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The Testament Stone

A Megyn Keith Paranormal Mystery

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Prologue

Sunday, July 3rd

The cool evening breeze felt refreshing as Alana Roberts stepped into a small clearing in the forest and closed her eyes. She had learned over the years that it was much easier to tap into the eco-net when she wasn't distracted with what she saw in the physical realm. As she stretched her hands out to her sides, palms up, and began to concentrate, the green pendant around her neck began to glow. Soon the breeze, which had been very mild when she had entered the woods, began to increase in intensity, swirling around her. The ubiquitous leaves that had been resting on the forest floor moments before began to circle her gently in the air. The branches on the surrounding trees started swaying rhythmically. She turned her face towards the sky as the wind lifted her slowly off of the ground until she was levitating almost a foot above the earth.

She was now in full communication mode, listening and watching in her mind's eye to see what the forest would show her. A month ago, she had seen a man trapped under an ATV that had rolled back on him when he'd been ascending a steep bank. He had managed to get out from under it, but the initial fall had broken his leg, and he wasn't able to push the ATV upright and get back home. Alana had been able to determine exactly where he was and had called the police so that rescue workers could find him.

Over the years, she had helped dozens of people. There had been lost children, hikers trapped by a snow storm, injured campers, and even lost animals whose owners were distraught when their beloved companions had gone missing. She had helped all of them with her unique gift.

Her gift allowed her to sense danger anywhere within the contiguous forest surrounding her or in the immediate vicinity of the forest for miles around. The plants themselves served as kind of ecological network and provided her with images and impressions that could be interpreted by her own senses. Her communion with the forest indicated no hint of trouble tonight, however. She smiled to herself, satisfied that

everything was calm in the surrounding forest. Slowly coming back out of her trance-like state, she was lowered back to the ground. The light emanating from the pendant began to recede until it once more appeared to be simply a beautiful piece of jewelry hanging around her neck.

Being the bearer of the Testament Stone wasn't always easy. There were times when she found it hard to balance her responsibilities in her 'normal' life with those of being a guardian with paranormal abilities. But she had learned to take life one day at a time over the years, taking both the successes and the occasional failures in stride. She was, after all, only a human steward of the Testament Stone – one of many in a long line of stewards stretching back hundreds of years.

Chapter One – A Run in the Woods

Thursday, July 7th

Alana ran along the forest trail on her morning run as she surveyed the lush forest scenery around her. She was listening to “Firework” by Katy Perry, letting her feet keep pace with the pulsating music as she enjoyed the bucolic surroundings and the physical exertion of her morning run. Having a woodland trail right across the street from her workplace at Apex Labs was perfect. She could get in her morning run, shower and change at her workplace, and still be at work by 7:30 a.m. Life was good.

Back in a locker at her workplace, the silver pendant with a beautiful green stone in the center sat nestled carefully on top of her work clothes. The green stone was glowing faintly in the complete darkness of the locker. She almost never took it off – only when she exercised or took a shower. Few people knew the true significance the stone, let alone had been witness to its power.

As Alana continued her run, the slope of the terrain began to increase sharply as the trail led up a steep hill, weaving from side to side with periodic switchbacks. She could feel her heart beating in her ears almost as loudly as the music now. Reaching the top of the hill, she began a measured descent down the other side just as the song “Sweet Dreams” by the Eurythmics began to play.

At the bottom of the hill, the trail began to level out. Then, without warning, she tripped and fell headlong. Landing hard on her right knee, one of the ear buds fell out of her left ear as her hands hit the ground. She skidded to a stop and rolled over onto her back, grimacing at the pain.

She expected to lay still for a few moments and catalog her injuries before attempting to sit up, but instead, she was confronted by a hooded figure rushing towards her with a baseball bat. In the locker at her workplace, the green glow of the pendant became brighter, as if it could sense Alana was in trouble. Meanwhile, Alana attempted to back away from her pursuer, flip over, and run, but her assailant had gained too much ground.

The first blow knocked her back to the ground, her head searing with pain. Some of the force of the second blow was diminished by her upraised arm. The impact of the bat snapped one of the bones in her arm before glancing off of her skull. With the third blow, the pendant in the locker stopped glowing. All that could be heard in the forest was the heavy breathing of Alana's attacker, and the music still emanating from her earbuds that had been knocked loose by the violent assault. As the assailant turned to leave, the faint words of the song's chorus could be heard playing, "*...Sweet dreams are made of this....*"

* * * * *

It was mid-afternoon before another runner along the trail called 911 and reported the gruesome scene. By 5:00 p.m. the Longview police were busy with boot imprints, crime scene photography, and other evidence collection. They pulled Alana's name from her cell phone, which was still in the runner's armband she had been wearing at the time of the attack. Her phone was unlocked, making it easy to find the next of kin. Maya and Jake Roberts had identified the body at the county morgue by nightfall.

In the Longview Police Department evidence room, Detective Sam Foster sat at a large table. All of the evidence they had collected from the Roberts murder scene was spread out in front of him. There wasn't much, he had to admit. There was a cast from a boot print and another of a shoe print that were still drying. The shoe print was likely from the victim; the boot print was probably from the killer, judging from its positioning and proximity to the victim's body. There was a coiled-up piece of plant vine, and lastly the victim's cell phone and accessories. After looking at each piece of evidence on the table carefully, he signed into the departmental server from his laptop and pulled up the crime scene photos.

Sam was a ten-year veteran of the Longview Police Department. Before that, he had been a homicide detective in the Portland P.D. He had seen his share of murders,

many far more gruesome than this, but this type of crime was unusual for Longview, population 36,648.

He spent a few minutes looking at the photos of the victim that had been taken at the scene. Such a tragedy. A mid-twenties female, about five-seven, dark hair, tan skin – likely some Hispanic or Native American heritage. She appeared to have been attractive, from the driver's license photo he had pulled up. Now she was gone. Cut off during the prime of life by some murderous creep. Shaking his head, he exhaled in frustration. He hated this part of the job. Identifying with the victim as a fellow human being and mourning their loss was what separated him from the killers, but it was emotionally gut-wrenching. Even after all the murders he had seen, he still felt sadness and a deep sense of injustice when he contemplated the fact that someone's life had been stopped prematurely for no good reason. It was probably one of the things that helped him to be so good at what he did. It was those emotions that drove him to catch the perpetrator, never stopping until he caught the responsible parties.

Of course, there were those few cases that he hadn't been able to solve yet – the cold cases. Every good homicide cop he knew had some. He kept files on those cases in his desk and looked through them from time to time when things were slow, always hoping something would jump out at him, give him a new perspective, and help him catch the culprit. He set his jaw in determination that this would not become another cold case. He would catch the twisted soul that had done this and bring them to justice.

The detective picked up a gallon-sized evidence bag that contained the long strand of vine which had been coiled up like a rope and put in the bag. This was, without a doubt, a pre-meditated murder. Whoever had planned it had been very meticulous. The killer had found a limber vine about the diameter of a piece of twine rope, tied it to a small tree on one side of the trail, and had strung it across the trail to the other side. Then, they had apparently wrapped it around a larger tree that would conceal them from the view of anyone coming up the trail, and waited. When Alana was close enough to the trap to be unable to stop, they had pulled the vine taut, using the tree and their body weight as leverage, and tripped her.

The killer was also smart. By using a vine and not a man-made rope, it was impossible to trace it to a particular person because no purchase had been made. The only useful evidence they had to go on at this point was a set of boot imprints in the mud – not much.

He flipped back through the notes he'd made when he interviewed the man who had discovered the body. He had seen the body as he rounded a corner in the trail. It was obvious that the woman was already dead by the severity of the head wound, so he hadn't touched the body or attempted CPR – he'd just called 9-1-1. The man hadn't reported seeing anyone else in the area. Aside from the vomit he'd deposited at the side of the trail after he'd seen the body close-up, there wasn't anything tying him to the murder yet, but it was still too early to rule anyone out as a possible suspect.

It was also too early to speculate on a possible motive. Alana hadn't had any wallet or money on her, so robbery couldn't be ruled out, but not carrying a wallet or money wasn't unusual for someone who was running cross-country. There were no obvious signs of sexual assault, but the autopsy hadn't been done yet, so that couldn't be ruled out either. Had she fought her attacker, or had she even had a chance? The autopsy would shed some light on that, too.

He scoured the crime scene photographs, looking for something – anything that would give him a clue as to why someone had murdered this woman. Looking through the photos again and matching the items he saw in the photos with the evidence on the desk, one by one, he examined each item meticulously. The vine, the boot imprint, the shoe imprint, the cell phone, the ear buds, the runner's armband, the.... Scanning the desk and looking for the last item, he came up empty. Moving every piece of evidence that could have been concealing the item and looking on the floor in case it had fallen off the desk produced nothing. He looked back at the photo and magnified it until what he was looking at was at its maximum clarity.

"Well, I'll be," he muttered to himself as he stared at the screen. After several more seconds, he abruptly stood up from his chair and headed out the door.

Chapter Two – The Investigation Continues

Thursday, July 7th

It was dark by the time Detective Sam Foster arrived at the point where the trail came back onto the main road. From this end of the trail, it was only fifteen minutes to the crime scene. The yellow crime scene tape was still up – that was a good sign that he might still be able to find what he had seen in the photograph. He slowed up as he reached the edge of the crime scene, trying not to disturb the foliage along the edge of the trail anymore than was necessary. Sam moved the beam of his flashlight slowly along the edge of the trail, hoping against hope that what he had seen in the photo was still here and that it would in some way help lead him to the murderer.

The first pass revealed nothing. His heart sank. He was certain it had been beside that old stump in the photo. Taking a pair of Latex gloves out of his pocket and putting them on, he crouched down near the stump and gently started picking through the dead leaves, twigs, and smaller plants that were growing near its base. After lifting up the fronds of a deer fern that was partially covering the exposed roots, he caught a glimpse of something white. Reaching down and moving a dead leaf revealed the prize for which he had been searching. It was a thin strip of paper.

He turned the paper over in his hand and shone the beam of his flashlight onto it. The words printed on the slip of paper looked like they might be Korean or some other far eastern language. He took out his cell phone and took a picture of the writing before placing the strip of paper in an evidence bag, heading back to his car once he was done. It might be nothing, but it might be the key to the whole case. Sam had learned over the years to never overlook even the smallest piece of evidence at a crime scene, and he wasn't about to start now.

* * * * *

Friday, July 8th

Sam pulled into the parking lot of Apex Labs, Inc. at 9:00 a.m. After learning where Alana had worked from her parents, he'd made an appointment with the owner of Apex Labs late yesterday afternoon. He wanted to interview several of their employees for possible leads on the murder case. Sam liked to get the interview process started as soon as he could. The longer you waited after a crime to interview potential witnesses, the less reliable their stories would be.

The building where Alana had worked was a large warehouse and fairly new from the looks of it. The lot where he had parked in front of the building was small, with space for about half a dozen cars and two larger spaces evidently intended for delivery trucks. A larger parking lot was adjacent to it, but cordoned off with a tall fence that had barbed wire at the top. It appeared the lot was only accessible by punching in a code on the keypad near the electric gate.

He walked up to the only door accessible from this side of the fence and depressed the buzzer next to the door. "Detective Foster, Longview P.D., I have an appointment." The detective could see the light on top of the camera mounted on a steel arm which extended out from the building about ten feet up. He stood back and held up his badge to the camera. A buzzing sound came from the door indicating that it had been unlocked, and Sam entered the building.

Once inside, he signed in with the security guard.

"Who are you here to see?" the security guard asked.

"Mrs. Davenport," Sam replied.

At this, the security guard's eyebrows shot up. He dialed a number on the desk phone and waited a few seconds before he said, "I have a Detective Foster here to see Mrs. Davenport." After listening to the reply, he hung up the phone. "Please have a seat; someone will be down shortly to see you."

Sam sat down in the small waiting area. It wasn't long before a striking woman in a gray business suit entered the room. From the research he had done online, he knew it was Renae Davenport, the owner of Apex Labs, Inc. Sam had expected an administrative assistant to greet him and was pleasantly surprised that Mrs. Davenport

was taking an active interest in the case. She was about five-foot-nine, had dark red hair, black-rimmed glasses, and was taller than Sam with her heels on. She looked like she could be a runway model, but her steely eyes and somber countenance at once communicated to Sam that she wasn't a person to be taken lightly and that she was used to being in charge. She wasted no time in coming to the point of the meeting as she held out her hand.

"Detective Foster, how are you this morning?"

"I'm fine, ma'am." Sam noted the strong handshake.

"This was a horrible tragedy. We all liked Alana here. She was a good researcher and had a bright future ahead of her. I wanted to come down here personally and let you know that we're committed to helping in any way that we can with your investigation."

"I appreciate that very much."

"I have a conference room ready for your interviews and have arranged for the people you requested to be available," she continued. "If you'll follow me."

The conference room in question was a short walk down the hall and around the corner. The walls of the room were made of glass. On the far side of the room, Sam could see into the spacious warehouse where there were row upon row of trees being grown. There were several storage tanks and various pieces of equipment off to the left, and workers dressed in white apparel going about their work. In the conference room sat a solitary figure. Mrs. Davenport opened the door and introduced Sam.

"Detective Foster, this is Doctor Steven Hill, lead researcher for the project Alana was working on."

"Doctor Hill," Sam responded as he held out his hand.

"Please, call me Steven," he replied as he shook the detective's hand.

"Well, I'll leave you to your interview. Just let the girl at the end of the hall know when you want the next person, and she'll send them in."

"Thank you," Sam replied.

Steven Hill was tall, lanky, and balding. He looked to Sam to be in his mid to late thirties. He didn't appear to be nervous but waited patiently while Sam opened up his folio notebook and placed a voice recorder on the table between them.

"Do you mind if I record the interview, Steven?"

"No, not at all."

"You know, of course, why I'm here. I'm trying to find out as much information as I can that might help me track down Alana's killer. Did you see Alana at all on Thursday, July 7th?"

"No, no, I didn't."

"What was the nature of your working relationship with Alana?"

"Well, she and I have been working to develop a new variety of trees that will grow twenty percent faster than current varieties. ...Ah, that's proprietary information, so I would appreciate you keeping that on a need-to-know level."

"Of course," Sam replied. "Has anyone on the team been threatened by anyone? Any competitors trying to intimidate you to stop your research? Anything like that?"

"No, not that I'm aware of."

"How did you and Alana get along?"

"We got along rather well. I was the one who recruited her to come and work here. I read her Master's thesis on plant genetics, and I thought she would be a great addition to our team."

"And was she?"

"Absolutely. Her instincts and her research were top-notch. It was almost as if she could talk to the trees. She really was quite special."

"Did she have any ex-boyfriend or girlfriend problems, anyone stalking her or anything like that, as far as you know?"

"No. I believe she had a steady boyfriend for some years. I recall seeing the same young man with her several times at company Christmas parties and the like. I think his name was Jake, or Jack – something like that."

“Do you know of anyone who would want to harm her for any reason? A co-worker who could be in line for a promotion if she was suddenly out of the way, for instance? Anyone at all?”

“No, I’m sorry, Detective. I wish I could be more help, but Alana’s murder is a total shock to us all. I don’t know anyone who would want to do such a thing to her.”

“Thank you for your time, Doctor. Here’s my card. If you think of anything that might help us on this case, please contact me immediately.”

“I’ll do that, Detective. I hope you catch whoever did this. Alana was a great researcher and a good friend, too. I just can’t believe....” Steven stopped speaking and seemed about to choke up, but then recovered. “If I can help in any way, please let me know.”

* * * * *

Sam conducted three more interviews, two being with other researchers Alana had worked with, and one with the security guard who had been on duty the morning Alana had been murdered. Neither of the researchers had shared anything that piqued his interest as being relevant to the case. The guard was able to confirm that Alana had left the building for her morning run at 6:30 a.m., but added nothing else of significance to what Sam already knew.

After the interviews he examined the items in Alana’s locker, taking pictures of all pertinent items in case they might be relevant. Her purse with all of her identification were still there. A necklace and pendant, along with some earrings were there, too, but no other jewelry. He was fairly confident that robbery could be moved off of the list of possible motives at this point.

Once he was done at Apex Labs, Sam pulled out his phone GPS app and punched in the address the Roberts had given him for Alana’s apartment. Finding nothing of immediate interest to the case, after a thorough search, he drove back to the police station. He was back at his desk by mid-afternoon.

As he checked his email he saw that the coroner's report was done. He double-clicked on the PDF version of the report that was attached to the email and scrolled down to the summary at the end. There was no evidence of sexual assault, the cause of death was blunt force trauma to the head, and the murder weapon was likely a baseball bat or something similar. The victim didn't have any debris under her fingernails that indicated she might have struggled with her attacker – only some dirt and plant material that had likely been lodged there when she fell to the ground. That was consistent with the scratches on her palms and knees.

He leaned back in his chair and reviewed what he knew so far. A young woman with no known enemies had been murdered on a remote running trail with no witnesses. There had been no sexual assault and no apparent robbery, and on top of that, the murder had been pre-meditated. Either it had to have been someone who knew she was going to be on that trail, or possibly a serial killer who would strike again in similar fashion, and Alana had been the hapless first victim. He shuddered at the thought of having a serial killer on the loose. The more he learned about this case, the less sense it made.

He hunched over his laptop computer, two-finger typing furiously as he looked up the website for Portland State University. He was elated to find that they had a Korean language instructor. Finding the email address for Professor Yoon on the language department website, he sent him an email with the image of the paper from the crime scene attached. He asked him whether or not the word (or words, he couldn't tell for sure) were Korean, and if it was, if he would provide a translation. Maybe it would turn out to be an actual clue and not simply some piece of trash that was totally unrelated to the case. When he was done, he took his empty coffee cup and headed toward the break room. He needed some afternoon energy to stimulate his mind for his next task – heading back to the evidence room to re-examine every piece of evidence they had collected so far and see if the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place.

Chapter Three – A New Beginning

The drive from Portland, Oregon to Longview, Washington along Interstate 5 was refreshing. As Megyn Keith drove her rental car along the highway, she almost found herself forgetting why she was there. The flight from Charleston, South Carolina, had been a long one, and she was glad to be off of the plane, back on planet earth, and out in the warm July sunshine again. She had her Ray-ban glasses on with the windows rolled down and was trying to enjoy the drive despite the somber reason for her visit.

Once the road left the city, it meandered into the countryside and finally along the Columbia River, providing a constantly changing visual feast. Houses dotted the countryside, interspersed with stretches of forest on one side and the river on the other, only occasionally being interrupted by a small town. But the further she drove, the more the memories from years ago when she and her best friend Alana had driven this same route almost every weekend began to flood her mind. And now Alana was dead – the victim of a senseless murder. Megyn fought back her tears and wished that it was all just a nightmare from which she could awaken at any moment.

When she arrived in Longview, she continued west, out of town, and took a right on Coal Creek Road, heading north. It wasn't long until she recognized the terrain of Goose Creek Hollow. Turning right onto Ragland Road, she continued for another mile until she saw the familiar driveway that led to Alana's parents' house.

The gravel driveway leading up to the house was almost a half-mile long, and Megyn slowed the car to a snail's pace. She didn't want to get to the end of the road where the house was. Up until now, she had been able to move forward in a kind of daze, and as long as she did so, Alana's death was a surreal experience – not yet proven to be a reality. But the wake would change all of that. Seeing everyone dressed in black and talking about Alana's life in the past tense would make everything so much more real.

The short beep of a horn startled Megyn, and she realized she had come to a complete stop. She looked in the rearview mirror to see Tom, Alana's brother, in the family pickup truck. He gave her a half-smile and waved, and Megyn waved back.

"Sorry," she said out loud as she drove to the end of the driveway and parked.

She got out of the car and saw that Tom was lifting a large pack of bottled water out of the bed of the truck.

"Hey, Tom. Can I help you carry anything in?"

"Hey, Megyn," Tom responded with a friendly smile. "Sure, thanks. There's a bag of fruit in the front seat if you want to grab it."

"O.k."

She retrieved the bag of fruit from the front of the truck and followed Tom into the kitchen.

"It's good to see you," Tom said as he put the bottled water down on the table.

"Yeah, good to see you too, Tom," she responded.

As Megyn placed the fruit on the counter, Maya, Alana's mother, entered the room. Megyn walked over to her, and the two women embraced. The tears that she had been holding back began to flow freely as both women began to cry.

"I'm so glad you were able to come," Maya said.

"I can't believe she's gone," Megyn responded through her tears.

It was a few minutes before either woman spoke again. When they finally parted from their embrace, Megyn felt a little better, like a small portion of the heaviness that she had previously felt had been lifted off of her shoulders by their shared expression of sorrow.

"I want to ask you something," Maya said.

"Sure, what is it?"

"After the funeral, some members of our tribe will be having a small ceremony at the grave. I would like you to be there."

Alana and her mother were members of the Cowlitz Native American tribe, whose ancestors had inhabited the region for hundreds of years. Megyn had become familiar with their history when she and Alana had become friends years before.

"But I'm not a member of your tribe," Megyn responded. "Would that be o.k. with everyone else?"

"Don't you worry about them. You and Alana were like sisters to each other, and I want you to be there. Will you come?"

Megyn could see that Maya wasn't going to take 'no' for an answer, and although she felt a bit awkward saying yes, she didn't have the heart to deny the request of her best friend's mom – especially now. "O.k., I'll do it," she said at last.

"Thank you," Maya replied.

* * * * *

The wake began at 3:00 p.m. One of the first people to show up besides immediate family was Alana's long-time boyfriend, Jack Sutherland. Jack had been Alana's boyfriend since high school. They had both attended the University of Portland together, where Megyn had first met Alana. The three of them had been as thick as thieves during their college days. Megyn had spent almost as much time with Jack as she had with Alana back then. When Megyn saw Jack come through the door, a fresh wave of emotion hit her as she walked up and gave him a big hug. She could tell he had been crying and struggled to keep herself from descending into a blubbery mess one more time.

"I'm glad you're here, Megyn," Jack said after they hugged.

"It's just horrible, Jack... just horrible what happened. How are you holding up?"

"I have good moments and bad ones... mostly bad ones lately," he replied stoically.

"I'm going to be in town all week. After the funeral, let's get together and catch up," Megyn suggested.

"That'd be great, Megyn. Just call me when you feel like hanging out. I'm taking a couple of days off to help out with the funeral and everything."

"O.k., I've got to go check and see if Maya needs help in the kitchen. But I'll talk to you soon."

"Yeah, o.k. Talk to you soon."

Various people came and went for the next two hours. Megyn recognized some of those who came by from the many weekends she had spent with Alana in Longview. There was, of course, all of Alana's immediate family, plus the pastor of their church and his wife, several church members who Megyn wasn't familiar with, and some Cowlitz tribe members, along with a smattering of Alana's childhood friends, and finally some of Alana's co-workers from the research lab.

After some time had passed, Megyn saw one young man, who appeared to be about nineteen years old, hanging out by himself near the punch bowl. He looked like a lost puppy. Megyn made her way over and introduced herself.

"Hello, I'm Megyn, a friend of the family."

"My name's Jim," he replied awkwardly.

"How did you know Alana?"

"Oh, she and I worked at the same place... a-a-at the lab."

"Oh, what area do you work in?"

"I-I'm just the janitor. I used to see Ms. Keith a lot when I'd be c-c-cleaning up in the morning. She was always nice to me. I can't believe she's... dead."

"How long did you know her?"

"O-o-only about a year," the young man fumbled. "She was one of the only p-people who didn't m-m-make fun of me."

Megyn put her hand on the young man's shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "I'm sure it would mean a lot to her that you came by."

"Th-th-thank you," he replied with obvious gratitude.

Megyn kept busy by keeping the food trays full and asking people if they needed drinks in between talking with the various mourners who she knew as they passed

through. As a quasi-family member, it felt right to be helping out with the familial responsibilities during the wake. After everything had been cleaned up, it was 6:30 p.m. and Megyn felt exhausted. She said goodnight to the family and went upstairs to the spare bedroom where the Roberts were letting her stay for the week, collapsing onto the bed. She didn't wake up until the next morning.

* * * * *

The funeral at the small country church was a brief one, and then the small cadre of family and friends proceeded to the cemetery. Although Alana's family attended the Methodist Church, her mother had always taught Alana to respect her tribal roots. There were several members of the Cowlitz tribe who had come to the graveside, where they performed a burial ritual and sang a tribal song to honor Alana.

After the song, the preacher said a short prayer and dismissed the assembly. Maya came up beside Megyn, looping her arm through Megyn's and leading her towards the small group of tribe members who were congregated beside Alana's grave. "This is the ceremony I wanted you to participate in," she whispered as they walked.

There were five other people in the small group, besides Maya and Megyn. All of them appeared to be around Maya's age, except for one young man who appeared to be around nineteen or twenty years old. Maya pointed to each one in turn and introduced them. "This is Chief Kiona, his son Antoine, Tribal Elder Plamondon, Elder Scanewea, and my cousin, Mary Cloquet. Everyone, this is my daughter's best friend, Megyn Keith."

"Nice to meet you, everyone," Megyn replied as she proceeded to shake everyone's hands.

"Why is she here?" Antoine asked in an irritated tone. "She's not a member of the tribe. This ceremony is for tribal members only."

"It's o.k., my son," Chief Kiona interjected. "Maya asked me if she could join us, and I approved."

“But the Testament Stone ceremony is a sacred ceremony for our people; we dishonor our tribe if we allow non-members to participate.”

Megyn cringed inwardly, willing time to move forward to the end of the ceremony as the Chief responded to his son’s accusation.

“The Testament Stone was given to us many eons ago, by someone who was not a part of our tribe, my son. It was entrusted to us by the Great Spirit so that we might use its power to keep our land pure from evil, and it will choose the best person for that task, Cowlitz tribal member or not. We cannot be greedy with the gift that has been given to us. We are simply stewards of the Stone, not owners.”

Antoine scowled, but kept his peace and didn’t say anything else. Megyn wanted to melt into the ground or simply turn and walk away, but she knew that once Maya had decided to do something, it was impossible to talk her out of it, and she had wanted Megyn to be a part of this ceremony. She just hoped it would be over soon.

Maya reached into her pocket and pulled out a small leather pouch, handing it to the Chief. He opened it up and took something out of the pouch. As he held it up, Megyn recognized it as the necklace that Alana had worn almost constantly, for as long as she had known her. It was a silver necklace, with a large silver pendant hanging from it. Mounted in the middle of the pendant was a smooth, rounded green stone.

“This is the Testament Stone,” the Chief began. “It was given to us by a messenger from the Great Spirit many generations ago, so that we could use its power to help keep our land pure from evil. In each generation, one person is chosen to carry the stone and wield its power. Alana was the last bearer of this great gift. Now, a new bearer must be chosen to carry it in her place. I will utter the words my father taught me, passed down through the generations, and then I will pass the stone around this circle. As each of you takes the stone, hold it in your hands with the stone facing upwards, and lift it to the sky. The new bearer will be identified when the stone begins to glow.”

The Chief placed the pendant in his hands as he had described, and held it up to the sky, uttering the words:

“O, Great Giver of gifts,
You sent us this gift to help keep us safe from evil,
Choose now for us the next bearer of the Testament Stone,
Give them wisdom to use its power,
And keep their heart pure.”

Once he had uttered these words, he lowered the stone and looked at it. It remained as it had been before, beautiful, but it certainly wasn't glowing. He passed it to Antoine on his left, who took the stone with reverence and held it slowly up to the sky, then lowered it down again, but the stone remained as it had been. The look of disappointment on his face was palpable. Each member, in turn, took the stone and did the same. Megyn was standing next to Maya, who was last in line. As each person had the same result, Megyn felt embarrassed for the group. She respected the tribe's rituals, but who could believe in such fantasies in this day and age? The chances of that stone glowing were about the same as winning the lottery without ever playing. She tried to show respect and hide her embarrassment as she took the pendant from Maya's cousin, Mary, and lifted it slowly up to the sky and back down.

She was turning to pass the pendant to Maya when suddenly the stone began to glow.

Chapter Four – The Guardian Awakens

No one moved for several seconds. Megyn's eyes were fixated on the pendant as it glowed – an emerald green light emanating from it as she held it in her hands. She heard a few of the other people around the little circle inhale sharply.

As she continued to stare at the stone, she felt an irresistible urge to touch it. She stretched forth the index finger of her free hand towards the glowing stone and felt a sharp prick on her finger. Drawing it back, she discovered a drop of blood on the tip of it. When she looked back at the pendant, she could see some of her blood had fallen on the stone, and now it was glowing even brighter than it had been before.

"It is accomplished," the Chief said. "The Testament Stone has chosen a new guardian."

He stepped forward and gently took the necklace from Megyn's hand, and then placed it around her neck. "You are the new guardian of the Testament Stone, wielder of its power, protector of these lands."

"I... there must be some sort of mistake. I mean... I don't even live here; I'm not a member of your tribe," she protested.

"The Testament Stone has chosen you. It is not for any of us to question who the stone chooses or why you have been chosen. In time, you will see the wisdom in the choice," the Chief replied, evidently convinced of the rightness of it all despite his own son's misgivings.

Maya leaned over and hugged Megyn, and then whispered in her ear, "Please take the pendant... for Alana. She would have wanted you to have it."

Megyn unconsciously reached up with her hand and caressed the necklace as she looked questioningly into Maya's eyes, but decided it would be disrespectful to say anything else, so she simply nodded her head up and down.

* * * * *

The following morning when Megyn woke up, she felt somewhat refreshed. The emotional weight of Alana's death still hung on her like a weight that she hadn't yet been able to lay aside, but that would come in time, she supposed. She could hear commotion downstairs, which was probably from the breakfast preparations. Dressing quickly, she headed downstairs.

The Roberts' were big breakfast people. Megyn usually just ate a bowl of cereal back home, but breakfast here was a full-on smorgasbord event. There were homemade biscuits, red-eye gravy, venison sausage, eggs fried over-easy, fresh orange juice, coffee as black as the ace of spades, and an assortment of jams and jellies to go with it all. Jack Sutherland had come over for the meal, and he and Tom helped Megyn clear the table and wash the dishes up afterwards. It felt good to be doing some work; it helped keep her moving forward instead of wallowing around in the shared misery of Alana's passing.

They were just about finished washing the dishes when a knock came at the door. Megyn could hear the sounds of conversation from the kitchen as Maya opened the door and talked with whomever it was, but she couldn't make out exactly what they were saying. She was busy hand drying the last of the big pans with Jack when Maya poked her head into the kitchen.

"Megyn," Maya said tentatively, "there's someone here to see you."

"To see me?" Megyn asked.

Maya nodded as Megyn put down the pan and the towel she had been drying it with, and then followed Maya into the front room of the house. A woman was there, looking somewhat distressed and holding a t-shirt with both hands. She waited somewhat impatiently as Maya made an introduction.

"This is Mrs. Lyall, a neighbor of ours," Maya began.

"How do you do, Mrs. Lyall?" Megyn asked as she extended her hand. Instead of taking her hand, the woman pressed the t-shirt she had been holding into Megan's fingers.

"Thank you for seeing me. My son Chaney... he's lost. He went out camping on Sunday and was supposed to come back yesterday afternoon, but he didn't. He always comes back when he says he will. His friend Tommy said he left camp to get some firewood this morning, and never came back. Please... I'm scared something bad has happened to him. Please find him."

"I'm sorry your son is missing, ma'am, but I don't think I can help you. You should call the police," Megyn replied, somewhat disoriented by the woman's request.

"But you're the new guardian. Chief Kiona said so. Please help me," the woman protested. At this point, Maya began talking back and forth with the woman in the Cowlitz language. The woman nodded her head up and down, seemingly placated by whatever Maya said. Maya turned and took the t-shirt back from the obviously confused Megyn, and handed it back to Mrs. Lyall.

"Thank you," Mrs. Lyall said to Megyn, and then the woman turned around and left.

"What just happened?" Megyn asked, looking at Maya for some kind of explanation. Maya let out a deep sigh before she answered.

"You'd better come with me," she said at last.

Maya took her by the hand and led her upstairs to Alana's old room. Alana had moved into her own place years ago after graduating from college, but Maya had kept the room almost the same as Megyn remembered it from her and Alana's college days. Maya reached up to a bookshelf and retrieved what looked like a photo album, and then she went over and sat down in the bay window, motioning for Megyn to join her.

Megyn sat down beside her and looked at the cover of the album. It had a picture of the ocean on the front of it, but besides this it looked unremarkable. She didn't remember ever noticing it in the dozens of times she had been in Alana's room. Maya opened to the first page, and there was a bird feather taped to the top of it. The tape had yellowed with age. Beneath the feather were a couple of paragraphs, written in Alana's neat handwriting.

"Alana was twelve when she became the Guardian of the Testament Stone. This was her first experience using the powers of the stone. A young boy from down the road had lost his pet bird. The bird's wings were clipped, so he couldn't fly, and the boy was terrified that a cat might eat his bird. He ran all the way down here – almost a mile-and-a-half, to tell Alana about it and ask for her help. He brought this feather from the bird's cage. Alana found the boy's bird that afternoon. He was hopping around in the woods behind the boy's house."

"So... you're telling me that I have some sort of supernatural powers to help find things now that I have this pendant?" Megyn asked skeptically.

"I'm telling you Alana's story from when *she* was the Guardian of the Testament Stone. I was going to tell you later. I thought you would have more time before you were called upon."

Megyn stood up and crossed the room, unconsciously holding onto the pendant that hung around her neck. She could feel the tension creeping up the sides of her neck, the muscles tightening, a headache forming in the front of her skull. "I'm sorry... I didn't ask for this," she said, her voice beginning to quake with emotion. She reached up and took off the pendant, laying it down on Alana's old bed. "I know you want me to be this Guardian, and I know the pendant glowed when I touched it, but I didn't come here for this. I came to mourn for my best friend and attend her funeral. This... is a big responsibility," she said as she waved her hand at the book and the pendant, "and honestly, I don't believe in all this supernatural stuff. I'm sorry if that offends you, but I don't. I'm just not wired that way. You can give the pendant to someone else, and tell your Chief I'm sorry. I just can't do it."

Without waiting for a response, Megyn walked out of the room, went down the stairs, and ran out the front door. She ran down to the small creek that ran through the Roberts' spacious front yard, to a swing that faced the water, where she sat down and began to cry. It was just too much to take. It wasn't fair for them to just assume she would take on such a role. She felt bad for the woman whose son was lost, but it wasn't her responsibility.

Megyn rocked in the swing, looking out over the creek and watching the water gurgle as it flowed downstream. It must have been about half an hour before she saw out of the corner of her eye that Big Jake was walking down through the yard towards the swing. She smiled when she saw him. If there was anyone she wanted to see right now, it was him. Megyn had lost her own dad when she was a young girl, but she often wondered if he had been like Big Jake. Big Jake didn't talk much, but he was big, gave great bear hugs, and when he did say something, it was usually good advice or something funny.

He came and put his hand on the side post of the swing's frame as he looked down at Megyn. "Want some company?"

"Sure," she replied, smiling slightly.

As he sat down beside her on the swing, she could feel the bench sink with his weight, and the chains that held up the swing grow tense. He was solid, in a comforting Rock of Gibraltar sort of way. She waited in silence.

"You know... Alana caught her first fish out of this creek. She was about seven years old. I can still see the smile on her face as she pulled that fish out of the water and it was flailin' all around... You would've thought she had just won first prize at the county fair." He smiled at the memory and paused, and then looked at Megyn before continuing.

"You're the closest thing I have to a daughter on this earth now that Alana's gone. I just want you to know that whatever you decide to do about that pendant is o.k. by me. Whatever you do, I just don't want it to come between us."

Megyn leaned over and put her head on Big Jake's shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her and gave her a hug. "Thanks, Big Jake."

* * * * *

Megyn avoided being in the same room with Maya for the rest of the afternoon. Part of her was feeling guilty about the way she had reacted to the situation that she had been thrust into. Another part of her was angry with Maya for putting her in the

situation in the first place. She had just finished brushing her teeth and had gone back into her bedroom to go to bed for the night when she noticed a handwritten note placed on top of her pillow. She picked it up with some trepidation, knowing it was probably from Maya and that it would concern the blow-up they had had earlier in the day. After taking a deep breath and sitting down in the comfortable wing-back chair near the window, she read the note:

Megyn,

I didn't like the way things ended with us earlier. I know you didn't ask for this responsibility. I didn't know that you would be chosen to be the bearer of the Testament Stone, and I understand how that it must seem overwhelming to you right now.

There is a story from the book of Esther in the Bible. In the story, a young woman named Esther was chosen against her will to be the bride of the king. Some time later, an enemy put her family in danger. A relative came to her and asked her to intercede for them with the king, but it was a dangerous thing to come before the king unless you had been summoned, and it could result in death. The previous queen had even been removed from her position for refusing to follow the king's wishes, so Esther was afraid and at first she told her relative that she wouldn't do it. Then, her relative asked her a question. He asked her, 'Who knows but that you have come into this position for such a time as this?'

I just want you to consider the fact that you have been given a great opportunity to help others, with a gift that most people don't have. You may not understand it yet, or even believe in it yourself, but there are those who do. All I'm asking is that you at least consider keeping the pendant for a while and see what happens – that's all. Who knows but that you have been chosen by some force greater than yourself for this very purpose?

I don't want this to make things awkward between us or cause some rift in our relationship, so I won't mention it again. I ask you to forgive me for any way that I have pressured you to take this on – I really mean that. Whatever you decide, I want you to know that you are welcome here in our home any time you want to visit.

Love,

Maya

Megyn folded the note in half and put it on the nightstand beside the bed. She felt somewhat relieved that Maya had decided to let go of her expectations and allow Megyn to make her own decision. She thought back to the look on Mrs. Lyall's face when she had pleaded for help in finding her boy. Megyn wanted to help but honestly didn't know what to do. She was, after all, just a visitor from the East Coast who was leaving in a few days. *They* might believe in some spirit using the pendant to help people, but *she* certainly wasn't convinced of the same.

Thinking about the book on Alana's bookshelf down the hall, filled with stories of her friend's experiences with the pendant, she made a mental note to read some of it the next day. At the very least, she owed her friend the respect of honoring her memory and considering her tribe's request that Megyn be the next bearer of the Testament Stone. Whatever that might mean, she wasn't sure.

She lay thinking about these things for several minutes before finally drifting off to sleep.

* * * * *

That night, Megyn had a nightmare. In her dream, she was in the woods. It was dark, and she was thirsty. She tried to get up, but she couldn't. Something was holding

her foot. She called out for help, but when she heard herself calling, it wasn't her own voice that she heard– it sounded like the voice of a little boy.

When she woke up, it was just before dawn. The dream played over and over again in her mind, and she felt a sense of urgency. She got up and dressed quickly, putting on a light jacket, pulling her hair back in a ponytail, and slipping on her sneakers before heading down the hall to Alana's old room. Opening the bedroom door, she saw the pendant lying on the bed right where she had left it the day before. She walked into the room and looked down at the necklace, observing it cautiously for several seconds. Finally, she picked it up and headed out the front door.

Chapter Five – The Guardian Arises

This is crazy, Megyn thought to herself as she drove down the Roberts' driveway to the main road. I probably just had the dream because that woman told me about her lost boy and my mind is trying to process the stress of being asked to find him. Even as the thoughts formed in her mind, she couldn't deny the irresistible urge to drive along the road, deeper into the wooded countryside, searching for something.

After about five minutes, she saw a sign coming up on the left. It was a brown wooden sign with a hiker pictured on it and an arrow pointing into the forest. There was a small dirt and gravel parking area near the sign, and she pulled off of the road. It was still chilly as she got out of the car and began walking along the trail – towards what she wasn't sure. Could the lost boy be out here? How was it possible that she could know? She looked down at the pendant, which she was absentmindedly holding again. What was up with that?

Ten minutes later, she came upon a bend in the trail. The main trail headed off to the left, and a less-traveled trail veered off to the right. She was drawn to follow the trail to the right and began a slow descent to the bottom of a ravine. There was a small stream at the bottom, and she stopped to look around. Then, she heard it.

It was faint at first. She almost didn't hear it above the gurgling stream. Closing her eyes so that she could concentrate, she was almost certain now that she was hearing someone calling very faintly, "Somebody help me, please...."

She found a place to cross the stream where a tree had fallen across it and managed to get to the other side without falling off. Walking about ten yards farther, she closed her eyes again, listening. Hearing nothing this time, she called out, "Is anyone there?"

Almost instantly, a voice cried out in equal parts panic and exhilaration, "I'm here! Help me! My foot is caught and I need help!"

"I'm coming!" Megyn yelled back as she walked towards where she thought the voice had come from. "Say something else so I can locate you!" she called out.

"I'm over here!" the voice replied.

As Megyn hiked over a hillock, she could see down into a small depression on the other side, where a young boy lay on the ground.

"Please, help me. My foot is stuck in a trap, and I can't get out."

Megyn hurried down the hill to where the boy was lying. His face was dirty, and he looked scared. She looked down at his right leg and saw that his foot was caught fast in what appeared to be an old animal trap of some kind. She had seen these kinds of traps in books before when studying American history, but she had never seen one in person. Fortunately, it was the kind that had two smooth metal bands on each side, and not one of the traps with jagged teeth.

"O.k. I'm here to help. I'm going to try and pull the bands apart, and you pull your leg out when I do, o.k.?"

The boy nodded his head up and down quickly. The trap was large enough for Megyn to put the heels of both her feet on the steel band on either side of the boy's leg, and grab the side closest to her with both hands. She began to push with her feet and pull towards her with her hands, but the trap didn't budge. It still held the boy's ankle fast.

The chain which led from the trap to a nearby tree appeared sturdy enough to make breaking it seem more daunting than freeing the boy's ankle. Still, she tugged at the chain, being careful not to pull on the boy's ankle as she did, but it was an exercise in futility. Standing back from the tree and staring down at the boy, she unconsciously began rubbing the pendant which hung around her neck, wishing she knew how to get the boy's leg free, and then the pendant started to glow.

Suddenly, the roots from the nearby tree seemed to come alive and began crawling toward the boy's leg like so many snakes. Before a scream could escape the boy's lips, the roots wound their way around each side of the metal trap and pulled it open far enough for the boy to pull his leg free. He quickly pushed himself backwards, away from the trap and the strange roots that had freed him.

"W-w-what was that?" he asked. Looking at Megyn and seeing the pendant for the first time, his eyes grew large.

Megyn looked down at the glowing pendant, and back up at the boy, but said nothing. Her eyes were wide with wonder, and her mouth was gaping open, as she was unable to explain the strange event that had just transpired. *Maybe there is something to this whole Testament Stone thing, after all*, she thought to herself. After several seconds, she finally responded. "I have no idea what that was, but at least you're free now."

After attempting to call 9-1-1, she discovered she had no reception for her cell phone. She put her hand underneath the boy's elbow on the same side as his injured leg to help support his weight, and the two began hobbling back toward the main trail.

"Are you Chaney Lyall?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Your mother is worried about you. She came to the Roberts' house and asked for our help in finding you. As soon as I can get some cell reception, you can call your mom and let her know you're safe."

"How did you find me?"

Megyn thought for a few moments about his question and realized she wasn't sure *how* she had found him, and that what she *did* know sounded crazy. But then again, this kid had just been freed from an animal trap by a bunch of animated tree roots. She decided to give a shot at answering his question.

"I had a dream. I heard you calling for help. When I got up, I felt I had to look for you. It was like I was guided to where you were. Believe it or not, I think it has something to do with this pendant I'm wearing."

"The Testament Stone?"

"You know about this?" she asked with surprise.

"I'm Cowlitz. Of course, I know about it, but I've never seen anything happen like what happened back there with those roots before. I mean, I've heard stories, but I thought they were just stories, you know?"

“That makes two of us,” Megyn replied

Chapter Six – A Suspect is Discovered

The email from Professor Yoon greeted Detective Sam Foster as he fired up his computer. Putting his first cup of coffee for the day down on the desk and leaning forward slightly, he opened the email anxiously to see what the professor had to say. He chided himself for the excitement he was feeling over the as yet unread email. It wasn't like it was going to be a signed confession from the killer or anything like that. Still, it could be something important in a case where no motive and little revealing evidence had been collected so far. He quickly read and re-read the short message:

Glad to help the Longview P.D. The words on the piece of paper from the picture you sent me represent a company name, which, roughly translated, means 'good-looking fashions'. I looked up the Korean-language website of this company on the internet, and found that the English-language company name is 'Chic Fashions'. I've put the link to their English-language website below. I hope this helps.

Detective Foster slumped back in his chair. His hopes weren't exactly dashed, but he had been holding out for something more substantial. He clicked on the link the professor had provided and stumbled around the site long enough to find a listing of U.S. outlets. It seemed they had several high-end outlet stores in the U.S., the nearest of which was in Portland, Oregon. There wasn't another outlet for another two-hundred miles in any direction. His eyebrows raised as he digested the information. A high-end store – so they likely had video cameras, and only one within two hundred miles. That meant that the person who had purchased the item of clothing from which this piece of paper had fallen had likely been in that very store at some point in order to purchase it.

His mouth turned into a frown as he continued to think through this line of reasoning. In the first place, the person in question was likely not even involved in the case and could have been on the trail days or weeks before the murder. Secondly, the

purchased item could have been a gift or purchased months before the murder. Thirdly, how in Hades was he supposed to identify the person, even if they were on video? In other words, this new piece of potential evidence was very likely a dead-end.

As he was pondering these uplifting thoughts, his cell phone rang. He looked down and saw the caller ID identifying the caller as Johnny Walden – a uniformed officer for the Longview P.D. “Hey, Johnny. What can I do for you?”

“Hey. Got some possible evidence for you. Somebody called dispatch reporting a bloody baseball bat and hoodie in a trash bin behind their apartment building. I went by to check it out, and it’s legit. Thought it might be related to your case.”

“Tape it off, and don’t let anybody touch anything until I get there.”

“Will do.”

“What’s the address?”

He jotted down the name of the street and apartment number on a piece of paper as the other man spoke. “Thanks, Johnny.”

“You got it.”

Sam grabbed his sport coat off the back of his chair and walked briskly out to his car, then drove to the Longview Villas apartment complex as fast as he could without using his siren. This could be the break he had been hoping for.

Once he was on the scene, he waited for the official Longview P.D. crime scene photographer to finish taking photographs before he began bagging the evidence. Back in Portland, a Crime Scene Investigation Unit would have processed all of the evidence after a detective had looked over the scene. In Longview, however, the police department wasn’t all that big, so the detectives collected the evidence themselves in addition to their other crime scene duties.

He ducked under the yellow tape and made his way to the open garbage bin. Officer Walden was busy talking to an older woman, presumably the person who had called it in. He began scanning the contents of the garbage bin, and it didn’t take long to notice the bloody bat and hoodie in the corner. The bat was leaned up against the side of the bin, with the hoodie on top of the remaining garbage.

Sam's brow furrowed. It wasn't much of an attempt to hide the evidence if you were trying to cover up a crime. The items weren't in a bag or anything. He took out a pair of Latex gloves and slipped them on before retrieving some evidence bags from the trunk of his car.

The garbage bin was big enough that he couldn't just reach over and pick up the items, so he used the ledge running across the front of it for a foothold and hoisted himself up, stepping gingerly into the bin to pick up the bat. There was a copious amount of dried blood on the wooden bat, which was consistent with Alana Roberts' wounds. As he rotated it, he could see some strands of hair matted in dried blood on the surface of the bat, as well. He was willing to bet his paycheck that the hairs would turn out to be Alana's.

Next, he picked up the hoodie, which had spattered blood all over the front of it. As he was checking the pockets, his fingers touched something that felt like a credit card. He took it out, turning it over to the front, and instantly recognized the face printed on the Apex Labs employee ID.

* * * * *

Chaney Lyall had to have his broken ankle set at the emergency room. His mother arrived shortly after Megyn and Chaney did, and she kept hugging her son until the doctor came to set his ankle. After that, she hugged Megyn so tightly that she could hardly breathe.

"Where did you find him?" Mrs. Lyall finally asked.

Megyn described the area to her in as much detail as she could remember.

"That explains why the search party hadn't found him yet. They were searching about two miles farther down that trail where they boys had set up camp. If you hadn't gone down that other trail, they might never have found him. Thank you so much." She hugged Megyn again.

"You're welcome. I'm just glad I could help."

* * * * *

After extricating herself from the emergency room and Mrs. Lyall, Megyn drove back to the Roberts' home. As she went, she smiled contentedly to herself. It felt good in the midst of the wake and the funeral, and everything else surrounding Alana's death, to be doing something to help another human being. It was a bright spot in the middle of an otherwise tragic experience.

As her mind came back to thoughts of Alana, though, her smile faded. Alana's killer was still out there. And, who knew – perhaps her killer would strike again and kill another innocent victim. By the time Megyn pulled up to the house, her brief moments of happiness had receded to the back of her mind.

It was lunch-time, and when she entered the house, she could smell something wonderful coming from the kitchen. Her smile came back, if somewhat tempered by the circumstances. She followed her nose into the kitchen to see what Maya was cooking today, and was surprised to see Big Jake at the stove frying up some bacon.

"Afternoon. We were wonderin' when you'd get home," he rumbled in his Big Jake papa bear way.

"Hey, sorry I didn't tell you where I was going. I didn't think about the fact that you might be worried."

"Well, truth be told, once we found out you'd taken the pendant, we didn't worry much. Alana used to go off all the time by herself like that. One time, someone even tried to hurt her, but she said the pendant helped her get away. I tried to get her to stop at first, but after a while, we just got used to it. I figured you were off on one of those adventures."

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Wanna tell me what it was?"

"I found the Lyall boy."

"Hot dang! I'll bet his mom was glad to see him. Was he o.k.?"

"A little dehydrated and a broken ankle, but he'll be fine."

Just then, Maya came in from the back of the house. She walked up and gave Megyn a big hug. "I'm so glad you're back. I just got off the phone with Mrs. Lyall. She told me all about what you did. Thank you."

"I'm glad I could help, but I'm still trying to process how it all happened. I mean, it was like I felt compelled to go to the woods and look for something. I didn't even know what it was at first. Then, when I heard his voice...."

"It was the Testament Stone," Maya interjected. "It was leading you." She took one of Megyn's hands in her own before continuing. "You should read Alana's journal; you have a lot to learn."

"Well, I'm not committing to keeping this yet," she said as she held up the pendant, "but I'll wear it while I'm here, at least."

"Lunch is ready; BLTs. Fixins are on the table," Big Jake said as he walked over to the table with a big pile of crispy bacon that smelled like heaven.

Lunch hit the spot. Fresh tomatoes, crispy bacon, mayonnaise, and sweet pickles, topped off with lettuce on wheat bread – it was just what the doctor had ordered. Megyn polished off two-and-a-half sandwiches almost before she realized it. She and Maya were cleaning up from lunch when Maya's cell phone rang.

"Oh, I completely forgot," Maya exclaimed. "Caprica Hill volunteered to help us pack up Alana's things and clean her apartment. That must be her now. I meant to ask you if you would help us with that, but with everything else going on..."

"Don't worry about it," Megyn replied. "I'd be glad to help."

"Thank you," Maya replied over her shoulder as she walked into the next room to retrieve her phone. "Caprica, I'm so sorry. I completely forgot about meeting you at Alana's apartment. Yes, yes, we'll be over there in about fifteen minutes if you can wait. O.k., we'll see you there."

Several minutes later, they pulled up in front of Alana's apartment next to a white Lexus SUV. Megyn recognized Caprica from the wake as she got out of the car.

"I'm so sorry again for forgetting to meet you here," Maya said as they all walked up the sidewalk to the front door of Alana's apartment.

"Don't mention it. I'm happy to help," Caprica replied.

Alana's apartment was part of a four unit building, and her unit was on the ground floor. Maya led the way, getting her keys out in preparation for opening the door. Caprica and Megyn followed, with Big Jake bringing up the rear, carrying an arm-full of unassembled cardboard boxes and holding a tape gun in one hand. As Maya opened the door, it looked as if a cyclone had come through the small apartment. Chairs were overturned, couch cushions had been ripped apart, books had been tossed on the floor in front of the bookcase, and the desk drawer had been pulled out and thrown onto the floor.

"Oh no," Maya said in dismay, putting her hand over her mouth, tears starting to well up in her eyes.

By this time, Jake had put down the boxes and moved in front of the small group. "Maya, stay out here and call 9-1-1. I'm going in. Whoever did this might still be here."

Maya shot out her hand to stop him. "No. It's not worth it. I've already lost a daughter; I'm not going to lose you, too, over a break in. It's just things – they can be replaced."

Jake was mad at whomever had done this and ready for a fight, but he held his ground. "O.k., then, let's get back in our cars until the police get here. Come on." He spread his big arms out wide and made a waving motion like he was herding cattle, directing the women down the sidewalk in the direction of the vehicles.

Once they were safely back in their cars, Jake called 9-1-1 to report the break-in, and they waited.

Chapter Seven – A Secret is Revealed

Detective Sam Foster sat across from Jim Simble in the interrogation room of the Longview Police Department. After discovering Jim's employee badge in the hoodie they had retrieved from the garbage bin, he had asked the woman who'd reported the items if Jim Simble lived in one of the apartments. She had confirmed that he did and then pointed out which unit he lived in.

With probable cause, Sam and Officer Walden had decided to enter the apartment. Sam had tried the back door and found it unlocked. Before entering, they had announced themselves. When no one responded, they went inside, guns drawn just in case they encountered a violent Jim Simble. Jim, however, wasn't home.

After they had made certain Jim wasn't hiding somewhere in the apartment, they immediately began searching the premises for more evidence. Sam had been in what appeared to be the spare bedroom of the apartment when Officer Walden had called out to him from the other bedroom, "Sam, you'd better come in here."

When Sam had entered the room, Officer Walden had been standing before a chest of drawers. "I think we have our guy; look at this." Taped to the wall above the chest were about a dozen pictures of Alana Roberts – most of amateur quality, one picture from what was likely an employee directory, and a couple of newspaper articles with Alana's name highlighted with a yellow marker. There was also a candy cane with a small note attached to it, reading *Merry Christmas* and signed *Alana*. Sam had holstered his gun and stared at the shrine before him. "Yep," he'd said, "I think you might be right."

Sam had asked Officer Walden to stay and stake out the apartment, in case the suspect came back, and then he'd headed over to Apex Labs to see if he could find Jim at his workplace. He'd called dispatch and had them send over another uniformed officer to Apex Labs to assist in the arrest, just in case they found him there. Once they had gone inside the research lab, they had found Jim sweeping the floor in the employee breakroom. Strangely, Jim had smiled when Sam had addressed him by

name and expressed utter shock when he'd been informed that he was under arrest for the murder of Alana Roberts. Sam had read him his rights while the other officer handcuffed him.

Now, Sam took photos of the bloody baseball bat and hoodie, as well as the shrine of pictures and mementos from Jim's bedroom, and spread them out in front of Jim.

"Why'd you do it, Jim? Why'd you kill Alana Roberts?" he asked flatly.

When Jim saw the bloody photos, he turned away and looked at another part of the table, then brought his gaze back up and looked the detective in the eyes. "I-I-I t-t-told you that I d-d-d-didn't kill her. I l-l-loved her."

"Maybe you loved her a bit too much, more than she could return. Maybe she rejected you, and you couldn't handle that. Is that what happened, Jim? Did you tell her you loved her and she laughed at you, so you killed her in a fit of rage? Is that what you did?"

"No!" Jim cried as he buried his head in his hands and began to sob. "I wish I knew wh-wh-who did it. B-b-b-but it wasn't me." He turned his head to the side again before continuing, "G-g-get those pictures away from me."

"I've got a bloody bat with a fingerprint on it, which we're running against your fingerprints right now. I have a hoodie with Alana's blood all over it with your employee I.D. in the pocket. It looks pretty bad for you here, Jim. If you confess now, maybe I can talk to the D.A. so he doesn't ask for the death penalty. Just talk me through what you did and why."

In truth, Sam had no idea if forensics had been able to pull any fingerprints off of the bat or not, but saying so might turn up the heat and get Jim to confess what he had done, so he went with it.

"This is b-b-bull. I d-d-didn't do it. I want a... lawyer."

"O.k.... you got it, Jim. You want a lawyer, we'll get you your lawyer, and we'll do this the hard way."

Detective Sam Foster gathered up the photos and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

The police arrived at Alana's apartment within a few minutes. They quickly cleared the apartment as safe for entry, and Maya, Big Jake, Megyn, and Caprica were allowed to go inside. After a few minutes of looking around, however, they still weren't able to determine if anything had been stolen. At that point, one of the officers addressed Big Jake.

"Mr. Roberts, I know you folks just lost your daughter. I'm really sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. You think this could be related to her death?" Jake asked. He still didn't like saying that his daughter had been murdered. It just sounded so wrong.

"I don't know. I'll mention the break-in to Detective Foster, just in case. If you notice anything of value missing or anything that you think might have a bearing on the case, call us and let us know. Here's a copy of the police report. Unless we can establish a connection between the break-in and you daughter's murder, we'll have to classify this as a simple B&E with some vandalism, for now. We'll finish dusting the door for prints; then we'll be on our way."

Big Jake took the report from the officer, folded it up, and put it in his shirt pocket. "Thank you, officer. We appreciate your help."

"You're welcome."

Big Jake brought the cardboard boxes in and began putting them together and taping up the seams while Maya began walking through the apartment from room to room. Megyn followed her around, ready to help, but not really knowing where to begin. When Maya entered Alana's bedroom, she looked at all of the clothes strewn around on the floor. The closet door was open, and much of the contents of the closet had been tossed out onto the bed. Tears began trickling down her cheeks. Megyn walked up and put an arm around the older woman's shoulders.

"Why would someone do something like this?" Maya asked.

"I don't know," Megyn replied. "I'm sorry, Maya."

"It's not your fault," Maya said, wiping the tears off of her cheeks and taking a deep breath. "Let's do this room last. I'm just not ready to pack up her clothes yet. How about you start with the other room, the one Alana used as her office?"

"Sure; just box everything up?"

"Yes, for now. We just want to get everything out of here before the rent comes due next month, then we'll go through it all at the house and decide what to keep later."

"What can I help with?" Caprica asked as she came up behind them.

"If you'll box up everything from the bathroom, that would be great," Maya replied.

Megyn went into the front room and grabbed a couple of the boxes that Big Jake had put together, and then she headed back to Alana's office. She started opening the drawers on the desk and putting the contents of each into one of the boxes. Pencils, notepads, a paperclip holder, a stapler. It was saddening to be putting all of these things away, things that had been used by a real living person – her best friend – just a few days before. Now they were unwanted reminders of the tragedy of a life cut short – a friend whose company she would never be able to enjoy again. She tried to push the depressing thoughts out of her mind and focus on the pure mechanics of the task at hand.

Next to the desk was a large potted plant sitting on the floor. A decorative metal trellis had been placed in the dirt inside of the pot. Over time, the houseplant, with its vine-like tendrils and large leaves, had woven in, out, and around the form of the trellis, almost completely covering it by this point. As she turned sideways and bent down near the plant to put the contents from the next drawer into the box, Megyn thought she saw one of the leaves move.

She immediately drew back, thinking it might be a small lizard that had made the plant its home, but as she continued to stare, the leaves seemed to take on a life of their own. Two large leaves moved to the side to reveal something small and white that

had been secured to a part of the trellis by one of the plant's tendrils. Megyn bent down to take a closer look, and discovered it was a small USB drive. As she reached forth her hand to pull it free, the tendril that had been securing it to the trellis began to unwind of its own accord. It was then that Megyn noticed the pendant around her neck had begun to glow. She tentatively stretched out her hand and placed it under the USB drive. As the tendril released its grip, the small device dropped into her hand.

She stared at it for several seconds, in awe at what had just transpired, before looking around to see if anyone else had witnessed the event. Not seeing anyone staring in her direction, she quickly put the drive into her pocket and went back to packing up the contents of the desk. The pendant was obviously trying to show her something, just like it had when it had led her to the lost boy. Whatever it was, she wouldn't be able to look at it here anyway – Alana had used passwords to safeguard her computers religiously since their college days.

It didn't take Megyn long to finish packing up the contents of the desk; then she started working on disconnecting the computer equipment and the printer. All the while, she was wondering what could possibly be on the USB drive in her pocket and why Alana had hidden it away using the strange powers of the Testament Stone.

Chapter Eight – A New Direction

After arriving back at the Roberts' house after their day of packing and cleaning at Alana's apartment, Megyn excused herself and went up to her room. She shut the door and locked it before pulling her laptop out of her backpack and turning it on. Once she signed in, she took the small USB drive out of her pocket and plugged it in. She just hoped Alana hadn't password protected or otherwise encrypted the contents of the drive. If she had, this was going to be a very disappointing and fruitless endeavor. Megyn just wasn't the computer hacker type. Her idea of hacking was figuring out how to use a temporary email account to sign up for any freebies on the internet. Cracking a password or an encrypted file was way beyond of her skill set.

To her delight, though, when she double-clicked on the USB drive icon, the contents of the drive were displayed on-screen immediately. *So far, so good*, she thought to herself. There was a folder labeled "research data" and a Microsoft Word file entitled "research_log.docx". She double-clicked on the research log, and it opened up without asking for a password. Megyn exhaled heavily and realized she had been holding her breath. Then she began reading the entries.

Friday, June 3 – Discovered one of the trees in our test sample infected with Armillaria Root Disease. Took a sample and analyzed it. Appears to be a different strain than anything I've seen before.

Monday, June 6 – Found two other trees in the test group that were free of disease on Friday that now have Armillaria. Conferred with Steven, who agreed we should destroy the trees to prevent any further spread.

Tuesday, June 7 – Further analysis of the Armillaria strain indicates it may have benefited from our genetic modifications of the tree DNA.

Thursday, June 16 – The Armillaria spread to half the trees in test group B. Today we destroyed all of the trees in the group in an attempt to stop it from spreading to the other groups.

Monday, June 20 – Had a big argument with Steven about telling Mrs. Davenport about the outbreak of Armillaria. I've never seen him so mad. He shouted at me, and at one point I thought he was going to throw his clipboard at me. He said it would jeopardize the whole experiment and that we should do more research before we tell her. I said o.k., partly because I was scared of what he would do if I persisted in wanting to tell her now. I'm not sure I did the right thing. I'm going to store this log and some research on a thumb drive just in case and store it in a safe place.

Tuesday, June 21 – Steven apologized for his behavior. He asked if I would agree to wait on telling Mrs. Davenport as long as none of the other groups get infected. I agreed. We spent the rest of the day analyzing the Armillaria samples I pulled from the infected trees.

Thursday, June 22 – None of the other groups have been infected so far, thank God! We have pulled about a hundred test saplings and placed them in a container all by themselves. We have infected one of them with what we now believe to be a new and unique strain of Armillaria to see what happens.

Monday, June 26 – All the saplings in the Armillaria test group are dead! Not just infected – dead! They were all black and shriveled up this morning when we came in. Several different species of trees involved here. We have to tell Mrs. Davenport. When Steven saw it, he asked me to please keep our agreement not to tell Mrs. Davenport until we did some more research. I could tell he was scared. We destroyed the trees in the incinerator before anyone else came in. I'm starting to feel like I'm participating in a cover-up. This project is supposed to be wrapping up, and now this. If we have to pull the plug now... I just can't be the one who lets a potentially deadly super-strain of Armillaria out into the wild. It could jeopardize entire forests, regions even.

Wednesday, July 6 – The last week and a half we have been tracking the development of the Armillaria strain. From analyzing samples of our earlier test groups, we have been able to determine that the genetic modifications we made to a tree that was in the early stages of an Armillaria infection allowed the disease to mutate into this super-strain. Steven agreed we should tell Mrs. Davenport tomorrow.

Megyn sat on her bed, staring at the screen of her laptop, trying to take it all in. Could the Armillaria outbreak have been the motive for Alana's murder? Had Steven Hill murdered Alana to cover up the problem? Megyn's mind was racing with possibilities. She forced herself to calm down by closing her eyes and using a yogic breathing technique, focusing her mind on the rhythmic pattern of her breath going in and out repeatedly.

When she opened her eyes, she knew what she had to do. She had to turn this information over to the police. It occurred to her that Steven may have told his employer about the Armillaria outbreak as planned. If so, it might just be a coincidence that Alana had been murdered on the very morning they were supposed to meet with Mrs. Davenport to tell her. All the same, she made a copy of the thumb drive's contents on her laptop.

When the copy was done, she opened the folder labeled "research data" and found dozens of files. She opened several of them, some of which appeared to be lab reports citing the steps that had been taken to analyze, treat, and subsequently destroy the infected trees. Another document provided data tracking the progression of the strain's development, up to and including the last devastating annihilation of the sapling test group. She briefly thought about telling Alana's family about what she had found, but decided against it. If she told them now, it could unnecessarily stir them up about a possible suspect who might turn out to be innocent. Better to let the police figure it out.

She looked at her watch; it was already 6:30 p.m. Taking it by first thing in the morning would be best. Unplugging the thumb drive from her laptop, she put it in a pouch inside of her backpack.

Dinner with the Roberts family was a numb affair. Everyone was still grieving their collective loss. In addition to their loss, they knew there was a murderer on the loose who was responsible for it all – an added burden that only people who had experienced such a situation could identify with. It was as if the tragedy wasn't over, and never would be until the murderer was brought to justice. For the remainder of the

night, all Megyn could think about was whether or not Steven Hill had murdered her best friend.

* * * * *

After booking Jim Simble for the murder of Alana Roberts, Sam and Officer Johnny Walden had driven back out to Apex Labs to examine Jim's car before it was impounded. All of the evidence so far seemed to point in Jim's direction, but there were some discrepancies, in Sam's mind, that just didn't add up. Why didn't they find all of the clothing in the garbage bin together? If Jim had been dumb enough to dump the murder weapon and hoodie in a garbage bin behind his own house, why not the pants and shoes too? The pants had to have gotten blood on them as well, based upon what he had seen at the crime scene, and likely the boots too. Then there was the fact that Jim hadn't seemed scared or wary of them when they had picked him up at his work place. He had actually smiled when he had seen them. Not exactly the behavior of a guilty man, in Sam's experience.

They arrived at Apex Labs and found Jim's car still parked in the employee lot. Sam was hoping to find the muddy boots to match the boot imprints recovered at the murder scene. If they did, it would bolster their case against Jim and indicate that he was almost certainly the guilty party, but a thorough examination of the car turned up nothing.

The next stop was Jim's apartment. They had stopped gathering evidence once they had found the collage of pictures and what-nots on the wall of Jim's bedroom. At that point, Sam had been most concerned Jim might try and get out of town, so it had become more of a priority to get him into custody than to finish searching his house. Now, with Jim lawyering up, it was back to evidence collection.

Sam found two pairs of boots in Jim's closet and took them as evidence. They also impounded Jim's desktop computer for review by the department's certified

computer examiner. Sam didn't know much about gathering evidence from a computer, but he did know enough not to try and turn it on himself, as that could be considered tainting the evidence. He had even read in one of the police journals that some people set up trap-door programs so that, if anyone signed on to their computer without doing it in a certain way, all of the data would be deleted. He didn't think Jim was that smart, but who knew? After another hour of going through the remainder of Jim's belongings, they hadn't found anything else, so they re-sealed the house and left for the night.

As Sam drove home, his mind kept coming back to the clothes and the murder weapon. If Jim was the murderer and he had transported the bloody clothes and murder weapon back to his house, he would have had to have put the items in a garbage bag or something similar to keep from getting blood on the inside of his car. As far as Sam could tell, there weren't any bloodstains in the car. If he had transported everything in a garbage bag, why wouldn't he have left it all in the bag and tossed the whole lot into the garbage bin? And where was the garbage bag and/or the pants? This was a bloody crime; the pants the murderer had been wearing would have had blood all over them, just like the hoodie did – yet, why hadn't the pants been tossed into the bin along with the hoodie and the bat?

Sam was getting a headache. He massaged his forehead with one hand while he drove home. He could already tell he wasn't going to get much sleep tonight with all of these unanswered questions rumbling around in his head.

Chapter Nine – The Net Widens

Somehow, Megyn was able to get a peaceful night's sleep. Perhaps it was the feeling that she might finally be able to do something to help catch Alana's killer, or maybe her mind was simply too exhausted to keep her up. Either way, she awoke feeling refreshed and optimistic about the day ahead.

There was, as usual, a hearty breakfast at the Roberts' table, comprised of homemade biscuits, gravy, eggs, deer sausage, juice, and coffee. Afterwards, she told Maya she had a few errands to run and that she would be back by lunch, and then she left for the police station. She wanted to get this evidence to the police as soon as possible.

After parking her car at the station, she went inside and walked up to the front desk, where a conservatively dressed woman in her mid-forties was typing on a keyboard. She stopped typing and looked up at Megyn with a warm smile.

"Good morning, how can I help you?"

"I'm here to see the detective who's working on the Alana Roberts murder. I came across some information I believe may be relevant to the case."

"Oh," the woman said, her demeanor changing to one of concern. "Were you a relative?"

"No, ma'am, just a friend," Megyn replied, not wanting to elaborate.

"O.k., just have a seat over there," she said, motioning to a small waiting area off to the left, "and I'll call back and see if Sam is available."

"Thanks." She sat down in the small waiting area and waited for the detective.

* * * * *

A few minutes later, Detective Sam Foster came around the corner and walked across the room, extending his hand towards Megyn. "I'm Detective Sam Foster."

"Megyn Keith," she replied, shaking his hand.

"I understand you have some information I might be interested in, concerning Alana Roberts' murder?"

"Yes, I believe I do."

"O.k., would you mind coming back to my desk so I can take down a formal statement?"

"No, not at all. It isn't much of a statement really – just this," she replied as she took the thumb drive out of her backpack and handed it to the detective.

"Wonderful. If you don't mind, though, I still need to ask you some questions."

"Not a problem."

Sam led the way back to his desk and motioned towards a metal chair with a cushioned seat that was adjacent to it. "Please, have a seat." He pulled a notepad out of a desk drawer and took a pen out of his pocket before he continued. "So, what's on this USB drive?"

"It looks like a research log that Alana was keeping on the project she was working on at Apex Labs, right before she died."

Sam's eyebrows shot up as he jotted down some notes. "And how did you get a hold of that?"

"I was helping the Roberts' clean out Alana's apartment, and I was in charge of cleaning up the office. When I checked out the drive and saw what was on it, I thought I should bring it to you right away."

Sam continued jotting down notes, apparently taking what she had said at face value. Megyn was relieved when he didn't press her further.

"So, why did you think it might have a bearing on the case?"

"Well, from what I can tell, she apparently discovered that a super strain of a deadly tree disease had been accidentally created because of the genetic modifications they were making on some trees for the project. She says her and some guy named Steven had a big fight about it, and that she finally convinced him to tell their boss, but she was murdered on the morning before they were supposed to have the meeting."

Sam opened a desk drawer and took out a small plastic evidence bag, opening it up and dropping the USB drive into it. He sealed the bag and jotted down some notes on the outside label. Then he took out a form from another drawer and put it on a clipboard, handing it to Megyn with a pen. "I need you to write down what you just said on this form, and then sign and date it at the bottom. Fill out the information on the top, as well, please."

"O.k.," Megyn said as she took the clipboard from him. She saw at the top of the form the words, 'Witness Statement'.

Sam picked up the receiver on his desk phone and punched in a number. "Billy, I need you to drop whatever you're doing and process a USB drive for me. I believe it contains some important evidence on the Roberts case... Yeah, I'll bring it to you right now...." He hung up the phone.

"Ms. Keith, please excuse me; I'll be right back. I have to run this down to our resident computer guy."

"No problem. I'll just finish this up."

"Thank you."

* * * * *

After Megyn had finished writing down her statement, Detective Foster walked her out to her car and gave her his card in case she found anything else that might pertain to the case. Once he was back inside the building, he headed down to the forensics lab to see if the results had come back yet from the blood and hair sample they had retrieved from the baseball bat.

The Longview P.D. forensics lab was a former records storage room that had been converted to a lab with the aid of a federal grant. They had been able to purchase a first-rate computer-integrated microscope, install a small firearms ballistics testing range, and add a few other pieces of forensic equipment that Sam wasn't all that

familiar with. Anything they couldn't handle they shipped off to the Washington State Patrol Forensic Lab.

Sharon Mathis was the Longview P.D.'s forensic expert, having been hired on about a year before as part of the grant program that had helped fund the creation of the small lab. She was about five years younger than Sam, a foot shorter than he was, and in addition to being the department's resident forensic expert, she was also the hand-to-hand combat instructor. He had made the mistake during his first training of whispering to a fellow officer that he hoped he didn't break her in half when it was his turn to demonstrate the take-down she was teaching them. That had been a mistake. She had overheard him, and instead of him getting to practice the take-down on her, she'd called him up and demonstrated the take-down on him. He'd ended up sprawled on the floor in front of all of his fellow officers – and everyone, including Sam, had had a good laugh. He had asked her out that next Friday night, and they had been dating steadily ever since.

When Sam entered the lab, Sharon was peering intently into a microscope. He knew Sharon didn't like to be disturbed when she was in the middle of an examination, so he patiently waited while she finished. After several more seconds, she finally looked up.

"Hey, Sam, what's up?"

"I was hoping to ask you the same thing."

"You must want the results from the Roberts case. Well, I have some good news... and some bad news."

"Let's have it."

"The good news is that we were able to pull a latent print off of the baseball bat. The bad news is that it doesn't match Jim Simble. I'm running it against known violent offenders in AFIS right now, but I don't have any hits yet. The blood and hair DNA samples aren't back from the WSP forensic lab, either."

Sam hung his head and stared at the floor momentarily. "Well, that isn't totally surprising based on some new evidence I just received. I guess we'll have to let Jim go

– for now, since we only have circumstantial evidence to tie him to the crime. Thanks for the update.”

“No problem.”

“Can you call me on my cell when you get anything back from WSP?”

“Sure can.”

“Thanks, Sharon.”

* * * * *

After processing the paperwork for Jim Simble’s release, Sam placed a call to the manager for Chic Fashions in Portland. “This is Detective Sam Foster. I’m working a case that may have involved someone who shops at your store, and I wondered if you could help me out.”

“What could I do to help?”

“Well, we need to know if anyone in the Longview, Washington area has made any purchases at your store – say... in the last six months?”

“O.k. To tell you the truth, this is the first time I’ve ever been asked about something like this. I’ll need to contact the owner to ask them if it’s o.k. to provide that information or not – and we won’t have anything on the cash purchases.

“Understood.”

“Can you email me an official request or something?”

“Sure, what’s your email address?” Sam jotted down the email address as the woman rattled it off. “O.k. I’ll send you a request right away. When do you think you might be able to get back to me?”

“Oh, I should be able to give you a reply by the end of the day.”

“Great, thanks for your help.”

After he had hung up the phone, Sam started walking towards Billy Sturgis’ office. If Billy was done with that USB drive and it had on it all that Megyn Keith had

claimed, Steven Hill was about to become the prime suspect in the murder of Alana Roberts.

Chapter Ten – The Devil in the Details

Wednesday, July 13th

By the time Sam arrived at Billy Sturgis' desk, Billy had already made a forensic copy of the thumb drive provided by Megyn Keith. A quick review of the research log entries confirmed that there was clearly a possible motive for Steven Hill to murder Alana Roberts. Sam was no computer expert by any means, so he started peppering Billy with questions about the files.

"So, how do we know that Megyn Keith didn't just type this file up herself in an effort to frame Steven Hill?"

"Good question. The fact that Ms. Keith provided the thumb drive does make it suspect. However, there are some things we can look at in order to get a pretty good idea who wrote the document."

"Do tell," Sam prodded.

"Well, this log file was created using a program called Microsoft Word..."

"O.k., o.k., I'm not *that* far out of the loop. I know what MS Word is."

"I'm not judging here," Billy replied with a smile. "It's just that I know you aren't the most tech-savvy guy in the department and I don't want to leave anything out."

"O.k., wise guy. Just keep talking, and I'll stop you if I need you to define any of the techie language."

"You're the boss. So, the last file edit date is prior to Alana's death. I can pull up the author of the document in the properties dialog of MS Word, which says the document was authored and last edited by Alana Roberts. Now, this could be faked by installing MS Word and putting Alana's information in during the installation process, so we can't prove anything by that alone. But if we find the computer on which this was written, there will be some temporary files that were stored on that computer containing some of the same information that's in this file. If she stored the file on her computer first, and then copied it to the USB drive, then we can match the digital

signature of the computer version to the one on the thumb drive and prove they are the same files. In either case, we can prove whether or not the file was created using Alana's personal computer. If so, that means it was highly likely that it was her that wrote it. If she had a password on the computer, then it's even more likely it was her – unless she's one of those people who shares her password with everyone."

"Is that the whole truth and nothing but?"

"Well, I left out some other techie things we can do to validate the file along with some of the finer points that we might need to mention in a court case, but those are the highlights."

"Alright. I need you to get Alana's personal computer, or computers, and work your magic to match the file, if you can, while I track down Steven Hill and Renae Davenport and bring them in for questioning."

"Will do, boss."

"You're a good man, Sturgis. There'll be a little something extra in your paycheck this month," Sam offered, smiling before he delivered the punch line, "...very little." As he left Billy's office, he had a good feeling that they were onto a solid lead. He couldn't wait to get Steven Hill in the interrogation room and see how he reacted under pressure.

* * * * *

The wind was blowing slightly as Megyn began her run along the woodland trail that started behind the Roberts' house. She needed to clear her head after delivering the thumb drive to the police, and a cross-country run was just the ticket.

In about a hundred yards the trail connected with a longer hiking route that was mentioned prominently in a local hiking brochure. It was a bitter-sweet experience, as she remembered running along this very same trail with Alana at least a dozen times when they'd been in college. Yet, she didn't push the thoughts away, but instead chose to let the run serve as the beginning of an emotional catharsis. She decided it would be

part of the healthy grieving process of mourning the loss, while celebrating the life of her friend and the times they'd shared together. She was determined not to let Alana's murderer steal the good times she and Alana had had in life, and in order to do that, she knew she had to work through and ultimately accept Alana's passing as part of life's larger plan.

Ten minutes into the run, the elevation began to rise and Megyn could feel the muscles in her legs begin to heat up. The breeze along with the shade provided by the trees made for perfect running conditions at 72 degrees Fahrenheit. In the distance, she saw a lone runner coming her way. As the runner came closer, she could tell it was a man. A sudden twinge of fear shot through her as she thought of Alana's killer – as yet uncaught, and likely a man, statistically speaking.

Her heart rate shot up in excess of what the run was requiring as the man neared, her body's fight or flight response kicking in. When he was within twenty feet or so, he looked up and nodded at Megyn as he continued down the trail, passing her without looking back. Megyn made more than one furtive glance over her shoulder to confirm he hadn't turned back around and started following her.

She tried to shake off the creepy feeling as she continued her ascent to the top of the hillock, then moved slightly down into the gap beyond. Something flashed into her view for just a second off to the right of the trail, and then was gone again. It was far enough away and had been exposed briefly enough that she wasn't sure if she had seen something or nothing at all. Then she heard a faint cry, "Stop! Please stop!"

It sounded like it was coming from the direction of the thing she had glimpsed in the forest. She stopped and took her cell phone out of her runner's armband case, quickly realizing that she had no cell phone coverage at this spot on the trail. The wind began to pick up, and she heard the words repeated, louder this time, "Stop! Please stop!" She saw movement in the thicket about ten yards away. For a second, she thought about running away, but remembering how Alana had died alone in the woods steeled her will to push forward.

As she came through the thicket, the figures before her took on full form. It was Alana, crawling backwards, her arm raised to ward off a blow from an advancing attacker who was covered in a hoodie and wielding a bat. Megyn froze, unable to move as the bat descended, hitting Alana's arm and glancing off of her head. As the bat hit home, Megyn's paralysis broke, and she lunged forward to stop the attack, yelling "No!" at the top of her lungs. But as she lunged, the images vanished once more, and she was left alone in the woods.

* * * * *

Detective Sam Foster escorted Steven Hill into the Longview P.D. interrogation room. As Steven moved around the end of the table to sit in the chair that Sam had indicated, he tripped and almost fell face-first onto the table. Fortunately for him, Sam was close enough to grab his arm and help save him from the nasty spill.

"You o.k.?" Sam asked after Steven had recovered his balance.

"Yes, thanks. It's these size twelve feet of mine. I'm always tripping on the furniture at my house. My wife says we should have a 'bigfoot' provision on our health insurance policy."

As they both took their seats, Sam took a few moments to evaluate Steven's demeanor. It was always interesting to see the before and after expression on someone's face during an interrogation – especially when they were about to be accused of murder. Sam had learned over the years that it was often his first instinctual response to this one-time reaction that would zero him in on the real perpetrator of a crime. It wasn't as easy as the television shows made it look for someone to feign shock and surprise at being accused of murder when they'd actually done it. There were tell-tale signs and missteps that seasoned detectives such as Sam could usually pick up on. This information couldn't be admitted as evidence in a court of law, but it could put him on the track of the real killer. Then, it was usually just a matter of time until he could find the proof he needed to bring a killer to justice.

Sam let Steven sit in the awkward silence on the other side of the table as he completed his patient observation in unbroken silence. He remained quiet long enough for the anticipated awkward feeling to kick in – a move that would have been taboo in a normal social encounter. Sam felt the awkwardness, and embraced it, waiting...

"I'm sorry," Steven said, finally breaking the silence himself, "are we waiting for someone else, or something?"

"You know, in our first interview, you failed to mention the fact that you and Alana had a meeting scheduled with your boss to tell her about a super-strain of *Armillaria* on the same day that she was murdered."

Steven's demeanor changed instantly. The blood drained from his face, the look of surprise obvious as he physically drew back while his eyes widened and his nostrils flared almost imperceptibly. "I... I..." he stammered, seemingly unable to form a complete sentence for several seconds. "How did you find out about that?"

"A little birdy gave me a thumb drive with all sorts of interesting information on it. We know about your argument with Alana, how you disagreed about when to tell your boss, all of it. You see, Alana was keeping a journal of everything – smart girl." Sam let his countenance turn menacing before he delivered his next line in the interrogation drama, leaning forward for effect. "It's awfully convenient that she died before that meeting took place, isn't it, Steven?"

"I... I... I didn't kill her, if that's what you're implying."

"I wonder what your boss is going to say when I tell her about this. Have you told her, Steven, that your project could be an ecological time-bomb waiting to happen?"

"I'm not sure that's relevant to the topic of Alana's death... Do you..." he took a deep breath before continuing, "...does Mrs. Davenport know about this?"

Sam sat back, content that he had Steven on the psychological ropes. He had just solidified a possible motive for Steven to murder Alana Roberts. Steven obviously hadn't had that meeting, and so he had benefited from Alana's death, but had he killed

her or did he know who had? Sam pressed the attack. "Where were you on Thursday, July 7th between 6 and 10 a.m.?"

"Oh no. You *do* think I killed her... I... I was, ah... I normally leave for work at 6:30. I punched in with security at around 7:00 a.m. I was at work for the rest of the day."

"Can anyone verify that you left your house at 6:30 a.m. that morning?"

"Ahh... my wife wasn't up when I left. She normally gets up at 7:00."

"So you could have left before then, driven to the trail that you knew Alana frequently ran on, murdered her, and gone back to work at your normal time, all without anyone being the wiser."

"What?! I... I... I want a lawyer, right now!" Steven leaned back, running his hands through what little hair remained on his head, his eyes filled with fear.

This could definitely be our guy, Sam thought to himself.

Chapter Eleven – A Costly Error

Renae Davenport arrived at the Longview police station a full fifteen minutes before she was scheduled for her interview with Detective Foster. She hated it when people were late to meetings that she scheduled, and so she made a point to be prompt for others. The clerk at the front desk had shown her into the interrogation room after calling Sam to let him know that she had arrived.

Mrs. Davenport appeared calm, Sam noted when he entered the room. She greeted him briskly, but not in an unfriendly manner, as he shook her hand and sat down on the opposite side of the table. As was his manner, he stared at her for several seconds, not saying anything. Unlike most people that he interviewed, she didn't show any signs of registering the silence as being awkward. Rather, she tilted her head slightly and smiled faintly, her interest apparently piqued by the tactic.

"So, I'm not here simply to provide additional information. I'm suspected of being somehow involved in Alana's murder, aren't I?"

This time, it was Sam's face that registered surprise. "And why do you ask that?"

"You were studying my face, my posture, getting a baseline before you ask me the bombshell question, so you can gauge my reaction and try to determine if I'm covering something up or not. Correct?"

"You're a sharp lady."

"I didn't get to where I am by being naive, detective. So, let's have it. What do you want to ask me?"

Sam nodded his head up and down, and couldn't help smiling just a bit. He liked this lady's brass. "O.k. Were you aware that Alana Roberts and Steven Hill had discovered a super-strain of Armillaria that may have been created as a result of the project they were jointly working on?"

The effect of Sam's question was immediate. Renae's countenance changed from one of somewhat relaxed amusement to one of thinly veiled anger. "No. Steven

neglected to mention that to me,” she said, her jaw clenching. “How, may I ask, did you come by this information? Did Steven tell you?” Sam thought that it would be an unpleasant experience indeed to be one of Mrs. Davenport’s employees and on the opposite side of the table from her just now.

“I’m sorry, I can’t reveal that right now. If there has been a new super-strain of Armillaria created, how would that impact your project?”

Renae remained steely-eyed and unmoving. Sam thought that she appeared somewhat like a snake, waiting to strike. “Depending on a variety of factors, it could be a simple nuisance, or it could cause us to have to scrap the entire project.”

“And what kind of financial impact would that have if you had to scrap the entire project?”

“It could easily cost us millions in losses,” she answered gravely.

Sam nodded his head up and down slowly. If she had known about the Armillaria outbreak, Renae would have had a motive for murder. If Alana had threatened to go public – and there was no evidence of that – then she would have been a multi-million dollar threat. With her out of the way and a compliant Steven Hill, they could have covered up the outbreak and eventually brought their product to market, saving the company millions. However, based on her reaction just now, Sam didn’t think she had known about the outbreak. On the other hand, Steven *had* known about it. He could possibly have lost his job over the incident if he had had that meeting with Renae and Alana on the day of Alana’s murder. And judging from the look in Mrs. Davenport’s eyes right now, Sam guessed that Steven Hill had likely worked his last day at Apex Labs, Inc. even if he hadn’t murdered Alana Roberts. Unfortunate for Steven, but not Sam’s problem. He had a murder to solve, and it was increasingly looking like Steven Hill was the murderer.

“Oh, by the way, do you ever shop at a store called Chic Fashions, in Portland?”

“Yes. What does that have to do with Alana’s murder?” Renae answered impatiently.

“Probably nothing, but we have to follow up on every lead. You’re free to go, Mrs. Davenport. Can you find your way out? I need to finish making my notes on our interview while everything is fresh in my mind.”

Sam looked back down at his notepad and busied himself with making notes, waiting for Renae to leave. Once she was gone, he took out his phone and dialed Sharon Mathis. “Sharon, this is Sam. Can you come up to the interrogation room and pull some prints off of the inside doorknob?”

* * * * *

After interviewing Renae Davenport, Sam got a warrant to search Steven Hill’s home and car. Neither Steven Hill nor his wife Caprica were home when he and Officer Walden arrived. When no one answered the doorbell and they found that the front door was locked, Sam went around back and tried the sliding glass door just in case. He had discovered over the years that one habit people often had in smaller communities was that they weren’t generally as vigilant as city dwellers in keeping all of their doors locked. He smiled as the door slid open, and then they spent the next two hours going over the Hills’ home with a fine-toothed comb. Johnny found a pair of muddy boots in Steven’s garage and bagged them up for analysis while Sam was searching other parts of the house, but besides the boots, they found nothing else in the way of potential evidence.

Neither of the Hills had arrived back at the house before they finished their search, so they left the home, being careful to leave everything in place so as not to alert anyone that they had ever been there. Sam wanted to keep them in the dark as long as possible. He drove by Apex Labs to see if Steven’s car was there, but found that he hadn’t returned to work once his interview had been completed at the police station.

Later that night, as Sam drove home, he had a contented feeling. Since finding the muddy boots in Steven’s garage, he was almost certain Steven was their guy. All he needed, in his mind, was a forensic match between the boots found in Steven’s garage

and the boot mold made at the scene of the crime, and the case would be as good as closed. It would be nice to get a fingerprint match, too. They hadn't had enough evidence at the time of Steven's interrogation to arrest him, so they'd had to let him go, but Sam *had* offered him a cup of coffee. Said cup was now sitting in Sharon's office awaiting fingerprint analysis. With any luck, by the time he got to the office tomorrow morning, they would have a match on Steven's fingerprints against the one pulled from the murder weapon.

* * * * *

Thursday, July 14th

The sweat dripped from her face as Megyn sat up abruptly, having just awoken from a nightmare. It had been the same as the vision she'd had the day before of Alana's murder. She turned to the nightstand beside her bed to see what time it was and saw the green pendant glowing brightly. Could the pendant have caused her dream? She wondered.

It was 6:30 a.m., so there was no reason to try and go back to sleep. Besides, she had a strong urge to go to the site where Alana had been murdered. Although she didn't even know where it was, she somehow felt it was very important that she go there right away. She slipped on some sweatpants and sneakers, then grabbed the pendant along with her keys and purse before quietly tiptoeing downstairs and out the front door.

As she pulled her car to the end of the driveway, she paused, wondering if somehow the same force that had guided her to the lost boy a few days before would guide her now.

In mere moments she had a strong desire to turn right, and so she began, following some supernatural GPS to what she believed would be the crime scene of her best friend's murder.

Chapter Twelve – Piecing Together the Puzzle

7:00 a.m. Thursday morning

Megyn pulled her car off of the road into the parking area not far from Apex Labs. The wood-chip covered lot had been culled out of the forest by local volunteers for the use of people who hiked on the trail. It had space for about four cars, and a small placard marking the beginning of the trail that pictured a stick-figure hiker with a walking stick. Megyn locked her car doors and unconsciously caressed the pendant as she approached the trailhead marker.

* * * * *

Caprica Hill drove towards Apex Labs, fuming. How could that witch Renae Davenport fire Steven like that? He was the most brilliant researcher working for that lousy company. They would probably sink without him. Steven had been overcome with anxiety after he had been interrogated by the police the previous day, getting drunk at a local bar and not even bothering to go back to the office. Once he had arrived home, he'd told her the whole story. He'd kept going on and on about how Alana had been keeping some secret log on a thumb drive, and that someone had found it and turned it over to the cops. Then Renae had come over at about 9:00 p.m. and asked to speak to Steven alone. They'd gone into the study, but Caprica had stayed just outside the door, listening to every word.

"Is it true, Steven, that there has been an outbreak of *Armillaria* in the test groups?"

"Yes," Steven responded weakly.

"And just when were you going to tell me about it?" Renae demanded.

"That meeting we had scheduled the day Alana was murdered. We were going to tell you then... but then when she didn't show up and we discovered she was murdered... I guess I just forgot to re-schedule the meeting afterwards."

"That's not something you forget, Steven. It's been a week today since she was murdered. You've been covering it up."

"I... I'm sorry, o.k.? I've been under a lot of stress with the murder, the extra workload now that Alana is gone, and now the police interrogating me..."

"I hope you didn't go and murder that poor girl just to save your own job, Steven."

"I didn't do it!" Steven protested.

"Well, I'm sure the police will discover it if you did. In either case, you're fired. You can come by tomorrow morning and pick up your personal belongings at the guard desk."

Caprica had continued to stand just outside of the study door, too stunned to move by what she had just heard as Renae Davenport stormed out of the office. She'd walked directly in front of Caprica and out the front door of their house without saying another word.

Later that night, Steven had taken a tranquilizer to go to sleep, and he hadn't been in any shape to go pick up his things this morning. Caprica clenched the steering wheel as she thought about how unfair it all was. Steven was taking the blame for what was likely Alana's mistake, or the mistake of one of those other lame-brained lab rats that Apex had hired to help Steven. That's what it was; his brilliance had been sabotaged by the incompetence of those weak-minded stooges that Apex Labs had surrounded him with.

She passed the parking area of the hiking trail where Megyn had just parked her car, catching a glimpse of Megyn walking towards the trailhead. Caprica was so absorbed in her thoughts that it took her brain several seconds to realize who she had just seen.

“...the thumb drive,” she said out loud as she continued to drive. She recalled walking by Alana’s office door while they’d been cleaning out her apartment after the murder and seeing Megyn put a thumb drive into her pocket. Caprica clenched her teeth. “It was her!” she seethed.

She slammed on the brakes and executed a hasty three-point turn, then hit the gas, tires squealing, as she headed back to the hiking trail where she had just seen Megyn. *She’s going to be sorry she ever put her grimy little paws on that thumb drive*, Caprica thought to herself as she got out of the car and slammed the door.

* * * * *

One hour earlier...

Sam opened up his email client and began reading through his daily allotment of incoming mail. The first message was concerning the department charity fish fry next Saturday. The second message was from someone he didn’t know, but the subject line read, “Client list you requested”. He opened it up and read it.

Detective Foster,

Here is the list of clients from your area that have purchased something during the past six months at our store (Not including cash purchases, of course):

Ellie Macnamara

Julie Bloom

Ray Stephano

Renae Davenport

Kelly Garcia

Mauricia Jones

Caprica Hill

I hope this helps.

Regards,

Alicia Jones

Manager – Chic Fashions

Interesting, Sam thought to himself. Besides Renae Davenport and Caprica Hill, he didn't know anyone else from the list. The paper with Chic Fashion's name on it could have been dislodged from some of Mrs. Hill's clothing in the wash and ended up clinging to something Steven wore, then fallen off during the attack at the murder site. Certainly not a signed confession, but it's another piece of circumstantial evidence that puts him in a small circle of suspects yet again.

He clicked on the next email, which was from Sharon.

Bad news - neither Steven nor Renae's fingerprints match the latent print we recovered from the murder weapon. Good news – the boots match the imprint from the murder site, so it looks like Steven Hill is your man. Congratulations. His feet are small for such a tall man, though – size 8 for a guy his size? Just sayin'. How about you take me out to dinner tomorrow night and celebrate?

Sharon.

Sam stared at the email, his mind racing. That didn't make sense. Steven had said his feet were size twelve in the interrogation room after he'd tripped on the table leg. Sam had even glanced down at his shoes once he'd mentioned it, so Sharon's email didn't compute... unless those weren't Steven's boots! He dialed Officer Johnny Walden as he walked briskly down the hallway to his car.

"Johnny, it wasn't Steven – it was his wife!"

"What? But the boots? I thought..."

"Yeah, me too, but the boots are size 8. Steven is a size 12."

"Son of a gun...."

"Meet me out at the Hills' house. No sirens, though; I don't want to spook her."

"Will do. I'll see you there."

* * * * *

6:40 a.m.

A groggy Steven Hill answered the door just as Sam was considering busting it down with the small battering ram that Johnny kept in the trunk of his cruiser.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Steven asked sleepily.

"We need to speak with your wife."

"What for?"

"We need to ask her some questions related to Alana Roberts' murder."

"O.k... I'll go get her," he said with some reservation.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to come in Mr. Hill. Please step aside."

"But don't you need a warrant to do that?"

"We have probable cause, Mr. Hill – now step aside or I'll have to arrest you for obstruction."

"O.k., o.k.," Steven said as he opened the door and motioned for them to come in.

"Where is she?" Sam pressed.

"I... I don't know. I think she's still asleep, or she's already left for Apex Labs to pick up my things."

"Johnny, check the bedroom," Sam ordered.

"I'm on it," Johnny responded as he jogged down the hall.

"It's the second door on the right," Steven called as Officer Walden went down the hall. "We sleep in separate rooms because I snore so loudly," he added sheepishly.

Sam busied himself with walking through the remaining rooms of the house, looking for Caprica. "Mrs. Hill? It's the police. We need to speak with you."

"Nobody in the bedrooms or bathrooms," Johnny called out as he came back down the hallway.

After Sam and Johnny had finished searching the house, Sam checked the garage and saw one empty space. He came back inside to where Steven was standing in his bathrobe, arms crossed, looking upset.

"Just what is so important that you search my house like this looking for my wife?"

"You don't know whether your wife was actually here last Thursday morning when you left for work, do you?" Sam asked forcefully.

"Well... no, not really. But where else..? Where else..?" He paused as he put the pieces together. "You think she murdered Alana," he said, his eyes widening in surprise as the thought came to him.

"You said she was going to Apex Labs this morning. Why is that?" Officer Walden asked.

"She's picking up my things. Renae Davenport fired me last night," he said somewhat accusatorily, looking at Sam.

"Johnny, you stay here with Steven, in case she comes back. I'll head over to Apex Labs."

"O.k., you want me to call in an A.P.B. on her?"

"Yeah, do that for me, will you?"

"No problem."

Sam bolted out the door, jumped into his car, and headed towards Apex Labs. He drove just over the speed limit, but without his flashing lights. Caprica didn't know they were onto her yet, so it would be better if he didn't give her any advance warning that she'd been discovered.

Chapter Thirteen – The Truth Revealed

It took Megyn fifteen minutes to hike from the trailhead to the site of Alana's murder. Even though the police tape was gone now, she could feel that she was getting close. The pendant started glowing more brightly as she rounded the final bend in the trail before she reached the location of the murder.

Suddenly, an apparition of Alana and a hooded figure appeared before her eyes. Megyn froze as she saw Alana backing away, her hand upraised to ward off the first blow, which was quickly followed by two more blows from the bat. Megyn put her hand to her mouth and shed silent tears as the scene played out before her. She wanted to do something to stop it, but she knew it was too late for that. Instead, she tried to focus on any details that might help police identify the attacker, whose face she still couldn't see. Then, once the deed had been done, the attacker turned around to leave, the killer's face still frozen in a mask of rage. Megyn inhaled sharply as she recognized the face of Caprica Hill.

The vision was interrupted as Megyn heard a voice from behind her. "You and your friend have been causing all sorts of trouble."

Megyn turned around to see Caprica Hill standing not ten feet away from her. "Why did you murder her?!" Megyn blurted out angrily. "Was it to keep the Armillaria outbreak a secret? Was that it?" she continued.

Caprica's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "So you figured it out. Smart girl. Too smart," she said as her countenance turned from a sneer to one of malicious anger. "Steven had developed a breakthrough genetic modification that was going to make us all rich. He would get a big promotion, maybe even become the head of Apex Labs one day, but that little whore was going to ruin it all by complaining to Renae about some little Armillaria problem. She had to be stopped."

As Caprica talked, she had brought her right hand out from behind her back, revealing a tire iron. The anger Megyn had initially felt towards her friend's killer was now tempered by a healthy concern for her own safety. Caprica started advancing

towards Megyn with a wild look in her eyes. Megyn wondered if she could keep Caprica talking and delay her long enough that someone else might come along the trail, or if she should just turn and run right now. Neither of them noticed the wind beginning to blow through the trees and the plants surrounding them starting to sway slowly back and forth in some preternatural fashion.

"Look, Steven's a smart guy, like you said. I'm sure he'll be able to fix whatever's wrong with the project. It could still work out o.k.," Megyn offered, trying to sound calm and reassuring.

"He was fired last night, you little tramp, and all because of you! You gave the police that thumb drive, didn't you?!" Caprica poked the tire iron in Megyn's direction as she spoke.

Megyn slowly began backing up, preparing to turn and run, when she tripped over a root and fell backwards. As she hit the ground, she could hear Caprica laughing. "That's almost the same thing that happened to Alana, only I was the one who tripped her, and now you're gonna die the same way!"

Megyn was scrambling as Caprica spoke, trying to get her footing to spin around and run, but Caprica was already running towards her with the tire iron raised over her head and closing fast, a maniacal look on her face. Just as Caprica was almost close enough to strike, a vine that was growing up a nearby tree shot out like a whip, grabbing the surprised Caprica, wrapping around her like a snake and slamming her head into a nearby tree. Megyn could hear the cracking sound of Caprica's skull impacting the trunk of the tree. Then, as soon as the vine had finished its gruesome task, it released her limp body, which fell motionless at Megyn's feet on the trail, still holding the tire iron.

During the whole event, the pendant around Megyn's neck had been glowing so brightly it almost looked white instead of green. Once Caprica lay unmoving, the glowing subsided once more.

Sam Foster stood, gun drawn but motionless, about twenty-five feet away on the trail. He had rounded the corner just as Caprica was charging Megyn, drawing his gun

and getting ready to fire when the vine had grabbed Caprica and ended her charge. Megyn looked up and saw him for the first time, her eyes as wide as his at what they had both just witnessed.

Coming back to his senses, his gun still trained on Caprica, Sam hurried forward and bent down, tossing the tire iron a safe distance away from the body – just in case. He extended two fingers to the body and checked Caprica’s neck for a pulse. When he didn’t find one, he slowly put his gun back in his holster and stood up.

“Is she...?” Alana began to ask.

“Dead? Yeah, she’s dead. Are you o.k.?” he asked, looking at Megyn.

“Yeah... I am....”

“What just happened?” Sam asked, still bewildered by what he had seen.

Megyn looked down at the pendant hanging around her neck, and then held it slightly away from her body as she looked up at Sam. “I... think this had something to do with it.”

Sam looked at the stone, then at Caprica, and finally at the vine that was now hanging motionless from the tree – just as it had been before the whole incident had begun. “Nobody is going to believe what happened here,” he muttered.

He looked around at the scene for a few more minutes, neither of them speaking. Finally, Megyn asked, “What are you going to say happened?”

Sam scratched his chin as he continued to think about a logical way to explain Caprica’s death. There was no way he could write up a report detailing the truth of what he had witnessed. They would have his badge and send him to a shrink for sure. Finally, it came to him. “Look at me,” he said. He waited until Megyn’s eyes were focused on him before he continued. “She charged you, she tripped on a root, the she fell to the ground, and hit her head. That’s all you say. Got it?”

Megyn slowly nodded her head up and down.

“Repeat what I just said,” Sam commanded her.

“She charged me, tripped on a root, and hit her head when she fell,” she responded dutifully.

“Great. Don’t say anything more than that about how she died.”

* * * * *

It seemed like an eternity before the other law enforcement personnel arrived. They took Megyn’s statement and then headed into the forest to process the second murder scene in the same location in less than a week. Of course, they didn’t know it was murder. They’d been told Caprica had tripped while rushing headlong to bash Megyn’s brains out. But Megyn knew the truth. In her mind, at least, it had been murder.

As she struggled to reconcile the feeling of being grateful for being alive with the feeling that she had somehow contributed to Caprica’s death by the powers of the Testament Stone, she drove to the cemetery where Alana was buried. She stood before the grave marker for several minutes before she spoke.

“I wanted to let you know that your killer was caught. I guess somehow this pendant had something to do with that. The way the vines came alive and grabbed her, then slammed her into that tree....” She drew in a sharp breath. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes and she shook her head. “I, ah... I just don’t know about this. I mean, if those vines hadn’t stopped her, then I’d probably be dead... but couldn’t they have just stopped her and not killed her?”

There was no answer. There were no thoughts floating around in her head, attempting to provide the information she sought. There was only silence. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a man’s form dart between the trees to her left. By the time her mind registered what she thought it was and she’d turned to look, whatever it had been was gone, and in its place stood a magnificent and majestic looking gray wolf. His piercing eyes stared straight at her, unblinking. Megyn’s hand moved to hold the pendant, and it began to glow. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the great wolf turned and ran into the nearby forest without making a sound.

* * * * *

When Megyn arrived back at the Roberts' home, she was greeted by Big Jake, Maya, Tom, and even Jack. Detective Foster had called the Roberts to tell them that Alana's killer had been caught, and that she had been killed while trying to attack Megyn. They had all gathered at the house to meet her when she came back from the murder site and had been about to send out a search party when she finally drove up.

She told them the story that she and Detective Foster had agreed to, but a knowing look from Maya told her that she, at least, wasn't buying it. Megyn stayed downstairs and had dinner with everyone to let them know that she was o.k. – which she wasn't – but she excused herself as soon as she felt she could without being rude, anxious to go upstairs.

Once upstairs, she made a beeline for Alana's room, took the journal of Alana's adventures as the bearer of the Testament Stone off of the bookshelf, and then went and locked herself in her room for the rest of the evening. She started at the beginning of the journal, intent on reading it straight through. As she read, she began to learn of the many powers that Alana had discovered the pendant possessed, and about how she had learned to use them during her adventures. One passage, in particular, stuck out to her as she thought about the day's events:

...I have discovered that the Testament Stone is raw power and that it executes absolute justice that can be – must be – tempered by the conscience of the person who wields its power. If left un-checked, it seems to mete out some type of harsh frontier justice that is devoid of mercy. I'm learning to hold it back and let my own judgement about how its power should be used prevail over this innate tendency towards retribution. It seems to favor an 'eye for an eye' approach if left to its own designs.

Further along in the journal, she read about Alana's own encounter with the shadowy figure she had seen earlier in the day, and the gray wolf:

I saw the stranger with the wolf again today. He seems to show up after every adventure where I use the power of the Testament Stone. I wonder who he is and what his intentions are. I have determined that, the next time I see him, I will use the powers of the Testament Stone to track him down and find out. There has to be some connection and, good or bad, I need to know who he is – friend or foe.

Weary from the day's events, Alana closed the journal without finishing it, placing it reverently on the bedside table. She was just beginning to realize how much she had to learn as she laid her head down on the pillow, not even bothering to undress before she fell asleep.

Chapter Fourteen – Headed Home

When Megyn woke up the next day, she began packing for her trip back to Charleston. After talking it over with Chief Kiona and Maya, they had all been in agreement that Megyn would keep the pendant for a while, on a trial basis, even though that meant it would be going with her back to Charleston. She wasn't sure she was ready for such a big responsibility, but she felt it would somehow be wrong to make no attempt to harness the Testament Stone's power for good when there was already so much evil in the world. Reading the stories from Alana's journal about all the good she had been able to accomplish by utilizing the Testament Stone's powers had helped convince her to take the plunge. *One day at a time*, she told herself, *just take it one day at a time and see how it goes*.

Maya had fixed a feast of a breakfast as a going-away treat, and invited Jack over in addition to the Roberts' clan. The spread on the table as Megyn sat down to eat was something to behold. Homemade blueberry waffles, maple syrup, eggs over-easy, deer sausage links, creamy oatmeal with butter and brown sugar, a bowl of strawberries, and freshly squeezed orange juice to top it all off.

When the meal was over, everyone walked her to the door where her packed bags were waiting. She picked up Alana's journal, which she had placed on top of her bags so that she wouldn't forget to ask, and turned to Maya.

"Maya, I know this is a lot to ask, but I wondered if I could borrow Alana's journal? I didn't get a chance to finish reading it, and since I've decided to keep the pendant for a while, it would really help me with the learning curve about how to use it."

Maya smiled. "Of course, you can keep it for as long as you need it. I look forward to hearing some stories of your own before too long." She leaned in close to give Megyn a hug and whispered in her ear so that the others couldn't hear, "And the story about what *really* happened in the woods yesterday, too."

Megyn smiled as they drew apart. "Thanks. Thanks very much."

Jake and Tom each gave her a hug as Jack picked up her bags. "I'll carry these out to the car for you."

"Thanks, Jack," she replied.

She popped the trunk of the rental car, and Jack deposited the bags inside. "Listen," he said after he shut the trunk, "I'm glad you didn't get hurt yesterday."

"Me, too," Megyn laughed.

"I know we talked about getting together and catching up, and with everything that's happened this week, we didn't get a chance to do that."

"I know, I'm sorry. It's just been a crazy week."

"Yeah, I know. But I still want to catch up. Can I call you sometime?"

"Yeah, sure," Megyn responded. "What's your number – I'll text you?" Megyn took out her phone and typed in Jack's number as he rattled it off, firing off a quick 'Here's my number' text before putting her phone back in her pocket. "There you go. It'd be good to catch up."

"Take care of yourself," Jack said as he stepped forward and gave her a goodbye hug. She smelled his cologne as she hugged him back. She had forgotten how good he smelled. After the hug, she got in her car and began the trek down the long driveway toward the main road. Glancing up, she noticed that Jack was still standing right where they had said goodbye, and he was watching her. Her cheeks flush slightly, and she immediately felt guilty. *He's your best friend's boyfriend... or was. Just calm down,* she chided herself. *He's just missing Alana, and you remind him of her, that's all.* Pushing the incident out of her mind, she pulled onto the asphalt and drove toward the airport.

* * * * *

On the way to the airport, Megyn's phone rang. She picked up the call and put it on speaker so she could drive hands-free. "Hello?"

"Megyn?" queried the voice on the other end.

She thought she recognized the voice, but wasn't 100% sure. "Yes?" she replied.

"It's Detective Foster, from the Longview P.D."

"Oh, o.k. Hello. Did you need something from me? I'm headed toward the airport right now."

"No, nothing like that. I just wanted to call and let you know that we matched the fingerprint on the murder weapon to Caprica Hill. She's definitely the one who killed Alana. I thought you would want to know."

Megyn didn't answer immediately. Her thoughts went back to the violent way that Caprica had met her end, and then the vision she had seen of how Alana herself had been murdered flashed through her mind. It was strange. Even though Caprica had murdered her best friend in such a brutal way, Megyn still felt a little guilty that she herself was partly the reason Caprica was now dead, too. *I suppose that's what makes most of us different from psychopaths like Caprica*, she thought to herself. *The sane people don't like killing, even when it's justified.*

"You still there?" Sam asked.

"No... I mean, yes. I'm sorry. I really appreciate you calling to tell me that. It means a lot."

"I figured it would. Listen, you aren't to blame for what happened out there. What happened to Caprica was her own doing. She sowed some bad seed and it came back on her. That's all. Understand?"

"Thanks, Detective Foster. I mean that."

"You're welcome. Have a safe trip home."

* * * * *

After returning the rental car and checking through security at the airport, Megyn stopped by one of the gift shops and bought a journal for herself. She made it to the gate about thirty minutes before the flight was scheduled to board, so she took Alana's journal out and opened up to where she had left off the night before to continue reading.

There are times I feel this pendant around my neck is a huge weight, and the responsibility seems too great for me to carry. Sometimes I feel responsible for anything bad that happens in our community because I wasn't there to help stop it – like I could have somehow predicted just where I needed to be and when to prevent any tragedy from happening to the people in our community. I'm feeling a little bit of this right now. A boy died today in a car wreck. I knew his mom. I felt that if I'd only been there, maybe I could have stopped it.

I think someone else knew I would be feeling this today. Our pastor read a verse from Isaiah on Sunday, from chapter 41 verse 4: 'Who has prepared and done this, calling forth and guiding the destinies of the generations of the nations from the beginning? I, the Lord... I am he.'

I need to remember that I'm not the one who is in control of everything. I'm just a human trying to do the best I know how with the abilities that I have. If someone gave me this pendant to help people, then they also knew I'm only human, and I couldn't save the world on my own. I'm just going to have to have faith that there is a bigger plan and that someone out there is guiding my steps, too, just like that verse says.

"Now boarding passengers in group one..." Megyn heard the attendant announce from her gate. She quickly closed the journal and shoved it into her backpack before getting in line behind the other passengers who were starting to line up to get on the plane. After she boarded the plane and finished putting her suitcase in the overhead bin, she sat down in her seat next to the window.

She didn't notice the man who passed by in the aisle and sat down several rows behind her. She probably wouldn't have recognized Antoine, the Cowlitz Chief's son, if she had looked right at him. He had taken great care to prevent that possibility by donning a hat and sunglasses and making sure not to look at Megyn as he passed by

where she was seated. The pendant hanging around Megyn's neck began to glow slightly.

* * * * *

As the plane reached cruising altitude, Megyn took out the new journal she had purchased in the gift shop and opened up to the first blank page. She wrote down the date and then stared at the page for a minute, thinking about what she wanted to say before she began to write.

Through a strange set of circumstances, I am now the bearer of the Testament Stone – a pendant with strange and wonderful powers that I have only begun to understand. I have so much to write about what has happened in the past week that it will be pages and pages before I'm done. I'm not sure how this story will end, but I am certain of one thing – this is going to be one great adventure...

TO BE CONTINUED...

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The Seer – chapter 1

Waves crashed against the rocks in a deafening chorus of nature's fury as the sea lashed the Tillamook Lighthouse mercilessly. The storm had been in full force for about an hour now and Dan Moses was hoping the generator house wouldn't get flooded

again. Occasionally, one of the really big waves would hit and he'd feel the vibrations from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.

He had retreated to the main keeper's quarters where he sat in his favorite chair, waiting out the tempest that raged outside. He'd given up on reading, which was what he usually did to wait out the lesser storms that frequented the area. As the next big wave hit and he felt the ground beneath him shake, he remembered one of the stories he had read about in the history of the lighthouse, from the great storm of 1934. During that storm, the lighthouse had been repeatedly submerged by the onslaught of waves. Sixty-pound boulders had been spewed forth from the ocean and crashed through the roof of the lighthouse. The watch room had been repeatedly flooded, the water rising up to the necks of the watchmen before finally draining out of the entrance door to the tower below them. They had been unable to leave the tower for the duration of the storm, which had lasted four days. Dan hoped this storm wouldn't escalate to that level. At almost sixty, he was getting too old for this.

Suddenly the violent assault of the waves ceased. The wind continued to howl as it forced its way around the buildings and he could hear the rain falling, but not a single wave could be heard hitting the shore or crashing into the lighthouse tower. Dan opened his eyes and sat up straight. He sensed a presence he hadn't felt in decades and he was instantly afraid. Seconds before he would have laughed at the idea that there was another living soul on this island besides himself. Now he was just as certain that he was no longer alone. He strained to hear anything that might indicate where his visitor could be.

Dan slowly pushed himself up from his chair and backed up against the wall, looking from side to side as he did so. He startled himself as his back touched the wall and then exhaled in relief when he realized what he had done. When a knock came at the door, he snapped to attention once more.

Slowly crossing the room, he drew back the bolt on the door. He reached down and grasped the door handle. As he briefly closed his eyes, he inhaled and exhaled

slowly to brace himself for what he was about to encounter. Reluctantly, but with finality, he opened his eyes and turned the door knob.

Before he could open the door of his own accord, the wind blew it open, hurling him back onto the floor. As he turned back towards the door, the lightning flashed in the distance, illuminating a hulking figure as it crossed the threshold and took a step towards where he lay. He brought an arm up defensively as he let out a startled cry, but the figure advanced no further. Instead, a large hand reached down and took hold of his own, effortlessly pulling him to his feet.

Dan stood and stared at the figure before him, unsure of what was going to happen next. It was the Keeper, just as he had suspected. Their first encounter had been a violent one that Dan wasn't anxious to repeat. He stared at the Keeper's face unblinkingly and waited.

The Keeper held Dan's hand and stared back at him. At six foot seven, with shoulders wide enough to fill the largest of doorways, the Keeper towered over Dan. He was bald on the top of his head, with a white, closely cropped beard covering his face. His visage was stern-looking and his eyes were crystal blue. As the Keeper held his gaze, Dan suddenly felt as if this being could peer into his very soul. He felt naked, terrified, and mesmerized all at the same time, unable to look away.

After several seconds, Dan found the courage to speak.

"Why are you here?"

"Another Seer has been chosen," came the reply. The Keeper's voice was just as he had remembered it. Commanding, firm, with a strange and other-worldly accent that he had never heard before anywhere else.

The Keeper turned and shut the door, locking the bolt in place. He turned back around and gently guided Dan back to the chair he had been sitting in previously and motioned for him to sit down.

"He will come to you seeking answers. Tell him what you know."

"When... when will he come?"

"Soon."

"What is his mission?" Dan asked.

"That is not your concern."

"How will I know him?"

"He will tell you that he has seen me."

As he thought back over the moment days later, Dan wasn't quite certain what happened next. The only thing he knew for sure was that the Keeper was suddenly gone and the storm had returned in all of its fury. In the days following the storm, he wondered who the new Seer was and what he had been chosen to do.

* * * * *

The pictures spread out before him on the table were proof enough. Susan was cheating on him. A younger man, some would say handsome, was holding his wife the same way he'd used to hold her not so long ago. He should have seen this coming. But a drug dealer? Really, she should have been more discreet. He glanced up at the detective sitting across from him, wondering what was going through his mind.

"So, how much is she spending on the drugs every week?" he said, trying to direct the conversation away from the embarrassing photos.

"About a grand from what I can tell," the detective replied.

"What is it?"

"The drug?"

"Yeah, the drug."

"Cocaine."

They had used cocaine recreationally at parties in the past, but they had never been regular users. Now, apparently, cocaine had become Susan's go-to entertainment and emotional pain killer.

"You know," he said rhetorically, "she says my job is my second wife. I guess I should have seen this coming."

The detective remained silent.

When he'd hired a private investigator to find out just how bad her drug habit really was, he hadn't expected to find that another man was sleeping with his wife. His original plan was for a sort of intervention. He would confront her with the evidence, and give her an ultimatum to clean up. But that was before. Now this other man had to be dealt with first.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Twenty-five hundred."

He paid the private investigator for his services and waited for him to leave, and then he took out his cell phone and speed-dialed the man who would help him handle this little situation.

Samuel J. Pendleton had not risen to his present height of power by sheer business acumen. One of his early risks had been to tap in to the lucrative world of money laundering. In the process of building up his list of clientele for these services he had become acquainted with numerous influential members of the criminal community. None of these was more influential than Martin "the Hammer" Scalini. He waited as the phone rang for the third time. The man who answered the call spoke in a crisp, high-pitched voice and reminded Samuel of the florist he frequently spoke to when he wanted to send flowers to his mistress.

"Mr. Scalini's office, how can I help you?"

"Bobby, this is Samuel Pendleton. I need to speak to Martin."

"One moment please."

Samuel waited on hold for about thirty seconds before hearing Martin's deep voice come on the line.

"Sammy! How's the world of high finance treating you these days? No problems with any of my interests, I hope."

"No, everything is fine, Martin. This is actually a personal call. I have a delicate situation that needs handling and I was wondering if you might recommend someone who could help me out..."

After Samuel hung up the phone a few minutes later, he smiled and sat back in his chair. It was nice to have such influential and discreet business associates. He contemplated this fact with satisfaction for a few moments before leaning forward and beginning to gather the pertinent information. The photographs showing Susan and her lover must, unfortunately, be included. It would be less embarrassing if there were some pictures with the man by himself. It wounded his pride a little to let someone else see them like that. He selected the documents listing the home address where he and Susan lived, the home address of her lover, and the details concerning the times of their meetings. Adding these to the photographs, he slid the items into a manila envelope.

He stood up and moved his chair out of the way as he turned to face a picture on the wall behind his desk. Pulling on one side of the picture frame revealed a safe mounted in the wall, as the picture swung open like a door. He typed in the combination on the illuminated keypad and turned the lever to open the safe's door.

In his line of work it was prudent to keep a large amount of cash on hand in order to take care of the frequently fluid cash flow needs of his more unconventional clients. Having this cash in his office meant he could be more responsive to those needs, and therefore, charge a premium for prompt service. He hadn't counted on being the next one to need the cash so readily available, but then again, luck favored the prepared. He counted out fifty thousand dollars and added it to the contents of the envelope, returning the remaining funds to the safe.

As he waited for Martin's courier to come by and pick up the envelope, he went about his day's work. Between the conference calls and emails, he frequently wondered what his wife's lover was doing at the moment. Martin had said not to worry, that the situation would be taken care of, and the less he knew, the better. Samuel did know better than to press the point, and contented himself with the thought that he needn't worry about the interloper again.

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* * * THE END * * *

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C.L. Wells lives with his family in Charleston County, South Carolina. His hobbies include writing paranormal, mystery, and crime/adventure fiction, kayaking, paddle boarding, hiking, and bicycling.

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