

ONE

Alexandra Russell lay like a battered rag doll with haunted lifeless eyes staring up into nowhere. The blood smeared all over her body revealed noticeable slashes and stab wounds on her neck, chest and arms. Her hair was matted down and her clothes had been torn from her body. Her sad life ended just before her twenty first birthday.

Kelly Kaufman couldn't keep the tears from running down her face and she knew the blame fell on her for involving Alexandra Russell in her investigation. She hid behind the confusion of the crowd of rubber necks and yellow tape. The fast paced work of the DC police and EMT's became a blur of movement as she closed her eyes and silently said a prayer. She was onto something, which was very clear, for this was a warning for her to drop the story before she was found in the same manner.

She swiftly slid out of sight and walked toward her apartment but realized it probably wasn't safe to go back there now. Where could she go for refuge? It was too dangerous to contact her mother, even though it had been two weeks since she last called. Her office was out of the question. That would be the first place they would look. Alexandra was her only reliable source and confidant, and it was obvious she was out of the picture. She needed time to think and regroup.

She turned the corner and slipped into a café seeking a table in the back against the wall and dropped down into a chair. She grabbed a napkin and blew her nose as she tried to focus on her iPhone through her tears. Swiftly scrolling down her contact list she wondered how an innocent story on a political figure could surface such scandal, and now murder. She stopped at the name of Desmond Clark, a retired CIA agent and close friend of the family. She hoped he was available at his Georgetown home because there were no other options, and where better to hide than at an agent's place of residence.

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She tapped his name as the phone automatically dialed his number and she heard his answering machine. Before she could leave a message she saw a familiar face walking toward the café. She frantically hung up her phone and bolted out of the chair and ran back into the ladies room and locked the door. She spotted a small window as her only way out and hopped up onto the sink and squeezed her way through the opening. She hung sideways and carefully lowered herself to the ground as she caught her balance and took off in a run. Maybe it would be better to visit Desmond personally.

She quickly looked back at the alley and saw no one following her as she darted onto the next block. She punched Desmond's address into her map app and realized it would be a hike to his place, but she had no other choice. She continued to follow the directions and prayed she made it there before they caught up with her. At that moment she was thankful for running track in college and continuing the morning routine because she would need the lung capacity to get there alive.

According to the map she was only a block away from Desmond's house. Since he hadn't answered his phone she hoped he wasn't on travel, if nothing else she could hide out in his back yard. She and her family had been to his house countless times for parties, and she remembered a back alley gate that would allow her to slip through to regain her breath and composure.

As she crossed the street and headed down the alley she took a quick glance behind her to be sure she was in the clear. Carefully edging up to the tall gate she peered through a wooden knot hole and saw flower beds filled with pansies and marigolds. A small fountain trickled down through a mound of rocks next to a dwarf red bud tree. To her surprise the latch opened as she swiftly slipped into the yard and closed the gate and leaned against the fence to catch her breath.

From her left she heard a swift rustle in the grass and quickly caught the nose of a semi-automatic hand gun staring back at her

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as her eyes grew wide. She took in a deep breath and shouted at the owner of the gun. “Desmond, it’s me, Kelly. What the hell are you doing?”

“Kelly, Kelly Kaufman is that you? What the hell are *you* doing lurking around in my back yard?” Desmond pulled back as he set the safety and placed the gun in the waist of his jeans. He slicked his shoulder length salt and pepper hair behind his ears. “You look like a scared rabbit.”

Kelly’s heart slowed to a semi-rapid pace as she leaned against the fence and closed her hazel eyes. Her cropped ginger hair was plastered to her cheeks with sweat and her petite frame shook as the adrenalin subsided. “Desmond, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know where else to go. You have to help me.”

“Okay, come on inside. You have some scratches on your arms that need cleaned. Let me get you a beer and you can fill me in on why you’re hiding in my back yard.” His tall athletic frame escorted her through the doors that lead into a sunroom filled with plants and wicker furniture.

Kelly followed him into the kitchen and pulled the stool out from under the butcher block countered island and sat down. “Desmond, Alexandra is dead.”

Desmond turned from the refrigerator. “She’s dead? What do you mean she’s dead?”

“That’s why I’m running. They’re after me, whoever they are. Alexandra was a warning. They know she was my source.”

He set the beer on the counter and brought out a medicine kit and searched for a medicinal wipe. “Okay, I think you’d better start at the beginning.”

“You’re never going to believe any of it. It involves U.S. Senator Jack Dawring.” Kelly saw his shocked look and continued, “Desmond, the word on the street is he’s going to run for President, so my editor wanted me to sniff it out. What I

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found was disgusting and will more than likely ruin his chances at the Presidency. Hell, it'll ruin his entire career.”

Desmond stopped wiping her cut. “It looks like I’m going to need more beer.”

Marie Bartek balanced the phone on her shoulder and tried to write legibly on the tablet. “Yes, Mrs. Kaufman, Washington, DC is a beautiful city. No, I haven’t had the opportunity to visit our Nation’s Capital. Can you repeat the types of claims you are having? Okay, well I will certainly take this to our investigative team. As soon as we can organize a solid date I will get back to you. Thank you and you have a good day also.”

Marie hung up the phone and immediately sensed the presence of Demon B as the room grew cold and the stench of death crept around her nose. Laura Faye’s spirit suddenly appeared as Marie tried to cross her over to the other side. Demon B was still too strong and Marie willed her mind to shut the demon out as the room returned to normal and Laura Faye vanished.

Without missing a beat she took a deep breath and called Gale Winters. “Gale, I just got a call from a possible client. Are you up for a visit to DC? Good, then get your butt over here and I’ll fill you in on the details.”

Bailey nudged his nose under Marie’s hand and dropped his head onto her lap. Marie smiled at the chocolate lab and rubbed his ears. “Bailey, it looks as though we’re going to be making a trip to Washington, DC. Do you think you’re ready for a ghost investigation?”

Marie smiled at Bailey’s wagging tail and jumped at the knock on her screen door. “Come on in, we’re in the dining room.”

Gale came around the corner wearing blue paisley canvas shorts, a red cotton t-shirt, and red wedged espadrilles. She

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balanced two coffees in a paper tray and a bag from the local bakery. Her charcoal colored hair danced over her shoulders and her olive colored skin was bronzed from the sun. “Hey there girlfriend, how are you? Where can I put these danishes so Bailey can’t get at them?”

Marie grabbed the bag and set them in the center of the antique walnut dining table. “There’s no safe place from Bailey. You got here quick.”

“I must be getting your vibes because I was already walking over here with these goodies. I’m glad I live close because my feet are killing me in these shoes. It’s difficult looking good and walking in sand.” Gale sat down and patted Bailey’s head. “Aren’t you a good boy? But you can’t have any of my danish because Auntie Gale hasn’t had any breakfast and I’m a bit cranky today.”

“What else is new?” Marie winked and pulled the lid off the steaming coffee and took a sip. “I love your shoes, goes great with the outfit.”

Gale smiled. “Of course, everything always does. You’re looking refreshed. Did you get more blonde highlights or is that from the sun?”

“I’m going to say it’s the sun...we’ll keep that between us. Getting back to this investigation, I just came in from a swim and barely answered the phone in time.”

“Isn’t it too cold to swim in the ocean?”

“I had my wetsuit on. Can I continue please?”

Gale shrugged and said, “Okay, sorry, I forgot what an exercise freak you are.”

“Anyway, her name is Shawna Kaufman and she lives on Sixteenth Street in DC.” Marie grabbed her notes and flipped the page. “She claims there have been shadows and odd feelings in the kitchen and living room ever since they moved in twenty years ago. They hear sounds of someone walking in the hall and

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bedrooms. Her daughter has seen a dark mist in one of the bathrooms and has frequently heard conversations at certain times of the day.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of activity. Why did she contact us? Isn’t there a local paranormal group she could have called, and why call after twenty years?” Gale licked the cream cheese icing from her lip.

“That’s exactly what I asked her. She said the occurrences have escalated and when she was searching for ghost investigators she found the article on the internet about us in New Orleans. I guess she was intrigued and thought we sounded reputable.”

“If you don’t mind I’d like to forget about our vacation in New Orleans. I still have strange dreams from that whole experience.” Gale rubbed her arms warding off a chill. “How have *you* been? You haven’t had any visits from *Beelzebub* creeping into your dreams have you?”

“Remember not to say his name, and as a matter of fact, I had a brief encounter just before I called you, but I was able to block him. Laura Faye showed up too. I’m still not able to cross her over. Demon B sure has a stronghold on her. It’s been awhile since my last encounter. It was much more frequent when we returned from New Orleans. I’m glad I have Myra’s help to block him.”

Gale cocked her head and raised her right eyebrow. “Have you told Cory yet?”

Marie shook her head. “No and I feel terrible because I know he worries about me. He has enough going on at his job without me adding that a demon is still trying to take over my mind. Oh, have I told you recently that I’m sorry for you being kidnapped and almost sacrificed in a satanic ritual when we were in New Orleans?”

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Gale rolled her eyes. “Yes, you’ve repeatedly apologized since Christmas. Look, it wasn’t your fault. When are you going to realize that? All of your visions helped solve the case.”

Marie smiled. “Thanks, and please know it’ll never happen again.”

“Well, enough about all of that, I’m all in for a trip to DC. I don’t have any issues closing my antique shop, but how much time can you take off from the clinic? Won’t your clients get peeved if you’re gone?”

“As long as I have enough notice to take a long weekend off, I should be okay. Loretta is a crackerjack assistant, she whips my schedule around better than me. Kara from Mount Pleasant said she’d be glad to fill in for me. I think the animals will be safe for a few days while I’m gone.” Marie slipped a piece of danish to Bailey. “Bailey finishes his last behavior training class next week and Myra and I have been training him for our next investigation.”

“I think that’s a great idea. I’ve heard that dogs have a keen sense of smell.” Gale smiled at Bailey and took a sip of coffee.

“Absolutely, and he can see better in low light, so he’s the perfect ghost investigator.”

“And let’s not rule out that you hate leaving him when you travel.” Gale chuckled and caressed Bailey’s snout with her foot.

“Yeah, I’m not going to deny it. Okay, so when is a good time to get the group together for a meeting?”

“I think this Saturday is the best, don’t you? It’ll be a week earlier than our normal meeting. So how is Myra? I haven’t seen her around town. She was pretty sick after all of that spiritual healing she did on us.” Gale sat back in the chair and crossed her long slender legs.

“She’s much better, but I worry about her. It really does drain her after a reading, let alone crossing a spirit over *and*

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blocking a demon from entering our minds. She had a tough time fighting off that pneumonia.”

“I know. She’s so frail, hell a strong wind could blow her over. Do you think she’ll be able to make the trip to DC?”

“I hope so, it’s an eight hour drive, and I think she’ll be okay if we break it up a little to give her a rest. Plus, I don’t think she’s willing to let me go alone on anymore investigations.”

“Yeah, I think you had her worried with what happened in New Orleans. You two have quite a connection.” Gale got up and threw her coffee cup in the garbage and leaned against the counter. “Speaking of connections, have you seen or heard from Ladislava or Ludomir? Those names still crack me up.”

“Hey don’t make fun of my spirit guides. They’re my ancestors you know.” Marie closed the bakery bag. “And yes, actually I do see them, all of the time now.”

“Really, I had no idea. You must be getting a better handle on your ability.”

“Well, there’s no doubt I’m able to do more and more every day. Myra said that my meditating has helped tremendously.” Marie sheepishly looked at Gale. “There is a bit of a new area that has come into play lately.”

“Well, don’t just sit there looking at me that way. Tell me.”

Marie got up and began to rinse her hands in the sink. “Well, it started about two weeks ago. I was walking down to the mini-mart to get a paper. While I was standing in line waiting to pay there was a spirit standing next to the lady in front of me. The spirit kept asking me to tell this lady, which was her daughter, that she’s doing fine and her emerald necklace fell down behind the bedroom dresser and was wedged between the floorboards.”

“What the hell? You mean to tell me that you’re starting to see spirits everywhere and they’re talking to you?”

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“It looks that way. I can’t go anywhere without someone talking at me to get a message to their loved one.” Marie sighed and leaned against the sink. “It’s wearing me out. I haven’t slept well since then. I’m still learning how to control it.”

Gale sat down and leaned her elbows on her knees. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier? You’ve been keeping this to yourself all this time? Have you told Myra or Cory?”

Marie shook her head. “I told Myra, but not Cory. Plus, it was pretty creepy when I was with Cory the other night and his sister Cheyenne showed up.”

Gale’s eyes got wide. “Oh man, now that *is* creepy. What did you do? What did she say?”

“I think I was numb and very distracted. I didn’t hear her very well and I think she sensed I was uncomfortable and just left. She knows how serious Cory and I are about each other.”

“Well, you *know* you have to tell Cory. In fact, you need to tell him everything. You can’t keep this inside of you. He needs to know what’s going on with you and that Demon B is still an issue.” Gale leaned back in the chair and folded her arms.

“I know, I planned on telling him, but I wanted to tell you first. You’re my best friend and sounding board.” Marie winked.

Gale leaned forward. “What’s really bothering you? You don’t normally keep anything from Cory. He accepted your psychic abilities a year ago, what’s the deal?”

Marie nervously wrapped a long strand of hair around her finger, and began pacing about the kitchen. “Why would you ask that? I’m just a bit sleep deprived that’s all. I haven’t been getting the rest I need with all of these *new* abilities of mine sneaking up on me.”

Gale rolled her eyes. “Really, that’s what you want to go with, that you’re sleep deprived? Marie, you’re a ghost investigator and a veterinarian who is on-call twenty four seven. You must think I’m an idiot. Come on, it’s me, Gale

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Winters...your confidant, sister-in-arms who helps you kick demons in the ass, fight off serial killers, and let's not forget I make the best damn margarita on Sullivan's Island. What gives?"

Marie stopped in mid-stride and flopped back into the chair as her lip quivered. "Oh Gale, I think I'm pregnant."

Gale shot out of her chair, tipping it over, and then dropped to her knees in front of Marie. "You're what? Marie, are you sure? How late are you? Did you take a pregnancy test? Did you tell Cory? No, of course you didn't tell Cory. Did you tell Myra? Oh Marie, that's great news...isn't it?"

Marie picked her head up out of her hands and shrugged. "I don't know if it's great news. I'm only a week late, which never happens, and no, I didn't take a test yet. Cory has no clue nor does Myra. Although I think she read me the other day because she asked if I was feeling okay. Oh Gale, what should I do? I haven't slept a wink. I'm scared to find out."

"Okay, well I'm leaving right now to buy a pregnancy test and we'll take it together." Gale held up her hand. "You know what I mean; I'll be here *with* you when you take the test. You can't sit here agonizing over it. Once you know, then you can work out the rest of the details."

Marie quickly wiped a tear off her cheek. "You don't need to buy one, I have one here. It's been sitting in my bathroom drawer. I guess I'm afraid to find out if it's positive and I didn't want to be alone to take the test."

"Okay, well I can understand that. But I'm here with you now, so go on, the suspense is killing me."

Marie faintly smiled and slowly walked into the bathroom. From behind the closed door she asked, "Gale, how am I going to explain this to Cory? Heck, how am I going to explain this to my parents? This whole thing has made me crazy."

"Well, I hate to sound like your mother, but weren't you and Cory using protection? I mean, I thought you were on the pill."