where the cops hung out.

“Some things are more important than money or career.” Lance would think twice about leaving the area now that he was dating Angus. Before that, he wouldn’t have blinked an eye at the thought of moving. Now, he wanted to be where Angus was, even if it cost him a better job.

“Yes, they are. I’d have trouble leaving you behind, and of course my mom and dad too. Though they travel so much, it’s not like they’re here all that much anymore.” Angus climbed out of the car and met Lance around the back of it. “Speaking of which, I’ve confirmed with Mom we’ll be by for dinner on Christmas Eve. Have you asked Jackson if he can join us?”

“I completely forgot about that. I’ll talk to him tomorrow. He’s out with his ex-girlfriend tonight. I’m hoping there’s something between them. That will help get him to come home in a year.” Lance took Angus’s hand as they walked.

“For your sake, I hope he does.” Angus paused as his cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen, then back at Lance. “It’s Detective Burns.” He quickly answered.

Lance stood to the side, giving Angus privacy. He tried to read Angus’s face as he listened to whatever Amy was telling him, but as usual, Angus didn’t give anything away. He said very little, just listening to whatever the detective was telling him.

“Thanks, Amy, that’s fantastic news. If you find him, give me a call, otherwise, I’ll start searching for him in the morning.” Angus ended the call and grinned at Lance. “We know who our killer is. We’ve been trying to identify everyone we have camera footage of from the hotel on the day of the shooting. We had two we couldn’t identify and the names they registered with came up as probably fake. Our amazing tech guy just compared Gerald Franklin’s image to one of the ones we couldn’t identify, and we got a hit. He’s wearing a pretty good disguise, but our facial recognition program says it’s a match. Amy’s currently trying to find Gerald’s location. We know he was at the attorney’s office this morning for the reading of the will, but Amy checked with Roger and Melissa and neither have seen Gerald since he left, upset that his brother hadn’t even mentioned him in his will. Amy’s checking airlines, hotels, and car rentals. If he’s here, she’ll find him.”

“Do you need to go in?” Lance asked.

“Not unless she finds him. I’m not going to drink tonight just in case, but we can go in and have some fun while we wait to find out.” Angus took Lance’s hand. “Let’s go update Franks and then I’m seeking out some mistletoe so I can steal a kiss or two.”

Lance grinned. “You don’t need mistletoe to get kisses. You only need to ask.” He leaned in and kissed him softly.

“Is it wrong I’m hoping Amy doesn’t find him tonight so I can get some time alone with you for a change?” Angus caressed his hand down Lance’s cheek.

“I was hoping for the same thing. I admit I felt a moment of dread when your phone rang just now,” Lance admitted. “I say we go in, make an appearance, say hi to a few people, then make our escape. We can go back to your place and have our own party.”

“That sounds good to me.” Angus gave his hand a squeeze.

As they walked into the bar, Lance couldn't ask for a better Christmas. Not only was Jackson home to spend it with him, but for the first time in his life, Lance had someone special by his side to celebrate the holiday. No matter how crazy his life had become, he wouldn't change a thing. He had friends and family around, and that made the season perfect.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Angus stared at the photo of Gerald Franklin dressed as an older man on the day of the shooting at the hotel. Only one camera had managed to catch a brief glimpse of him, but it was enough. He had gray hair and wore a hat low over his head in the photo. He'd even gone as far as to put in a hearing aid and used a can as he wheeled a golf bag through the lobby, but if you looked past the dyed hair and knew who you were looking for, it was clearly Gerald. "Bet he's got the gun in that golf bag."

"They're going over his hotel room now, hoping to find prints or other evidence, but that room has been rented out to several others since the shooting. I don't have high hopes they'll find much there. I doubt he spent more than an hour there. He checked in two hours before the shooting, then never checked out. He would have had time to get away while we were working the scene. It took us a while to figure out where the bullets came from." Franks rubbed the back of his neck and sat back in his chair.

"He probably ditched his disguise in one of the dumpsters. Bet he walked right past us as we dealt with the body." Angus tossed his pen on his desk. "So why do we think he killed Gene? He had to have known Gene wasn't going to leave him everything in his will. Gene was married and had a kid. Common sense says he leaves everything to his wife and kid."

"Right, but who did his parents leave their money to? They wrote Gerald out of the will. Did he kill Gene so it would revert to him as the surviving son?" Franks asked.

"But it's not as if both parents are going to die at the same time. And they now know Gene is dead, they have time to change it again..." Angus sat up straighter. "Unless..." He reached for his phone. "I'm calling Houston P.D.. We need to

make sure the parents are safe. I'm betting money Gerald is on his way there as we speak. He kills off both parents and with Gene out of the picture, Gerald gets everything."

"He's not stupid enough to murder them so soon after Gene dies, is he?"

"He won't make it look like murder. He'll find another way. Even if I'm wrong, we have to tell them to be on alert. Call the retirement center they're at and talk to the head of security. Tell him what's going on and not to let Gerald near his parents for now." Angus reached for the phone on his desk but paused as his cell phone rang. He didn't recognize the number but answered anyway. "Hello?"

"Detective Young, this is Bill Franklin. We spoke over the computer a few days ago about my son, Gene."

Angus held up a hand for Franks to wait a minute. "Mr. Franklin, I was just about to call you. How can I help you?"

"We thought we should let you know that Gerald called us this morning. He was angry and spouting off like usual, but he said something that worried us."

"What did he say? Do you know where he was when he called?"

"I assume still there in Fairway. He was complaining about Gene and all the attention he's been getting. He was laughing about the fact that Gene will never inherit our money now. I think I made a mistake. I told him Gene was never going to inherit it. That we'd left everything to Roger, our only grandchild. When I mentioned that, Gerald cursed up a storm and hung up on me. I'm worried about Roger and Melissa now." The older man's voice shook as he spoke. "I've tried to call, but I get voicemail. Neither of them are answering."

"I'm sending officers over to the Franklin's right now to make sure they're safe." Angus motioned to Franks to do that while he tried to get more information from Bill. "Did Gerald say anything else?"

"No, but from his reaction, I hate to say it, but I think Gerald killed Gene. I didn't want to believe it. He is my son,

but something's not right with that boy." The pain in the man's voice was very evident.

"I'm going to head over to Melissa's now and hopefully we'll find Gerald and bring him in for questioning. I'll give you a call as soon as I have more information." Angus stood and started to gather his things.

"Thank you." Bill hung up.

Angus glanced at Franks. "Gerald called Bill and they argued. When Bill mentioned he'd left everything to the grandson, not to Gene, Gerald got angry and hung up. Bill's worried Gerald will go after Roger."

Franks stood. "I'll drive."

They rushed out of the office and to the car. Once on the road, Angus shook his head. "I can't help but feel for Bill and Lois. They're going to lose both their sons if we're right about all of this. Gene's dead and Gerald will probably never make it out of prison."

"All over money." Franks shook his head. "I can't imagine. I mean, I fight with my brothers and sisters over all kinds of things, but I'd lay down my life to protect them."

"Right?" Angus sighed, wondering what they were about to find. He prayed Gerald hadn't gone after Roger. The last thing they needed was another murder. "I'm going to try and call Roger." He pulled out his phone and found the number he'd saved. He hit call and waited, listening to the phone ring several times before going to voicemail. "Not answering."

Franks stepped a bit harder on the gas. "We'll be there in two minutes. I'm sure officers are on scene by now."

Angus watched out the window, dreading what they might be walking into. If Gerald was as upset as Bill thought, there was bound to be some sort of confrontation. Luckily, they had a warrant for Gerald's arrest. If he was at Melissa's house, they could arrest him and sort everything out more easily.

His hope was dashed as they pulled up in front of the Franklin home to find two police cruisers parked with their lights on and officers standing behind the cars, on alert.

“This doesn’t look good.” Franks parked behind one of the cars.

Angus agreed as he climbed out of the car and turned to the closest officer. “What do we have?”

“We knocked on the door and heard someone yell for help, then another male yelled for us to stay back or he’d kill him. We were just pulling back as you pulled up. Want me to call it in?” one of the officers asked.

Franks shook his head. “I’ll do it.” He pulled out his phone.

Angus stared at the house. “Any idea how many are inside?”

“We only heard the two men,” a younger officer told him. He looked young. Too young for this job.

Angus looked up the driveway and noticed Roger’s rental was missing, but that didn’t mean anything. He could have returned it and been driving one of the family cars. Angus wanted to head up the driveway and peek into the garage but didn’t dare until they had a better idea of what was going on inside.

“Think you can get Lance over here?” Franks asked.

Angus looked at Franks in surprise. “You think Gene’s here?”

“If he is, we might be able to find out what’s going on inside,” Franks said softly so the other officers couldn’t hear.

“Worth a try.” He glanced at the time on his phone. “He’s at work. There’s no guarantee he can get over here.”

“What about your mom?” Franks asked.

Angus grimaced. “I was trying to keep her away from Gene, but I’ll call her if Lance can’t make it.” He found Lance’s number and hit call. When he didn’t get an answer, he shook his head. “He’s probably in the middle of an autopsy. I’ll call Mom. As long as she stays where it’s safe and I can keep an eye on her, she’ll be okay. If Gene goes off on her

though, we might have a problem. Mom won't keep her mouth shut."

Franks laughed. "That could be entertaining." Then he held up a hand. "Just kidding. I know you're only trying to protect her, but won't Betty come with your mom? If Gene's not here, Betty can go in and see what's going on."

Angus nodded. He hadn't thought about that. "True." He quickly called his mother.

"What's up with my favorite son today?" Lizzy asked.

"Only son, Mom." He smiled at her joke. "I need a favor. I'm on a scene and could use your skills if you have time." He didn't need to explain what skills.

"Sure, your father and I are just finishing lunch. We can come right over. Where are you?" She asked.

He gave her the address. "Thanks, Mom. The area will be blocked off, but I'll put word out to let you and Dad through. Is Betty with you?"

"She is," Lizzy answered.

"Good. I'm not sure if our ghost is here or not. I might need her help."

"Betty loves this kind of stuff. We'll be there in about ten minutes." His mother hung up on him.

"They're on their way," Angus told Franks, then informed the officer who was securing the scene that his parents needed to get through when they arrived.

He spent the next ten minutes bringing the officer up to date on the case and watching as more officers arrived. They hadn't called out SWAT yet. He needed to know what was going on inside the home first.

"I'm going to try calling the house." Franks pulled out his phone. "Maybe we can get Gerald talking."

Angus waited as Franks made the call. When he hung up without saying anything and shook his head, Angus sighed.

“Answering machine after four rings.” Franks shoved his phone into his pocket.

“We need to know who’s inside.” Angus glanced at the garage again. There was no way to approach the detached garage without being seen from the house. He only had limited time before someone higher up than him showed up and took over the scene. Once that happened, he’d have limited ability to do anything other than wait and watch.

“Angus?” his father’s voice called to him.

Angus turned and smiled as his mother and father hurried over to him. “It’s good to see you. Thanks for coming.” He hated having his mother help with these things. He wanted to keep her safe and hidden from the darker side of life, but his mother loved being involved. “Is Betty here?”

“Right beside me.” Lizzy nodded.

“Betty, I need to know what’s going on inside that house. How many people are in there and what the situation is.”

Lizzy nodded. “She’s on it. Give her just a minute to go peek.”

“Thanks.” Angus wished he could see Betty. She was like a second mother to him in many ways. He had to remind himself that no one here could see her, and she would be safe going into the house. He’d know soon enough if Gene was around. Once Gene found out his mother could see him, he’d be screaming at her the way he’d screamed at Lance. Angus braced himself for that, hating what his mother might have to put up with.

It seemed to take forever, and Angus tried to focus on other things as he waited, but he kept glancing over at his mother, trying to tell if she was talking to Betty or not.

“Detective Franks?”

Angus turned to see who was calling for his partner and let out a relieved breath when he saw Roger being escorted to them by a uniformed officer.

“Thanks, we’ll take it from here,” Franks told the officer before speaking to Roger. “We thought he had you in the house. We tried to call.”

“My phone is in the house. I forgot it when I ran over to the attorney’s office.” Roger glanced at the house. “What’s happened? I tried to call Mom, but she didn’t answer.”

“Is she home? They said they heard two men inside.” Franks glanced at Angus with a worried look.

“Mom and Harvey are inside. At least they were when I left. They were sorting through more of Dad’s Christmas stuff. Alex Mayford was going to drop by later today and see if there was anything more that he wanted to buy.” Roger gestured to the squad cars parked along the street. “Is Mom okay?”

“We don’t know anything yet. Your grandfather called me and told me he was worried about Gerald coming after you when he found out that you were set to inherit everything from them, and it wasn’t being left to your father. When officers arrived at the house and rang the doorbell, a man screamed for help, and another man told them to go away or he’d kill him. Officers backed off. We’ve tried to call the home phone, but no one is answering,” Franks explained.

“You think Gerald wants to hurt me?” Roger asked.

“We’ve got evidence that puts Gerald at the scene of your father’s shooting. We think he was hoping that with Gene gone, he’d inherit the money from your grandparents when they died. When he found out it was left to you instead, he got upset and hung up on your grandfather. That’s when he called us to warn us what had happened.” Franks put a hand on Roger’s shoulder. “Have you seen Gerald recently?”

“He showed up for the reading of Dad’s will the other day but got upset and left when he found out he wasn’t even mentioned in it.” Roger stared at the house. “If he wants me, let me go in and trade places with Mom and Harvey.”

“No one is going to trade places. We aren’t giving Gerald a chance to kill you,” Angus said.

“Better me than Mom.” Roger was starting to sound frantic.

Angus noticed his mother wave to him. He refocused on Roger. “Stay with Detective Franks. We’re trying to find out what’s going on inside. Once we do that, we’ll have a better idea what we’re facing.” He left Roger with Franks and hurried over to his mother. “Well?”

“Betty says there are three people inside. Two older men and a woman about my age. She’s on the floor, bleeding from a gash on her head, but she’s alive. Betty doesn’t think she’s in danger of dying. She says the asshole has a gun on the other man. I can draw you a layout of where they are from what she tells me.” Lizzy looked over to the empty space where Betty was probably standing.

“I’ve been inside. Where are they located?” Angus asked.

“The woman is on the kitchen floor,” Lizzy told him. “And the men are in the living room. The man with the gun is pacing, while the other is sitting on the couch, begging the guy to let him help the woman.”

Angus glanced at the house. The blinds in the living room were shut tight, making it impossible to see in. “How upset is the man with the gun?”

“Angry, but not screaming or violent at the moment. He keeps telling the man to get hold of Roger, but the man said he doesn’t know how. Said Roger’s phone is on the kitchen table so he has no way to call him,” Lizzy repeated after listening to Betty.

“Are there any other ghosts around? One who might look a lot like Santa?” Angus asked.

“Betty says she hasn’t seen any other ghosts around here.” Lizzy glanced at Angus. “Is this about that Santa Claus who got shot a while ago downtown?”

Angus gave a slight nod. “The man with the gun is his brother. We think he was trying to kill his brother, then would kill his parents in an attempt to inherit everything, but he just found out the grandson will inherit everything. We’re not sure

what his plans are now. Obviously, he knows we're out here." He pulled out his phone and was about to send a message to Lance to find out if Gene was at the morgue, but then hesitated. There was nothing Gene could do about the situation, and he would only cause his mother and Betty problems if he started screaming at them. God, he didn't want this. Gerald had to know he had no chance to escape. He glanced at Franks who was still talking to Roger. They needed to get Roger away from the house and out of sight. If Gerald wanted Roger, seeing him would only make things worse. "Franks, have an officer escort Roger to wait somewhere away from the house. We can't let Gerald see him."

"I have to get in there. My mom's in there," Roger argued.

"No way. I'm not trading you. I'll arrest you if I have to so you stay safe." Angus nodded to a uniformed officer that Franks had called over. "Take him somewhere safe. Keep him out of sight of the windows. Put him in the back of a car if you have to, but don't let him out of your sight. You have my permission to cuff him if he gives you trouble." Angus didn't care if it was legal or not. Keeping Roger safe was his first priority right now.

"Yes, Sir." The uniformed officer took Roger's arm gently. "Come with me."

"You have to keep me updated. Don't leave me wondering what's going on," Roger called over his shoulder as he was led away.

Angus didn't answer because that was a promise he couldn't make. Things were too fluid and if they happened quickly, keeping Roger up to date was the last thing on his mind. He had to get communication inside somehow. Gerald wasn't answering the phone.

A gunshot rang out from the house and Angus's blood ran cold.

"Betty, stop," Lizzy yelled.

Angus ignored his mother. Betty couldn't get injured by anything going on. He was more concerned about Roger who

had broken away from the officer and was now running through mess of police cars, toward the house. “Stop him.”

Franks was already moving. He was several feet in front of Angus but not close enough. Roger made it up the front steps of the house before a uniformed officer tackled him, taking him down on the front porch hard.

“I have to get in there.” Roger struggled as the officer pulled him up and forced him down the steps and away from the house. “Mom!” The pain and worry in Roger’s shout were evident to everyone listening.

“Damn it,” Angus grunted as he met Franks at the front porch. They both ducked down below the porch to stay out of sight.

“What now?” Franks glanced around.

“We need to get into that house.” He looked around the yard. “We could go in the back. Hell, maybe that basement window even.”

“Angus!” His mother waved and ran toward him only to be stopped by another officer.

“Stay back!” he yelled at his mother, wishing he hadn’t asked her to come here. The last thing he needed was her in danger.

“It’s safe. He shot himself,” his mother called to him as she tried to free herself from the officer’s grip.

“What?” He stood and ran to where his mother was.

She shrugged out of the officer’s grip. “Betty went in. He committed suicide. The man and woman are both injured, but the guy you are after is dead.”

The officer looked at Lizzy as if she was crazy.

“You’re sure. Gerald shot himself. He didn’t shoot Harvey?”

His mother nodded. “Betty is sure.”

“Who is Betty?” the officer asked.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Lizzy smirked at him, then looked back at Angus. “Would I put you in danger if I wasn’t sure?”

Angus knew she wouldn’t, but how the hell was he supposed to explain this in a report? It didn’t matter. He had victims who were injured inside that house, and he had to get to them. “Mom, go back over where you’re safe. I’ll get a team and go inside. Tell Betty thank you.”

“You just did.” His mother smiled at the confused officer beside them and turned to walk back to where she’d been.

“Want to tell me what that was about?” the officer asked.

“Nope.” Angus shook his head. “We need to get into that house.” He glanced around, glad that he didn’t see any of his superiors on scene yet. “Franks, can you kick that door in?”

“You sure you want to do this? It goes against—” Franks started to argue.

“I know that, but Melissa and Harvey are injured. We have to get in there. I trust Betty.” He gave Frank a hard stare. “She wouldn’t lie.”

“I know, but how—” Franks started to ask.

“I’ll figure it out later. Can you kick in that door?”

“Probably.” Franks shrugged. “If not, Officer Webster can.” He pointed to a uniformed officer standing by one of the cars who had played professional football for years before becoming a police officer.

Angus smiled. “Let’s get a team ready before anyone important gets here and tries to stop us.”

It took only minutes to get a group together. He hated they had to play this by the book and take precautions when he was sure the threat was gone, but he didn’t have any choice. He was going to have a hell of a time explaining how he knew Gerald was down anyway. He let several officers lead the way up the porch with shields in hand, then watched as Officer Webster took down the door with one well-placed kick. The team entered the house and cleared it.

“Three down. One in the kitchen, two in the living room,” someone called.

Angus ignored Gerald’s body. He wasn’t going anywhere. He hurried over and kneeled beside Harvey’s body and blew out a relieved breath as he saw his eyes open and looking up at him. A large gash along his forehead bled, but other than that, Angus didn’t see any other injury. “You okay?”

“Melissa’s in the kitchen.” Harvey’s voice was raspy.

“Franks is with her. I’ll give you an update as soon as I get one. Other than your head, are you injured?”

“I think he broke my finger.” Harvey lifted his left hand. “He hit it with the gun when I told him I had no way to call Roger.”

“We’ll get you taken care of.” He glanced up as Franks walked into the room.

“Melissa is unconscious but breathing. Webster’s with her right now.” Franks glanced down at Gerald’s body. “I’ll call the medical examiner.”

“Have someone let Roger know his mother and Harvey are alive and he can head to the hospital with them as soon as the ambulances arrive,” Angus said.

“On it.” Franks left the room.

Angus stayed by Harvey’s side as they waited for the paramedics. “I’m going to need a statement, but I’ll drop by the hospital later to get it. Can I call anyone for you?”

“My son, Matt Wilson. My phone was on the kitchen table. You can get the number there.” Harvey gave him the code to get into the phone.

“I’ll call as soon as I can,” Angus promised as he heard sirens arriving outside. “Looks like your ride’s here.”

“Melissa first.” Harvey closed his eyes.

Angus stepped aside when the paramedics entered. One checked Gerald for a pulse but didn’t find one. He then came over to Harvey and got to work. Angus quickly made his way

to the kitchen, carefully getting the number from Harvey's phone as he watched them load Melissa onto a stretcher.

Once back outside, he made the call to Harvey's son, then turned and looked for his mother. He found her leaning against a fence half a block from the house. She smiled as he walked up to her.

"Your Santa is here and freaking out." She rolled her eyes.

"Tell him it's over and he can cross over now," Angus said softly so others didn't hear.

"Betty's talking to him. Not the friendliest ghost I've met." She took his hand. "You okay?"

"I'm good. Nothing I haven't seen before." He hated that Betty had gone into the house and seen Gerald's body. It was a sight he wouldn't wish on anyone. "I owe Betty."

"She's fine. Don't you worry about her. We were glad we could help." Lizzy released his hand. "Can we do anything more?"

"No, thanks for coming to help. I tried to get Lance, but he was working. I'm sorry I had to involve you."

"Hush. You know better than that. I wouldn't have this gift if it wasn't supposed to be used. Now you go finish up. Your dad is taking me out for dinner tonight so I need to get home and get ready." She turned. "Betty, you ready to go?"

She paused a moment, then sighed. "Your ghost wants to go to the morgue."

"The medical examiner will be here shortly. He can ride with Sam when he takes the body." Angus would need to call and warn Lance that Gene was headed his way. He bent and kissed his mother's cheek. "Have fun tonight. If I don't see you before, we'll be there Christmas Eve."

"I'll talk to you before then." She smiled, then turned. "Come on, Bets, we need to get home." She walked off, appearing to talk to herself, but Angus knew Betty was right there beside her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lance set the food on Angus's kitchen table. "You look exhausted." It was nearly ten at night, but Lance had wanted to make sure Angus got something to eat, and honestly, he just wanted to see him and hold him for a minute. He never liked hearing that Angus was involved in a situation where there was a shooting. And suicide was never easy to deal with, even when the person who died was evil.

"I am. I can't promise to be good company, but I'm glad you're here and that you brought food. I don't have the energy to even toss something in the microwave."

"Then just let me take care of you for a bit." Lance opened the fridge. "Drink?"

"Just water." Angus slumped into one of the kitchen chairs.

Lance grabbed two water bottles before going back to the table. He set one down in front of Angus, then sat down next to him. "Any update on Melissa?"

"Harvey said she woke up about an hour ago. They're running tests, but so far, everything seems fine other than a concussion. Roger is staying at Harvey's house for a while so they can get the mess at the Franklins' cleaned up." Angus reached for the food and started scooping servings onto his plate. "No sign of Gene yet?"

"Nothing. Jeremy hasn't seen him around either. Maybe he moved on. He wasn't with Gerald's body when it came into the morgue." Lance took the rice that Angus was handing him. "I'm betting he saw his brother's spirit and followed him into the light, hoping to scream at him."

"We can only hope." Angus gave a wry grin.

"At least you wrapped this up before Christmas. Hopefully, everything stays quiet between now and then."

They only had a few more days to go.

“I hate to think what Gene’s parents are going through though. Tough time of year to lose both your sons. Roger said he’s going to take some time to go see them before he heads back to Florida,” Angus told him.

“How’s your mom doing? I’m so sorry I didn’t get your call. I hate she had to go to the scene. Even more so, that Betty had to see what she did.” Lance had gotten the message once he’d finished the autopsy, but by that time, Gerald was already dead, and Sam had left to pick up the body. There was nothing Lance could do to help.

“She’s fine. Acting like it was nothing. You know how she is. If I hadn’t called her, she would have been upset. She wants me to call her about these things more often. I just can’t stomach having her involved or even bringing her somewhere she could be in danger.”

“I don’t blame you. I feel the same way, but I’m glad she could help when I couldn’t. Speaking of your mom, what do I need to bring on Christmas Eve?”

“Nothing really. You could bring a dessert if you want, but Mom or more so Dad will have everything set. He loves preparing big dinners like these. You saw how they were on Thanksgiving. I finally found the perfect Christmas gift for Mom. It’s a collector’s Iron Maiden LP that’s quite rare. I think she’ll be excited about it.”

“You know that eventually, you’re going to inherit all this stuff?” Lance grinned.

“Don’t remind me. I’ll end up spending months online trying to resell it all. Honestly, I might keep some of her stuff. My luck, she won’t cross over and she’ll haunt me continuously, making threats if I even attempt to sell anything.” Angus sighed.

“Are you telling me not to tell you if she hangs around?”

Angus laughed. “I wouldn’t be a very good boyfriend if I let my mother haunt you and not me, would I?”

“No, but I’d understand if you didn’t want to know. Especially if she’s angry at you for something. Seriously, your mom knows enough people who can see ghosts, she’d probably send them all to your door if I refused to communicate for her.”

“Even if she’s in a mood, I’d want to know she’s there. Mom and Dad have already made a deal to wait for the other and go into the light together. You’re going to be stuck with one or the other no matter what.” Angus reached out his hand and covered Lance’s. “I like that you’re thinking we’ll still be together then. I’m hoping Mom and Dad live a long time.”

Lance swallowed his food and linked his fingers with Angus. “I have no plans on going anywhere.”

Angus leaned in and kissed him softly. “Good. Neither do I. In fact…” He stood and went to the counter, opening a drawer. “I was going to wait until Christmas to give this to you, but we might not get any time alone. Now is as good a time as any.” He pulled a small, wrapped package out of the drawer.

Lance took the gift, wrapped in red and green striped paper. “You want me to open this now or wait for Christmas?” The package was small, about the size of a greeting card.

“I have something else for you to open in front of everyone, so open this one now.” Angus sat back down.

“Thanks.” Lance slowly opened the gift and set the paper aside. It took him a moment to realize what he was looking at. “You got us tickets for a cruise?” His chest tightened at just the thought of the gift and the time alone with Angus.

“Yeah, I hope that’s okay. You don’t have some phobia of ships or the ocean, do you?” Angus asked.

“No, this sounds fun.” He looked at the location and tears came to his eyes. He swallowed hard, emotion making it hard to speak. “Five-night, Western Caribbean cruise.”

“Not until April, but I figured we’d both need to get the time off work. If it doesn’t interest you, I can give it to Mom and Dad or something.” Angus looked unsure of himself.

“Don’t you dare. This is perfect. I can’t wait. This will be amazing together. I’ve never been on a cruise.”

“Neither have I. Mom says they’re fun. I figured we could both use a break. Something more than a weekend trip.”

“I can’t wait. Thank you. I have your gift at home. I didn’t think we’d be exchanging them tonight.” Lance was now wondering if the new leather jacket and motorcycle accessories were good enough. He’d spent a lot and knew they were things Angus needed, but they weren’t anything like a cruise.

“That’s okay. I just wanted to do this when we were alone in case you didn’t like the idea.”

“I love the idea. I can’t wait for April now. It was a great gift.” Lance leaned in and kissed him. “Thank you.” He wiped his eyes, embarrassed by the sudden show of emotion. He’d been alone for so long. Having Angus by his side now meant everything to him. And the confirmation they were both thinking long term just solidified his feelings. He couldn’t imagine his future without Angus in it.

“It will give us something to look forward to. Will you have trouble getting the time off?” Angus asked.

“No, I have two weeks of vacation every year. We can do the cruise in April and still have time later in the year if we want.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They ate in silence for several minutes, then Angus yawned again.

“I should probably let you sleep.” Lance took his plate over to the sink.

“You could stay.” Angus started closing the leftover food boxes.

“I could, but you need sleep more than you need me. Besides, with Jackson in town, I feel like I need to be home. He’s only here a few more days. I want to spend as much time

with him as I can.” Lance took the boxes from Angus and put them in the fridge.

“Sorry, I forgot he was in town.”

“He’s been busy with his friends, but I promised Kel we could sit down later tonight and talk some more. He wants to work out a way to communicate with Jackson while they’re away.”

“Will Jackson tell his teammates?” Angus asked.

“He’s not sure. I’m guessing that’s part of the conversation we’ll have tonight. I know he’s worried they won’t believe him, but Kel wants the team to know he’s there. I’m not sure what they’ll decide. Jackson’s worried they’ll think he’s lost his mind, which I understand. At least I can help them work out a way to use touch to answer yes or no questions and such.”

“Who would have thought your brother would have a ghost attached to him? Maybe Jackson and Kel will end up being like Mom and Betty years from now.” Angus laughed.

“I never thought I’d get my brother who always thought death was the end of the line for us to accept there are such things as ghosts.” Lance smiled. “Jackson’s going to have to rethink his thoughts on the afterlife now.” He walked over and hugged Angus from behind, leaning down to rest his cheek on the top of Angus’s head. “You going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I’m just glad it’s over. I have some paperwork to handle tomorrow, which I hate, but at least we know Gerald’s not out there putting someone’s life at risk. I hate how this ended, but he was facing life in prison and knew it. Once he found out his original plan wouldn’t work, he was out of options.”

“Maybe things will stay quiet so we can enjoy the holiday.” Lance laughed at the glare he got from Angus. “Sorry, I forgot we aren’t supposed to say the q-word. But seriously, let’s hope the criminals take the week off.”

Angus stood and pulled Lance into his arms. “While I won’t say it out loud like you will, I agree.” He leaned in and

kissed Lance softly. “Thank you for bringing dinner.”

“Of course. You can enjoy the leftovers for lunch tomorrow.” Lance cupped Angus’s cheek with his palm. “I love you.”

“Love you too. Now go help Jackson. I’m going to lock up behind you, grab a hot shower, then fall into bed until my alarm goes off in the morning.” He pressed another gentle kiss to Lance’s mouth. “Good luck tonight.”

“Thanks.” Lance smiled. “I’ll call you when I get a break from work tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

As Lance headed out, he wondered if Gene had moved on. It was the first time he’d met a ghost he wouldn’t miss. He missed Jeremy hanging around the morgue and hoped with Gene gone, Jeremy would come around more often. He missed the chatter as he worked, even if he was the only one there who could hear it.

He smiled as he got into his car and thought about everyone waiting for him at home. His life was full of friends and family now. A mix of both the dead and living giving him something he’d never had before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Merry Christmas.” Ray grinned from where he sat at the kitchen table with Bethany and Kel beside him. “Sleep well?”

Lance moved toward the coffee pot. “I did. Too well maybe.” He went to work, getting the coffee going. “I really wish you guys could do simple things like have the coffee going when I get up.”

“You could get an automatic coffee maker,” Kel said. “Or even one of those fancy things with pods.”

“The pods make no sense to me. I drink two or three cups in the morning. I like being able to just make it and leave it warming as I go about things. Besides, the pods cost more when you break it down. I’m not into those weird coffee flavors. I just want a good cup of black coffee. As for the automatic one, I probably should, but I know me. I’d forget to get it ready every night.” Lance took a seat beside Kel once he was finished. “Where’s Jackson?”

“He snuck out after you guys got home from Lizzy’s last night. I think he went to see Megan. He told me to stay here. I did as he asked.” Kel shrugged.

Lance was about to complain about it being Christmas morning when he heard the front door open. A moment later, Jackson walked in, wearing the same clothes he’d worn to Lizzy’s earlier in the night.

“Sorry, I ended up sitting up all night with Megan. We had some stuff to talk about.” He eyed the brewing coffee pot before sitting down at the table with them. “Merry Christmas.”

The group mumbled Merry Christmas back, but Lance was the only one Jackson could hear.

“So how are things with Megan?” Lance was almost nervous to ask. He was sure Megan would be a huge part of Jackson deciding to come home in a year or not.

“Good. We’re going to write while I’m away and see how things go. If life doesn’t toss anyone else in either of our lives, we’ll give things a go when I come back home.”

“So you’ve decided to come home when your time’s up?” Lance stared at him, hopeful he’d be getting his brother back sooner rather than later.

“I think so. I’m leaning that way. I need to talk to the team, but I think it’s time I settle down and find something here to keep me busy. I’ve got a few options. I’ll see where things are in a year and go from there.” Jackson grinned. “You going to be able to put me up if I come home while I look for my own place?”

Lance reached over and hugged Jackson tightly. “You know you have a place here any time you need one.” He looked over at Kel. “You too. If you want to come back and stay here with us, you’re always welcome.”

Jackson pulled back. “You talking to Kel?”

“Yeah, he’s sitting beside me. Bethany and Ray are here as well,” Lance explained.

“Oh, hey. I didn’t realize everyone was here.” Jackson sighed. “Still getting used to this whole ghost thing.”

“It takes time, and I should have told you they were here when you walked in.” Lance stood and pulled two coffee mugs from the cabinet. He poured each cup, then set one in front of Jackson before sitting down with his own. “Let me get some coffee in me and we can go exchange gifts.”

“Angus coming over?” Jackson asked.

“Later. He’s dropping by his parents’ this morning, then will head over here. He’ll be staying the night.” Lance could hardly wait. It felt like forever since he’d held Angus in his arms all night.

“I’m going back over to Megan’s later. I won’t spend the night, but I’ll probably be late. You’re not doing anything big for dinner, are you?”

Lance shook his head. “Lizzy sent home leftovers last night that we’ll heat up and I’m cooking a ham to pick on. Bethany wants to put on Christmas movies and sit in front of the TV all afternoon. I might try out a cookie recipe that Celeste gave me if I get bored.”

“I think that would be a great idea.” Jackson patted his stomach. “You know I’m going to be thinking about you and Celeste’s recipes the whole time I’m away. You better not let her cross over. She’s improved your cooking skills a hundred percent.”

Lance grinned. “I do have to admit I’ve gained a bit of weight since meeting her. I now understand why you used to enjoy watching her show so much.”

“You need to write everything down she tells you. Once I’m home for good, I’ll impress Megan with some of those recipes.” Jackson blew over his coffee. “Do you think I should tell Megan about Kel? It would mean letting her know about your ability.”

Lance thought about it. His first reaction was fear at the idea of others knowing, but if Megan was going to be part of their lives, he would want her to know eventually. Lance glanced over at Kel. “What do you think?”

Kel shrugged. “She can’t see or hear me, so it doesn’t matter to me if she believes or not. I just don’t want Jackson to lose her because she thinks he’s lost his mind. If he wants my advice, which he probably doesn’t, I’d wait until things are more stable and he’s back home to stay before breaking the news to her.”

Lance repeated that to Jackson, then added his own thoughts. “I don’t mind her knowing about me as long as she isn’t going to talk about it to everyone. I don’t want people whispering about me behind my back. I’m not as brave as Lizzy. I worry about how it might affect my career if word gets out that I see ghosts. Most won’t believe it and will think I’m nuts. If you tell her, just remind her it’s a secret and she can come to me if she has questions.”

Jackson nodded. “She’ll think I’m crazy for believing you, won’t she?”

“Probably, but if she trusts you and loves you, she’ll give you a chance to explain about Kel and how you didn’t believe at first either. Once you tell her how Kel convinced you he really was around, then maybe she’ll believe you. It’s hard to say. I thought getting you to believe would be impossible, yet you showed up with Kel, making it easier to convince you I haven’t lost my mind.”

“Yeah, I have to admit, if Kel hadn’t been here to verify everything, I wouldn’t have believed you. I would have figured it was some long-lasting injury from your accident.” Jackson shrugged. “Sorry. It’s just so hard to believe without some kind of proof. You see so many shows with these fakes who try to swindle money from people.”

“I get it. I had trouble believing it at first as well. I was ready to turn myself in for a psych evaluation. If it wasn’t for Angus and Lizzy, I would have.” Lance took a drink of his coffee. “I trust you to only tell those you trust not to use it against me. I don’t care if they believe or think I’m nuts as long as they aren’t talking about it behind my back so my boss finds out.”

“I get it. If I tell anyone, it would be just Megan and possibly the team if Kel and I decide they won’t toss me out of the next helo we take,” Jackson teased. “Come on, let’s go open gifts.” Jackson stood with his coffee in hand.

Lance followed as did the rest of the group. Lance took a seat on the floor beside the huge Christmas tree so he could hand out gifts, though either he or Jackson would have to open the things he got for the ghosts.

Jackson sat in the big chair beside him. “It’s been a long time since we’ve had a Christmas morning together.”

“It has. I’m usually opening a package you sent by mail.” Lance handed Jackson the first gift. “This is from Kel.”

“How?” Jackson took the large gift.

“He told me what he wanted to do, and I made it happen.” Lance smiled over at Kel. “It wasn’t much work, but I think it turned out amazing.”

Kel sat in the other large chair while Bethany and Ray sat on the couch watching them.

Jackson slowly opened the large box and pulled out one of two picture frames. He sucked in a breath when he saw what was in the frame. “It’s the last picture we took as a team before Kel died.” He looked up. “Where’s Kel sitting?”

Lance pointed to the chair.

“Kel, this is perfect. How did you manage this?” Jackson asked.

“Tell him,” Kel said to Lance.

Lance nodded. “He had me get into his old email. We weren’t even sure it was still open, but we got lucky. He picked the picture and had me get it blown up and framed. There are others a bit smaller for you to take back for the rest of your team. Check out the other one. It’s just for you.”

Jackson pulled out the next frame and laughed. “This was taken when we were in Morocco. I remember this day.” He held up the picture for everyone to see. It was of Jackson and Kel with their arms wrapped over each other’s shoulders as they stared into the camera with silly grins on their faces. “Believe it or not, we were sober when we took that.”

Kel laughed. “We’d been through hell the week before and were finally able to relax a little.”

Jackson nodded when Lance told him what Kel had said. “I love these. Thank you. I’ll leave them here when I go, but as soon as I get my own place, they’re going on the wall.”

Kel nodded.

“You next, Lance.” Jackson pointed to a large box. “The one with the snowmen on the paper.”

Lance grabbed it and opened it. Inside, he found a pair of expensive motorcycle boots he’d been thinking about getting. “You shouldn’t have spent so much.”

“You’re not easy to buy for.” Jackson shrugged. “I had to ask Angus what he thought you might want. He mentioned you’d been looking at the boots but refused to spend that much on them. I have the receipt if they don’t fit right, but I got your size.”

Lance ran his hand over the steel-toed boots. “I love them. Thank you. Now I can’t wait for the weather to improve so I can wear them riding.” He knelt up and hugged Jackson, touched that he would seek out advice from Angus when deciding on a gift.

The rest of the morning was spent sharing gifts and laughing at stories of when Jackson and Lance had been kids. Ray and Bethany loved the new Kindle he’d gotten them, with a bunch of the books they’d wanted to listen to already downloaded. He’d also gotten a smaller one for Kel for Jackson to take with him so Kel could listen to books when no one else was around. He wasn’t sure the ghost would use it, but he hoped it was something he’d enjoy. There weren’t a lot of options for gifts when it came to giving to the dead.

Lance enjoyed the time with his brother and new friends. It was the perfect Christmas morning. When Jackson finally left to go see Megan, he turned his focus to baking as the ghosts kept him company in the kitchen.

“So did Angus close his case?” Bethany asked.

“He did. Turns out the guy was planning to kill off his parents after killing his brother to ensure he got their money, but the parents were a step ahead and named their only grandson as the beneficiary of their estate. When Gerald found that out, he panicked and went after his nephew. He ended up committing suicide once officers had him surrounded,” Lance explained.

“That’s horrible.” Bethany shook her head. “How horrible for that family. Especially around Christmas.”

Lance nodded. “I can’t imagine that kind of greed. I couldn’t even consider harming Jackson for any reason, let alone a monetary one.”

“So your rude ghost is gone?” Ray asked.

“Looks that way. No one has seen him. I spoke to Jeremy at the morgue yesterday before I left, and he hasn’t seen him. We’re hoping he moved into the light when his brother did.” Lance shrugged as he measured flour.

“Do you really think so?” Kel asked. “The ghost was so into Christmas. Do you really think he’d leave before the holiday?”

“Maybe.” Lance hadn’t even thought about that. “If he’s stuck around, he’s with his son or gone off to spend time with his parents. He’s not around the morgue.”

“They wouldn’t have gone into the light together. Gerald wouldn’t get the light. Darkness would take him since he killed someone. At least I’d assume that would be his fate,” Ray commented.

“You mentioned that before. Tell me again about the darkness,” Lance asked.

“You’ve seen it, right?” Ray asked Kel.

“Yeah, more times than I like. It creeps me out.” Kel gave a visible shiver.

“I haven’t seen it yet,” Bethany said.

“Hope you never do. It’s terrifying. It’s like this mist of blackness surrounds the person and just takes them. It’s not just black, but the blackest of blacks you can imagine. It’s not really a mist, not steam or smoke, but I don’t know the right way to explain it. It just surrounds them and consumes them. Then it slowly fades away as if it was never there.” Kel rubbed his arms. “When I’m close to it, I can feel it. It’s an unnerving feeling. Like you’re in the presence of something truly evil. I don’t know if there’s Heaven or Hell, but if there is, this stuff feels like something from Hell.”

Ray nodded. “It’s not misty like smoke. It’s got texture. Maybe like oil. It’s not pleasant to be around at all. The first time I saw it I almost jumped into the light just to escape the feeling it put off.”

“I doubt I could see it since I can’t see the light you guys talk about either. Not that I’d want to be near something like that darkness. Just hearing about it scares the hell out of me.” Lance reached for the sugar as the doorbell rang.

He brushed his hands off and went to answer. Seeing Angus, he grinned. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.” Angus leaned in for a kiss. “I come bearing gifts.”

“Come in. We’re in the kitchen. Let me get the cookies in the oven and we can open gifts.”

“You had me at cookies.” Angus carried a box of wrapped gifts in and set it by the tree for later. “Who’s all here?” He paused in the kitchen.

Lance pointed to where each ghost sat so Angus wouldn’t sit down on top of them. “Jackson took off to be with Megan. I’m betting he won’t be back until late.”

Angus took one of the empty chairs. “What kind of cookies are you making?”

“They’re some kind of cinnamon drop cookie that Celest thinks we’ll love. We’re supposed to try them out and let her know when we see her again. She’s spending a few days with her grandkids right now.”

Angus stood and went to the sink. “Well, put me to work. How can I help?” He washed his hands and then turned to Lance.

As they worked side by side baking, Lance wondered how long it would be before this was a normal thing. He wanted to share everything with Angus but wasn’t sure when would be the perfect time to bring up moving in with one another. He was pretty sure it was too soon, but that didn’t mean he didn’t want it to happen.

Focusing on the cookies, the friends, and the laughter, he let worries fall away and just enjoyed the afternoon. Today was what mattered. The future wasn’t promised, and he wasn’t going to get lost in thoughts of tomorrow when he was so happy today.

EPILOGUE

The moon was high in the sky but barely visible through the clouds as Lance sat beside Angus in the backyard. The ghosts were inside watching another movie, giving him and Angus time alone. The air was cold, but that just gave them more reason to cuddle together as they stared out over the yard.

Angus held a cookie up to Lance. "Want another?"

"Yes, but you have to ignore the extra five pounds I've gained from eating them today."

"More of you to love." Angus laughed. "Besides, I've had twice as many as you. Does that mean I'll gain ten pounds?"

Lance laughed. "It was an amazing day. I'm glad you came over to spend it with us."

"I'm glad I have you to spend it with. You're much more fun than watching basketball games with Dad all afternoon."

Lance was glad Angus wasn't a huge sports fan. They both would watch a game from time to time but didn't obsess over it like some guys did. "I'm not sure old Christmas movies were much better, but they make Bethany happy."

"I don't mind them, but I was glad to escape for a bit." Angus brushed his nose down Lance's neck. "After the last few weeks, I'm happy if I don't have to see another Santa Claus for a while."

"You and me both." Lance laughed, then turned his head to capture Angus's mouth for a kiss. When he pulled back, he smiled. "There's no one I'd rather spend Christmas with."

"Good, because this is just the first of many I hope to spend together." Angus kissed him again. Before they could get too involved in their impromptu make-out session, Lance felt wetness on his cheeks. He pulled back and looked up, shocked at what he saw. "It's snowing."

Angus looked up. “So it is. Don’t see that too often here.” Snow wasn’t unheard of, but it was rare in their area. “Think we’ll get enough to make snow angels in the yard?”

Lance shook his head. “I doubt it, but that doesn’t mean I’m not willing to lie on the grass and stare up at the snowflakes with you.” He took Angus’s hand and pulled him to the center of the lawn, glad they’d shut the door so Haunt wouldn’t bother them once they were lying on the grass. “I can kiss each snowflake from your face.”

“You do that and we’re going to quickly heat things up so the snow melts.”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing.” Lance laughed.

“I love you.” Angus rolled to face him, ignoring the flakes that seemed to be falling even harder. “I love that you’re insane enough to lie outside in the cold and let it snow on us.”

“Haven’t you learned yet that there’s not much you couldn’t talk me into?” Lance stared into his eyes, meaning every word.

“I hope you mean that, because there will come a day I will ask you and I hope when that time comes, you’ll still be willing.”

Lance’s heart seemed to swell. He didn’t need Angus to say what he would ask. They both knew what he was talking about. “When that time comes, I’ll be willing.” Lance wondered if this was Angus’s way of testing his reaction to the idea of marriage. He knew in his heart that it would be in their future, but he didn’t know when. He liked they were taking things slowly, but being apart was getting harder. They’d been together almost a year now. When was the right time? He wasn’t going to worry about that. He’d let Angus know that when he was ready, so was he. That was enough for now.

Angus kissed him and Lance let the world fall away as he lost himself in Angus’s touch and kisses, knowing that no matter what, he was with the man he was meant to be with. He’d enjoy every moment together, always remembering how

empty he'd been before Angus came into his life. This was his forever.

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