

## CHAPTER ONE

**THE** winter that brought the pandemic began like any other, at least in the wine country where I live. The fall harvest was as bountiful as it was promising, the grapes were crushed, and the magic of fermentation well underway. The rain arrived on schedule—it was Oregon, after all— and for most of us in the Northwest rain is a blessing. Not just because it makes this slice of the country the wonder that it is, but because it signals a slowing of activity and a time for reflection. And rest and reflection back then were certainly in order for me. I'd been involved in an intensive, gut-wrenching investigation of the murder of a young woman, and after the persons responsible had been brought to justice I was ready for some down time.

But you know what they say about rest for the wicked. There isn't any.

My one-man law practice is located in Dundee, a small town between the Willamette River at the northern end of the Willamette Valley. But on this particular day I was in Portland at my second office. Dubbed Caffeine Central after the coffee shop it once was, the small building was the site of my pro bono practice. Once a week I came there to offer legal representation to the homeless and other people of limited means.

Aside from washing your hands and not touching your face, there wasn't much advice out there for curbing the spread of the new virus from Wuhan, China that was being talked about in the media. However, it seemed obvious to me that holding meetings with clients in my small office was not a particularly good idea, since even a common flu bug usually kicked me like a mule. So I posted the following sign on the front door of my Portland office that morning:

Caffeine Central Legal Services is open, but not for in-office consultations. If you need to reach me, call 503- 555-7623 and we can arrange an optimum place to meet. Cal Claxton

I just finished filing a stack of papers late that afternoon when a call came in. "Are you Cal Claxton?" The female voice was firm.

"I am," I answered, "And you are...?"

"Willow, Willow Daniels. I know it's kind of late, but I'd like to talk to you about a legal matter. I'm out in your parking lot."

"I was just closing up. We can chat out there if that's okay with you?" She agreed, and I grabbed a notepad in case I needed it. Archie, my Australian shepherd, got up from his mat in the corner with a stretch and was ready to go. He had enough Portland lawyering for one day and was undoubtedly longing to return to his five-acre domain in the Red Hills of Dundee.

Willow Daniels was nearly my height and fit looking in jeans and a sweatshirt with Cartopia Rocks across the front. She was a redhead with a spray of freckles, a silver ring in one of her nostrils, and almond-shaped eyes whose color landed somewhere between brown and green. She stood next to a street bike with a kiddie trailer on the back. A small child, maybe a year old, was tucked inside, wearing a pink bike helmet and sleeping soundly. When Willow saw Archie, she looked alarmed and stepped between my dog and the bike trailer.

"This is my daughter, Tanya, but I call her Tater. Is your dog okay? I don't like dogs getting too close to Tater. I saw a little boy on the street get bit once."

"He's fine, loves kids, actually, but I can understand your concern." I turned to my dog and said, "Lie down, Archie, and stay." He gave me a look but did what I asked him. I turned back to the young woman. "How can I help you, Willow?"

"First of all, I want you to know I appreciate you taking the time. I've heard about Caffeine Central, and I respect the work you do here, Mr. Claxton. But I'm not looking for a handout. I just need a lawyer."

I nodded. "It's Cal."

"Okay, Cal. Here's the thing. My uncle died recently, and I guess I'm one of his heirs. My cousin, Donny Romano, is the only other one. He's ten years older than me. Uncle Mal never had any kids, and my mom and Donny's parents passed too early in life."

"Your uncle was unmarried?"

"He got divorced two years ago. Anyway, Donny's attorney called me the other day and said he wanted to meet about my uncle's estate." Her eyes narrowed, revealing a hint of steeliness. "I, um, I think I should probably have my own lawyer."

"I'm sorry for your loss. And yes, I think it's wise for you to have your own attorney, Willow. Your cousin's lawyer represents his interests and his only."

"Thought so. Donny and I never got along all that well." A faint, wistful smile. "I think he was jealous of my relationship with Uncle Mal."

"What's Donny do for a living?"

"He works at a gun shop on 82nd. R and J Firearms, I think it's called."

"Did your uncle leave a will?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. He hated red tape, anything having to do with business, that kind of stuff. I know he got in trouble once for not paying his taxes. So, it wouldn't surprise me if he didn't. He loaned me some money on a handshake four years ago." Her look turned resolute. "I want to make sure that gets accounted for."

I eyed her for a moment. "You want to pay back the estate?"

"Yeah, before things get divided up. I pay my debts."

"That's commendable. How much money are we talking about?"

"Fifty-five thousand dollars. It was to help me buy a food cart. I've paid back fifteen thousand so far."

"What's your uncle's name?"

"Malcolm Bainbridge. You might have heard of him. He's, um, was a partner in a high-tech startup here in Portland called Spectro Systems. They make spectroscopic widgets of some kind. He was kind of a technical genius."

I hadn't heard of Bainbridge or Spectro Systems, which wasn't surprising. There were a multitude of tech startups in Portland. "When did your uncle pass?"

"January fifteenth at his house in Portland near Mount Tabor." Her face clouded over. "There's something else... Uncle Mal supposedly committed suicide—"

*"Supposedly?"*

"That's what they're saying, but I don't believe it."

"You don't think he took his own life?"

"He had bouts of depression now and then, so I guess it wasn't surprising to a lot of people. But, no, I don't think he killed himself."

"Accident? Murder?"

"They said he died of a gunshot wound." Her eyes flashed at me. "It was no accident, so I'm thinking that leaves one alternative."

.....