

Buried Truths, Long Shot Series, Book 4

Chapter 1

Winter's fury had descended, its howling February winds battering the historic house on the hill. The light from the delicate crystal chandelier above Olivia Kai's head flickered and she pulled her tattered cardigan tight to ward off the chill.

Seated at the antique writing desk in the corner of the small bedroom, she squeezed her eyes closed to relieve screen fatigue then returned her attention to her laptop. Her notes on the deities worshiped by the Kaw Native Americans blended and blurred. She tried for a few minutes longer to focus before snapping the laptop closed. Tomorrow would be soon enough to dive back into her research.

With a groan, she stood and stretched. At the window she stared out into the inky darkness of the estate. In daylight, the tableau of rolling hills between the Civil War era home, Potter House, and the city of Atchison Kansas was quilted by wintry shades of brown and gray. But now all she could see were the first flakes of what promised to be several inches of snow.

A soft knock on the bedroom door startled her. Even after weeks of being a guest in Julia's home, she still felt a bit on edge. "Yes?"

The door clicked open, and Mr. Alvers peeked his balding head inside. Olivia wasn't sure of his title. But even at his advanced age, his role seemed to be doing Julia's bidding. "Good evening, Ms. Kai. Madam would like to see you in the library if you're free."

What that really meant, Olivia had learned, was that her presence was required in the library. Julia Potter-Lynch was a woman used to having her orders respected and honored. Not that Olivia could or would complain. A free place to stay in an area rich with Kaw history was worth spending some time with the lonely old woman. The chance to leave Chicago behind for a few months was a welcome bonus.

Olivia raised her voice enough to make sure Alvers heard. "Please let her know I'll be right down."

"Very well." He nodded then closed the door.

Olivia quickly changed out of yoga pants and fuzzy socks into a pair of slacks and black ballet flats. She pulled her hair from the sloppy bun that sat askew on top of her head then brushed out and braided the thick mass into some semblance of order.

Moments later, she made her way down the wide staircase and opened the library door to the left. As she'd expected, Julia awaited her at the backgammon table, tea service at her elbow. Her white hair was coiffed as always, but her face seemed more drawn than usual.

"I thought you might welcome a break from your research." Julia motioned to the chair opposite her.

Olivia joined her at the table. "Thank you. My brain was running in circles. A break is exactly what I needed."

The older woman gave a ghost of a smile. "Have you uncovered anything new?"

The topic of Olivia's research was often first up, naturally, since it was what had brought them together. When Olivia had reached out with hopes of gaining access to the grounds, she'd never dreamed that Julia would invite her to stay in residence. "Not really. Most of the new information I've been able to find so far revolves around the primary god Waucondah. Not much so far on the lesser gods. The notes and references from my sister's journal and her fiancé's research are still my most significant guides. But I believe Annie led me here. I can feel it."

"Well, you're welcome here as long as you'd like. It's been a nice change for this big old house to have a little life in it."

Staying here forever sounded pretty damn good to Olivia. That wasn't really an option, but neither was returning to her old life in Chicago. Not yet anyway. The sabbatical from her teaching job at Midwestern State had been granted through the end of July. It would take at least that long to figure out how to deal with the betrayal she'd run from.

Her own life circumstances had faded into the background, though, on a blustery morning in December. The day she returned to her sister Susan's apartment and heard the words that were indelibly inscribed on her heart. *Annie is dead.*

Their baby sister.

Julia gently touched her arm, startling Olivia out of her dark thoughts. "Will you pour for us?"

"Of course. Yes. Sorry." Olivia took the few moments preparing their cups and pouring to sheath the ever-present twin daggers of grief and guilt. She handed a cup and saucer to Julia.

The older woman's solemn gaze met hers. "You'll find peace for your sister, Olivia. I have no doubt."

The softly spoken words bolstered Olivia, reminding her of her mission and her priorities. She *would* find peace for Annie. It was only a matter of time.

After setting up the backgammon board, Julia sipped her tea. Several minutes passed as the game progressed and Julia meandered through her life history, citing places and people Olivia would never have a clue about. She feigned interest because she had a feeling that Julia needed an outsider to talk to. Someone who wasn't emotionally tied to the memories.

Like Olivia, Julia had lost a family member to suicide.

It was so difficult to make sense of such tragedy, in any case. From what Julia shared, her son Frederick had been a revered member of the community and had even served as the mayor of Atchison for a time. But his wife's sudden and unexpected death had sent him down a spiraling dark path, and on his fiftieth birthday he went to sleep and never awakened.

Olivia looked up after realizing that Julia had been quiet for several moments. Her faded, unfocused brown eyes stared across the room.

"Are you feeling unwell?" Olivia touched her hand. "Is there anything I can get you?"

Julia brought her attention back to Olivia. She shook her head slowly. "I'm fine." She paused and Olivia thought she might have lost her again until the older woman spoke, her words much quieter. "Don't settle for a life of regret, Olivia. Whatever else you do."

Olivia's cup rattled in her saucer. She already lived a life of regret. Regret for not being there for Annie. Regret for not paying attention to the signs. Not taking them seriously. She set the cup down. "That's a tall order."

"It is. But you're what? Twenty-six, twenty-seven?"

"Almost twenty-eight." *An age Annie would never experience.*

“You have your whole life in front of you.” Overwhelming sadness filled Julia’s eyes and leaked down her cheeks. “Don’t live your life so that the only people in attendance at your funeral are the attorneys and the clergy.”

Olivia couldn’t imagine choosing that lifestyle. Though her parents had passed a little more than three years ago in a car accident, her childhood home had been a haven of love and laughter and precious memories, a sharp contrast to Julia’s stark loneliness that had seeped into every room in the house. Olivia walked around the table and squatted at Julia’s side. “I’m so sorry about your son.”

Julia produced a handkerchief from the sleeve of her robe and dabbed her eyes. “It’s not just him. I spent my entire life so worried about our family’s reputation, I never acknowledged my only grandson.”

Olivia searched her face. “You have a grandson? Frederick had a son?”

Julia stared into her teacup as if she could find absolution there. “Yes. Cameron was a product of...Frederick’s rebellious years. And because of my foolish pride, I’ll never know him.”

“It’s not too late, is it?”

Julia looked at her again, her eyes dry now. “It is for me. I’ll leave it to my lawyers to track him down after I’m gone.”

Twelve days later, Olivia looked back on that evening’s conversation as she stood at Julia’s graveside. To Olivia’s left were two attorneys. To her right was Mr. Alvers and his son, Jeff, who took care of the grounds of the estate. Juan Flowers, the president of the historical society, stood next to them.

Julia Potter-Lynch had suffered a heart attack three days after her conversation with Olivia and never regained consciousness. She had died the way she had lived. Alone. Olivia’s breath hitched as the cemetery workers slowly lowered the casket into the ground. She blinked back the tears that threatened, tears for Julia’s regrets and her own.

The following morning, Olivia tossed her shoes into her suitcase then plopped onto the bed, her heart heavy. For Julia, yes. But for her own aborted mission as well. She never got the chance to explore the physical grounds.

She’d read and reread Annie’s journal so many times, the words were etched in her brain. She’d felt so certain the obscure references and vague descriptions, not to mention the damn dreams, had led here. And soon she’d be headed back to her mess in Chicago, empty handed and failing Annie once more.

A soft rap on the door drew her attention. “Yes?”

Mr. Alvers peeked in. “Good morning, Ms. Kai.”

“Good morning. I was just finishing my packing.”

He squinted at her. “Say again?”

She pointed to her suitcase and raised her voice. “I’m almost finished packing.”

Alvers nodded. “I’m sorry to delay you. Mr. Wilkerson is here and is requesting your presence in the library.”

He ducked out of the room, leaving Olivia with a frown. Her car was fueled up and she was planning to go. Surely they didn’t feel the need for some kind of formal eviction. She hurried down the staircase, her heart thumping in her chest.

The man who introduced himself as Martin Wilkerson, Esquire, was seated in the tufted leather chair behind the desk in Julia’s library. The dark woods in the room and the low light of the cloudy March afternoon lent an even more somber air to the small group gathered.

“Ms. Kai. Thank you for joining us. Please have a seat.”

Mr. Alvers and Mr. Flowers sat across from the attorney. Olivia opted for an upholstered chair to the left of the desk and returned Mr. Wilkerson’s gentle smile.

Once she took her seat, Wilkerson extracted a manila envelope from his briefcase and set it on the desk. “Thank you all for making time to meet with me today. Julia had requested that each of you be in attendance.”

“Of course.” Mr. Flowers shot Olivia a wary glance. “We at the historical society expected as much, with the Potter family’s longstanding affinity for the rich history of the area.”

Olivia frowned at the man’s business-like tone. Though her perception was likely skewed, she felt an odd sense of defensiveness for the softer side of Julia she’d seen.

The attorney removed the papers from the envelope and smoothed them on the desk. “Indeed. The Historical Society will be receiving a generous donation in the amount of fifty thousand dollars for your continued preservation efforts.”

Silence filled the room. Mr. Flowers mouth opened and closed several times before he spoke. “Only fifty thousand? Are you certain? What about the property?” His eyes darted from the attorney to Mr. Alvers. “Keith, I thought she was entrusting her entire estate to us.”

Mr. Alvers’ face flushed. “I always assumed so.” He turned a puzzled gaze to Olivia. “Surely not you. You barely knew her.”

The attorney cleared his throat. “Please allow me to offer some clarity. Ms. Kai’s presence here today isn’t as a recipient of any of Julia’s assets.” He nodded to Olivia. “Julia wrote a stipulation allowing you the legal right to stay on to do your research until such a time as you conclude your efforts, or your sabbatical is over in July, whichever comes first.”

The air whooshed out of Olivia’s lungs as another string tugged on her heart, thanks to Julia and her generosity. What a gift. She would be able to take the time she needed to continue her research and follow where Annie’s was leading her. Julia must have known there was no way she could have afforded to stay in the area, let alone go about getting permission to explore the grounds.

Mr. Flowers leaned forward in his seat. “Then who? Who did Julia leave her estate to?”

Mr. Wilkerson flipped to the final page of the document. “Exclusive of the enumerated amount detailed for the historical society and the stipend of one hundred thousand dollars to Mr. Keith Alvers for services rendered to the estate and for his continued service until ownership of the property is transferred, the entirety of the estate belonging to Julia Potter Lynch is bequeathed to Cameron Lyle Tate, Julia’s grandson.”

“Her what? Fred had a son? Absolutely not. The town would have known.” Mr. Flowers’ brow furrowed. “Who is this kid? And where is he?”

The attorney shuffled his papers back into their envelope then stood. “Per the terms of the will, upon the event of Julia’s passing, our office was tasked with locating Mr. Tate. We have begun our search.”

From the corner of her eye, Olivia saw the tightening of Mr. Flowers’ jaw as he rose from his seat, his disappointment keenly evident. But all she felt was relief. With strict focus and any luck at all, she would fulfill her promise to her sister. Then, maybe, she’d be able to figure out how to forge a new path for herself.