

A woman with long, dark, straight hair is shown from the chest up, looking directly at the camera. Her hair is partially covering her face, with only her eyes and part of her nose and mouth visible. She is wearing a dark, possibly black, top. The background is a dark, misty forest with many thin, bare trees. The overall mood is mysterious and somewhat eerie.

THE SOUL
SUMMONER

ELICIA HYDER

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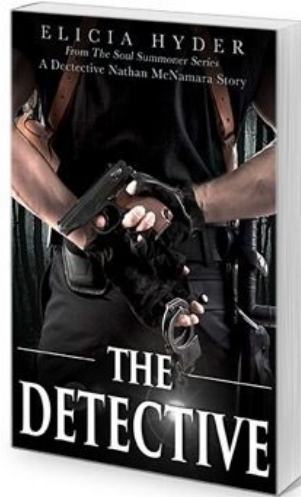
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The Soul Summoner

By

Elicia Hyder

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The Soul Summoner is for my kids...
in hopes that it pays for college.

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MY AWESOME LAUNCH TEAM - I would be nowhere without you! (Alphabetically):

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HER HAZEL EYES were judging me again. *God, I wish I could read minds instead.*

Adrienne spun her fork into her spaghetti, letting the tines scrape against the china. I cringed from the sound. She pointed her forkful of noodles at my face. "I think you're a witch."

I laughed to cover my nerves. "You've said that before." Under the white tablecloth, I crossed my fingers and prayed we would breeze through this conversation one more time.

A small, teasing smile played at the corner of her painted lips. "I really think you are."

I shook my head. "I'm not a witch."

She shrugged. "You might be a witch."

I picked up my white wine. "I wish I had a dollar for every time I've heard that. I could pay off my student loans." With one deep gulp, I finished off the glass.

She swallowed the bite in her mouth and leaned toward me. "Come on. I might die if I don't go to see him tonight! Do you really want that kind of guilt on your hands?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're so dramatic."

She placed her fork beside her plate and reached over to squeeze my hand. "Please try."

My shoulders caved. "OK." I shoved my chair back a few inches and crossed my legs on top of my seat. I closed my eyes, shook my long brown hair off my shoulders, and blew out a deep slow breath as I made circular O's with my fingertips. Slowly, my hands floated down till they rested on my knees. I began to moan. "Ohhhhhmmmm..."

Adrienne threw her napkin at me, drawing the attention of the surrounding guests at Alejandro's Italian Bistro. "Be serious!"

I dropped my feet to the floor and laughed as I scooted closer to the table. "You be serious," I said. "You know that's not how it works."

She laughed. "You don't even know how it works!" She flattened her palms on the tablecloth. "Here, I'll make it easy. Repeat after me. Billy Stewart, Billy Stewart, Billy Stewart," she chanted.

I groaned and closed my eyes. "Billy Stewart, Billy Stewart, Billy Stewart."

She broke out in giggles and covered her mouth. "You're such a freak!"

I raised an eyebrow. "You call me that a lot."

"You know I'm only joking. Sort of."

Adrienne Marx had been my best friend since the fifth grade, but sometimes I still had trouble deciphering when she was joking and when she was being serious.

I picked up my fork again and pointed it at her. "It's not gonna happen, so don't get too excited."

She let out a deep breath. "I'm not."

I smirked. "Whatever."

~~Our waiter, who had been the topic of our conversation before Adrienne began gushing about her new crush on Billy Stewart, appeared at our table.~~

"Can I get you ladies anything else?" His Southern drawl was so smooth I had nicknamed him Elvis over dinner. He was a little older than the two of us, maybe twenty-three, and he had a sweet, genuine smile. His hair was almost black, and his eyes were the color of sparkling sapphires. I had drunk enough water that night to float the Titanic just so I could watch him refill my glass.

I looked at his name tag. "Luke, do I look like a witch?"

His mouth fell open. "Uh, I don't think so?" His response was more of a question than an answer.

Across the table, Adrienne was twisting strands of her auburn ponytail around her finger. I nodded toward Luke. "See, he doesn't think I'm a witch."

Luke lowered his voice and leaned one hand on our table. "You're too pretty to be a witch," he added, with a wink.

I smiled with satisfaction.

Adrienne laughed and pushed her plate away from her. "Don't be fooled, Luke. She has powers you can't even dream of."

He looked down at me and smiled. "Oh really?" He leaned down and lowered his voice. "How about you let me take care of this for you"—he dangled our bill in front of my face—"and later, when I get off, I can hear all about your powers?"

Heat rose in my cheeks as I took the check from his hand, and when I pulled a pen from his waistband apron, his breath caught in his chest. I flashed my best sultry smile up at him and scribbled my name and phone number on the back of the bill. I stood up, letting my hand linger in his as I gave him the check. "I'm in town on a break from college for the weekend, so let me know when you get off."

He smiled and backed away from the table. "I will"—he looked down at the paper—"Sloan."

I took a deep breath to calm the butterflies in my stomach as Adrienne followed me toward the front door. She nudged me with her elbow. "You should win some kind of award for being able to pick up guys," she said as we passed through the small rush of dinner customers coming in.

I shrugged my shoulders and glanced back at her with a mischievous grin. "Maybe it's part of my gift."

"Witch," she muttered.

The icy chill of winter nipped at my face as I pushed the glass door open. When we walked out onto the sidewalk, I stopped so suddenly that Adrienne tripped over my legs and tumbled to the concrete.

Billy Stewart was waiting at a red light in front of the restaurant.

* * *

Adrienne might never have even noticed Billy's official game warden truck at the stoplight had my mouth not been hanging open when she struggled to her feet. She was cursing me under her breath as her eyes followed the direction of my dumbfounded gaze across the dark parking lot. When her eyes landed on the green and gold truck, she fell back a step.

Her fingers, still coated in gravel dust, dug into my arm. "Is that...?"

I turned my horrified eyes to meet hers when traffic started moving again.

Frantically, she waved her finger in the direction of the traffic light. "That was Billy Stewart! She was so excited that her voice cracked.

"Yeah, it was." Mortification settled over me, and I pressed my eyes closed, hoping to wake from a bad dream. When I focused on Adrienne again, I realized she had taken a pretty nasty fall. He

blue jeans were torn and her right knee was bloody. "Oh geez, I'm so sorry."

~~—She looked at me, her eyes wild with a clear mix of anxiety and amusement. She glanced down at the gash on her knee. "Can you heal me too?" Her question had a touch of maniacal laughter.~~

I shoved her shoulder. "Shut up." I tugged her toward the restaurant's entrance. "Let's go to the bathroom and get you cleaned up."

Once we were behind the closed door of the ladies room, Adrienne's curious eyes turned toward me again. She hiked her leg up on the counter beside the sink. "What the hell just happened out there?"

I ran some cold water over a paper towel and handed it to her. "I need a drink." I splashed my face with cold water and, for a moment, considered drowning myself in the sink.

She pointed at me as she dabbed the oozing blood off her kneecap. "You and me both, sister. You've got some major explaining to do."

Alejandro's had a small bar near the front door where I had never seen anyone actually sit. When we pulled out two empty bar stools, the slightly balding bartender looked at us like we might be lost. His eyebrows rose in question as he mindlessly polished water spots off of a wine glass.

"I think I'm going to need a Jack and Coke," Adrienne announced.

I held up two fingers. "Make that two."

"IDs?" he asked.

Getting carded was one of the best things about being twenty-one. Any other time, I would have whipped out my finally-legal-identification with a smile plastered on my face. But in that moment, fear of what the next conversation might bring loomed over me like a black storm cloud that was ready to drop a funnel.

I had already learned the hard way not to talk about these things.

People are scared of what they can't comprehend, and the last thing I wanted was for Adrienne to be afraid of me. Despite my unnatural propensity toward popularity, Adrienne was one of the only real friends I had.

I knew the jabs she made about me being a witch were all in jest, but there was a part of her that had been genuinely curious about me since we were kids. Adrienne, above anyone else, had the most cause to be suspicious of the odd 'coincidences' that were happening more and more frequently around me.

Summoning Billy Stewart had been a complete accident. God knows I had tried my whole life to summon all sorts of people—my birth mother and Johnny Depp to name a couple—without any success at all. Sitting next to Adrienne at the bar, I knew from the look in her eyes that seeing Billy at that stoplight solidified to her what I already knew to be true: I was different. Very different.

Swiveling her chair around to face me, she pointed to the dining table we had just vacated. "OK, I was kidding about Billy at dinner. That was some serious David Copperfield shit you just pulled out there, Sloan. Totally creepy."

I groaned and dropped my face into my hands. "I know."

An arm came to rest behind my back, and Luke appeared between our seats with a tantalizing grin that would normally make me swoon. "Did you miss me that much?" he asked.

Adrienne pointed a well-manicured fingernail at him. "Not now, Elvis," she said without taking her eyes off me.

Stunned, Luke took a few steps back.

I offered him an apologetic wink. "We need a minute."

He nodded awkwardly, stuffed his hands into his pockets, and left us alone.

When he was gone, I turned back to Adrienne. "I don't suppose you could be convinced this was all a really big coincidence?"

"Sloan, when we ran into my Gran after you said you needed to pick up some canned green beans from her, that was a coincidence. When we were talking about going to Matt Sheridan's keg party and we ran into him at the beer store, that was a coincidence. When you said you hoped Shannon Green would get syphilis and we saw her walking out of the Health Department, maybe even that was a coincidence." We both laughed.

She tapped her nails against the bar top. "Billy Stewart is supposed to be working on the backside of a mountain right now, Sloan. He shouldn't be anywhere near the city. I was joking and trying to get you to make him magically appear...and then *you did*. That's not a coincidence."

I groaned.

She lowered her voice and leaned into me. "What are you not telling me? Did you make that happen or not?"

It was too late to try and recover with a lie. I had no other choice but to tell her the truth. My legs were shaking under the table and a trickle of sweat ran down my spine. "I'm not a hundred percent certain, but yes. I think so."

She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Her eyes were wide and looking everywhere but into mine. "I'm going to be honest. You're kinda freaking me out a little bit right now."

I nodded and pinched the bridge of my nose. "I know. I wish I had a grand explanation, but I've never had anyone explain it to me either."

I felt her hand squeeze mine. "I love you, so let me have it. Tell me everything."

My stomach felt like an elevator free-falling through the shaft. "You're going to think I'm crazy."

"Sloan, I think we bypassed crazy about twenty minutes ago," she said with a genuine chuckle.

The bartender placed our drinks in front of us, and I wrapped my fingers around the short tumbler. Adrienne drained half of her whiskey in one swallow.

I took a deep breath. I let my thoughts roll around for a moment in my head, and I tried to choose my words carefully so I didn't sound as nuts as I felt. Finally, I looked at her and lowered my voice. "You know when you're out and you see someone you really feel like you know, but you can't remember how or who they are?"

She nodded. "Sure."

I paused for a moment. "I feel that way around *everyone*. Like I already know them."

Her face contorted with confusion. She tried to laugh it off without success. "Well, I've always said you've never met a stranger."

I looked at her seriously. "I haven't *ever* met a stranger, Adrienne."

She cleared her throat. "I really don't understand what you're talking about."

Sadly, I didn't understand what I was talking about either.

"I see people I've never met and feel like I've known them forever. I can even just see a picture of someone and know if they are alive or dead and what kind of person they are. I don't know their names or anything specific, but I have a weird sense about them before ever talking to them. It's like recognize their soul."

She let my words sink in for a moment. "Like the time you told me not to go out with the exchange student in the eleventh grade, and then he date-raped that cheerleader?"

"Yes. I knew he had a lot of evil in him," I said.

"And you get these 'vibes' from everyone?" she asked.

I nodded. "Absolutely everyone."

"So that's why you're so good with people...why you can talk to anyone and everyone at any time?"

I nodded again. "It's easy to befriend people when it feels like you've known them for years, and I seem to be somewhat of a people-magnet."

She interrupted me. "But what does that have to do with Billy Stewart showing up here tonight?"

"There's more."

She sat back, exasperated. "Of course there is."

"I think it's somehow related. People are naturally drawn to me, and somehow I can manipulate that."

Her eyes widened. "You can control people?" Her voice was almost a whisper.

"I don't think I would call it *controlling* people..." My voice trailed off as I sorted through my thoughts. "I know things about people, and sometimes when I talk about someone, it's like I can summon them to me."

She laughed, but it was clear she didn't think it was funny. "Come on, Sloan. Really?"

"Just think about it." I looked at her over the rim of my tumbler and sipped my drink.

She was quiet for a while. There were a thousand odd events she could have been replaying in her mind. Like, the time I said I wanted Jason Ward to ask me to the homecoming dance, and he was waiting by my locker after class. Or, when I told her I had a bad feeling about our gym teacher, and we found out on Monday he had died of a heart attack over the weekend. Finally, she looked at me again. "You know I wouldn't believe a word of this if I hadn't known you for so long."

I nodded. "I don't believe it most of the time myself."

"When you say you 'know' people. What do you know? Like, do you know that guy?" She pointed at the bartender.

I laughed. "No. It's just a sense I get. I can tell you he's an OK guy, but I'm not a mind reader."

She drummed her long nails on the countertop. "So you're psychic?"

"No, I don't think so. I just seem to be able to read people really well."

She leaned toward me and dramatically fanned her fingers like a magician. "And make people suddenly appear!"

"Shhhh!" I looked cautiously around.

Luke, who was waiting nearby, caught my eye and started in our direction.

Adrienne extended her long arm to stop him. "Not so fast, you little eager beaver."

I laughed, and the tension finally started to drain from my shoulders. After a moment, I gripped her arm. "You're not gonna get all freaked out on me now, are you? I haven't told anyone about this since I was old enough to know better."

Her head snapped back with surprise. "Old enough to know better?"

I ran my fingers across the faint scar just above my right eyebrow. "Kids can be pretty cruel when they find out you're different. When I was eight and we still lived in Atlanta, one of them threw a big rock at me during recess."

She gasped. "That's horrible!"

I nodded. "After that, Mom and Dad decided it would be best to move."

"So they know about what you can do?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Not exactly. Whatever is wrong with me can't be explained by science, so I think it scares them to talk about it. They haven't brought it up once since we moved here." I touched my scar again. "And seven stitches in the face taught me to keep my mouth shut."

She squeezed my hand, her eyes no longer judgmental. "Well, I'm not going to freak out, and I'm not going to tell anyone."

I sighed. "Thank you."

She grinned over the top of her glass. "No one would believe me anyway."

"I know."

~~Suddenly, she perked up with a wild smile. "What about Brad Pitt?"~~

I raised my eyebrows. "What about him?"

"Can you get him here?"

I laughed. "That's not the way it works!"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "How do you know?"

I smiled. "Because I've already tried."

IT HAD BEEN several years since that night when I finally told Adrienne the truth about me. She had spent that entire weekend hounding me with ridiculous questions:

Can you read people's minds?

If you can sense bad people, why did you let me date Bobby?

How do you get people to come when you call their name?

ARE YOU a witch??

I couldn't blame her. Adrienne knew about as much as I did about whatever powers or abilities I possessed. After that weekend, however, she calmed down, and our friendship returned to being as it had been before I told her—maybe even better.

I finished college that year at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and graduated with a degree in public relations much to the dismay of my father. He was a geriatrics physician who had wanted me to follow in the family footsteps of a long line of doctors in the Jordan family history. Specifically he wanted me to become an obstetrician so we could, as he would like to joke, 'bookend the family practice with one doctor to bring 'em into this world and another doctor to take 'em out!' He was a funny man, my dad.

It had been my mother's idea for me to put my impeccable people skills to use and pursue a career in public relations. I had interned with the Buncombe County media department during college and when I graduated they offered me a full-time job in the communications office. After two years, I had been promoted to Public Information Officer, which was a fancy title for a publicist. It hadn't proven to be the most glamorous job in the world, but it was fairly easy, close to home, and it paid really well.

Settling in Asheville after college made sense. Most of my life had been centered around that weird little town. Asheville had somehow slid straight from the 70's into the new millennium, pausing in the time shift only long enough to pick up a few Goth kids from the 90's. It was the only city I knew of where one could pay homage to a war memorial, open an investment account, befriend a vampire, visit a fine art gallery, and pick up a new bong—all on the same street. In 2000, Rolling Stone magazine christened Asheville as 'America's New Freak Capital' which reaffirmed my decision to put down permanent roots there.

Over the years, I got better at using my ability and at hiding it. Talking about someone and having them make an appearance had almost become routine. I still couldn't summon just anyone at will, but I had noticed that if I was talking about someone and picturing them in my mind at the same time, they were much more likely to show up. It still hadn't proven true with Johnny Depp or Brad Pitt, however.

The leaves had just begun their colorful transformation in the fall when my workday began at the sheriff's office rather than at my office in the county building. I was to attend the swearing in of two new deputies at nine in the morning and prepare a press release. Before I left my house, I checked my purse to make sure I had remembered to bring my Xanax. I took a half of one as a preemptive strike against the anxiety attack I knew was coming. The sheriff was headquartered at the county jail. I hated going to the jail. A place packed with that many bad people was a panic incubator for a girl like me.

I arrived on time and checked my reflection in the glass doors as I approached the sheriff's office entrance. My white blouse was tucked in all the way around, and my black slacks weren't showing any panty lines. I reached for the door handle, but before I could pull on it, the sheriff himself swung it open and stepped aside for me to enter.

The lobby was full, and I suspected the entire bunch had just watched me check out my own ass in the mirrored glass. "Wonderful," I muttered.

"Nice to see you, Ms. Jordan," Sheriff Davis said with a grin.

I shook his extended hand. "You too, sir."

"We were about to head to my conference room," he said.

I nodded, ducking my head with embarrassment as I fell in line with the group.

As we shuffled through the lobby, the nerve endings at the base of my neck began to tingle. I sucked in a sharp breath and held it. On the count of three, I blew it out slowly and reminded myself that the walls weren't really humming with evil. It was only my imagination. I needed to think about something else. Anything else.

My eyes scanned the room of county officials before landing on the two new officers who were being deputized. One, in particular, was certainly an adequate distraction. He was about my age and a little taller than me in the heels I was wearing. He had short blond hair, and his black police uniform fit so well over his sculpted torso that I would've believed it had been custom made had I not known the county was too cheap for such a luxury. A polished brass name tag was pinned to his chest that I had to squint to read. "N. McNamara" could have been Mr. January on the Buncombe County Hot Calendar if one existed.

"Good morning, Sloan," a familiar, squeaky voice said behind me, snapping me out of my hormone infused daze.

Mary Travers, a petite woman with mousy brown hair and a face smushed like a Pug's, was shuffling to match my stride. I smiled down at her. I liked Mary a lot. She was old enough to be my mother and was one of the most genuinely kind people I'd ever encountered. As the county manager, Mary was also my boss.

"Hey, Mary. How are you today?" I asked.

She pushed her bifocals up the bridge of her stubby nose. "Busy as a bee." She looked up at me. "Are we going to be ready to have the newsletter out by Friday?"

"I'm confident I'll have it done by Thursday," I answered with a smile.

She hugged the armload of file folders she was carrying. "And you'll take the pictures today and get the statement posted on the website and on the Facebook and Twitter thing?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've got it all under control."

She patted my arm like a grandmother praising a child. "Good girl."

The whole group was coming to a slow stop at the locked, heavy metal door to get inside the heart of the facility. All of the doors were secured electronically and were only able to be opened by whoever was running the master control desk. I suspected, given our halted status, that Virginia Claybrooks was working master control.

The sheriff rang the buzzer for a second time, impatiently trying to see through the double-

sided mirror beside the door. There was no answer. He pressed the buzzer again.

—A loud woman belted over the loudspeaker. "Who keeps blowin' up my door? I'll get to you when I get to you! I've only got two hands, ya know?"

Yep. It was Ms. Claybrooks.

The sheriff let out an exasperated sigh. "Ms. Claybrooks, it's Sheriff Davis. Can you please open the door?"

"Uh...Oh, oh," she stammered over the loudspeaker. Her voice shifted from shrill and threatening to syrupy sweet. "Sheriff, you shoulda said somethin'. C'mon in."

He closed his eyes and silently shook his head as the door slid open. "Thank you, Ms. Claybrooks," he said to her as we passed by her office door.

She stood up and gave him a small wave and a wide, toothy smile.

Ms. Claybrooks, a black lady from southern Georgia, was barely five feet tall and almost as wide. Her bosom was narrowly confined to the sheriff's office button-up shirt she was stuffed into. She wore bright red lipstick and a short bobbed wig. I would guess she was in her mid-fifties. Ms. Claybrooks was one of my favorite people on the planet and almost made it worthwhile for me to face my fears and visit the sheriff's office more often.

She peeked around the corner as the group of us filed in. "Dang, Sheriff Davis! How many people you bringin' through my door today?"

He didn't answer.

I smiled at her. "Hey, Ms. Claybrooks."

Her face shifted into a tilted look of confusion. She planted her feet and put her hand on her wide hip. "How 'you know my name? Do I know you?"

"Everyone knows your name," Mary added with a sweet smile.

"Well, hi there, Mary!" Ms. Claybrooks cheered. "Let's do lunch soon, m'kay?"

Mary nodded and waved to her. "Maybe later this week!"

Ms. Claybrooks swung around into her office and plopped down in the master control chair before picking up her radio and barking into it again. "I told you to hold your damn horses!" she shouted at another unfortunate soul.

I giggled. "I absolutely love that woman."

Mary nodded. "She definitely brightens the mood around this dreary place."

That was the truest statement I had heard all week, but dreary wasn't the word I would've chosen. Before I started to obsess over the heebie jeebies that were creeping in on me, I changed the subject. I leaned down so only Mary could hear me as we filed into the conference room. "Did everyone see me looking at my backside in the window?"

She nodded and chuckled silently. "Everybody."

I groaned.

The swearing in ceremony consisted of oaths, pictures, and paperwork. The hot Mr. January officer was from Raleigh, and he was a detective with an impressive resume. His name was Nathan McNamara. Unfortunately, hanging around to meet him after the ceremony would require spending more time at the jail than I was willing to, no matter how good he looked in his uniform.

Mary insisted on us getting an early lunch together before returning to our office, so she rode with me down the street to the Tupelo Honey Cafe.

"It was a good ceremony today," I said as we sat down at a wooden table that overlooked the street.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Wasn't much of a ceremony if you ask me." She opened up the brunch menu and adjusted her glasses as she carefully scanned the page. "What do you like here?"

"The craft martinis," I replied.

She laughed.

"What do you think about the new officers?" I asked.

"They seem satisfactory," she said, void of any emotion.

I pushed my menu away from me and folded my hands together on the table. "Just satisfactory?"

"Well, the one was really handsome." She was grinning behind her menu.

I perked up. "The cute blond one from Raleigh?"

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "No. The older one who came here from Knoxville. He was a fox."

In my opinion, with his red hair and ultra long nose, he could have been a fox—an actual fox—maybe in a previous lifetime. I grimaced. "No. I meant Detective McNamara. I wouldn't mind getting on a first name basis with him."

She smiled. "Oh, to be young. You never told me what is good to eat here," she said, signaling the end of our boy talk.

My shoulders sank, and I looked out of the window to the busy downtown street. "The goat cheese grits are amazing."

It had been over a year and a half since I had been in an actual relationship with a man. Getting dates wasn't a problem because I enjoyed meeting new people. The problem was my ability to see the grime on the souls of everyone I went out with. That, and the constant worry that men were simply attracted to me because of my power. The longest romance I had ever entertained was with Luke Burcham, the waiter from Alejandro's. Our relationship lasted long distance for a total of three and a half months while I was in college. Elvis broke up with me because he felt like I was hiding something from him. If he only knew.

After lunch, I returned to my office in the Buncombe County building. It was a cozy space with calming gray walls and black and white photos of places I had never visited. The large window behind my desk framed the view of the national forest that was beginning to pop with the colors of autumn. Asheville tourism advice was one of my biggest responsibilities as nature lovers from all over the country flocked to the colorful North Carolina mountains in the fall.

For a few hours, I worked on the county e-mail newsletter before remembering the unedited photos on my camera from that morning. As I ejected the memory card, it catapulted from its slot into the furthest corner under my desk. After an unsuccessful attempt to retrieve it blindly with my toes, I crawled under my desk.

There was a knock at my door.

Startled, I smacked my skull against the underside of my keyboard tray.

When I popped my head up after scrambling backward on my hands and knees, Detective Nathan McNamara was wide-eyed and standing in my doorway with his hand still posed in the knocking position.

"I'm sorry." He cautiously stepped into the room and looked around. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Are you Ms. Jordan?"

In an instant, I forgot about my possible skull fracture and broke out in an involuntary smile. I stood up and extended my hand. "Call me Sloan," I answered as he squeezed my hand. "You're Detective McNamara, correct?"

He shook his head. "Just Nathan or Nate, please."

I smiled again and motioned to the two empty chairs in front of my desk. "Nathan, what can I do for you?"

He had changed out of his formal uniform and was wearing a black polo shirt and black tactical cargos. He wore an olive drab ball cap with a grayscale American flag patch on the front. He had a

badge pinned to his belt that I couldn't even look at for fear of getting too distracted. It was the first time I had seen him up close. His eyes were the color of cold gray steel. I had to remind myself he was talking to me and I probably should pay attention so I could respond.

"I have a press release about a missing person." He handed me a sheet of paper before settling into a chair.

Blame it on the tantalizing belt or the eyes, but after glancing at the middle-aged man's photo without thinking I blurted out "he's dead" as mindlessly as I would've said "thank you" or "yes, I'll go out with you!"

His eyes widened. "Excuse me?" He drew out each syllable.

I slowly sank down behind my desk and cleared my throat as I scrambled for a recovery. "It's just my guess." I shrugged my shoulders like it was no big deal that I had just sounded at best calloused and uncaring, or at worst—crazy.

He studied my face until I thought my heart would pound out of my chest. I couldn't even bring myself to look him in the eye.

Forcing a smile, I placed the sheet carefully in front of my computer screen. "I'll take care of it right away." I hoped he would leave so I could have a proper meltdown, but he looked too puzzled to move. I decided to change the subject. "How did you get stuck bringing me press releases on your first day?"

His shoulders relaxed. "Rookie grunt work, I guess. I think some people aren't too happy that I lateraled straight over to detective."

My heart rate was beginning to slow to normal. "Probably not. Welcome to the department, by the way. You're from Raleigh, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Technically, I'm from—"

I cut him off, laughing and waving my hand in his direction. "Watch it with the 'ma'am' stuff. I'm pretty sure you're older than me, and I would rather be unprofessional than feel old."

He laughed. "Sorry. I transferred here from Raleigh, but I grew up closer to Durham."

"No kidding?" I asked. "I went to college at UNC."

He reclined in the seat and grimaced. "Ahhh...I'm a State fan."

I crossed my fingers like the letter X. "Boo." I leaned against my desk and frowned. "Oh, that's so sad. I thought I was really going to like you!"

He laughed. "Sucks for me, I guess."

Grinning, I folded my hands in my lap. "Too bad."

Nathan rose from his seat. "Well, I've injured you, insulted you, and I like NC State. I'd better take off before you hate me any more than you already do."

"I'm glad you stopped by, Nathan," I said.

He smiled and I felt a little dizzy. "Me too." He paused at the door. "I'll see you around, Sloan."

I thought about telling him to just fax over missing persons' reports in the future, but I just nodded and enjoyed watching him leave. Interdepartmental efficiency be damned; I wasn't going to let a fax machine stand in the way of another possible visit from Detective McNamara.

When he was gone, I dropped my forehead onto my desk and groaned. After a moment of sulking and one hell of a scolding internal monologue, I typed out the pointless press release.

The cops weren't looking for a person anymore. They were looking for a corpse.

* * *

After work, I drove to my parents' mountainside chalet for dinner like I did almost every Monday night.

Robert and Audrey Jordan were actually my adoptive parents but few people knew it. Audrey had been a twenty-two year old nursing student in Florida when she found me wrapped in a pink

blanket on a park bench outside of the hospital where she worked. I was only a couple of days old. Even though she was unmarried and only working as an intern, she fought the courts for custody of me and won. My adoption was finalized shortly after she married the man who would become my dad. She had often joked that Robert only married her because he loved me so much, but I knew that wasn't true. They never had any other children.

Even though they were amazing parents, I often wondered if their love for me was completely real, or if it was some kind of supernatural manipulation that obligated them to me.

"Knock knock!" I called as I pushed the front door open.

Mom was in the kitchen with her hands covered in flour. "Hey honey," she called over her shoulder. My mother was about a foot shorter than me and almost too thin. She had cropped brown hair that was showing more gray every time I saw her. However, even at fifty, she still jogged three miles every day and taught yoga at the local senior center.

"Where's Dad?" I jerked my thumb in the direction of the driveway. "His car isn't here."

"Oh, he's running late at the office. He'll be home soon," she said.

I sat down on a stool at the kitchen breakfast bar. "Can I help with anything?" I already knew what her answer would be.

She shook her head. "Nope. I'm almost done. How was work today?"

I recalled the look on Detective McNamara's face and slumped in my seat. I groaned and dropped my face into my hands. "Ugh. I made an idiot out of myself twice today."

She chuckled. "What did you do?"

"Well, I had to go to the sheriff's office this morning for a meeting, and before I walked inside I checked myself out very thoroughly in the reflection of the mirrored glass. Little did I know that half the county was in the lobby watching me check my butt for panty lines."

She covered her mouth with her hand and laughed.

I cringed. "And I said something really stupid to this cute new detective at work."

"Oh really?" Her voice slid up an octave. She was clearly more interested in the cute guy than me embarrassing myself. My mother wanted grandkids.

I sighed. "Yeah. I probably blew my chances with him."

Her laugh was full of sarcasm. "You know better than that."

With Nathan McNamara, I wasn't so sure. He had seen a bit of my circus freak side that day.

"Do you like him?" she asked, recalling my attention to the conversation.

I drew circles with my finger on the countertop. "Well, he's really, really attractive and he seems like a pretty good guy, but I only met him today, so I don't know yet."

She nodded and motioned toward the television in the den behind me. "Honey, can you turn on the news?"

I got up and found the remote on the coffee table. I switched on the TV and surfed to the local news station. On the screen, a man in a ridiculous blue suit was waving his arms and pacing around a used car lot. "Commercials." I sat back down at the counter.

"I want to see the weather. I've put together a running group for tomorrow morning," she said. "You should join us."

I laughed. "No thanks."

She leaned over the counter and squeezed my forearm. "Chasing boys around the office isn't exercise, Sloan."

I felt an uneasy nudge in the back of my brain. It was a twinge akin to having a tiny pebble trapped under the lining of a tennis shoe. I pulled away and looked at my mom. There were lines I had never noticed before at the creases of her eyes.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked.

She looked at me curiously and laughed. "I'd be better if I knew my daughter was taking better care of herself."

The door from the garage opened, and my dad walked in pulling his rolling briefcase behind him. He was thin and wiry like my mother. His brown hair was graying around the ears, but it was still thick with a distinctive wave toward the back. He had the lightest blue eyes I had ever seen. My father could have been a movie star. "Hey, sweetheart," he said when he saw me.

"Hey, Daddy." I smiled over at him. "How was work?"

"Exhausting." He groaned and parked his briefcase by the wall. "I had one patient break a hip in my waiting room, and another dementia patient wandered into my office and fell asleep on my sofa."

I laughed.

He sighed. "I should've gone into pediatrics."

My mother helped him pull his coat off and laughed as she folded it over her arm. "Then you could've had babies spitting up on your sport coat and toddlers peeing in your office."

He gave her a soft peck on the lips. "I missed you today." My mother was still a nurse, and she worked in my dad's office.

She patted his chest. "I'm sorry, honey. I don't know what I was thinking. I completely planned my days wrong this week and forgot you said you needed me today. I hope you weren't too shorthanded."

The sound of the news station anchorwoman caught my attention. "*Breaking news in Buncombe County...*"

Dad gave me a side hug. "How was your day, Sloan?"

I held up my hand to silence him and then grabbed the remote. I turned up the volume on the television. "Just a sec, Dad."

The man's photo from the press release was splashed across the screen. "*The body of missing BB&C executive Byron Milstaf was found today at his sister's lake home in Tuxedo, North Carolina. Milstaf has been missing since Saturday from his home in Asheville. Police say it was an apparent suicide, and no foul play is suspected. In other news...*"

"Are you all right?" My dad was peering down at me. "Did you know that man?"

I looked out the window toward the mountains. "Sort of."

* * *

A few times during the week, I had briefly considered making up an excuse to visit the sheriff's office so I could bump into Detective McNamara again. However, those urges were overridden by my fear of the jail. I had also considered phoning in some sort of detective-necessary issue but couldn't justify missing pens from the supply closet as a reason to call the police. So I was pleasantly surprised when I came into work the following Monday to find Nathan leaning against my office door with a stack of paperwork in his hand.

"Good morning, Detective. Are they still sticking you with the office grunt work?" I batted my eyelashes up at him as I fumbled for the key to my office.

"No," he said. "I came on my own. I was hoping to talk to you."

When the door was opened, he followed me inside and closed the door behind us. I eyed him suspiciously as I walked around my desk and placed my briefcase on the floor. He wore black cargos and a dark gray t-shirt with his badge on a chain around his neck. His American flag ball cap was pulled down low over his eyes. He wasn't doing office work that day. His rigid stance made me a little nervous.

"Talk to me about what?" I sat down in my chair and pressed the power button on my computer.

He folded his arms across his chest, tucking the papers against his side. "How did you know that Byron Milstaf was dead?"

It was my hope to never revisit that conversation.

I turned my palms up. "I told you. It was a guess."

He shook his head. "I don't believe that. I'm an interview and interrogation specialist. I know when people are lying."

Laughing, I cocked my head to the side. "Are you planning on interrogating me, Nate?"

A muscle worked in his jaw. "No, ma'am. I would just appreciate you telling me the truth."

I pointed to the chairs and narrowed my eyes. "Have a seat, Detective." Any flirtatious desire was suddenly quelled.

My icy tone caused his eyebrows to lift. He sat in the chair and rested the ankle of his tactical boot on top of his knee. His stare was expectant, and his perfect lips were shut.

Leaning forward, I rested my elbows on the desk. "First of all, I don't appreciate being clotheslined at my office door with accusations about being dishonest. I especially don't like it when it comes from a detective who is apparently suspicious about a deceased victim. Don't barge in here and shut my door and demand answers from me without telling me why you're here." I splayed my palms face down and leaned toward him. "I may be young and I may be a woman, but I'm not going to be bullied by anyone. Not even you."

For a moment, he was speechless.

His tense shoulders relaxed a bit. He leaned forward and dropped his stack of papers on my desk. On the top was a report sheet with a photo stapled to it. It was a picture of a child, a little girl. She had blond ringlets and a bright, cheerful smile. Her eyes were captivating; one was blue and one was bright green. My stomach twisted in knots.

"What is this?" I looked at him instead of at the photograph.

He tapped his finger on the picture. "This is Kayleigh Marie Neeland. Last night, there was a raid on a suspected meth operation in Leicester. Her mom's boyfriend, Ray Whitmore, panicked when the cops busted down the door. He grabbed Kayleigh and held a Taurus 9mm to her head, using her as a shield to escape. At 3:19 this morning, we found his abandoned car in Haywood County with blood on the back seat."

I was horrified but determined to keep a clear head. I sat back in my chair and turned my hands up in question. "What do you want from me?"

I could tell he wasn't sure exactly what he expected to find out in my office, but it was obvious this wasn't an excuse for a social call. "I guess I want your opinion," he replied.

I pushed the papers toward him. "My opinion is that you should do your job, Detective McNamara, and stop wasting your time in the office of the department publicist."

He let out a frustrated huff and stood up so fast his chair threatened to topple backwards. He reached into the velcro pocket on his thigh and slammed down a business card before picking up the stack of papers. He cut his eyes at me. "Kayleigh is about to turn six. For her birthday she wants a Prince Charming to go with the Sleeping Beauty doll she got from her Nana at Christmas. She hasn't put down that doll all year until she dropped it in the driveway as she was being dragged away. If you think of anything, Sloan, give me a call." Without waiting for a response, he turned on his heel and stormed out of my office.

I picked up his business card and flicked it against my fingertips as my brain scrambled to make sense of what had just happened. Why had he come to my office that morning? What did he think I might know? The bigger question was, what was I going to do?

Kayleigh Neeland was still alive and I knew it.

ADRIANNE AGREED TO meet me for lunch on her break from her job at the Merrimon Avenue Salon. My head was throbbing as I sat in the corner booth waiting for her at the Mellow Mushroom. She walked in with fresh new highlights and pink high heels that were so tall I wasn't sure how she cleared the doorway without ducking. She slid into the bench across from me and pushed her sunglasses up on top of her head. "Hey weirdo," she said with a wink.

I forced a smile and rubbed my temples. "Do you have anything for a headache?"

She retrieved a bottle of ibuprofen from her purse and slid it across the table toward me. "You all right?"

I grimaced. "Rough day."

She glanced down at her silver watch. "It's only eleven."

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. "I know."

The waiter appeared and took her drink order. When he was gone, she scanned the menu and then looked up at me. "What's up? You sounded really stressed on the phone."

I sighed. "I've got a big problem at work." She waited expectantly, and I leaned on my elbow to support my throbbing head. "There's this new guy, a detective, at the department. I sort of slipped up the other day and told him I knew that a missing person was dead."

She straightened in her seat. "Who was dead?"

"Some random guy he wanted me to do a press release about."

"How did you know he was dead?"

I just glared at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh."

"Well, I played it off, and he hasn't said another word about it until today. He met me at my office this morning asking questions," I said.

Her lips sank into a frown. "Uh oh."

The waiter returned with her water and we ordered a pizza to share.

"What did he want to know?" she asked.

I thought that was obvious. "Well, the guy turned up dead in another county, and the detective wanted to know how I knew."

"And what did you say?"

"I played dumb. I insisted it was a guess," I said.

She shifted uneasily in her seat. "Does he think you were involved? Like, are you a suspect or something?"

I shook my head. "No. It was a suicide, but he suspects something because he came to my

office asking me about a little girl who was kidnapped at gunpoint. They think she might be dead."

"Is she dead?"

"No."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you know where she is?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't really work like that. I can't find people."

"But people can find you," she said. "What's her name?"

"Kayleigh Neeland." I knew what Adrienne was trying to do. She wanted to see if I could summon the girl. "I don't think I can summon someone I don't know. If I could, I would have found my birth mom years ago."

"I heard about that kid on the news this morning. What are you going to do? Are you going to tell him you know she's alive?" Adrienne was mindlessly tearing her straw paper to bits.

I had been asking myself the same question all morning. "It's only going to make him ask more questions that I can't answer. Adrienne, I think I have seriously screwed up my perfect job."

She thought about it for a second. "Or maybe you've found a way to really do your job well." She lowered her voice. "Sloan, what's the purpose of being...whatever you are, if you're not supposed to use it to help people?"

"This isn't exactly the kind of news people process well. I can't even get my parents to believe me. You know that, Adrienne."

She nodded. "But what do you do? Keep your mouth shut when you're the only person who knows this little girl is still alive?"

I squeezed my eyes closed. "That's why I have a headache."

Her eyebrows scrunched together. "Not to sound like a bitch or anything, Sloan, but I think you're being pretty selfish. This is a little kid we're talking about. You have the power to help her, but you're worried what questions about you that it might raise."

She was right.

"I know. It's completely selfish. There's just going to be a whole lot of blowback from this that I'm not sure I'm ready to deal with," I said.

She smirked. "Poor you." She leaned forward. "Are you ready to deal with the guilt you're going to feel if that little girl winds up dead, and you didn't say anything?"

I hated it when Adrienne was right.

After lunch I took the rest of the day off and went home to the stillness of my house. I stretched out on my white sofa from Pottery Barn that was trendy and stylish but absolutely uncomfortable. In an attempt to relax, I kicked off my black heels and covered my eyes with my forearm.

The details of Kayleigh's abduction replayed over and over in my mind. I envisioned that Sleeping Beauty doll discarded in the driveway and realized Nathan McNamara was a better manipulator than I could ever be. I picked up my cell phone, punched in his phone number, and sent a one line text message.

She's alive. - Sloan

A reply came less than ten seconds later. *Where are you?*

When I didn't respond, he tried to call me.

I hit ignore and tapped out another message. *I can't help you any more than that. I promise, that's all I know.*

I hadn't lied to Adrienne. I had no way of finding the girl even if I wanted to. I wasn't omniscient, and I couldn't see anything that a detective couldn't. The only thing I had to offer was more confusion, and that was exactly the reason I chose to stay out of the affairs of others. I wasn't hero material.

The little bit of help I could offer obviously wasn't enough for the good detective. Twenty minutes later, my doorbell rang.

The hardwood floor was cold against my bare feet as I trudged across the room to the entrance foyer. I pulled open the front door and leaned my head against it. "You looked up my home address?"

"Can I come in?" Nathan's ball cap was still pulled low over his eyes, but I could still see they were bloodshot from stress and lack of sleep.

Rolling my eyes, I stepped out of his way. "Be my guest."

This wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I dreamed of Nathan McNamara's first invitation into my house. I felt like a criminal watching him wipe his boots on my welcome mat. "Nathan, I told you I can't help you with anything else. All I know is that, yes, Kayleigh is still alive."

He followed me to the couch and sat down next to me. "Do you know where she is?"

I folded my arms across my chest and narrowed my eyes. "Do you not understand the version of English that I speak?"

He tightened his hand into a fist, clenched his jaw, and squeezed his eyes closed for a split second before throwing both hands in the air in frustration. "Can you not, for one second, put yourself in my shoes here?" He was almost shouting.

"You?" I spat at him. "You keep pushing and prying into things that aren't any of your business!"

He jabbed his thumb into the center of his chest. "This is my job!"

I held my hands up. "I'm not your witness! I'm not involved in this thing at all, and I don't want to be! You're pinning all your hopes and dreams of finding this kid on a feeling I have that I can't explain to myself, much less to you or a judge or the freaking media!" Tears were beginning to prick at my eyes.

He dropped his head and took a few deep breaths before he finally placed his hand on my knee. He blew out a slow sigh. "I'm sorry."

Nervously raking all my fingers through my hair, I tried to exhale all of the anxiety and adrenaline that was pumping through my veins. After a few beats of awkward silence, I looked over at him. His head was down, but his face was bent toward me.

"I'm sorry too," I whispered.

He placed his hand on my back for a second and then stood. "I appreciate you letting me know Sloan."

I nodded, and he backed out of the room. When I heard the front door open, despite my better judgement, I called out to him. "Wait."

I turned around, and he looked over his shoulder. He closed the door.

"Just wait." I dropped my face into my hands, and when I looked up again, he was seated on my coffee table in front of me. "I don't know where she is. It's just a feeling I get. I know she's alive."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "What do you mean, it's a feeling? Do you get feelings about everyone?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Is it just a dead or alive thing or what?"

I sighed. "It's more than that. I know things about people."

His face was inscrutable. "What do you know?"

"Like, I know you're a pretty decent guy who has lived a clean life. However, I have another feeling that I may regret ever having met you."

He thought for a moment. "What if you talked to Kayleigh's mother? Would you know if she was lying to me?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were the interrogation specialist? I thought you could tell

when people are lying?"

—His head tilted to the side. "Will you help me?"

"I will talk to the mother, but that's it." I pointed my finger at him. "I mean it, Nathan."

He quickly stood so I wouldn't have a chance to change my mind. He pulled his keys out of his pocket. "I'll drive."

In the passenger's seat of Nathan's county-issued tan SUV, I wondered what on earth I was getting myself into. I could see before me the proverbial can of worms that was about to be cracked wide open. My entire life, I had dedicated myself to trying to be like everyone else, and there I was headed at forty-five miles per hour toward never being normal again.

Nathan was angled back in his seat with one hand on the steering wheel. "Thanks for doing this." He slowly merged onto the interstate.

I just nodded.

He looked over his shoulder at me. "You know I'm going to have a hell of a lot of questions when this is all over with."

My index fingernail was bloody from my nervous chewing. "Why did you come to my office this morning?"

After a few quiet seconds, I cut my eyes over at him. He was grinning. "I guess I just had a *feeling*."

"Jerk."

He laughed.

Desperate for a new topic of conversation, I forced a change of subject. "What's your story, Nate? How did you wind up here? Why Asheville?"

He sucked in a deep breath. "My girlfriend lives here."

The day kept getting better and better.

Nodding, I prayed he wouldn't continue. He did.

"She's a reporter for WKNC."

"Of course she is," I grumbled under my breath. I probably knew his girlfriend through work.

He leaned his ear toward me. "What'd you say?"

I examined my bloody fingernail again. "I didn't say anything."

"What about you?" he asked. "Have you always lived here?"

I nodded. "Other than college and the time I spent being probed by the aliens on the mothership, yes."

He laughed again.

"I actually grew up about five minutes away from here. If you ever visit the Grove Park Inn, you will pass my parents' house on the way up the mountain," I said.

He took the exit onto College Street. "I hear that hotel is really nice."

Sitting up straight, I looked out my window. "Where are we going?"

"The jail. The mom was arrested last night during the raid," he said.

I dropped my face into the palm of my hand and groaned.

"Is that a problem?"

I forced a smile. "Nope."

He pointed at me. "You're lying."

I shuddered. "I hate the jail. It gives me the creeps."

He focused on the road ahead. "I won't let anything get to you."

His words would have made me feel all warm and tingly inside, had the thoughts of prison rapists and murderers—and his reporter girlfriend—not squelched the moment. I waved my hands in the air and rolled my eyes. "Yay."

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