

Chapter One

It seemed like a simple request. Find a packet in the attic.

It wasn't simple.

And it wasn't safe.

I gathered a crew and scheduled the search for Thanksgiving week so I could wrap it up with a grand feast. Now that this oceanfront house on North Carolina's Outer Banks finally felt like home, I wanted to celebrate it with friends.

Kip Hawkins had the longest drive—six hundred fifty miles—but he'd insisted on helping. His father and mine had been joint caretakers of a dodgy property called Dacretown near Concord, Massachusetts. Kip's dad, Gregory, had been murdered for his trouble. Mine, Lang Hunter, had contracted a neurological debility. Just before these blows, they'd discussed that place in *this* house. Then Dad had vanished, leaving his house to me.

I'd pieced this all together when I'd finally located him. However, our reunion was brief. Before Dad left to work on a cure for his Dacretown blight, he'd asked me to look for a 6x9-inch white envelope. He thought it was in the attic. "It has a wax seal," he'd said. "It's private. Please don't open it. Just tell me when you find it."

I'd concurred...but I hadn't promised.

I knew Dad might be dying. He'd grown ill from experiments he'd tried to stop. His "vanishment," as he calls people gone missing, had robbed me of five years with him. Growing up, he'd been my anchor in a home full of shifting winds. He'd left my mother when I was a teen, but his advice from a distance had kept me on track. I could grant him this small favor. At least, I thought I could. To be fair, he hadn't adequately warned me.

I'd already seen the multiple boxes, notebooks, and stacks of papers from Dad's years of vanishment research. Locating a single envelope, I knew, would be like finding a one-eyed ghost crab on our beach. Doable but not quick.

Recently, Kip had pushed to complete this task, so I'd scheduled the quest. In Concord, he and I had started on the wrong foot, but a common mission involving my dad had pulled us together. It made sense to include him.

Two days before Thanksgiving, I stood at my picture window watching the wind push white caps toward the beach. Layers of cobalt and azure clouds hinted that rain was on the way. I hoped Kip would beat it. I expected him within the hour.

Natra Gawoni, my case manager, strode in. She tugged on the long brown ponytail that draped over her shoulder and gestured for her Doberdor, Mika, to come. The dog padded over to me for an ear rub.

“Coffee’s fresh,” Natra said. “The unit’s ready.”

“He’ll like it. Gives him privacy but also access to us when he wants it.”

We’d prepared the largest of my two rental studios on the ground floor. Off season, they weren’t used. My personal living space was on the second floor, adjacent to my great room conference area in the center of the house. Natra’s apartment was on the other side. My two-car garage sat below us, between the rentals.

A chime sound. A car had entered the driveway.

I gestured toward Natra’s unit. “Can you put Mika in her room? Let’s let Kip get settled.”

Natra took the dog out.

Kip knew this house. He’d been here with his dad two months before Gregory had died. I thought it might be rough for him to return. Just sixteen then, Kip hadn’t said what he’d witnessed, but he believed he knew what we were looking for.

I opened the sliding glass door to the balcony. A cold gust blew past me to ruffle papers inside. Kip stood below, next to the white Range Rover my father had gifted him, a long wool coat protecting his slender frame. A breeze jumped the backyard dune to ruffle his dark wavy hair. He looked up and waved. That afternoon, under a darkening November sky, I couldn’t have guessed at the perilous burden this young man bore...and brought to my door.

Chapter Two

Kip gestured toward the back of his SUV. “Got a full car. More files from Kate.”

He meant from Kate Gardiner, the lawyer handling my late grandfather’s complicated estate. I pointed to my right. “Pull in over there. We’ll get that stuff later. You’ve had a long drive.”

At twenty-one, Kip was the oldest of three brothers. His legal name was John Kinney Hawkins, named for an outlaw killed by Billy the Kid. He'd adopted 'Kip' on his own. It fit him. Tall and lanky with brown eyes and a headful of dark curls, his demeanor suggested a burdened soul. He'd protected his brothers while solving his father's murder. He now worked for his cousin in a home restoration business, carving marble and restoring woodwork. He was quite the craftsman. I'd hired him to work on Dad's Concord properties. In a convoluted way, Kip was family.

When he came level with me on the balcony, I hugged him. At just over six feet, he was taller than me by at least six inches. I ushered him into my living/dining/conference area, which has the best views in the house. From the large window facing the ocean, we watch sunrises and storms, dolphins and pelicans.

"Coffee?" I asked. He accepted. I gestured toward a wraparound leather couch. "Please, have a seat."

He snorted. "I remember that couch. Fell asleep on it a few times."

"Dad had good taste. I kept the furniture."

"All of it?"

I nodded. "Pretty much. I made this room a conference area and installed more tech, but till last month I always thought he'd come back. Most of Dad's things are still how he left them." Kip's face showed a flash of relief. That seemed odd. "You stayed in Philadelphia last night?"

"South of there. Saw a friend. Helped break up the trip."

Natra came in. "Hi, Kip. Nice to see you in person."

They'd talked thus far only by video. He shook her hand. "Thought you had a dog."

"I do. You like dogs?"

He nodded.

"I'll get her later. She made a big fuss over not greeting you."

"Let 'er loose."

I brought over the coffee pot. Kip accepted a mug and sat down. "Is your daughter here?"

"My ex has her this weekend. Kamryn's in South Carolina."

I sat opposite Kip while Natra took a seat on the other side of the couch. She's the observer. I count on her for a second opinion.

Kip looked around. "Seems like you've settled in."

I picked up my mug. “It wasn’t easy, despite the impressive location. I didn’t move in right away. Each time I came, I just felt empty and sad.”

He nodded. “I get that.”

“It took almost a year, but I finally saw an advantage in the extra space. That’s when I started our PI consulting.” I gestured toward Natra. “I brought in Natra after we worked a case together. She named us the Nut Cracker Investigations.”

“Annie likes complicated cases,” Natra explained. “Nuts that are hard to crack.”

Kip raised an eyebrow. “I noticed.”

Natra flipped her hand. “The name’s unique, so people remember it. In just three years, we’ve gained a solid reputation. Not many investigators are also psychologists.”

I smiled. “Ayden was next.” Kip had met him in Concord. “He tricked me into hiring him as my PI. He used a case I couldn’t resist and proved his talent. Plus, he’s an artist and, as you know, he does carpentry on houses around here. Then there’s our part-time digital examiner, Joe Lochren. He’s been increasingly valuable, although he has a demanding career in cyber security. He helped me set up my podcast, *Psi Apps*, and I’ve developed a network of forensic consultants. Jackson Raines—you’ll meet him on Thursday—has become our go-to legal counsel. My executor’s fee from my grandfather’s passing last month helps with the bills.”

Natra pointed at me. “We need that, cuz she’s drawn to cases that don’t pay.”

“Spoken like a business manager.” I leaned toward Kip. “Have you made plans for joining Lang in Scotland?”

Kip shrugged. “He’s been ill. Bedridden. Hasn’t communicated in a week.”

I felt a stab of jealousy. I wished I didn’t, but there it was. My dad had taken to Kip like a son he’d never had. During the five years Dad was “missing,” he’d secretly worked with Kip and his brothers in Concord. They’d been privy to his darkest secrets, partners in his work, the recipients of his attention. Kip had been his main point of contact. For me, that left an aching gap. I’d had only a few days with Dad in October before he left again. He’d urged me to give Kip some maternal guidance. I wasn’t old enough to be his mother, but I could offer a sensitive ear.

“I’m so glad you came,” I said. “When I first got this house, I couldn’t go through Dad’s things. I made a start but always stalled. Dad wasn’t organized and there’s a lot to go through.”

Kip nodded like he knew Lang's habits. He'd probably spent more time in the attic than I had. More to the point, he'd been a witness to multiple important transactions that bound our families.

"We've got you set up in the studio suite downstairs," Natra told him. "Same one you had before but nicely updated."

Kip smiled. "Good thing. I remember the shower not working."

As he talked, his left hand, scarred from stonework, rubbed the side of the mug, perhaps the way he caressed a piece of marble to evaluate its challenges for carving. A heavy insignia ring adorned a finger on his right hand.

Kip turned to me. "I'll help with whatever you need, but I have a reason for coming. I'm looking for something myself. Dad brought several things here I'd like to retrieve. Lang didn't want them. They argued when they thought I was outside. It was pretty intense."

I leaned toward him. "What things?"

"First, that envelope Lang asked you to find."

I shook my head. "No, that's something Dad—"

"I know which envelope he means. It's white. Stamped with a wax seal. I told Lang my dad left it here. That made him angry. He meant to come back to get it."

Natra cocked her head. "What's in it?"

"A communication Dad got from someone they both knew. I think it's a threat. Dad wanted Lang's help. I remember Lang saying, 'You can't do this. It's too risky.' But Dad left it here, anyway. I saw him take it up to the attic and come down without it. Besides that, there's a package, a couple inches thick. That's in the attic, too. I think it holds a binder that has some records. On the way home, I asked Dad about it, but he wouldn't tell me. He said he had to protect us, me and my brothers."

I squinted. "You saw this binder?"

"Yes. It's a leatherbound three-ring binder with lined note pages, like an accounting ledger. It has transparent sleeves for maps and pictures. I saw it at home when I was ten or eleven. I tried to look through it, but Dad grabbed it. He told me to never touch it. After he died, I looked for it but couldn't find it. I think it might be in that packet."

"Sounds like we're on a scavenger hunt."

"Sort of. The binder's distinct. Shouldn't be hard to spot."

I cleared my throat. "So, you're not here to help me get this envelope for Lang."

Kip shook his head.

"Does he know?"

"No."

I narrowed my eyes. "Is this a secret you want me to keep?"

Kip clutched the handle of his mug. "I hope you won't have to. I didn't tell him I was coming this week. Only my brothers and Kate and Mark Gardiner know I'm here. She's your Concord attorney and Mark's my boss. Lang wants to burn this stuff, but it belonged to *my* dad. I have the right to decide its fate." He lifted his chin.

I drew in a breath. "What if he asks if you're here? What do you expect me to say?"

"He's ill, Annie. He hasn't communicated since last week. He won't like what I'm doing, but..." He glanced over his shoulder toward the window. "Whatever disturbed our dads, it's still out there."