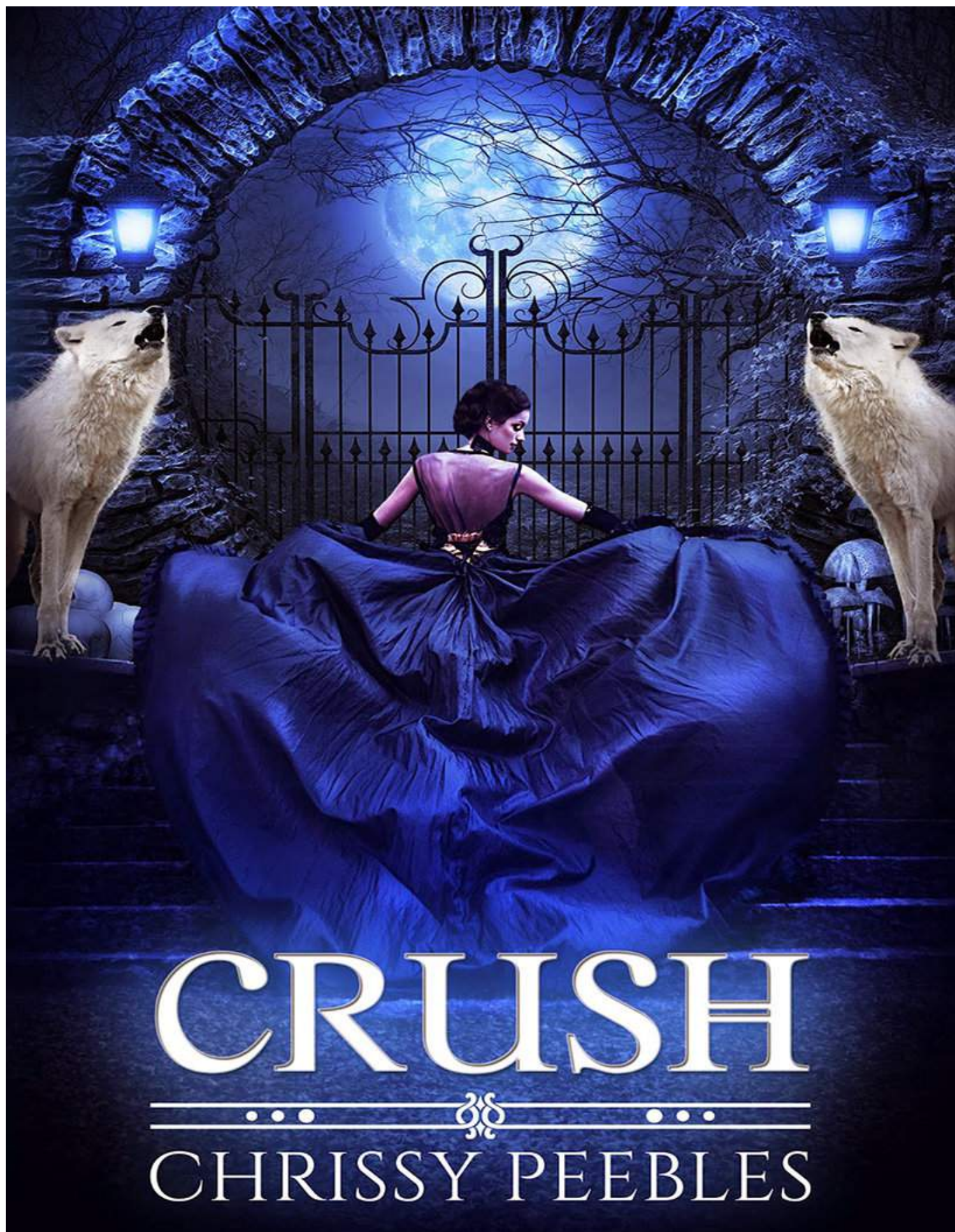




CRUSH

... ❧ ...
CHRISSY PEEBLES

Crush

Book 1

The Crush Saga

by

Chrissy Peebles

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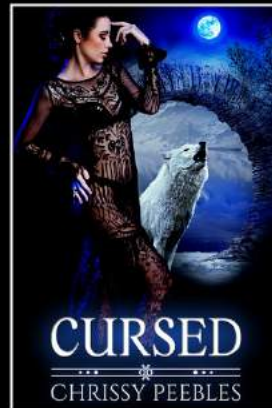
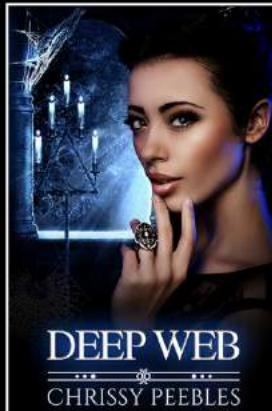
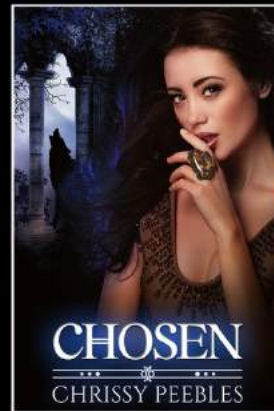
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THE CRUSH SAGA

CHRISSY PEEBLES





The Crush Saga Book Trailer: <https://youtu.be/LbfIsKTsPhw>

Jump into this adrenaline-packed, supernatural thriller from USA TODAY bestselling author Chrissy Peebles.

His precious touch could prove deadly...

Synopsis of The Crush Saga series:

I was born to die... But to defy fate is to control your own destiny. Little did I know that I was entering a world of ritual and magic and that my blood needed to be spilled so the witches' legacy could be complete.

Vampires. Witches. Werewolves. Supernatural Creatures. Dramatic Revelations. A Ritual Sacrifice. Ancient Artifacts. A Cold-hearted Serial Killer. Spilled Blood. Secrets. A Hidden Heritage. A Love So Deep. Supernatural Bloodlust. A Dangerous Curse. An Uneasy Alliance With A Dangerous Vampire.

Legends of vampires and shape-shifters have been around for centuries, so Taylor Sparks isn't too worried when the rumors start to fly. When Taylor learns secrets that are beyond terrifying, they threaten to destroy her entire world. She is born to die... But to defy fate is to control your own destiny.

She warns her crush to leave. But how do you forget someone who is aligned with your soul? They fight against the witches, the vampires, and the werewolves. They know the consequences. They know the risk. But they don't care. Nothing will get in the way of these two star-crossed lovers.

Taylor finds out she's a KEY player in a dangerous game created 1,000 years ago that will give the witches and werewolves the upper hand against the vampires. Blood will be spilled and secrets will be revealed in this action-packed thrill ride and paranormal romance.

Will Taylor dive into a paranormal world she knows nothing about to be with the one her heart can't live without? Or will her life spiral out of control when she learns her blood is needed, just the serum necessary to lift an ancient curse from a group of supernatural beings and give the witches back their magic? Werewolves will serve as her guardians and protect her until the first full moon of the new year, the night of her sacrifice...

Will she accept her destiny?

Or will she refuse to let evil swallow her up?

“Be resilient!”

“Never give up!”

“Be strong and courageous!”

“Be a champion!”

“Be you.”

“Stand tough.”

Life is a struggle...but keep fighting!

When life and death were on the line, I didn't become a victim, I
became a WARRIOR.

I was born to die... But to defy fate is to control your own destiny.
Little did I know that I was entering a world of ritual and magic and
that my blood needed to be spilled so the witches' legacy could be
complete.

Chapter 1

Big Bear Lake, California is located in a lush green valley, surrounded by mountains and the towering pines, sparkling streams, wildlife, and hidden lakes of the San Bernardino National Forest. We'd just moved into a cute, two-story brick house along the south shore of Big Bear Lake. The beautiful and quaint little home was left to us by my grandmother, when she passed away. She'd spent her whole life in the house and had loved it. So my parents thought it would be fantastic to dump our city life, to move out to the smog-free middle of nowhere, where we could get lost in the peace and quiet tranquility.

My parents loved the solitude here, because they were both writers. My father wrote mystery thrillers, while Mom penned romance novels. They hated the hustle, bustle and noise of the city and were sure the peaceful wilderness would help them concentrate. "It'll be a fresh start for all of us," my mother assured me, following a bad breakup with my boyfriend, "a very healthy experience all around."

I wasn't so sure, though. I didn't know how easily I'd be able to adjust to the simple life of a small town, after living in New York City, but once we got there, I loved the place. It was a far cry from my life in the Big Apple, with honking geese and towering trees replacing the honking taxicabs and towering buildings, but I knew my mother was right; it would be the perfect spot to forget about my depressing love life.

I have two brothers and a sister who had already moved out of the house, so now I was virtually an only child. I am lucky to have two wonderful parents. We are a loving and close-knit family, and for that I couldn't have been more thankful.

It was only June when we moved in, so I had almost the whole summer to get used to California and my new home before school started. I carried in the last heavy box to my cluttered room; everything was a mess. I bit my lip hard as I looked around at all the boxes and bags, knowing there was no way that I'd get everything unpacked and put in its place in one night.

"Pizza's here," my mother called, as she came in and pushed through the maze of boxes, toppling them everywhere.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me it was after lunch time. My German Shepard began prancing around and barked. I knew that he needed to go outside pronto if I didn't want a mess on the floor.

"Mom," I said, "Max needs to be walked first."

She brushed her hair behind her ear and smiled. “Go ahead and take him out then, but don’t wander off too far.”

“Of course not,” I said kissing her cheek.

She looked at my face and pointed to my eyes. “What’s with the dark circles?”

“Uh...I’m sure it’s just makeup, or maybe it’s just because I’ve been getting absolutely no sleep.”

“It’s your makeup,” she said smiling. “You look like a raccoon.”

“See? I’ll fit right in with the wildlife out here.”

My mom laughed. “Well, maybe the raccoons can adopt you, they’re nocturnal too.”

“I just can’t sleep at night. I can’t help it.”

She lovingly wrapped her arms around me. “Is this about the breakup with Sean? Honey, it’s been six months. Remember what we talked about? We’re here for a new beginning, a fresh start.”

“I know,” I said, wincing because the whole thing still hurt.

Sean had dumped me, totally out of the blue. Getting dumped sucks, no matter the reason. I had given him my heart, and he had trampled all over it. The breakup had totally blindsided me, I hadn’t seen it coming, when he called me and said, “Taylor, this just isn’t working for me anymore.”

I knew it was time for me to move on with my life, with whatever grace and dignity I could muster. We’d both made mistakes in the relationship, and neither of us were perfect by a long shot. Still, I was determined. I refused to let that relationship define who I was. Just because we didn’t work out and clearly weren’t meant for each other, that didn’t mean things wouldn’t work out with someone else in the future. My friends tried to help, setting me up on stupid dates that never worked out. I wondered if I’d ever find the “spark” again with someone else. I decided that, for the time being, I was done with guys. I was going to enjoy my fresh start and focus on my passion for painting. The yard was overrun with weeds and vegetation, but my dad had hired someone to fix it up. When he was finished, it would be the perfect place for me to pursue my art.

I quickly threw my curly black hair into a messy ponytail, and slipped my feet into my white tennis shoes. I was wearing a white t-shirt and my favorite pair of skinny jeans, which hugged my curves so tight they felt like a second skin. I’d washed them so many times that they

were faded, super soft, and form-fitting in all the right places. There was a large rip in the right knee, but that only gave them originality. Silver and leather bracelets dangled from each of my wrists, and sterling rings adorned my fingers. I looked into the mirror, wiped the smeared eyeliner from beneath my brown eyes, and headed outside.

It really was a beautiful place to live. Our yard was surrounded by towering trees that stretched high into the sky. I listened to birds chirping as the sun shone on my face and a cool breeze ruffled my hair. I loved the woods that were part of my new home. Inhaling the clean air, I smiled. *I'm really going to enjoy my fresh start here...and so is Max*, I thought as the dog explored the back yard. He was fascinated and intrigued by all the new smells and sounds.

Suddenly, Max's ears shot back, as if he had noticed an animal in the woods. Peering closer, I glimpsed a white-tailed deer sipping from a puddle. My heart melted as I gazed at that adorable creature nestled among the trees. It seemed totally unaware of us watching it, until a sharp bark from Max scared it almost to death and the poor animal darted off into the vegetation. He wasn't used to all the natural wildlife, but I knew he was going to love it there as much as I was, if not more. His barks became fierce, then he suddenly bolted through the trees, deeper into the woods.

I guessed he'd decided to pursue the fleeing deer, and I decided then and there that I'd have to keep him on a leash.

"Max!" I yelled. "Come back!"

He didn't listen.

I glanced back at the house, wondering if I should get my parents for help. The woods and its inhabitants scared me a little. I stood there a while, debating my next move. Finally, I decided to just go a little ways into the woods, but I did—if only for a brief second—wonder about the odds of running into a bear.

I stepped through the vegetation at the edge of the lawn, and took a tentative step, into the woods beyond. I glanced around looking for any sign of Max, but he was nowhere in sight, I called for him a few times, only to get no response. I was beginning to worry, when I heard a bark in the distance. Without a second thought, I took off, sprinting deeper into the forest surrounding our property. Finally, I pushed aside some green vegetation and scanning ahead I could finally see my beloved and ornery pet.

"Max!" I shouted. "Come back!"

He gave me the doggie version of the I-see-you-but-I-don't-care look, then started sniffing the ground. As I made my way toward him, I was seriously considering obedience classes. My thoughts were interrupted when a thorn grazed my skin. Biting my lip to stave off the pain, I swore I'd never let that cantankerous canine off his leash again.

I stumbled a bit to the left, tripping over a pile of termite-ridden, moss-covered, rotting logs. Stumbling on I broke through more towering ferns, but Max had once again disappeared into the thick vegetation. I couldn't see him anywhere, but could still hear him barking. Panting, I spun in a slow circle trying to decide what to do. I was afraid I might get lost if I went in any deeper, but I couldn't just desert my best friend.

The *snap* of a twig behind me, followed by the unmistakable *crunch* of dried leaves, halted me mid step. I strained to listen. *Was that...Max?*

Snap, the sound of another branch breaking echoed through the quiet forest.

"Max?" I yelled, scanning through the trees and high grass ahead, "C'mere, boy."

Silence.

With my senses now on full alert, I swept an uneasy gaze through the surrounding trees. I whistled for Max calling out, "Here, Max! C'mon, boy. Let's go home."

The sound of the crickets and chirping birds was my only reply.

I jumped, startled, as a sudden flash of tan glinted to my left. I flinched. For a split second, I saw amber-colored eyes in the foliage. Panic stuck. I was sure it was some kind of wild animal. I worried that Max might have been attacked, knowing that one bite to the throat might prove fatal. Fear began to take hold and I grabbed a long, sturdy stick. It wasn't much of a weapon, but I'd be able to poke those yellow eyes out if their owner came after me.

A menacing growl broke the silence. My heart thudded against my ribcage, and a shiver swept over my skin. What was I thinking? Running after Max had been a dumb idea. My dad had warned me about black bears, coyotes, mountain lions, and bobcats. He hadn't said anything about tigers, but it was still quite the oh-my situation.

I knew that the creature, whatever it was, had also seen me. There was no point in trying to hide. I had to call for Max again. I couldn't possibly leave until I knew he was okay. "Max!" I yelled, pointing the stick at the eyes peering out from the vegetation, ready to fight with every ounce of strength I had.

Finally, Max burst through the thick plants, bounding toward me. I clutched my heart and let out a sigh of relief when I saw that he was unharmed. He immediately took a protective stance in front of me and started growling, snarling and barking at whatever was in those ferns. Given the fight-or-flight choice, I was sure the best course of action was to slowly sneak backward and get the heck outta there.

The ferns parted and I gasped. I was suddenly face to face with a mountain lion. It raised its head, unleashing its bloodcurdling signature roar. My heart began to pound in my chest like a high school marching band.

What I encountered next was nearly as shocking as the mountain lion. I turned around quickly, only to bump into a guy who looked to be about my age. He wasn't just any guy though, he was so scorching hot that if I had wet my finger with my tongue and touched him, his chest would have steamed and sizzled. He instinctively pushed me behind him as if to protect me, then started shouting and throwing sticks at the big cat. I joined in with some noise of my own, and in an instant, the mountain lion fled into the grass.

The beautiful stranger eyed me up and down, warmth and empathy radiating from the depths of his gaze. "Are you okay?"

His gorgeous, winter-blue eyes hypnotized me, and I was pulled into his hold with one look. My breath had never literally been taken away before, but I was absolutely suffocating under the power of his stare, and my knees began to shake. "I-I..." The butterflies that had landed in my stomach, in fear of the cat, were now turning flirty somersaults. My eyes slid up his towering body, gliding over his features drinking in every detail, from his high cheekbones to the dark stubble shading his sharp jaw. He was definitely tall, dark, and handsome. Even if it was quite cliché of me to be so taken by him, I felt like I'd been struck by lightning. I'd never been face to face with somebody so beautiful and angelic. He was the kind of guy who I thought only existed in movies, as if a Calvin Klein model had stepped down off of one of those big, delicious billboards for a hike through the woods.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked, after my stutter never turned into a complete answer. He didn't fidget or stumble for words like I did, whenever I was standing in front of a gorgeous stranger. Rather, his cool confidence spoke volumes to me, as if he was used to girls throwing themselves at him, which I was just about to do.

My breath froze in my throat, and my stomach clenched. I'd never been so drawn to anyone before, never so instantly, so madly attracted. I couldn't stop staring at his messy tangle of dark hair, it had that tousled, just-out-of-bed look, which I loved and found so sexy. From his piercing blue eyes, to his strong chiseled jaw, to his handsome face, he was absolutely godlike. Even dressed in a plain black t-shirt and jeans. I took a deep breath to try to calm down, but it felt as if time had stopped.

When our eyes locked, we both seemed to get lost in each other's gaze, oblivious to anything else. I was fixated by his piercing stare. There was an explosive chemistry between us which was absolutely undeniable.

My ex had told me that sexual attraction and chemistry couldn't possibly be planned, it was something that would just happen naturally. I knew, standing there looking at this new guy, that he wasn't lying. I had never felt like that with my old boyfriend. I couldn't even explain the uncontrollable force that was drawing me to him like a moth to flame. When he looked at me with that sexy smile on his face, I'd never felt so desirable, so wanted. I had a strong urge to jump into his strong embrace. He was a smoldering hot hunk, and I couldn't believe I had his attention.

"Is everything okay?" he asked a third time, snapping me back into reality.

My mouth dropped, and it took a minute for my brain to function. "Uh, huh? Oh yeah. I'm, um...I'm fine," I babbled, as if that big cat had my tongue.

He stepped forward and looked off into the vegetation. "It's gone for now, but you must be careful of predators out here," he warned, meeting my gaze straight on. "Predators are always on the prowl. They'll stalk their prey until an opportunity arrives to pounce and go for the neck with a fatal bite."

"I know," I said. "The thought of anything biting me anywhere kind of freaks me out."

"If you're not all right with fangs piercing your skin, you definitely shouldn't be out here."

He shot me a look like he knew something that I didn't.

I blinked. "You're right. Let's get outta here before the big kitty comes back."

Staring deeply into my eyes he said, "It won't."

Max growled at the handsome stranger and began to bark.

I was a bit embarrassed that I didn't have my dog under better control. "Don't worry," I told him, patting the furry beast's head. "Max doesn't bite."

“Well,” he said with a grin. “Tell him that I do.”

We both burst-out laughing, his ice-breaker had worked.

Nevertheless, even with my soothing tone and gentle touch, Max continued to growl and pace in front of me.

“Max!” I scolded. “Knock it off, boy.”

“Don’t blame Max. It’s not his fault,” he said. “All dogs hate me, it’s their natural instinct.”

“Nah, he’s just protective and loyal, that’s all,” I said, trying to explain. “You’re still a stranger to him, and he’s trying to look after me.” I was still a little rattled by the mountain lion. That must be why Max is acting this way, I thought. “We’d better go, just in case that snarling menace comes back looking for dessert.”

“Like I told you, it’s not coming back,” he said sternly, shifting his powerful stance. “It caught a whiff of my scent. It fears me, just like your dog does.”

“You mean it’s afraid of shouting humans?”

“The shouting, yes.”

I laughed. “So you’re telling me that big lion is scared of our little voices?”

He just stared at me with those dazzling blue eyes for a moment, then totally changing the subject he asked, “Do you always hike unprepared?”

“No. It was an unintended hike,” I answered. “My dog took off and I had to find him.”

“At the very least, you should carry pepper spray to scare off bears.”

I chuckled. “I don’t see you sporting a can.”

“I don’t need it,” he replied with a smirk. “I can fight off a black bear with my bare hands.”

“All right, Davy Crockett.”

He grinned right back at me, nearly melting me where I stood. “But all joking aside, you shouldn’t be out here. As I said, these woods are full of hungry predators,” he warned again.

I shot him a flirty look. “Well, then it’s a good thing I’m safe here with you.”

I didn’t know what had come over me, but something had. *Where are these wild emotions even coming from?* I’d never been so bold and daring. It wasn’t like me at all, but I couldn’t seem to keep the words or the girly giggles from coming out of my mouth. I couldn’t explain it, but there was some hot, intense, intoxicating connection between us. The attraction was sizzling, but I didn’t have the guts to ask him out, or even for his phone number. I didn’t even know if I

was his type or not, if he even liked dark-haired girls with frizzy, curly hair and chocolate-brown eyes. For all I knew, he was only into that boob-job and bleached blonde type, and that most definitely wasn't me.

"You don't know a thing about me," he said. "What makes you think you're safe with me?"

"Are you saying I should fear you more than that mountain lion?" I asked. "Maybe I should be carrying more than pepper spray, if that's the case."

"What I'm saying is that you need to be careful. Seemingly nice guys cannot always be trusted," he answered, glancing down at a still growling Max.

I just smiled. "Are *you* a nice guy?"

His face lit up, and he grinned again. "I suppose there's only one way to find out."

I took the bait and engaged him with, "How's that?"

Suddenly, his gorgeous grin faded, worry flashing across his features. He began to dart his eyes around from tree to tree, shrub to shrub, and appeared to be listening so intently that a tiny wave of fear washed over me.

Max started to bark and snap at the air. I peered into the foliage and thick brush, but I couldn't see anything to be afraid of.

"They're back," he whispered, then pointing to Max he added, "Please keep him quiet."

They? I thought, worried that he was talking about more than one mountain lion. As he suggested, I patted Max's head and tried my best to calm him, but it didn't help.

Finally, Mr. Mysterious knelt down and petted Max. "Shh, boy."

Much to my surprise, Max immediately quit barking.

The handsome stranger then placed his hand on my lower back and briskly led me in the direction of our house.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "More mountain lions?"

"Or worse."

I didn't like the sound of that. "Let's go!"

But Max didn't want to leave.

The guy gently tapped Max's head. "Go home, boy."

Obediently, Max bolted off. Wow. He had the magic touch. I knew panicking wouldn't help me one bit. I kept my cool and started to run back home. The handsome stranger followed.

When the house was in view, I glanced over my shoulder to thank my escort. I was shocked to discover that he was gone, vanishing just quickly and mysteriously as he'd shown up in the first place. I squinted, peering through the dark spaces between the trees, but he was nowhere in sight. It was as if he'd just vanished into thin air.

Who is he? I wondered. Where does he live? I'm such an idiot. I didn't even get his name. Shaking my head at my foolishness, I walked to the back door and opened it.

"There you are. What took so long, sweetheart?" my mom asked. "And I know you didn't stay in the back yard like I told you to."

I pointed in the direction of where I'd come from. "I saw a mountain lion!"

My dad immediately pulled me into a tight hug, then stepped back and began inspecting me from head to toe. "Are you okay?" he asked, looking concerned.

I sighed. "I'm fine, Dad. Max ran off, and I just—"

"You weren't supposed to go in the woods."

"What was I supposed to do? I had to find Max."

"You shouldn't go out there alone. You could have hollered for me, and I would have gone with you."

"It would've only taken a minute to get me or Dad," Mom added.

"I didn't know he was gonna go so deep into the woods, or I would have," I explained.

My dad's brown gaze narrowed. "Are you sure it was a mountain lion you saw?"

"Positive. I just took off running and—"

"Taylor," my father pushed, "if that was a bobcat or mountain lion, its natural instinct would be to chase you. Never run. Just yell, shout, and make yourself look bigger."

"Yeah, I know, but I panicked, I guess. Still, it didn't chase me."

"I don't want you going out there alone again," my mom chastised, as if I was five years old.

Dad handed me a plate with two slices of pizza on it. "Well, you're safe now, so sit down and eat."

I tried to calm my breathing. I didn't have the guts to tell them I'd met a man in the woods, or that he had saved me from the mountain lion. My stomach was tangled in knots. "Thanks but I'm not really hungry. I think I'll just go unpack a few boxes."

“All right. I guess you have had quite a day,” Mom chimed in. “We’ll save your pizza, and you can just microwave it later if you get hungry.”

I nodded and started to head to my room. “Thanks.”

On my way upstairs, I couldn’t help glancing out the window, but I didn’t see anything unusual.

Later that night, as the moon began to shine, the crickets began to chirp, and the wind began to whisper through the treetops, I thought about my mysterious stranger. In my dreams, my mind replayed the entire scene over and over again. I woke up the next morning with his beautiful face on my mind. I had to find him, to see him again, if only once more. I wanted to at least have a name to pair with that beautiful face, a face that I knew would linger in my mind for a long, long time.

Chapter 2

“Taylor,” my mother called, “we’re going to the lake, to fish and take a paddle-boat ride. C’mon, dear!”

“Can I stay and unpack?” I asked.

“No, we’re all going,” she answered firmly.

I blew out a breath. “But I don’t want to fish,” I whined, far more interested in reveling in the memory of the mysterious hottie from the woods.

“Then you can try to get a tan. It’s supposed to be warm and sunny today.”

I gazed at the leaning tower of boxes that rivaled the one in Pisa. “How am I supposed to find my bathing suit in this mess?” I was hoping I might have found an out.

“I’ve got an extra you can borrow.” She chuckled as she walked into my room. “But I must warn you that it has a skirt.”

“Mom!” I laughed and shook my head.

She smiled. “Besides, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

My mouth dropped. “No way. Tell me you’re not trying to set me up, especially not while I’m wearing a swimsuit that makes me look like a nun.”

“Honey, it’s nothing like that,” she assured me. “I met a friend and she has a daughter your age. I was thinking you two could hang out. She’s new in town too.”

“Oh,” I said. “It’d be nice to have a friend around here. But let me look for my own bathing suit. I think I might know what box it’s in, now that I think about it.”

She grinned. “Great. We’re leaving in a couple hours.”

“Okay, I’ll get my stuff together.”

Knock!

When I answered the front door, a guy about my age with short brown hair and piercing green eyes looked at me. He shot me a grin, and I smiled back. He wasn’t as built as the guy in the forest, but he was definitely a cutie. He was dressed like a jock in a t-shirt, shorts, and Nikes. I couldn’t fathom why this guy was standing in my doorway.

“Hi,” I said. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Your dad hired me to do some yard work,” he answered.

I suddenly remembered that my dad had told me about that, but I had no idea the landscaper would be so young and attractive. I’d expected a short, balding man in a grubby old flannel shirt and clunky boots. “Oh, okay. Let me get him for you.” I called for my dad, and he came to the door.

“This is Fred,” my dad said, introducing him. “He’s going to give our back yard a makeover.”

“It could sure use one,” I said, smiling at Fred. “I can give you a hand if—”

“No way,” my father interrupted. “The last time you helped, the yard looked...well, let’s just say that yard work isn’t your forte, honey.”

Just then, my mom opened the door and peeked out. “Fred, would you like to come to the beach with us?”

Not wanting to be rude, my dad just cleared his throat and looked at her in disbelief. He was paying Fred to do a job and didn’t expect it to be put off. “We’ve gotta get this jungle under control, dear,” he said, looking a bit harshly at her. “I think the sooner Fred gets started, the better.”

“One more day isn’t going to hurt anything,” my mother said. “Let him come with us. He can deal with the yard tomorrow.”

“Is living in the Amazon one more day really going to hurt anything?” I asked.

Frowning a little, Dad wrinkled his brow at me, then at Mom. "Taylor, you go on and finish getting ready for the beach. Fred, please come with me so I can show you what we need done," he said refusing to be dissuaded.

Fred's green eyes sparkled like emeralds. "See ya later, Taylor."

I waved. "Bye. It was nice to meet you."

I watched intently as my dad talked his ear off with all his big plans for the yard. Fred snuck a look over his shoulder and smiled. I grinned back, then watched my dad escort him to the other side of the house. Once they were out of sight, I went back upstairs to my room to finish packing for the beach.

* * *

While I stayed on the beach for some sun and fun, my mom and dad went fishing not too far away. I spread out a colorful towel, applied plenty of Coppertone, slipped on a pair of sunglasses, and then laid down on my back to soak up all the sunshine I could. My gold bikini left little to the imagination, including more cleavage than my dad was a fan of, but I figured he needed to face the fact I was growing up and was not his little girl anymore. It didn't really matter anyway, because there were so few people on the beach that one would have thought shark warnings had been posted. I just enjoyed the solitude, warm rays and listening to the birds and gulls soaring overhead.

"Taylor?" a girl's voice said.

I sat up and grinned. "Yep, that's me."

A tall blonde in a gold bathing suit, with a large striped beach bag over her shoulder, standing there smiling. "Hi, I'm Julie," she said, holding her hand out for a shake. "I've been dying to meet you. My mom tells me we're the same age, in the same grade. I just moved here last week, and I don't know a soul."

I shook her hand and smiled. "That makes two of us."

She smiled, then spread out her own beach towel, adjusted her sunglasses, and politely asked, "If you don't mind? I'm gonna catch some rays too."

"Sounds like a plan," I said, laying back down and turning my head in her direction to talk. "Where do you live?" I asked.

"Not far from you. My parents split, and my mom's—"

"Divorced?" I asked.

“You nailed it. Divorce, the future tense of marriage.”

I had to stifle a laugh, considering that her wounds were probably still fresh, but I appreciated her cynical sense of humor.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine, and I’ll be fine too. I always bounce back. It’s like I have nine lives,” she said confidently. “My dad got remarried and lives in Washington, and my mom got a job as a manager for Sleepy Forest Cottages and their sister hotel. Where do your parents work?”

“In their pajamas sometimes.”

“Huh?”

“They work from home. They’re authors, so for them, this place is like a writers’ retreat, the perfect inspiration.”

“Oh. Well, that’s pretty cool.”

“I guess. They met at a writing conference and have been inseparable ever since. I guess you could call it love at first write,” I said with a smile.

She laughed. “Fairytale perfect, huh?”

“Well...sometimes, but speaking of fairy-tales,” I said, “I think I met Prince Charming.”

She lifted her glasses up and smiled. “Really? Where? Is he a lifeguard or something?” she asked, looking around.

“Not that I know of—at least not in the traditional sense. Yesterday, my dog Max took off into the woods, and when I ran in there to get him, I bumped into this super-hot guy.”

“Whoa!” She lifted a brow. “A hot forest boy, huh?”

Just then, another vision of him looking like a Greek god flashed through my head, his black hair wafting in the wind like some majestic stallion’s mane. I grinned as I imagined how the intimate touch of his lips on mine would feel.

“Hello? Earth to Taylor,” said Julie, snapping me out of my trance.

“Oh...sorry. I was just thinking about him. He was just so...hot.”

“Do tell!” she said with a grin.

I lifted my sunglasses off my face. “Smokin’...really!”

She furrowed a brow. “As in...sizzling?”

I grinned. “Absolutely smoldering.”

“What’s his name?”

“Um...that’s the thing. I don’t know.”

“What!?” she gasped. “You mean to tell me this gorgeous creature was standing right there in front of you, and you didn’t even find out who he is?”

“Well, we talked for a few minutes, and I felt this amazing connection,” I answered, trying to explain something I really didn’t understand myself. “I guess I was so caught up in the moment that I just didn’t think to ask.”

“You know what that was, don’t ya?” she asked.

“What?”

“Chemistry.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So lemme get this straight. You met some hot guy who took your breath away, and you didn’t even get his name?” she asked again. “Do you even know where he’s from?”

“You mean besides Heaven?” I answered with a grin.

She laughed. “Oh my gosh, that’s soooo corny.”

I laughed back at her. “I don’t know.”

She shot me a look like I was crazy. “Why didn’t you ask?”

“Well, there were mountain lions, and—”

“Mountain lions, as in *plural*?” she asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

She lifted a finger. “That’s clue number one. Mr. Wonderful doesn’t know much about the wildlife around here. I read up on it. Mountain lions travel alone.”

“Hmm. That’s odd,” I answered. “When we were out there, after we scared one lion away, my dog started acting funny, and he said, ‘*They’re* back.’”

“Only mothers and kittens live in groups, and I doubt a mama mountain lion would come back with her babies. So what happened after that?”

“He seemed jumpy and rushed me back home, then took off. When I glanced over my shoulder, he was gone.”

“Hmm. He does sound mysterious,” she said, looking intrigued. “I’ll keep out an eye for him. What does he look like?”

“He’s gorgeous,” I said.

“Yeah, you already said that. What else?”

“Well, he has black hair to his shoulders,” I answered smiling even wider, recalling every detail of his features. “And he’s got these big, bright blue eyes, almost like he was wearing those colored contacts.”

“You mean, like pastel or a piercing shade of bright blue?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” I said. “When I was a kid, there was this crayon in my box of Crayolas that was called Periwinkle. It was kind of like that, it was the rarest eye color I’ve ever seen. It was the lightest blue ever, as blue as the sky. I don’t know who he is, but I’ve gotta find out.”

She smiled. “So you’re calling dibs on the hottest guy in town already? I sure hope he has a brother.”

I put some more suntan lotion on my arms. “I’m not even sure if he lives here.”

“What would make you think otherwise?”

“Well, you said yourself that he made a mistake about the mountain lions. It seems like a local would know better. Maybe he was just hiking and is staying at one of the hotels.”

“Was he dressed like a hiker? Did he have a backpack and gear and hiking boots?”

“No, none of that.”

“Hmm. I do love a good mystery. We’ve gotta find your hunky hottie and see if he’s got an equally smoldering brother.”

I laughed. “And how are we supposed to do that? Stalk the resorts, hotels, and cabins?”

“No. I have a better idea. This guy named Jed is throwing a party tonight at his cabin. Lucky for us, I got invited. If this mysterious guy is a local, I’m sure he’ll be there.”

“And if he doesn’t show up?”

“Then we move on to Plan B.”

“Which is?”

“Stalking the resorts, hotels, and cabins.”

“Man, that’s gonna suck,” I said with a groan.

“Yep,” she said, rolling over to get some sun on her back. “If he’s a tourist, he’ll most likely be here for no more than a week or two. But even if he leaves, I’m sure there are other cute guys around here somewhere.”

I sighed. “I don’t want another cute guy. I want him.”

“Picky, picky, picky! When you show up tonight, make sure you look good. Wear something cute. If he happens to be there and he’s single, maybe you’ll snag him. At least you can find out his name this time.”

“Right,” I said, giving my new friend a fist bump.

“I need to meet somebody to forget about my ex.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling. I did meet another guy who’s pretty cute too.”

“Wow. What are you, a guy magnet?” she asked with a chuckle. “How’d you meet that one? And don’t blame your dog.”

“He knocked on my door.”

“Hey!” she laughed. “How come I don’t have that kind of luck?”

“My dad hired him to do some yard work. His name is Fred.”

“So introduce me.”

“I will.”

“Unless you want him.”

“Nah, he’s a cutie all right, but I’m all hung up on Mr. Blue Eyes. Fred’s are jade green, kinda like yours.”

“Well, anything to get my mind off my ex,” Julie said.

“My love life isn’t so great either. I was dumped about six months ago. Sean said we didn’t have the spark he needs.”

“Spark? The guy sounds like a jerk. Trust me, you’re better off with somebody else. You don’t need a guy who’d ever say something like that to a girl,” she said, adding, “If he wants a spark, maybe somebody oughtta shove a lighter up his—”

I squealed, cutting her off before she made me visualize something I didn’t want to see.

She laughed, and I couldn’t help laughing too.

“Anyway, he’s a jerk, like you said. He had a girlfriend one day after he dumped me.”

“Idiot!”

I sighed. “Tell me about it.”

Sitting up and grinning coyly, she looked at me. “So...are you ready to forget about him and have some fun?”

A huge grin spread across my face. “Definitely.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up tonight. My mom already told me where you live. Is seven okay?”

“I’ll be ready and waiting.”

“Cool. And look, Taylor, if your fiery forest friend isn’t there, don’t worry about it. I’ve got a feeling there won’t be a shortage of hotties around here—or at least I hope there won’t.”

“I’ve got a feeling we’re going to be really good friends,” I said smirking, somehow knowing it was the truth.

Chapter 3

Julie pulled up in a pickup truck. Her bright blonde hair hung in long beautiful waves, and her green eyes really popped thanks to the brown eyeshadow she’d chosen. She was dressed in tight black pants with a black glittery top that sparkled from a mile away.

“You do know we’re going to a party in the woods, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she answered. “Why?”

“You look red-carpet ready.”

She pulled down the visor and looked at herself in the mirror. “Too much?”

“Maybe a tad,” I said, gesturing with my index finger and thumb.

Her eyes twinkled like emeralds. “When I get the hottest guy in the room, I’ll be sure to give you my Academy Awards speech.”

I smiled. “Love your confidence.”

I wore a simple, black dress with a sweetheart neckline, and accessorized with a silver bracelet and black shoes. Nothing as fancy as Julie, but it was nice nonetheless.

“Get in,” she said gesturing to the passenger seat of her truck.

I pretended like I was talking into a microphone. “And the Academy Award for best dressed goes to—”

“Julie Winters!” she said with a laugh.

When she pulled into the driveway of our destination, my jaw dropped. For some reason, I had pictured a cottage in the woods, but the place was far from that. Instead, it was a huge, fancy cabin with a spacious deck and bay windows all around.

She peered at me with a huge smile. “Are you ready to find Prince Charming?”

I couldn’t help but grin. “You know it!”

She opened her compact and checked her makeup, making sure her smoky eyes were still smoky enough. "Okay. I think we're good to go."

Two thin girls with long hair and short skirts walked past us. They were so pretty, that I felt intimidated. I was sure I had no shot with my mysterious guy while those two were in the vicinity. Swallowing hard, I pondered. He had so many girls to choose from, and I felt like a beat-up station wagon in a lot full of Benzes and Ferraris. I had never been low on confidence, but I suddenly felt as if I didn't stand a chance with any guy, let alone the one I wanted.

"Taylor," my new friend said, "is this the first time you've been out in public since your breakup?"

I slammed the truck door shut. "Yeah, basically. But you know what? He's the last person on my mind."

"I guarantee by the time we go home, you'll have forgotten all about the scumbag," she assured me. "He doesn't deserve to be missed."

"I don't think about him anymore," I lied.

She smirked. "Yes, you do."

"All right," I said, "maybe just a little, but we dated for a long time, so it's only natural to—"

She grabbed my arm. "No sad stories tonight. Let's go."

Glancing around the yard, I noticed beer bottles strewn everywhere. Clusters of people were sitting around outside, and one couple was making out beside a red sports car. A drunk person stumbled down the steps, and a woman in the shortest skirt and the highest heels I'd ever seen ran over to him, laughing hysterically, probably more drunk than he was.

Somebody whistled as we walked past a group of people, and I heard a man ask, "Hey, do I know you?"

"Jed invited us," Julie said.

"Welcome to the party then," he said. "Go on in and help yourselves to some appetizers and drinks, ladies."

I smiled. "Thanks."

Inside, the music was blaring, and everyone was laughing and dancing. It was hot and sticky, and the crowd was a little older than I thought. I was surprised that none of them looked

like high school students. It reminded me of a college frat party, and I immediately wondered why Julie had even been invited?

Whether we wanted every one's attention or not, all eyes were on us, staring at us like we were some kind of two-headed unicorn. I swallowed hard, glancing from one open mouth to another. Something was wrong. I could have almost cut the tension with the proverbial knife. I wasn't sure why they were looking at us like that, so I assumed they just weren't expecting teenagers to show up at their older-crowd get-together.

"That's them," I heard a woman next to me say. "And neither one of them knows who they really are."

"Shh," the man said. "They're kept in the dark for a reason!"

"Does it matter if they hear us? They'll be dead before sunrise if Drake gets his way."

I wasn't comfortable by the woman's words. But obviously, they had mistaken us for somebody else.

When the chatter and laughter resumed, much to my relief, I nudged Julie. "We should leave, I said. "I don't feel comfortable here."

"Oh, don't be a party-pooper," Julie replied. "Look at all these hot college guys. Maybe I'll even snag one."

"Really, Julie, I think it's best we leave," I pleaded.

She put her hand on her hip and turned to face me, then actually stomped her foot like a spoiled toddler. "Seriously? You wanna go back to your boring house? Let's just have a drink and chat a little. If you still want to leave then, we will."

I looked around uneasily and swallowed hard. "I already know I want to leave now."

"Well, you didn't drive," she said.

My lips pressed into grim lines. I didn't like being forced into such a situation, and she knew it.

"Oh, all right. If you wanna leave, we'll go," she said over the loud music. "But since we got all dressed up...one drink would be nice."

She shot me that stupid puppy dog face and stuck her bottom lip out.

Just like that, I caved. "Fine. One drink, but then we're heading back to your house."

She smiled at the compromise. "I knew you'd see it my way," she said smugly.

I was sure one drink wouldn't kill us, but I still couldn't wait to get out of there. The stench of smoke wafted past me, and I stepped away from the girl who was blowing at me. I jumped when another girl hurled right beside my feet. I frowned when Julie pulled me away and into the crowd.

"You ladies want a drink?" asked a blond guy in his twenties.

Julie grinned saying, "Sure." When he walked away, her grin grew even wider. "See?" she said. "We fit right in."

"I guess it's better than sitting on the porch and listening to frogs and crickets," I said with a shrug.

"That's the spirit!" She suddenly grabbed my arm. "Hear that?"

What? The loud music or the roaring laughter? I thought. "Hear what?" I asked.

"Only my favorite song in the whole wide world!" she answered, swaying her hips to the beat of the music.

The music pounded louder as the blond guy finally returned with our drinks.

"Thanks," I said.

Just as I opened it, he slammed his bottle against mine in some kind of impromptu and uninvited toast, beer splattered my face and started to fizz all over the place.

I started to wipe my face. "Ah! What was that for?"

"Gotta pay better attention, little girl," he said with a wink and a laugh.

I didn't see what was so funny, and in a rage I turned to Julie. "I've been here less than five minutes, and I've already been soaked with beer, accosted by smoke and almost puked on!"

"Don't pay him any mind. He's drunk," she said, pulling me further into the crowd. "That spot won't take long to dry, and then no one will even notice. C'mon. Let's have some fun."

A tall guy with pretty green eyes reached for Julie, she giggled flirtatiously as he twirled her around. "I see you love to jam," he said, eying her up and down. "Wanna dance?"

"I'd love to," she said. "This is my favorite song."

He shot her a smile. "Mine too."

She glanced at me. "Do you mind?"

I couldn't possibly refuse to let her go because the invitation to dance with a college guy had her looking like she'd just won the lottery. I didn't see the harm in letting her bask in the light for one dance or two. "Have fun."

“You’re the best!” she shouted.

After she shimmied off with the green-eyed goon, I glanced around and swallowed hard again when I realized I didn’t know a soul other than her. Eager to claim my role as an unnoticed, inconspicuous wallflower, I made my way to the corner and waited for the dance to finish. I leaned against the wall sipping my drink.

The next song that came on was a slow love song. I suddenly felt even more uncomfortable standing there by myself as couples snuggled close all around me. I decided it would be better if I made my way through the crowd and headed out to the deck for some fresh air.

Just as I spun around to leave, a towering figure with brown eyes smiled at me. He looked to be in his early twenties with medium length, brown hair. “What’s a pretty girl like you doing here without a date?”

He was a handsome guy with an adorable English accent.

“Like the old song says,” I said with a shy smile, “*girls just wanna have fun.*”

“Well, dancing is fun. Would you like to?”

“Sure,” I said with a shrug.

“I’m Drake.”

My jaw dropped.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I heard a girl next to me saying my friend and I would be dead before sunrise if Drake gets his way.”

He laughed. “We’re playing Dungeons and Dragons downstairs. I’m sure they didn’t mean it figuratively. My character is abducting beautiful women for a king’s ransom. If he doesn’t pay up, I might have to execute the women.”

I laughed. “Okay, that explains it. Just please don’t kill them.”

“As long as the king pays up. But it’s just a harmless game.”

I held out my hand. “I’m Taylor.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

He seemed to be studying me as if he was trying to figure me out.

“Do you have any idea how special you are?” he asked.

Flattered, but a little shocked I peered at him. “Um, no. I’m just a regular girl.”

He looked deeply into my eyes. "You're far from regular."

"I wish," I replied, sure I must be blushing by now and hoping it was too dark for him to notice.

"You're the talk of the immortal world. And you have a destiny you cannot control."

The music was loud and I wasn't sure if I heard him right. "What?"

"Just know that you are very special, very unique."

I smiled again and said thanks.

He pushed a strand of hair from my face. "You can give my enemies everything they need, and that's why I'm debating whether or not I should kill you. But you're so captivating that it would be such a waste to hurt you."

I took a step back. "What?"

"You were led to the party so we could destroy you."

"Destroy me? Why?"

"Because I can't have you siding with my enemy."

The man was crazy and delusional. "I would never side with your enemy. And I don't play Dungeons and Dragons."

"They've already put their plan into action. And you're a key part of it. But if you're dead, it will slow them down tremendously. And I have to think about the greater good."

"Killing me is for the greater good?"

"Don't you realize everyone wants you dead? You're dying one way or the other. Does it matter if I kill you now, or if your people kill you on the destined night?"

Just as I was about to bolt from the nut job, a woman cut in. "Drake's had way too much to drink. We've been playing Dungeons and Dragons all night. He's losing touch with reality with all this booze." She tapped him on the back. "Remember, we need to keep the princess alive."

"Why?" he asked. "So our enemies can destroy us?"

"You are cut off," she replied firmly. "No more beers for you."

She shot me a smile as she led him away. "Sorry, sometimes these guys get a little carried away with their fantasy role play. Especially when they've been drinking."

A little puzzled, I decided it was time to find Julie, who of course wanted to stay longer, even though I was beyond ready to call it a night. I told her about crazy Drake, and the cute guy she was with brushed it off, saying Drake got like this when he played Dungeons and Dragons. I

was told to just ignore him. Julie told me the same thing and assured me that nobody wanted us dead. She and I did shots, but all in all, she drank far more than I did. After the drinks loosened me up a little, I did dance with a few other guys and made lots of small talk as the minutes ticked by.

After a while, Julie leaned on my shoulder in a drunken stupor. “He wants me to go upstairs with him. Should I go? I mean, I’m totally turned on right now, and—”

“You’re drunk,” I said interrupting her and snatching the drink out of her hand. “Consider yourself cut off and you’re definitely not going upstairs with him or anybody else on my watch.”

“What!?” she shrieked. “Why am I cut off?”

“Because you have to drive us home. I can’t drive a stick.”

“You’re right,” she admitted. “I’ll start trying to sober up. Besides, the last thing I need is a bad reputation already. I just got here!”

“Exactly.”

When she leaned on me with all her weight, I almost stumbled. “I’m so glad you’re here to watch out for me,” she said. “You’re my new best friend. We girls gotta stick together. And you know what?”

“What?” I asked.

“Where’s the guy who promised to bring me coffee? My head feels like there’s a thunderstorm in it.”

“I didn’t know somebody was getting you coffee.”

“Not just somebody,” she said, with a dreamy look. “An angel. The caffeine angel.”

I almost laughed at her, but I didn’t feel that would be appropriate. “You’re so wasted,” I said instead.

“No really,” she said, “a blue-eyed angel offered to bring me a cup-a-jo. Blue eyes like Heaven, where he comes from.”

Wait...light blue eyes? Maybe....periwinkle eyes? My heart began to thump in excitement that I hoped wouldn’t be for nothing.

In the next second, she turned to a guy and smiled. “You’re back...and you really did bring me coffee. How sweet. Thank you.”

When I could muster up the courage to glance up at her hero, I found myself staring right into the eyes of my own, my handsome stranger from the forest. My heart pounded out a

symphony all its own, as I stared into his intense, vivid blue eyes. I couldn't pull my eyes away from his face, drinking in every detail of his sharply chiseled face. I'd never seen such a beautiful face before, such a masterpiece of strength, contours and beauty. It was like something off the cover of a romance novel or some dapper leading man in a classic romance movie. This time he was wearing a white shirt, dark blue jeans and a well-worn bomber jacket. I was immediately envious of all that cotton, denim and leather, tightly hugging his gorgeous body.

"Hi. I'm Jesse," he said, as he smiled and held his hand out to me.

"Taylor," I said, unable to put a whole sentence together.

"Nice to officially meet you. You've been on my mind since the second I met you."

I couldn't help but smile at his blatant flirtations, the heat in my blushing cheeks scorched my skin. I was absolutely melting.

Another slow song began and Jesse casually took off his jacket and smiled. The fabric of his long-sleeved shirt clung to his broad shoulders and muscular chest, the white cotton making his shoulder-length hair stand out even more.

He offered me his hand like a perfect gentleman. "Would you like to dance?"

"I'd love to," I answered with a grin, taking his hand.

He flashed his leading-man smile at me as he wrapped his arms around my waist and I placed my arms on his shoulders. My heart suddenly began beating out a new rhythm of excitement. We stared intently into each other's eyes as we danced slowly to the music. I was nervous, but at the same time, I felt comfortable and safe, scared but happy. I'd never felt such a strange mix of emotions, and I couldn't stop smiling. There was a thrilling, rushing, euphoric something going on between us, and for that one timeless moment everything in my life seemed perfect.

As we swayed with the beat of the song, he held me close and I rested my head in the crook of his neck.

It felt wonderful.

I never would have imagined myself dancing with someone like Jesse, someone so beautiful. I couldn't believe *he* was holding *me*. I felt I was walking on air. I'd always laughed at that cliché before, but for the first time, I suddenly knew what it meant.

Some of the guys I'd been chit-chatting with at the party didn't seem to be fans of him and I dancing. I could feel the weight of the glares they were shooting at me like daggers in the back.

As much as I wanted to be with Jesse, I didn't want to cause any trouble, so I thought it was best that we head back to Julie's house. I had a nice buzz, wasn't trashed like she was. When I glanced through the crowd looking for her, I noticed that she was drinking a second cup of coffee. I hoped that would sober her up enough to drive us home in one piece.

"I hope she's okay to drive," I said to Jesse.

"If not, I'm sure you'll get her home safe and sound."

"Do you live around here?"

"Yes, here in Big Bear Lake."

Excitement flooded through me when I discovered he wasn't merely a tourist who'd be taking off soon. I smiled up at him, then glanced down and noticed a bracelet on his arm. It was leather woven with silver beads and decorated with weird symbols. "I love that," I said, nodding toward it, "but what do the symbols mean?"

He shot me the most beautiful grin, a movie star smile. "You've gotta get to know me better before I can tell you all my deep, dark secrets."

He smiled when he said it, but I got the feeling he wasn't joking.

I gave him my best flirty smile. "Is that a promise?"

"You have my word...and my word is my bond."

I smiled again, then nervously fidgeted with my hands like some silly little middle-schooler. I really had no idea how to keep up a conversation with such a hot guy, and every word was a struggle.

"How old are you?" I finally asked, since I couldn't think of anything else.

"Seventeen," he answered.

"Really!? Me too."

"So is this a new school year for you?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"Maybe we'll be in some of the same classes."

"Nah, I'm home-schooled. My mom is a bona-fide control freak, and—"

He was cut short when Julie yelled, "Taylor!" adding, "I feel sick. I think I'm gonna pass out."

When I turned and looked toward her she was pale and teetering. I rushed over, but before I could reach her, she swayed to the left and toppled over. She tried to grab a side table on the way down, but it didn't help. She crashed to the floor, knocking a huge vase over in the process.

"Oh my gosh!" I cried, hurtling toward her through the crowd. "Julie!"

The alcohol was one thing, but I couldn't understand why blood was gushing from her neck, running down onto her shirt.

Chapter 4

I ran over to my friend looking down at her wounds, I assumed the shattered vase shards must have cut her during the fall. I hoped she wouldn't need stitches, because she was bleeding pretty profusely. Someone handed me a kitchen towel. I quickly applied pressure to the wound. As the blood began to soak through the towel, I realized she needed medical attention. "She needs a hospital or a doctor or maybe some stitches and—"

"No!" said a woman, who was suddenly standing over me, looking down at Julie. "It's a shallow cut, nothing a bandage and some peroxide can't fix."

"Are you sure?" I asked, unconvinced. "I mean, she's bleeding really bad, and—"

"Positive," she said sharply, cutting me off. "I'm a medic. Let me go get my medical kit from the car."

I squeezed Julie's hand. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "I-I think so."

"Just lie still and hold on," I said trying to comfort her. "There's a medic here, and she's going to help."

"A medic?" Julie asked. "Wow. Lucky for me. I drank way too much, huh?"

"Yeah, that's putting it lightly. Do you remember me cutting you off?"

"Yeah," she answered, offering me a weak half smile, "but I still snuck drinks behind your back."

Knowing it was important to keep Julie awake, I kept her engaged in conversation until the woman came back.

"Can you give me a hand?" the woman asked Jesse.

"Sure," he replied.

She then went to work, first cleansing the wound, then covering it with a sterile white bandage.

Once Julie was all fixed up, Jesse and I helped her back to her feet.

“See?” she slurred. “Good as new.”

“It’d be best if she gets some rest now,” said the medic.

“But I-I can’t drive,” Julie stuttered. “I’m toasted...and now wounded from a pissed-off vase.”

Jesse pulled me to the side. “Can you get her home?” he asked in a whisper.

“This is so embarrassing, but her truck’s a stick shift, and I’ve got no idea how to drive one. I probably can’t drive any safer than she can right now.”

“Lucky for you, I can,” he said.

“But then how will you get back?”

“I can walk.”

“No, it’s way too far, Jesse.”

“I’ll be fine.” He bit his lip looking down at Julie as if he was worried. “It’s best we sneak out of here.”

I furrowed a brow asking, “Sneak out? Why?”

“Did you see that guy she was dancing with?”

“Yeah, I think she might have told me his name, but I forgot.”

“It’s Jonathon. And he’s an absolute psycho. I’m afraid he might follow her home if he sees her leaving.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, shaking my head in disbelief. “That’s insane!”

“I heard him claim her, and I heard some of the other guys claiming you. They may look like average, drunken frat boys, but they’re beyond dangerous. Trust me Taylor, the nice guys are outnumbered at this party. I’ve got a couple of buddies here, but we’re no match against all the others. They’ll jump us, and I’m not sure we can protect you both.”

“Wait...claiming people? Just what kind of party did she bring me to?” I muttered to myself.

“A dangerous one,” he retorted, obviously overhearing my comment. “My buddies will distract them while I sneak you two out the back door.”

“Great idea. Maybe they won’t see us leave.”

“That’s the plan,” he said, still looking concerned.

Jesse wrapped his arm around Julie and helped her walk out the back door of the cabin. Gripping my purse tightly, I followed. Once outside, I felt a cool breeze blow through my hair, and shuddered wishing I’d worn a jacket. I couldn’t believe the extreme temperature change. Earlier that day, I’d been sunning on the beach, and now Mother Nature had invited Jack Frost over for a nightcap.

“How much did you have to drink?” Jesse asked Julie.

“She’s had way too much,” I answered for her. “I bet she’ll puke all over the truck.”

“Hey!” Julie said. “I can answer for myself.” Her gaze turned to Jesse. “Mr. Gorgeous, Handsome Prince, I had lots of beers, a Long Island iced tea, more beers, and some shots,” she answered. “Oh, and there was this one bubbly purple thing, the color of that dinosaur on the kids’ show and—”

“Do you remember where the keys to your truck are?” he asked, cutting her off before the confession could continue.

“Hmm. Maybe you’ll have to frisk me, Officer McHottie,” she said in a flirty tone.

I rolled my eyes, mouthed an apology to Jesse, then reached into her pocket and grabbed them. “They’re right here.”

“Hey!” she said. “I didn’t want *you* to frisk me!”

“This isn’t the time for games Julie,” I snapped. “We have to get out of here and back home.”

“I’m freezing!” she retorted. “Who turned on the air?”

I spotted a light blue sweater on the seat of her truck, and I reached in and grabbed it. “Wear this,” I said handing it to her.

She put it on and smiled. “Mmm...so warm. Gosh, I’m so drunk. Thank you though.”

Jesse helped my intoxicated new best friend into her pickup. She sat between us and laid her head on his shoulder. He glanced at me questioningly, but all I could do was shrug and apologize again, on behalf of my drunken friend.

“I guess she had a little too much to drink,” I whispered.

He laughed. “A little?”

Julie tapped him. “Are you Prince Charming?”

“What?” he replied, turning the key in the ignition, “because I helped bandage you up?”

“Are you the hot guy from the woods?” Julie asked, ignoring his question. “The hero who saved Little Red Riding Taylor from the big, bad mountain lion?”

“Julie!” I exclaimed, a crimson blush flooding my cheeks.

Before Jesse could answer, she continued. “You have black hair and eyes like that crayon. Taylor told me all about you.”

My cheeks grew even hotter with embarrassment. I suddenly wished with all my heart that my life had a rewind button.

“And Taylor was right,” she continued, unabashed. “Your eyes are gorgeous, like the sky.”

I cleared my throat and glanced at him awkwardly. “You do have pretty eyes,” I admitted, with a sheepish grin.

“And so do you,” he responded, grinning back at me.

I couldn’t stop smiling from his compliment as we sped along the road, until all of the sudden something jerked us forward.

“What the heck?” Julie asked stunned.

I looked around as we came to a jerky stop. “Feels like we blew a tire.”

“That sucks,” Julie slurred. “I don’t have a spare.”

“Are you sure?”

“I used it last month.”

Julie’s mom was working the night shift at the hotel, and wouldn’t home until eight a.m. at the latest. So if we got home a little bit late, she wouldn’t know.

I pondered what we should do. “We can just walk. I don’t think we’re that far away from your house.”

“Absolutely not!” Jesse said firmly, shaking his head. “I’ll call somebody.” He flipped his phone open, dialed, and was almost immediately talking to one of his friends.

“Julie, how are you feeling?” I asked. “Are you doing okay?”

“I’m fine. I forgot to tell you I drank a Long Island iced tea. Do you know how much liquor they put in those things?”

“Yeah, you told me already. How’s your neck?”

“Fine, but that stupid vase nailed me real good. Wanna know the worst part though?”

“What?”

She sighed. “I didn’t even get the blond’s phone number. He was so hot.”

“Trust me,” Jesse cut in, “you don’t want that guy’s number.”

“Yes I do,” she answered.

“He’s way too dangerous,” he warned.

“A bad boy, huh? I like that.”

“Not a bad boy. He’s a bad man—a real bad man—and like many of the guys back there, he’s nothing but trouble. You two had no business being at that party, out in the middle of the woods, with a bunch of older strangers.”

Julie turned toward Jesse. “Yeah? Well, I guess we were lucky you were looking out for us.”

“If I hadn’t been there…” His voice trailed off.

“So what can we do about the tire?” she asked.

Jesse opened the door and started to climb out. “My friend’s coming. I’ll wait outside for him. You two stay put.”

“Why not stay in here with us?” I asked.

“Because I have to make sure the big, bad wolf doesn’t come and eat you.”

“Ooh. Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” Julie slurred.

I laughed as he slammed the door shut.

“He’s cute,” Julie whispered, “and funny too.”

“Yeah, but if that party was so dangerous, what was he doing there?”

“Maybe he’s just as dark and dangerous as they are,” she replied in a creepy voice.

“I hope not.”

“Boo!” she said as she grabbed my arm.

I jumped and screamed. “Julie! Stop that!”

She began laughing like a crazy person. “Oh, man! You…Taylor, you shoulda seen your face! Priceless.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny.”

“I’m sorry the party didn’t work out, but at least you found Prince Charming. Wasn’t that the important thing?” she said with a sly smile, as she gave me a fist-bump.

Grinning, I bumped her back.

“Look at you, all lusty at first sight for our knight in shining armor.”

“There’s definitely a connection.”

“It’s obvious that you’re attracted to him like there’s no tomorrow.”

I smiled and couldn’t possibly deny it.

“You’ve got it for him big time, don’t ya?” she asked.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Then why are you sitting in here talking to me when he’s out there all by himself, glistening in the moonlight?”

“I’m sure girls throw themselves at him all the time. I don’t wanna be like that.”

“Going out there and saying hello would not be throwing yourself at him, unless you intend to take your top off while you do it,” she said, with a mischievous wink.

I laughed. “Very funny. Okay, I guess it would be nice to go keep him company.”

She grinned as I hopped out of the cab.

“Hey, Taylor.”

“Yeah?”

“Go get em, tiger!”

I softly chuckled at her comment. Outside, Jesse was sitting on the edge of the truck bed, his gorgeous black locks blowing in the wind.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.”

“Need some company?” I asked.

His eyes twinkled in the moonlight. “I’d love some.”

I sat next to him on the tailgate. “Keeping us safe from all the wild animals out prowling around?”

“Lots of dangerous predators hunt at night,” he answered.

“Like the mountain lion?” I asked, as I smiled and gazed into his eyes.

“Yeah.”

“Lucky I’ve got you here.”

“I almost didn’t come tonight. Now I’m glad I did.”

I smiled, nervously tossing my hair to the side. “If you knew it was dangerous, why did you—”

Before I could even get the question out, he quickly shifted his gaze to the left and scanned dark, dense forest. “Taylor,” he said urgently, “get back in the truck and lock the doors!”

I smiled, thinking he was joking. “Why? Are we being stalked, maybe more mountain lions?”

He didn’t laugh, though. His face was tense and full of concern. “Please get back inside the truck,” he pleaded.

Knowing he was dead set on protecting me and realizing how serious he was, I didn’t protest. I opened the door and climbed in.

“What’s going on?” asked Julie.

I tried to get a glimpse of what had him so concerned, but saw nothing. “He thinks there’s something out there.”

“Really? Like what?”

“I’m guessing a wild animal or something.”

She blew out a breath and glanced out the window. “He needs to get his butt inside too. I don’t wanna watch him get torn to shreds!” She rolled down the window and shouted. “Jesse! Get your butt in back in here.”

He didn’t respond. Instead he continued pacing at the edge of the road, staring deep into the dark towering trees. I began to get really creeped out.

Where the heck is this friend of his?

BANG!

Suddenly, something shattered the driver’s-side window of the truck. I ducked as broken glass sprayed everywhere. Disoriented, I glanced up at Julie.

“Now *you’re* bleeding!” Julie shouted. “Where’s that medic when we need her?”

Chapter 5

I glanced down and realized that some of the glass from the window had cut the top of my hand. “It’s okay,” I said, “I just got cut when the glass shattered.”

Suddenly, rifle shots were echoing through the darkness.

I froze, and a cold chill shot down my spine.

“Some body’s shooting at us!” cried Julie, her voice wavering as she stated the obvious. “We’re being robbed or something!”

I wanted to say something, but the words remained frozen in my throat. I could only shake my head in shared disbelief. I reached for my phone and quickly called 911, but the call wouldn't go through. "Great," I said. "No signal!"

"Same here," Julie said, trembling with fright as she stared at her own phone.

"Jesse!" I shouted through the broken window. I glanced around for him, but he was nowhere in sight.

BOOM!

More glass shattered, like rock candy, spraying us with shards as the windshield was shot out.

"We've gotta get outta here!" I called. "Some crazy person is shooting at us, and I've kinda got the feeling they aren't gonna stop until we're dead."

"No!" exclaimed Julie, paralyzed with fear. "I'm not leaving. If we step out of this truck, it'll be like target practice for our trigger-happy stalker!"

"If we stay in this truck, we're as good as dead."

She met my gaze, her eyes wide with terror, clearly scared sober.

"We can hide in the woods," I begged, gripping her hands.

"No way! Haven't you ever seen a horror movie in your life? The hockey mask guy always chases the girls into the woods, and I don't wanna be chopped up with a meat cleaver!"

"That's just the movies, Julie. I've been in those woods already," I said, trying to reason with her. "It's so dark and there are so many trees, shrubs and boulders. He'll never find us."

"But what about Jesse?" she whispered.

Droplets of sweat rolled down my face. "I-I don't know. I don't see him anywhere."

"So he just abandoned us? Your knight in shining armor left two damsels in distress? Humph. Some Prince Charming he turned out to be."

I tentatively glanced out the window, and another chill shot down my spine as I noticed a puddle on the street, glimmering crimson in the moonlight. "Oh my gosh!" I gasped.

"What?" she asked.

Biting my lip hard, I pointed. "Blood! Jesse's hurt."

She cautiously glanced out, peeking through her fingers the way someone would look at a car accident, then let out a trembling breath. "Wh-where did he go?"

A cold feeling washed over me and I felt as if all the blood had instantly drained from my face. “I dunno,” I answered, my voice trembling.

BANG!

More glass shattered, as a bullet destroyed one of the side windows, garnering another scream from Julie.

I gripped Julie’s hand. “We’ve gotta get out of here! We’re sitting ducks if we stay.”

She nodded, finally realizing I was right.

I opened the glove compartment, fumbling around through all sorts of junk, everything from gum wrappers, to a tire gauge, to coupons for fast food places. “You got a flashlight?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “I know I should, but I didn’t expect to be...”

As her voice trailed off, I heard an unmistakable howl echoing in the distance, and the hair on my neck rose.

“Did you hear that?” Julie frantically whispered. “Maybe my Little Red Riding Hood joke wasn’t so far off. There are wolves out there, Taylor! Wolves!”

With that cruel realization, I second-guessed my decision to run into the woods, but staying in the truck and being easy pickings for the deranged Rambo wasn’t an option either.

Swallowing hard, I slipped out of the passenger’s door and stayed low. Adrenaline spiked in my veins, I had to force myself to take slow breaths. I motioned for Julie to follow me, and we slowly crept into the woods. Eerie shadows stretched and shifted in the trees like ghouls.

Darting forward, I jumped over some fallen logs, zigzagging through the towering trees. I was going as fast as the burning muscles in my legs would allow, dry leaves and twigs crunching beneath my feet. I continued checking over my shoulder and was glad to see that Julie’s drunk escapade had worn off enough so that she could run. I glanced over my shoulder. Moonlight glinted off of her sparkly shirt letting me know she was right behind me.

I scanned the woods in front of us and something off to the side caught my eye, I spun and spied an alternate route that squeezed through the clustered trees. I quickly veered towards it in the hopes of escaping our pursuer.

A few feet behind us, within earshot, twigs snapped and ferns rustled as if someone or something was hot on our trail. I wasn’t sure if it was a human, mountain lion, or some other variety of predator. I twisted through the overgrown ferns and foliage, running faster and calling to Julie encouraging her to hurry. I suddenly remembered something from the party and turned to

Julie to tell her about it. “I met this weird guy named Drake back at the party,” I said, panting from all the running. “He was lost in some role play from a game of Dungeons and Dragons. He said that he was debating killing me. Maybe he’s the one chasing us.”

“So he’s living out his fantasies?” she asked.

“Yeah, he could be. He said I could help his enemies and that they would destroy him.”

“He’s clearly lost touch with reality.”

“He went off the deep end.”

“Taylor!” I heard Jesse’s voice call.

I had no idea how he found us with all the turns and twists I’d led us through, but it was a relief to know that he was there and hadn’t deserted us after all.

I saw Jesse and watched as he sucked in a deep breath holding his chest, where blood was dripping from a gaping wound.

I gasped, taking a deep trembling breath. “Jesse, I saw blood by the truck. Are you okay?”

He struggled to breathe. “I was...he shot me.”

My pulse pounded in my ears. I had no idea what to do for a gunshot wound. Even if I had known, I was too scared to think clearly enough to play nurse.

Julie took off her sweater, pressed it to Jesse’s chest and applied pressure. “Stay calm, she said, “and whatever you do, don’t pass out.”

“We need to keep moving,” I told them. “We gotta get back on the road and find help.”

“He’ll have no idea where we’re coming out,” Julie added as we walked briskly, helping Jesse along.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “I just need a little while to recuperate.”

“Uh-uh, buddy. Don’t go trying to be Mr. Macho right now. This isn’t like shaking off a twisted ankle,” Julie warned. “You were shot, for goodness sake! You need surgery, medical help, and a lot of prayers.”

I pushed some branches aside, stepping into the dense vegetation, a strange noise caught my attention and I then straightened to listen. Barking, whining, and haunting howls echoed in the night air. It seemed like we had lost the maniac shooter, but now we were wandering around a lonely forest, through a dark labyrinth of trees, and by judging the sounds possibly being stalked by a pack of wolves.

“We gotta keep moving,” said Jesse.

Suddenly, a deeper more menacing howl, rang through the forest, making my hands shake. It reminded me of a bloodhound my neighbor had once owned. These sounds were different though, what sounded like a pack of wolves screeching in the night was beyond freaky, it was downright ominous.

We kept going, climbing over slippery logs and jagged rocks, pushing our way through thick underbrush and tall grass. My foot caught on a broken log and a cluster of rocks, but before I toppled over, I somehow managed to regain my equilibrium. I didn't fall but I twisted my ankle, it throbbed, now slowing me down.

More howls.

"It sounds like they're getting close, too close," Julie said. "We'll never outrun them."

"Forget the wolves," I said. "They just add ambiance to our spooky night hike."

She shook her head. "How are you so calm?" she asked as we stumbled along through the thick terrain. "Jesse's dying, we're lost in the woods, a trigger-happy madman might be following us, and now some wolves wanna make a midnight snack out of us. All things considered, maybe the hockey mask guy with the meat cleaver would be better."

"I'm not dying," Jesse said, leaning into me, using us as human crutches.

"Sorry," said Julie. "I don't mean to be so negative. I guess I'm still a little drunk, wondering if this is all a dream and hoping I'm really passed out back at that party."

I stumbled on another log, somehow managing to regain my balance again. I was dressed for a party, not exactly wearing hiking boots. I was desperately trying to stay calm and wanted to reassure Jesse and Julie. "Don't be scared," I said. "Wolves are predators, but they don't attack humans. After my run-in with the mountain lion, my dad gave me a long lecture on all the wildlife around here."

Jesse looked at me. "You still have a lot to learn about these woods."

"But wolves naturally fear humans," I said confidently.

"These wolves don't," said Jesse.

"Wolves have been known to leave a kill when they saw a human coming in their direction," I argued. "Besides, I'm more scared about the guy who shot at us." Looking at Jesse, I saw fresh blood soaking into Julie's sweater. "We really need to get you to the hospital."

"Wolves are...predators," Jesse gasped out between breaths.

I glanced at him skeptically. “They may be predators, but they almost never attack people. My dad said that in the past century, there have only been two incidents in North America. He wouldn’t lie to me, not when he wants me to be safe out here.” I glanced back over my shoulder and gasped seeing large canine silhouettes not far behind. “Wait...they *are* following us! They’re not acting right. Do you think they have rabies or something?”

“Or something,” said Jesse, suddenly stopping and pointing to the right. “There’s a cabin up there. Maybe someone’s home who can help us.”

I glanced ahead but couldn’t see anything. I wasn’t sure but I thought he might be hallucinating from blood loss, like a thirsty man seeing an oasis mirage in the desert. As the howls grew louder coming closer and closer. I hoped my imagination was just playing tricks on me. *Nope. Wolves don’t hunt humans*, I kept telling myself, but I wasn’t sure if I could believe it, in spite of my dad and Animal Planet.

“There it is!” gasped Julie. “How’d you see it from that far away?” she asked Jesse.

He just moaned and didn’t answer.

It was still hard to see, but I could make out a structure in the moonlight, a cabin looming in the distance. The barking and howling growing louder still, I knew the wolves had captured our scent. I hoped the cabin would offer us safety and a land line. That hope was the only thing that kept me sane and calm.

“Hurry!” said Jesse urgently.

My gaze was now fixed on the target destination and with new determination I put my body into gear. I knew we needed to run, but Jesse was leaning on us for support.

Only thirty-feet to go. Ugh! Why does it feel like a freaking football field?

There was no time to look back, but I had to take a tiny peek over my shoulder to see how close the wolves actually were.

With their curiosity piqued, the snarling, growling, hungry animals were gaining on us.

Twenty-five more feet. Just fifteen more...now ten...five...three. Almost there! Just another foot!

We climbed up the stairs and pounded on the door.

“Help!” I screamed.

Why wouldn’t someone just open the door?!

I pounded even harder.

No answer.

“The pack’s coming!” Julie shouted. “Just break a window or something!”

When I glanced over my shoulder, I gulped as more growls and snarls filled the air. I jiggled the doorknob, but it was locked.

“C’mon!” Julie shrieked, terrified.

My heart thundered. “It’s locked!”

“Let me try!” said Jesse.

He threw his shoulder into the door, busting the lock pretty easily. I breathed a sigh of relief, but just as I went to rush inside, powerful arms gripped me from behind.

Chapter 6

I gasped as I glanced up and saw one of the guys from the party, the guy Julie had been dancing with, the “psycho” Jesse had warned us about. I fought and flailed as Jonathon attempted to restrain me.

In a flash, Jesse lunged at Jonathon, knocking him to the ground.

The fiend’s grip loosened and I jumped to my feet.

“Get inside!” Jesse ordered.

I grabbed Julie’s hand and pulled her inside. “Let’s find a weapon to help him.”

“The kitchen!” suggested Julie.

We bolted inside the cabin.

With my heart racing, I glanced around looking for the light switch. My fingers skimmed over it on the wall by the, and lights flickered on.

“Is anybody here?” I screamed.

“Help us!” Julie shouted. “Is anybody here?”

But there was no answer.

I glanced around the cabin, it was furnished, so either everyone was asleep or it was a vacant rental. I walked through the living room and into the kitchen with Julie in tow. We frantically began rummaging through the kitchen drawers, looking for anything we could use to

defend ourselves. My fingers curled around a butcher knife, just as Julie held a long sharp steak knife.

“I guess it wasn’t that crazy guy I met at the party, that Drake,” I said.

“Nope, guess not. It’s my crazy crush from the party.”

“Why is Jonathon chasing us?”

“If he wanted my number, he could’ve just asked.”

“What!? The guy’s a psychopath, Julie. Do *not* give him your number!”

“Maybe if I go out there and talk to him, I can—” she began.

“No! He’s been chasing us. You can’t reason with someone who has been shooting at us. I’m pretty sure he wants us dead.”

Her eyes widened as she pondered the situation and reality hit. She grabbed my arm. “I’m so sorry I got you into this!” she said, near tears.

“It’s not your fault. Listen, just stay here, okay? I’ve gotta help Jesse. He’s hurt and can’t fend Jonathon off by himself.”

She nodded and I rushed back to the front door, finding it now closed.

Just as I grabbed the doorknob, Julie touched my shoulder causing me to jump. I clutched my chest in an attempt to calm my racing heart.

“Don’t go out there,” Julie begged.

“I have to help Jesse. He needs me.”

“Well, then I’ll help too,” she responded, flicking on the porch light and peering through the curtains. “I don’t see him.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“I want to help Jesse,” said Julie, “but what if that lunatic is out there waiting for us?”

The knife in my hands shook. “How’d a party turn into...this? This night was supposed to be fun, not some kind of life-and-death battle with murderers and wolves.”

“We can’t go out there,” Julie pleaded.

My heart was racing as fear washed over me. I peeked out through the window. I saw nothing but the dark sky and towering trees.

I tried to keep my composure, but my lips were quivering. “Listen, stay here. I’ll be right back. I promise.”

“No!” cried Julie. “Don’t you dare!”

“I have to see if Jesse is okay. He’d do the same for me.”

“What if he’s gone already and that guy attacks you?”

I swallowed past the lump of fear in my throat. “It’s a chance I have to take.”

She took a deep breath. “Then I’m coming with you.”

As I opened the creaking door and stepped onto the porch, a snarling wolf lunged for my ankle. I immediately jumped back inside and slammed the door. My breath caught in my throat. I was absolutely terrified.

Just stay calm.

A shudder ran through me as I tried to figure out what to do.

With shaking fingers, Julie put the chain lock on. Luckily, it wasn’t on when Jesse initially broke the door lock, so it wasn’t destroyed.

“What now?” she shouted.

We peered out the window and saw at least a dozen of the animals circling the porch and front yard. There was no sign of any human, Jesse, psychopath, or otherwise. I knew Jesse would never run off and leave us there. I didn’t know him all that well, but I was sure he wasn’t the kind of guy who would do that to us. He had after all, risked being jumped to sneak us out of the party. My biggest fear was that he had succumbed to the bullet wound, that he’d passed out and the wolves had gotten him. My heart ached at the thought.

“The back door is locked!” called Julie from the kitchen.

“Good.” An idea suddenly seized me. “Can we possibly get out that way?”

“Nope,” she answered. “It’s wolf Central out back.”

“We need to see if Jesse is out there. He’s hurt, and drastic times call for drastic measures.”

“But we already tried, and that stupid thing almost bit your foot off.”

An idea popped into my head. “Maybe we can distract them with meat.”

“Sure. Let’s just whip up a medium-rare T-bone or two.”

“Seriously, it could work,” I said, ignoring her grim cynicism. “We could distract them, then run for the main road and get some help. Jesse’s hurt, and we need to help him before...” I couldn’t even finish the thought, because it turned my stomach. I knew we had to act fast, so instead of arguing with Julie about it, I walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge. Unfortunately I found nothing, but a jug of water, a bottle of mustard and a wrinkly radish in the bottom of the vegetable crisper.

“Shoot,” I said. “No doggie treats in here.”

“This blows!”

“We have to think positive. Maybe Jesse got away. Maybe he’s getting help this very minute.”

“Yeah? Well, what if he’s dead? And what if that crazy lunatic comes back for us?”

Just then the wolves howled even louder, making the hair on the back of my neck stand at attention.

“At least wolves can’t break into the cabin.” I tried to sound positive, but I was scared to death. “And if anyone tries to come in here, they’ll be attacked. Jonathon won’t stand a chance when this place is surrounded by wolves.”

“But you said wolves don’t attack humans,” Julie reminded me.

I sighed heavily. “I know, but Jesse’s right about these wolves. For whatever reason, they don’t seem scared of us.” I whipped out my cell and dialed 911, again without success. “Still no signal.”

Knock-knock!

My heart jumped at the sudden tap on the door. I froze for a moment, then gripped the butcher knife in my hands tightly. Even though chills were running down my spine again, I started to sweat profusely. I was a nervous wreck. Terrified thoughts flooded my mind. *What if it’s Jonathon playing games with us? What if it’s someone who can help? Should we hide?* I knew hiding might be risky, since our only real hope for rescue might be on the other side of that door. Then again, I also knew that opening the door might seal our fate for good.

Julie stared at me, her eyes wide. “Don’t answer it,” she whispered.

“I’ll just peek out the window.”

“No!” she whispered back.

I ignored her and crept to the front window, my hands shaking.

Outside I saw Jesse leaning against the door, the wolves circling him with exposed teeth, snarling and drooling.

“It’s Jesse!” I shouted back to Julie.

Then, from out of the darkness, a tall shadow emerged. I gasped again as I made out his features. Jonathon!

“Jesse!” I shouted, but it was too late! Before I could warn him, Jonathon grabbed him from behind.

Somehow despite being injured, Jesse broke Jonathon’s stronghold and lunged back at him. He tried to ram his head and shoulders into Jesse, but with a big push Jesse hurled the guy five-feet. In a flash, he had grabbed Jesse again and was lifting him over his head, he threw him like a rag-doll. Jesse crashed straight into the door, hitting it so violently that the door flew off the hinges with a loud *bang*.

“Jesse!” I screamed. “Get in here!”

“Can I come in?” he asked, a strange question, that made me wonder if he’d hit his head a little too hard.

“Yes,” I said. “Come in!”

He hobbled in, bleeding profusely. Droplets of blood staining the hard wood floor.

Jesse stood in the doorway, glaring at his attacker, who was still seeing red, clearly blind with rage. Jonathon’s sinister gaze swept over me and my heart began to thunder in my chest. I didn’t understand why he was just standing there like that? He wasn’t trying to attack or push his way in. In that strange moment of silence, Julie and I looked at each other in complete shock.

“Let’s go!” I screamed, pulling on Jesse’s arm.

“We’re safe now,” he said.

“Maybe, but for how long?” Julie retorted. She motioned us over and we worked together to scoot a heavy china cabinet in front of the door. “You hit him pretty hard, he’s disoriented now, but as soon as he gets his head back in the game he’ll try to come in. All he has to do is take one step through the open doorway.”

I went around and pulled the curtains closed on all the windows, so crazy Jonathon couldn’t see us.

“Trust me,” said Jesse calmly. “He won’t burst through our barricade.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Julie asked, breathing heavily in quick shallow heaves. “If we could move that cabinet, he most certainly can. Our cells don’t work. We need to find a land line and call 911.”

I tried to help Jesse to the couch but he was stubborn and refused to lay down. I gazed around searching for a phone, but didn’t see one. “We don’t have much of a choice. And I can’t let you die here. I’m gonna go get help. Julie can stay here with you.”

“No, don’t,” said Jesse, grabbing my arm. “You step out that door and you’re dead.”

Pushing the drapes aside, I nervously glanced out the window.

The guy outside held up a lighter. “Don’t think I can’t burn you out!” he shouted.

I sucked in a deep breath.

Please don’t let him do that!

“He’s going to torch the cabin!” Julie said.

My eyes widened in horror as my heart pounded.

Julie stepped back with a trembling breath. “What are going to do?”

“Grab the knives! Let’s get Jesse, and get the heck outta here!”

“We can’t leave,” Jesse said.

“And we can’t stay and be toast either,” Julie retorted.

This cabin could go up in flames. We would be better off to take our chances hiding in the forest. If we could get past the wolves, we could have a chance in the darkness. “Julie’s right. We gotta go!”

As I started to help Jesse, Jonathon screamed in agony.

“Look!” Julie pointed.

The guy screamed more as two snarling wolves bit into his flesh. He flailed with all his might, but the wolves just dug in harder.

I hated witnessing anything that violent. It made my stomach turn. But I knew it was the perfect time for a great escape! “The wolves are surrounding him. We have to leave while the wolves and the killer are distracted.”

Julie looked out through the curtains. “Wait! He’s gone!”

I took a closer look. Jonathon was gone. “Did they drag him off?”

Julie let out a shuddering breath. “I don’t know, but wolves are still circling. I don’t think he’s our problem anymore.”

“One down, one to go,” I said. “Now all we have to do is get past the pack. If we do, we’re home free.”

Just then, a long plaintive wail echoed through the air, followed by a chorus of defiant howls.

I turned and looked at Jesse, who was still bleeding profusely. “Let’s get you to bed, and I’ll go look for medical supplies.”

He leaned against the wall for support and gasped. "I'll be fine. We have more important things to worry about."

"Fine my butt!" I said, my voice wavering. "You need a doctor."

He winced in pain and his blue eyes watered. "I promise," he said with a groan. "I'll see one in the morning."

Julie looked at him and shook her head. "You mean *if* you live that long. You're sweating like a thief in church," she said, feeling his forehead. "Oh my gosh! You're burning up." She gripped my arm. "He must have a fever of 110! We can't stay here. If we do, the news will be reporting a homicide tonight, one hot young guy with a bullet wound to the chest."

I felt Jesse's head and realized she was absolutely right. He felt like he was on fire. "It's not safe in here. That man could easily push through our makeshift barrier. We need to get outta here and lose him in the forest. Then we need to get Jesse to the ER."

"That's exactly what he wants," Jesse warned. "Our best bet is to stay here until first light."

Julie peeked out the window again. "That guy's dead. The place is swarming with wolves. Maybe Jesse's right, let's stay here a few hours and see if the pack leaves."

I helped Jesse into a recliner.

He glanced up at me, seeing the concern on my face, he tried to reassure me. "It's our best bet," he said, holding my hand. "The wolves will move on soon."

Then a thought occurred to me. *We needed to secure the upstairs and make sure no one else is in the house.* After the night we'd had, I didn't want to leave anything to chance. I moved toward the staircase. "Hello?" I called into the darkness above.

We cautiously began to climb, the stairs creaking as we walked up them. My nerves were on edge as we reached the second floor and headed down a lonely hallway, amidst shadows that danced on the walls.

Julie pointed to the first bedroom. Clutching my butcher knife, I flicked on the light switch. As light filled the room I didn't see anyone, much to my relief. I carefully moved through the bedroom. Suddenly I saw a figure in the shadows. I freaked out and jumped, startled for a split second, until I realized it was my own reflection in the dresser mirror. My nerves were so on edge that every little thing was beyond frightening.

The room was pretty typical, with a bed, dresser, and other furnishings. We searched for weapons but couldn't find any. Julie and I checked the next two bedrooms, thankfully they were also clear.

I was able to relax a little, my labored breathing easing though my lungs still burned. My head was pounding like there a chorus line of stiletto-wearing hippos dancing around in it.

Julie motioned toward the master bedroom. "Jesse can rest in there. It looks clean and comfortable at least."

"Jesse, you should lie down," I said as we made our way back downstairs to get him. "There's a nice bedroom upstairs so you can rest."

"I'm fine," he replied firmly.

"No," ordered Julie, "you're not. You're gonna go up there and get in bed, and then we'll barricade the bedroom door and stay in there till morning."

His wound had started to bleed again, and I gulped hard. I couldn't help but notice how pale and weak he looked. Jesse needed medical help and I couldn't get it for him quick enough.

"You're bleeding again," I said, wondering if he would live to see sunlight again.

Chapter 7

I didn't know what to do. Jesse was dying right before my eyes. I knew we needed to get help, what I didn't know was how to get past the snarling wolves. We couldn't call for help because our cell phones had no signal out in the middle of nowhere and there was no land line in the cabin. I touched Jesse's arm. "Please," I begged, "You need to lay down."

"No. I have to keep you safe."

"You aren't going to be able to do that if you die on us," I pleaded. "You just need a little rest."

When he didn't move, Julie chimed in, "She's right, Jesse. We need you to protect us, so how about you lie down for an hour or two, then you'll be more up to defending us. In the meantime, we promise not to get ourselves killed by rabid dogs or gun-wielding strangers. Deal?"

He smiled and nodded. "Can't argue with that."

I smiled appreciatively at Julie and her ability to manipulate even the most strong-willed of people.

Jesse grunted as I helped him into bed and covered him with a blanket.

Julie found some towels in the bathroom and used them to apply pressure to his wound. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d be taking care of a gunshot victim.”

His eyes fluttered shut, and I gasped. “He passed out! We can’t just sit here and do nothing, no matter what he said. He’s really sick and fading fast. If we’re going to save him, we’ve gotta take a chance. You stay here. I’m going to get us help.”

“How are you going to get past the wolves?” Julie asked sounding scared.

“I don’t know. But, I can’t just stand here and let him die.”

She took a deep breath. “I know.”

I felt his forehead, glad to find that his skin was cooler now and not as sweaty. The fever seemed to have subsided.

“He feels better,” I said.

Julie softly touched his arm as she studied him. “He’s breathing better too. Maybe we should wait a little longer.”

I nodded and peeked out the bedroom window, only to shudder when I saw the wolves still prowling around. “It’s not like we have much choice,” I answered defeated. I sat down on a vinyl chair, propping my feet up on the footstool. I kept watch vigilantly, constantly peering out the window, waiting for the scraggly dogs to leave.

A couple of hazy, sleepy, silent hours later, just as the first rays of light shone on my face, I looked out the window again.

“Julie,” I called, “they’re gone!”

“I’ll go look out the front.”

“The pack is gone!” I cried, rushing over to Jesse. “Let me look at your wound.”

He pushed me away. “I’m fine, hon. We don’t have time to waste. Let’s go.”

“Are you sure you feel all right?” I asked. “Can you walk?”

He groaned as he sat up. “Yeah, I’ll live to tell the tale.”

I looked at him doubtfully, then helped him up so we could make our way down the stairs.

“It’s all clear,” Julie happily reported, removing our homemade barricade.

I stared outside skeptically at the deceptively calm forest surrounding us. As if mocking our trepidation, the sun was shining brightly and the birds were chirping happily. When I looked down though, I saw paw prints everywhere. It was still hard to fathom that we'd been shot at, chased and virtually held prisoner in the cabin by a bunch of wolves. We moved slowly, cautiously approaching the edge of the forest.

Pushing some vegetation aside, I stepped into the woods. "C'mon, guys!"

As we hiked through the woods, continuously trying our cell phone. Jesse actually got a signal for about two minutes, managing to get in touch with one of his buddies who offered to pick us up. Just as we reached the road, a blue car stopped and Jesse introduced the driver, his friend Billy.

"We've gotta get Jesse to the hospital," I said. "He's been shot."

Billy turned toward his friend. "What!? They're joking, right?"

"No, we're not! And this isn't a joking matter."

"And you want to take our Jesse here to the hospital?"

I looked at him like he was one Prozac away from a straight-jacket. "Uh...yeah, the hospital, that's the best place for gunshot victims. Now please just drive us there."

Jesse shot Billy a strange look, and he nodded.

Billy gripped the steering wheel tight. "Okay, then. But I'm dropping you two off first."

"We're not the ones hurt," Julie said. "Jesse should be our first priority."

"Listen, Blondie. I'll worry about Jesse. Let's just get you home."

I wasn't sure I liked this guy. But it was time I took control of the situation. "Listen buddy. Please get Jesse to the hospital. And us to the police station."

Julie grabbed my arm. "Are you crazy? I don't wanna get involved with the police. We're alive and breathing, so why bother?"

"If that guy survived the wolves, and is still out there, he needs to be stopped."

Billy arched an eyebrow, looking at me as if I was the crazy one. "He's dangerous, probably whacked outta his mind on drugs and still armed. I wouldn't suggest you ratting him out. They'll let him go with a slap on the wrist, and then he'll come after you with a vengeance."

"I don't want to involve the police," Julie stated again, more sternly this time.

"And neither do I," Jesse intervened. "I gotta be honest with you, Taylor. Billy's not takin' me to the hospital."

“But you’ve been shot,” I argued.

“No need for hospitals,” he said, cutting me off. “My mom is a doctor.”

“But—” Julie added, trying to argue.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Jesse assured us. “I’ll be fine.”

I shook my head. “Jesse, please don’t risk your life like this, especially not just to be a tough guy and show off.”

“I’m not showing off. My mom won’t let anything happen to me. I just need you to do me a big favor.”

“I know, I know,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Leave the police out of it.”

“It’s the best thing.”

Julie nodded in agreement. “I’m great at keeping secrets. If my mom finds out I snuck out of the house to go to a college party and almost got myself killed, she’ll freak. I’ll end up being the one needing a doctor—especially if the police are involved.”

“I won’t say anything either,” I agreed reluctantly.

Billy pulled into Julie’s driveway at eight a.m., and we knew Julie’s mom would be coming home any minute.

He looked at Julie. “Hey, don’t worry about your truck. One of my friends is a mechanic. He can have it fixed in hours.”

“No way, there’s way too much damage! And mechanics can take forever.”

“Listen, I have connections. I’m not taking it to your average mechanic. My guy is fast.”

“Really? I can’t thank you enough! My mom will ask about it. Do you promise I’ll get it back today?”

“I promise,” he replied.

“If you don’t get it back before my mom wakes up around six p.m., I’ll be grounded for the rest of the summer, or worse be forced to surrender my truck keys indefinitely.”

“I got this,” he said.

My attention turned back to Jesse. “Jesse, I really need to know that you’re okay. I won’t stop worrying until I know your mom has given you the all-clear.”

“Gimme your number. I’ll call you with the official report.”

We exchanged numbers, putting them in each other’s phones. As I gazed into his eyes, just about to say something, his friend cut in.

“No time for mushy goodbyes,” Billy said. “I gotta get Jesse home.”

Before I could say another word or even wave goodbye, the blue car had backed out of the driveway and sped down the street.

As we walked into Julie’s house, I flung my shoes off. My hands were shaky from the ordeal, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with nausea.

I sat down at the kitchen table, staring at the kitchen wall, trying to process everything that had happened last night. Julie handed me a glass of water.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. Just a little freaked.”

“Better freaked, than dead. My head is pounding, but I think we learned a valuable lesson here.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“No more parties with crazy, unstoppable party animals—or wild, furry animals either. I’m still trying to process what we went through.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it. And we might want to avoid Barney-colored drinks and Long Island iced teas too.”

“I’m sorry I took you to that party.”

“You didn’t know.”

“I can see how scared you still are.”

“I am. But it’s over. I’m thinking we should call the cops. What if Jonathon comes after you?”

“I think the wolves demolished him.”

“Then we witnessed a murder. We have to call the police.”

“No police! I don’t want to get involved. But I’ll tell you what. If anything happens...like the guy shows up dead on the news, we’ll go tell them our story.”

“Okay.”

She ran a hand through her blonde hair. “Do you really think they’ll get my truck back in time?”

“His friend promised you would.”

“Maybe, but we don’t even really know him.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. If not, I’m dead meat.”

“Why was that guy chasing us anyway?” I asked. “What did you say to him?”

She sipped her water. “Nothing out of the ordinary...and he seemed nice at the party. He just went all psycho. Maybe Jesse’s right. Maybe he was high.”

“If he was high on drugs, how the heck was he able to find us in the dark woods?”

“I dunno. How’d Jesse find us, especially when he was shot and bleeding all over the place?”

“Yeah, you’re right. That was weird.”

“I think there’s something Jesse’s not telling us,” Julie said.

“Why were you invited to that party?” I asked.

“I met Jed in town, and he was inviting all the pretty girls. He said I could bring anyone I wanted to bring. But there is something else I’ve been wondering.”

“What?” I asked.

“If Jesse’s such a great guy, why would he hang out with guys like them in the first place?”

“I don’t know. And why won’t he go to the hospital like a normal person?” I asked, trying to put two and two together. “Anyone else would insist on going to the ER.”

“He’s either scared to death of needles or he’s hiding something,” Julie said, then ripped the bandage off her neck. “Speaking of hospitals, how does my battle wound look?”

“Not bad at all,” I assured her. “There are just a couple spots where the glass must have nailed you.”

“I can’t believe my taste in men. Out of everyone in the party, I pick the one that oughtta be locked up.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know. And I talked to another guy that oughtta be locked up. That crazy guy who played Dungeons and Dragons.”

“At least one of us lucked out.” She smiled. “You got Jesse’s number, right?”

I smiled and held up my phone proudly. “Yep. Mission accomplished.”

Julie looked at her neck in the mirror. “There’s hardly anything there. I’m leaving this thing off.”

“Yeah, you don’t want your mom seeing it, and she just pulled in.”

“Tell me about it.”

The door creaked open, and Julie’s mom walked in. “Julie, where’s your truck?”

“I parked it in the garage after Taylor and I washed it.”

“Honey, it’s gonna get dirty again around here, no matter what you do,” she said, smiling at Julie and I. “No sense in trying to keep it spotless.”

“I know, but I want it to look nice for as long as possible. How was the night shift?”

“Good. You girls are up awfully early.”

“We pulled an all-nighter,” I said.

“Sounds like fun. I remember having girls’ nights like that. Did you paint your nails and—”

Julie grinned and nudged her mom playfully. “Mom, I’m not twelve.”

“Right. Pardon me for forgetting that my little girl isn’t so little anymore. Anyway, I’m making breakfast. How do pancakes sound?”

“That’s nice of you, but we’re kinda beat. If you don’t mind, we’d kinda like to sleep for a few hours.”

“Sure, but don’t sleep all day. I’ve got some plans for us. I figured we could go to—”

“Mom,” Julie said, “we’re tired, and you worked all night. Can we please talk about the plans later?”

She smiled again. “You’re right. We could all use a little shut-eye. Sweet dreams, you two.”

* * *

We didn’t mean to, but we slept until dinner. I think I was really worn out after all the drama from the night before. I peeked out the window, only to see Julie’s truck sitting in the driveway, good as new. Even the windows had been replaced. *That was so nice of Jesse*, I thought. I’m so glad his connections worked because the average repairman could’ve never worked this fast.

A few minutes later, a horn beeped, indicating that my mom was there to pick me up.

“Bye, Julie. It’s been...interesting,” I said, smiling knowingly at her as I rushed out the door.

“Right,” she called after me. “It was a howling good time. We’ll have to give it another shot sometime.”

We both laughed at her punny-ness as I walked out the door.

Chapter 8

A few days passed without a word from or about Jesse. I was so worried about him that I couldn't eat or sleep. Not knowing whether he was alive or dead, the anxiety was overwhelming me. I tried calling him a few times, only to get no answer.

When my phone finally rang with a call from his number, I was ecstatic.

"I'm recovering," he assured me. "Don't worry."

I thanked him countless times for fixing Julie's truck, silently thanked God that he was okay, then hung up the phone.

After that we talked sporadically, but texted each other every day. I thought it was best to let him recover at his own speed. I really wanted to see him and would have paid him a visit, but his mother didn't want anyone stopping by until he was fully recuperated. "Doctor's orders," he joked, though it was technically true.

* * *

Before I knew it, a month had passed by.

Jesse had a part-time job at the local zoo. When he told me that they were hiring, I filled out an application, interviewed well, and managed to land a position. If nothing else, I had all my dad's lectures, and all that Discovery Channel and Animal Planet documentary knowledge, to go on when it came to dealing with animals. Not to mention, I'd survived a mountain lion attack and a run-in with a huge pack of human-harassing wolves.

My first day of work at the zoo was also the day Jesse returned after his injuries, though he'd told everyone that he had a 'family emergency, to deal with, and nobody was the wiser.

I smoothed out my brown, short-sleeved, button-down shirt. It was part of my uniform and had the logo name of the zoo and my name embroidered on it, and it looked kind of cute for safari wear.

As I stood there trying to get a grip on my new job responsibilities, Jesse walked into the room with an adorable baby raccoon in his arms and a bottle of milk specially made for the little creature. His shoulder-length hair was tied back, and while I tried not to stare, I couldn't help it. He was so absolutely gorgeous that I was sure I'd never want to take a sick day off of work. His uniform was the same as mine, but it looked so much sexier on him. The material stretched across his broad chest and muscles, not too tight but just perfect, revealing a tribal tattoo circling

his huge bicep. I hadn't seen it at the party under his jacket, but I wanted to know what it meant, if anything. I decided it best to leave that conversation for somewhere outside the workplace.

"This is Herman," Jesse announced, introducing his furry friend.

The little raccoon had a bushy ringed tail, with the blackest band of fur around his eyes, just like a mask.

"He's so cute!" I squealed.

"Yeah. We're trying to rehabilitate the little guy. The zoo receives hundreds of orphaned and injured wild animals every year. We do our best to fix them all up and release them back out into the wild as soon as we can so they don't become too dependent on humans or lose their natural survival instincts. If you kneel down on the floor, you can feed him."

"I don't know, Jesse. I mean, I've never fed a raccoon before," I said nervously. "I've only fed Max."

He gripped the bottle. "It's easy. I'll start, then you can jump in."

I smiled. "Okay."

He set the baby coon on the floor and held the bottle at a downward angle. The little raccoon stood on his legs and gripped the bottle with its tiny paws. It was perhaps the most adorable thing I'd ever seen—well, besides Jesse's eyes and Max when he was a puppy.

"Okay. Ready to take over?" he asked.

I gazed up at him and smiled. "Sure."

He knelt behind me, putting his hand on my shoulder as I fed the critter.

"You're doing good," he said.

As the raccoon lapped away at the bottle, it was difficult for me to concentrate on feeding Herman with Jesse's hot breath raining down on the back of my neck. Still, I tried to tune out the gorgeous creature behind me and pay more attention to the cute one in front of me.

"Tilt it a little higher," he said, sending shivers through me as he touched my hand to adjust the bottle.

His hand lingered on mine and I felt a jolt of electricity flaring between us. That is indescribable, yet totally undeniable chemistry was back. My heart raced as his hand rested on top of mine.

Finally, he slowly lifted that scorching hand away. "You're a real pro and Herman likes you."

I smiled. "So...what else can you tell me about the zoo?"

"Hmm. Well, we usually have around 190 animals, representing 80 species here. There are also all kinds of exhibits, special events, and educational programs," he explained. "If ya want, I'll give you the grand tour later."

After we fed the raccoon, Jesse took me to a different room, where five ducklings were frolicking in a shallow heated pool, playing with a stuffed mama duck.

"What happened to their real mom?" I whispered, as if the fuzzy yellow things could understand me and might be offended.

"She was hit by a truck. Her four babies were lost and confused, following around humans because they didn't know what else to do," he said, pausing to look down at the chirping quintuplets. "We're gonna get them big and strong, then release them back into the wild."

"Jesse, it's amazing what you are all doing here."

Jesse picked a little fluffy chick up. It was so touching to see that big, strong, muscular man holding a defenseless little bird. It melted my heart all over again.

"Shh. Don't be afraid," he told the baby. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

As he gently and sweetly patted the little animal's head, I saw a softer side to him. A side that showed that he genuinely cared for the animals. I grinned from ear to ear as I watched him place the little one down with its paddling brothers and sisters.

As promised, Jesse did give me a grand tour. He seemed to know everything about the place, and I enjoyed our walk around as he explained things to me.

At the aviary, an outdoor enclosure filled with birds, he pointed out the animals who called it home. "One turkey vulture and two bald eagles live here."

"The turkey vulture isn't as pretty as her bald eagle friends," I said.

His gaze shot up to the repulsive-looking bird. "Maybe not in everyone's eyes, but I named her Beauty Queen."

I laughed at the irony as I gazed up at the large dark brown bird. It had a red, bald head and neck, like a turkey's. "I'm sure she appreciates you flirting with her."

"She came to the zoo as a juvenile with a broken wing. There were complications, and the vets here weren't able to save her wing, so we can't release her. She'll be a permanent resident, and I've grown quite fond of her. You know what they say."

"What?"

He smiled. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. She's a sweet bird."

"I'm gonna love working here."

"Yeah, I never get tired of it. I love my job. It sure beats flipping burgers."

"Yeah. I can tell you're passionate about it."

He smiled sheepishly, obviously uncomfortable taking compliments, even though he deserved a million of them.

I gazed up at his feathered friends. "These birds are really huge."

"Beauty Queen has a wingspan of about five feet—at least the wing that's still good."

"She's a vulture, right? I bet she's got bad breath after eating all that dead meat."

"Maybe, but she can't help what she was born to eat. It's just the way nature works. No one can help the card we're dealt. Just like us, these birds and all the animals in this zoo and in those woods out there have to live and make do with what their bodies want as a food source. Maybe she despises eating carcasses, but she's stuck with it. It's eat or die."

"Yeah, I guess I shouldn't be so quick to judge. She probably thinks we're gross for eating pizza."

He laughed. "I'm not that much older than you, but I've learned it's best not to judge anyone until you've walked in their shoes—or flown in their feathers, as the case may be."

"I absolutely believe that. So anyway...what's next?"

"How about some lions and tigers and bears?" he joked. "And...wolves?"

I clutched my chest. "Sorry, but I'll pass on the wolves."

"Bad memories, eh?"

I let out a breath. "Yeah."

"I'm so sorry about all of that," he said.

I bit my lip. "You know what? Let's not dredge up old memories. I really don't wanna talk about it."

"I agree. Let's let bygones be bygones and just...start over."

"I think we deserve a clean slate," I replied, relieved that we had agreed to put that terrible night behind us.

All of the sudden the door opened. In walked a short redhead with her hair tied back in a ponytail.

"Hey, Jesse," she said, "there's a guided tour group waiting for you."

He looked at me, then back at her.

“Taylor, this is Jeanie, my best friend in Big Bear Lake,” he said introducing us. “We’ve been through a lot and I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

He looked toward the door, then back at us.

I smiled and shook her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

He grinned as he headed out to meet the group. “She’ll show you the ropes while I’m gone. See ya later.”

“See ya,” I said returning the smile.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I turned my attention to Jeanie. She had natural red hair and beautiful blue eyes, though not nearly as beautiful as his, though it would be nearly impossible for anyone to replicate those gems. I sighed when I realized his best friend in the world also had the perfect figure, with not an ounce of fat on her.

“So...how’s your first day treating you, Taylor?” she asked, making it obvious that someone besides Jesse had already told her my name.

“Great,” I answered.

Getting straight to the point, she blurted, “I saw the way your eyes sparkled at Jesse before he left.”

I arched an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“It’s best for you to stay away from him,” she continued.

I couldn’t believe she was marking her territory already. “And why’s that?”

“He’s a player, that’s why,” she replied smugly. “Jesse has dated half the girls in this town.”

“Isn’t that what dating is all about, trying to find the right person?” I shot back. “I mean, I’ve dated lots of guys, and—”

“Fine, honey. It’s your heart that’ll get broken, not mine. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I wanted to tell her to butt out, because it was my chance to take, but instead I just kept my mouth shut.

“Look, Jesse’s a great friend to have, but if you step out of the friend zone, it will go all to hell. Trust me. I know firsthand.”

I assumed she was just jealous. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

At that moment, our almost-heated conversation came to a halt when our boss Ms. Aikers, walked in.

“I need you to check all the enclosures,” she said, looking seriously at Jeanie. “Make sure every animal is in its place.”

“What’s up?” Jeanie questioned.

“Somebody in town was attacked and killed by an animal,” she replied grimly. “The sheriff is out front. We have to make sure none of our animals have escaped, especially the bears. This is top priority, and I’m putting every employee on it.”

“Oh my gosh!” Jeanie cried. “Who was killed?”

“A tourist, hiking in the woods.”

“That’s gonna be front-page news. The media is gonna swarm this place if it’s got anything to do with us.”

“I know,” Ms. Aikers said, looking at both of us with a worried expression on her face. “Let’s just hope none of our animals got out.”

At that very moment, the wolves crossed my mind. I feared that the same group of fearless, possibly rabies-infected canines had devoured someone. “I ran into a pack of wolves in the forest that weren’t acting...natural,” I chimed in.

“Really?” Ms. Aikers asked.

“Yes. They stalked me and my friends and—”

Jeanie laughed adding, “That’s ridiculous!”

With that, she stormed out of the room. Ms. Aikers stared after her for a moment, then turned toward me.

“You better hurry and catch up,” she said. “Until we know what happened, I don’t want anyone off on their own.”

I jogged after Jeanie to start inventorying the animals. We checked every pen, cage and enclosure, relieved to find that all of the zoo’s animals were present and accounted for. Still, it didn’t make me feel much better. Somewhere in those woods, someone had been killed, I was sure those wolves had something to do with it.

Chapter 9

When Jesse's number showed up on my caller ID, I quickly answered.

"Taylor?" he said.

His voice sent shivers down my spine. Just hearing him say my name caused an adrenaline rush like none I'd ever felt before.

"Yes, this is me," I answered.

"What are you doing on your day off tomorrow?"

"I don't have any big plans," I answered. "Why?"

"Do you like to roller-blade?"

"Sure."

"Cool. I was wondering if you'd like to meet at the Alpine Pedal Path? It's a paved path that runs along the north shore of Big Bear Lake."

"Sounds good. I'll be there!"

"Great!"

"Do you mind if I bring Max?" I asked.

"Sure, no problem. Is two p.m. all right?"

"Perfect," I answered.

"Okay, see you then. Bye, Taylor."

"Goodbye," I said as I hung up the phone.

* * *

I thought Friday would never come, but it finally did. I dug through my boxes but couldn't find the outfit I wanted. When I finally found my spring pastels, I threw on a white tank-top with mint green trim and a big mint and silver heart, and matching pants. To finish, what I hoped was a cute, summery look, I slipped on new pair of strappy sandals, but then I realized tennis shoes would probably be better for the occasion, so I threw my bright white ones on. I took one last glance in the mirror and smoothed out my eyeshadow. I wanted my makeup to look natural and not caked on since we'd be outside in daylight.

My heart leapt in my chest when Max and I pulled into the parking lot of the Alpine Pedal Path and I saw Jesse standing there. Again, I took in his chiseled features, and he looked so handsome and cute in his roller-blades and helmet that I simply had to rush out of the car with my dog to greet him.

"C'mon, Max," I said, "and you better be a good boy today."

Jesse waved me over, and we both rushed right up to him. Unfortunately, while I was breathlessly gazing into Jesse's winter-blue eyes, my dog was not so happy to see him and again wouldn't stop barking.

"It's okay, Max," said Jesse, trying to calm him down.

To my surprise Max calmed down immediately and sat down next to me, still as a statue except for his wagging tail.

"Hi, Jesse," I said, overcome by that feeling in the pit of my stomach, as if I'd swallowed a hornet's nest. We had been talking at work, had texted quite a bit and talked a few times on the phone, but those were simple conversations, but nothing like this, our first official date! I was excited but a little nervous, desperately hoping it would go well and that we wouldn't be encumbered by too many awkward silences or uncomfortable moments.

"You're early," he said, smiling.

I wasn't sure what to do next so I just stood there for a minute, holding Max's now slack leash in my hand. "I'm always on time," I said, praying I wasn't blushing already.

He reached for the leash, and I sat on the bench to put my roller-blade equipment on. As I adjusted my red helmet, I smiled. "Okay. I'm ready."

He grinned. "Great."

With Max's leash tightly in my grasp, we started to skate down the mountain trail. It wound through a pine forest and meadows. Birds flitted overhead, and lizards sunned themselves on big granite rocks absorbing the heat and all that Vitamin D. Max absolutely loved it and couldn't stop smelling every little thing as we strolled by. It was such a nice change to breathe that fresh, clean mountain air after living in the smoggy city. In fact, it was like being in a completely different world.

"So...on the phone you said you wanted to talk to me about something in person?" asked Jesse.

"Yeah. I just need to get something off my chest," I said, not really sure where to start. "I know we all agreed not to talk about that night, but I kinda need to."

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

I couldn't take all the guilt I'd been harboring. "I feel like it was my fault that you got shot."

"Why would you even think that?"

“If you hadn’t had to drive us home, it would have never happened.”

“Don’t even say that. You and Julie might have died, because neither one of you was in a position to drive safely.”

“I can’t believe that Jonathon guy was so high on drugs that he actually shot you. It’s just...crazy. How well do you know him?”

“He’s, uh...an acquaintance.”

“Well, I hope he gets his act together before he really hurts or kills somebody.”

“It’ll be taken care of,” he said, sounding like some godfather in a mobster movie. “In the meantime, thanks for keeping quiet.”

“I still don’t get why those wolves acted the way they did. Do you think they’re responsible for the attacks on tourists and hikers?”

“Maybe,” Jesse replied. “A lot of weird things have been happening around here.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s over and done with, like a bad dream, and I just want to forget about it. I should’ve never let Julie take me to that party in the first place. I’ve definitely learned my lesson.”

He smiled as if he was glad to hear it.

“Let’s get off this lame subject about drugged-out crazies and infected wolves.”

“Right,” he agreed. “I’d love to know more about you. Do you like to bike or play any sports? Collect stamps? Dance around to seventies disco music singing into a hairbrush when you’re bored?”

“I’m not really into stamp collecting, but I love to sketch designs,” I said with a laugh. “I have hundreds of virtual and hand-drawn designs, and I hope to go into fashion someday—maybe with my own clothing line or label.”

“Wow, it sounds like you’re really creative.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before, but the truth is, sometimes the ideas just come to me. They can come anytime, if I’m sitting at a restaurant and one hits me, I’ll sketch it out on a napkin.”

“I guess it’s best to get your idea down while it’s still fresh in your head.”

“Lots of fashion schools require a portfolio so I’ve been trying to get one together.”

“Isn’t that hard?” he asked.

“Not really. Like I said, I have hundreds of ideas for clothes, accessories, and shoes.”

“Taylor, I know I haven’t known you that long, but I’m pretty sure you can do anything you put your mind to,” he said sweetly.

I blushed a little. “Thanks. When we moved here, I thought I’d have to give up on my dream career. I mean, when it comes to fashion, Big Bear Lake’s not exactly the center of things, like New York City. Still, I’m learning to adjust, and I must admit the gorgeous natural surroundings and the wonderful people I’ve met here are pretty inspiring.”

“It must be nice to get away from all those beeping taxis, all the hustle and bustle of the city. It’s so peaceful here. Besides, if you come up with your own label or line, you could just run a business online. We country folk have that there inter-web now too, ya know.”

“Right,” I laughed. “Maybe I’ll start a huge Internet empire, a dot.com—or maybe I’ll just become a painter instead.”

“You paint too?” he asked sounding surprised. “Wow. You’re quite the multi-talented artist, aren’t you?”

A smile curved my lips. “Drawing and painting have been hobbies of mine since I was a little girl. If the fashion thing bombs, I can always turn to one of those. With all the inspiration around here, all these beautiful landscapes and animals, I’m sure I’d have a never-ending supply of paintings to sell.”

“Right. You can stay in Big Bear Lake and become an artist.”

“I’d love to. I gotta admit, I’m falling in love with this place more and more every day,” I said, though I knew the guy rollerblading next to me had much to do with that. “It sure is beautiful and peaceful out here.”

He nodded toward Max, who looked to be having the time of his life. “Your dog thinks so too.”

I laughed. “He loves it out here. How long have you lived here?”

“I came here when I was little. My mom just loves it here, and there’s no way my mom would ever leave.”

“And your dad? I mean...if you don’t mind my asking.”

“My mom left him when I was little. She said he turned into a monster, a crazy lunatic. But I don’t remember him ever being that way. I always wondered why he never came looking for us.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“We’ve all gotten along without him.”

“Is there anyone besides you and your mom?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a brother and a sister.”

“Who is the oldest?” I asked.

“No one really.”

“Huh?” I asked, confused.”

“We’re triplets, all seventeen,” he said with a chuckle. “Technically, Sam is the oldest, then Kierra, then me.”

“What’s it like growing up as one-third of a set of triplets?”

“We’re pretty close, and my brother and sister are awesome, even if they can be annoying sometimes. Kierra is really bossy at times, and I swear Sam lives to embarrass me.”

I laughed. “Yeah, siblings can be like that.”

“Oh?” he asked, “I thought you were an only child.”

“No. I have two brothers and one sister, but they’re all grown and are out on their own. I’m the baby, the last one to leave the nest.”

“Another thing we have in common,” he said with a grin. “We’re both the youngest.”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “I guess so!”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to get out there and tackle the world head on. I dream of traveling around the globe. I’ve been stuck here my whole life, and now that I’m almost eighteen, I want to see what lies beyond Big Bear Lake.”

“Any particular places you want to visit?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“So many!”

“Name one.”

He started gliding, skating backward so he could face me while he talked.

“I want to surf in Teahupoo, Tahiti. There are these unbelievable swells that roll over a shallow coral reef. I’ve read and heard that catching a wave is just like flying. Most people who see waves as tall as Mount Everest would run in the other direction, but not me. I’d love to ride them.”

“I had no idea you’re so adventurous. What are some other things you’d love to do?”

His eyes lit up, as if he’d been waiting for someone to ask him that for years.

“I also want to ski down the Chugach Range in Alaska.”

When Max spent too much time sniffing a flower, I gave him a gentle tug. “That sounds adventurous.”

“Yeah. Helicopters are the only way to get up to some of the most extreme ski peaks,” he explained. “Once you copter up, you ski down this huge mountain, and if you wipe out you cartwheel. It’s like falling in space, except you reconnect with the snow every fifty feet or so. I also want to swim with sharks in Florida, without a cage, of course.”

“Maybe you could wrestle a gator in the Everglades?” I said with a laugh.

“Yeah!” he said excitedly. “That sounds awesome, I’ll definitely add that to my list. I’d also love to at drive crazy speeds across frozen lakes in someplace like Arjeplog, Sweden and do a ninety-MPH donut!”

“Wow. Those are some risky goals you’ve got there, but they sound like a blast.”

“There are some places in California I’d like to check out too, like Laguna Beach, for body-surfing, body-boarding, diving, and tide-pooling.”

“A thrill-seeker, huh?”

He grinned. “That I am.”

I pointed to his tattoo, solid black, with curves that ended in points and interlocked in complex patterns and abstract designs. “Tell me more about that. I noticed it the first day at work, but I was too embarrassed to ask.”

He lifted his short sleeve. “Oh. Well, this is the symbol of strength, power, and bravery.” He pointed to the swirls in his design. “These represent the past, present, and future.”

I pointed to the ankh in his design. “I recognize this one. I have a cross like it.”

“Cool. I thought long and hard before I settled on this design. It has a lot of symbolism in it. If I was going to have something on my arm forever, I wanted it to mean something.”

“So every single line and shape has meaning?”

“Yes. I wanted something special and unique to me.”

I traced the lines on his arm. “I love it. When did you get it done?”

“Last year.”

“It’s really cool, Jesse.”

“Thanks.”

“Tell me, is Big Bear Lake this pretty in the winter?” I asked.

“Believe it or not, it’s even more incredible. The skiing is amazing.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never skied before.”

“You will...and I will teach you. You’ll be off the bunny hill in no time.”

I was taken aback because he was talking as if we might actually have a future as friends or maybe even something more.

“Wow,” I said, trying to keep the blush from my cheeks. “I never thought I’d have such a handsome ski instructor—or any ski instructor, for that matter.”

We gradually picked up the pace, skating in long, smooth strides, and then cruising effortlessly down the trail. I enjoyed the thrill and speed, and I was glad Max’s four furry legs enabled him to keep up with my eight wheels. I glanced up briefly and caught sight of an eagle flying majestically overhead, only to be followed by a pelican a few minutes later. The lake was amazing, and it looked like a classic oil painting, with the beautiful mountains for a backdrop. Max barked at the wildlife on the lake, and I couldn’t help but smile when I saw a mama duck with all her little chicks paddling along behind her.

When we stopped skating for a moment to take in the panoramic beauty, I turned to meet Jesse’s gaze. His thumb brushed across my skin, sending ripples of excitement through me at the place his skin had touched mine. I couldn’t take my eyes off of him, and in that moment, I truly imagined what it would be like to kiss him, to be held lovingly in those strong arms of his.

I could tell by the longing I saw in his eyes that he was looking for a sign that I wanted more, and that made the moment all the more thrilling. He cradled my hand in his ever so gently as our eyes locked. I was trapped in the moment by the passion in his piercing gaze, even the sky behind him paled in comparison to the glory of his eyes, and the heat from his hand felt like a thousand suns. I could have sworn my heart almost stopped.

His gaze sizzled with challenge, as if he was just daring me to go ahead and kiss him. I desperately wanted to. Red-hot flames of arousal burned through me like a raging forest fire. *How can I resist such temptation? How could any girl resist him?* I thought. But then I tore my gaze away and stared toward the water, trying desperately to regain my composure. Everything was silent, other than the blood gushing through my temples from the excited and hopeful beat of my heart. I wondered what he would do if I got up and pulled him into my arms for a deep, passionate kiss.

However, it was our first date, and I didn’t want him to think poorly of me in any way. As badly as I wanted to kiss him right then and there in that beautiful magic moment, I knew it was

better to wait. I wanted to be different than the girls he'd met before, and I wanted him to see that I was.

Chapter 10

Over the next week, I hung out with Jesse every chance I got. When we weren't together, thoughts of him still lingered in my head. We went for walks, long hikes, and a day of kayaking and even jet-skiing. Some nights he came over and we just hung out on my porch and chatted for hours talking about everything.

One day I was painting in our back yard, which is its own little paradise, thanks to Fred's hard work. The sun was shining high in the sky like a bright yellow beach ball, the birds were chirping in perfect harmony, with the crickets singing backup. I set up my easel and supplies by the pond where I could see all the ducks and ducklings gliding across the water. I was eager to paint a beautiful natural landscape. With all the natural beauty surrounding me, I didn't need to look far for inspiration. Once the paintbrush was in my hand it just glided over the canvas, turning my creative energy into a work of art.

My mom approached from behind.

"It's stunning," she said. "You've really captured the essence of nature here."

I smiled. "Thanks. But it's not done yet."

"Oh, well all that hard work takes energy. Are you coming inside for lunch?"

"Sure, sounds great. I am getting hungry. Just give me ten more minutes though, I want to finish this part before the light changes."

"I know very well that your ten minutes is an hour to anyone else," she said, crossing her arms. "It'll be dinner not lunch before you come inside."

I smiled at the woman who knew me so well. "I know. You're right. I'll come now."

"Oh, honey. I haven't seen you this happy in a long time."

"I just love it out here. The sky is a deeper shade of blue, the grass is greener, the sun is brighter, the—"

"And the boys are cuter?" she asked, then winked. A big smile spread across her face.

It was evident all over again that I couldn't hide anything from my mother, and I blushed. "I'm seventeen now," I said sheepishly. "I don't meet boys. I meet *guys*."

"You don't have to tell me who he is, but I know you've met a nice young man—guy, boy, or otherwise. It's written all over your face as clearly as that paint on your easel."

I sighed in defeat. "You're right. I have met someone, and he has shown me just how beautiful it can be here. I don't ever wanna leave."

"You have no idea how happy I am to hear that. Pulling you out of your old school like that...well, I know it had to be hard to start over in your senior year."

I grinned. "I don't mind."

"You've really adjusted well, honey, and I'm sure meeting new friends has helped."

"This place is amazing. I love the forest. There's fresh air to breathe. The birds sing beautiful songs. All this nature...and great people too! Who could ask for more?"

"Good! I wanted a fresh start for us, and I think we've found it," said my mom happily. "Your father and I love this place just as much as you do."

"I'm glad, really. I think being here is good for all of us. I'm finally over Sean. He's nothing but a figment of my imagination anymore."

"I think that has to do with a *certain* boy...err, uh...*guy* you work with at the zoo," my mom said, with another knowing wink.

"Jesse is amazing," I gushed. "He loves animals and wants to be a veterinarian when he graduates. He's so charming and friendly, not to mention so smart. We just have this fantastic connection. We get lost in each other's eyes. I've never met a guy who has made me feel like that."

"Wow, sounds pretty serious. So...are you guys going steady?"

"What?" I said shaking my head at her. "Steady? Nobody says that anymore."

She laughed, embarrassed. "I suppose you're right, but you know what I mean."

"We're just friends. I'd like there to be more, for him to be my boyfriend though. He looks like a Gap model. Can you imagine a guy like that on my arm?"

"I'm sure he's adorable, dear, but don't rush into a relationship," my mom warned. "For now, just have fun and date."

"You're right, and that's what I plan to do. We'll take it slow and become good friends, then maybe move it to the next level and—"

“Taylor!”

“Dating, Mom! I mean I want to *date* him.” I let out a sigh. “I can’t explain it, but I’ve never felt anything like this.”

“I remember how I felt about your father,” she said, with a whimsical look in her eye. “My head was spinning from all the red roses and heart-shaped boxes of chocolates he sent me. He was so handsome, and I was just smitten.”

“Jesse is too handsome.” I blew out a long breath. “I think he’s out of my league.”

She shook her head and pushed a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Oh, my darling daughter, don’t you even realize how beautiful *you* are?”

“You *have* to say that. You’re my mom.”

“You are a work of art all your own, Taylor—inside and out,” she said, pulling me in for a hug. “I’d say that whether I was your mother or not.”

I grinned. “Thanks.”

“I’d love to meet his parents.”

“It’s just him and his mother, brother, and sister.”

“Where do they live?”

“Bear Lane.”

My mother’s eyes widened. “Really?” she asked surprised. “Some of the most expensive homes in the area are out there. His mother must be wealthy.”

“I’ve never asked because I don’t care. Rich or poor, I like Jesse for the amazing person he is.”

“Well, that settles it then. You’ve been shot with Cupid’s arrow for sure.”

My face beamed. “Every time he looks at me, I feel this burst of energy.”

“I remember that feeling. Believe it or not, your father still gives it to me sometimes.”

“Really?” I said, smiling at her. “Anyway, when I talk to Julie about him, I just babble and babble, go on and on, like I’m on a caffeine rush. I just can’t stop thinking about him.”

“Honey, you’ve got it bad, but remember that these heightened emotions and euphoria will eventually fade.”

“I don’t want them to—not ever. I’ve never felt this wonderful before. I don’t even know how to explain it. I just...I wish we could be together all the time. He makes me feel so calm, so serene, so...safe.”

“I’m sure you’re feeling physical attraction and some infatuation, but love has to be based on more than just that,” my mom assured me. “It evolves in time. You’re in the beginning stages, but it has yet to blossom and grow before it will get stronger and deeper.”

“I’m not saying I love him....yet. He just...”

“He’s swept you off your feet?”

“Yeah. Definitely that.”

“It sounds like a pretty severe crush to me, but whatever it is that has made you so happy, I’m just glad to see it. Your father and I are just as happy as you. I wasn’t so sure at first, but now I know it was a great idea to move here.”

“Mostly, I can’t believe how well I seem to fit in here, better than I ever did in New York. Maybe I was never a city girl after all.”

My mom motioned toward the house. “Let’s go get lunch.”

I smiled. “Thanks for listening.”

She squeezed my hand. “Of course honey, anytime. That’s what mothers do.”

Chapter 11

It was Monday morning, time to go to work. As I ate pancakes with my parents, my dad shot a knowing grin in my direction.

“What?” I asked.

“I’ve never seen anyone so happy to go to work,” he said.

“I love working with the animals.”

“I’m sure the animals aren’t the only perks,” he said with a chuckle.

“Dad!”

“Don’t embarrass the poor girl,” my mom admonished.

My dad set his newspaper down, folded it up, and looked at me.

“She has to have met somebody pretty special, because I haven’t seen her eyes sparkle like this since...” he began.

“Sean,” I finished for him since he didn’t have the nerve to say it.

“I’m glad you’re over him. He wasn’t right for you, or nearly good enough.”

“Sean’s a jerk. I’m so over him.” I guzzled down my orange juice as fast as I could. I didn’t want to talk to my dad about Jesse or my love life, at least not yet.

“I’ve gotta go,” I said.

“You never used to keep secrets from me.”

“Dad, it’s no big deal,” I replied. “It’s just someone who—”

He smirked. “Is he cute?”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “I’m gonna be late,” I said, kissing his cheek. I gave my mom a huge hug and kiss and hurried for the door. “See you guys later.”

“Have a great day at work,” Dad said with that same knowing grin.

I smiled back at him. “I will.”

“Only one thing could put a look like that on a girl’s face,” I heard my father say as I walked out and shut the door behind me.

Like most seventeen-year-olds, I found my dad so embarrassing. I was almost grown, perfectly capable of handling my relationship without giving him a blow-by-blow description. Shaking my head, I started my car and screeched out of the driveway. I drove a candy metallic blue Ford Focus and loved it. I rolled down the windows and the music blasted.

* * *

Jesse rushed over to greet me when I clocked in at the zoo. “Hey, you!”

“Hi,” I answered, smiling up at him.

He smiled back. “I’ve been dying to see you.”

Before I could respond, Ms. Aikers walked straight toward me. Her hair was pinned up, and she was barely wearing any makeup, if any at all. She always looked nice but in a much more natural way than my New York bosses, who were always elaborately made up with their hair perfect, wearing only the latest fashions. The people in Big Bear Lake dressed nice but nothing over the top like the people in the Big Apple.

The truth was, my parents had never liked living in NYC. My mom had gotten mugged and beat up and was scared of the big city. They’d only moved there when their books had taken off, because of the demands of their publishers. They’d never really been happy among all those skyscrapers. Big Bear Lake was different. My parents were more relaxed, happier, and loving it, and I felt the same. Of course it was more relaxing and scenic, but there was also a hot guy with

cerulean blue eyes that I just couldn't stop staring at. Because of Jesse, I wanted to stay there forever.

"Taylor, I'd like you to work with Jesse today to move the ducklings to a larger enclosure," Ms. Aikers instructed.

I nodded. "Sure. I'll get right on it."

She wrote something on her clipboard, then handed Jesse a summary of what we had to do.

At first, we worked together on the items on the list, but then we decided we could get things faster if we did our own thing for a while.

"Where should I set this?" I asked, dragging the kiddie pool used by the ducks inside.

"In the corner," Jesse said, "but let me help you."

I shot him a flirty smile. "I can handle it. I'm not some dainty daffodil. Besides, it doesn't weigh much."

"Wow. I'm impressed. I love a girl who can handle her own."

"You have no idea what I can handle," I answered with a teasing grin.

Jesse picked up the water hose and adjusted it to fill the pool.

"These little guys and gals are gonna love their new swimming hole."

"It's so much bigger. They'll all have plenty of room now."

"I know. I love watching the babies grow up, getting bigger and stronger every day."

"There's no better feeling than helping them out."

"Let's go get 'em," Jesse said. "I can't wait to see how they like their new home."

We quickly scurried to the other room and each grabbed a fuzzy duckling. Jesse's went right into the water, but mine squeezed out of my hands and took off across the floor. Jesse and I laughed as we chased the squawking bird around the room.

We finally cornered the cute little devil. Jesse scooped up the stubborn little one and I reached for his hands to take the duckling, but suddenly lost my balance. I slipped in a puddle of water on the ground. Jesse's automatic reaction was to try to catch me while still holding on to the duckling. As he tried, his body twisted awkwardly and he tumbled backward. Thank goodness he and the baby duck were both okay. He had let go of the little guy before falling. The duckling was waddling around near Jesse's feet. He looked at the two of us like we were the silliest things he'd ever seen, and chastised us with a loud irritated quack. A sight so adorable we both burst out laughing.

Heat rushed to my face as I looked over at Jesse as he stood up.

“Sorry,” I said.

He pushed a long, curly piece of hair out of my eyes. “Don’t be. You can knock me off my feet anytime.”

When our eyes locked, my smile was automatic.

“You have the most beautiful smile,” he said.

“Thank you.”

He locked his fingers in mine and brushed his thumb over my skin, sending shivers down my spine.

Suddenly, I felt tiny webbed feet walking over my shoe. I gently picked the naughty duckling up and set him in the water. He happily glided through the water, loving the new pool. We brought in the others who all looked just as happy when Jesse placed them in their new home.

“Are you ready to feed them?”

“Minnows?” I guessed.

“Try crickets,” he said as he picked up a foam cup with hundreds of chirping insects inside. “We need to make sure the ducklings can eat when they’re released. Let’s throw a few in and see if they’ll catch them like they’ll have to in training.”

I picked up a wiggly cricket and smiled. “Here it goes!” I tossed the bug into the water.

Jesse began tossing them to the ducklings as well and the babies quickly started diving after the insects, swallowing them up. It was a good sign that they were learning how to feed themselves, even without their mother around to teach them. It was refreshing to know that in some small way, we were preparing them to survive and live a happy life outside on the lake. This was only a temporary home, a place to get strong before they could be returned to where they really belonged.

* * *

When I got home from work, I found a note letting me know that my parents had gone out to dinner and a movie and would be home late. My mom had left me some chicken and mashed potatoes in the microwave, so all I had to do was heat my dinner up. After a whole day with Jesse, butterflies still fluttered around my stomach, which totally killed my appetite.

I watched television until about eight p.m. After flipping through the unopened mail, I jumped into the shower. As the soothing, hot water danced across my skin, many thoughts ran through my head, most of which were about Jesse.

About twenty minutes later, I dried off and slipped into a fluffy pink robe and slippers. When my stomach began to growl, I decided to heat up my dinner while I got dressed for bed. I walked downstairs to the kitchen and threw my food in the microwave.

I jumped when Max started barking. “Max! Be quiet,” I scolded. “You scared me to death, boy!”

As I walked over to sit at the kitchen table, I saw why Max was barking: Through the sliding glass doors, I could see a figure moving outside in the darkness. My heart lurched. I only saw it for a split second, but I could have sworn it was someone dressed in black from head to toe, including a black ski mask. I was so panicked, I thought I might have a heart attack.

Max ran to the window snarling, growling and barking.

I frantically reached for the land line phone, only to discover that it was dead as a doornail, just as I feared I was about to be. My gaze shot to my purse. “My cell!” I exclaimed. I reached my purse in two strides, but chills flooded through me when I realized my cell phone wasn’t in it. It suddenly dawned on me that someone had been messing with the phones. I swallowed hard as I spun in a slow circle, my nerves on complete edge. My stomach dropped when I came to the realization that someone was outside, so I couldn’t even run. My biggest worry was that someone was inside as well, because I knew for a fact that I’d left my cell in my purse.

My fingers hurriedly rummaged through the kitchen drawer for a knife. When I found one that I thought sure would do the trick, I clutched it tightly, then glanced out the window again. The moon sliced through the darkness, and shadows shifted in the blackness beyond.

I didn’t see anyone, but when the television shut off and complete silence filled the air, I had never felt so utterly alone. “Max!” I said. “Come here.” As the dog sat by my feet, I sucked in a trembling breath.

Next, the power went out, and everything went black. I forced myself to walk to the drawer where I knew I could find a flashlight. My trembling fingers wrapped around the cold metal, and I switched it on. The beam wavered in my shaking hands.

A growl echoed from the living room, one I knew didn’t belong to Max.

What the heck was that?

The knife in my hands shook. I'd never been so frozen with fear before, not even during the mountain lion attack or when we'd been surrounded by wolves. I was scared to go outside, but I was more terrified of whatever was in the living room. I tried to reason what could be growling. *Maybe a stray dog got inside somehow. Maybe my parents adopted another dog and didn't tell me.*

Max kept growling and barking, then suddenly shot off into the living room.

"Max!" I cried, but the only answer was silence.

Chapter 12

My loyal and faithful companion had taken off into the dark living room.

With my heart pounding nearly out of my chest, I took a few daring steps forward. "Max?" I whispered. "Max, come back."

Heavy breathing echoed in the air, and my heart thumped wildly. A few long growls made the hair on my neck stand on end. I gripped the knife tightly. Feeling like I was cornering a wild animal, I took slow, measured steps. A howl pierced my ears, a sound that only a wolf could make. Nearly paralyzed by fear, I somehow managed to carefully back up, abandoning my plan to take a good look.

"No! I have to help Max," I said to myself, shining my flashlight around the darkness.

At the sound of another howl, I jumped back. My heart had never beaten so fast before, and the floor creaked with every step I took. My flashlight beam swung around, but I didn't see anything in the dim light. Sweat coated the palms of my hands as I stood there holding my breath, listening for any sounds, trying to hang on to what was left of my sanity.

Then, a ravenous moan echoed from across the room, and a sudden panic flooded through me. I paused, drew a deep breath, and pressed myself against the wall. I could hear something shuffling in the living room. I took a deep, trembling breath, my beam wavering as I whipped my flashlight all around.

A scratching noise made me jump, especially since it was coming from directly behind me. Gasping for breath, I turned around. There was Max, outside and scratching at the glass. I had no clue how he got out, but as I was trying to figure that out, my poor dog let out a long yelp and then started barking.

I bolted into the kitchen and grabbed my purse. Regardless of what was outside, I had to get out of that house, and since Max was already out, I didn't have to worry about deserting him. I opened the sliding glass door, my heart threatening to explode. I turned on the back porch light. Holding the knife tightly, jutting it out in front of me like some kind of horror movie menace. I glanced around and then made a run for it. My legs took off, carrying me like a bat out of hell to the driveway in front of the house. My senses were on high alert, and I glanced over my shoulder to make sure my trusty canine companion was keeping up with me.

Just as I opened my purse and grabbed my keys, a howl came from inside the house. When I glanced up, I saw that the front door was wide open, and I realized that had to be how Max had gotten out and whatever it was had gotten in.

Move! I thought, but I almost couldn't breathe. *Find the right key.* I couldn't hold on to the flashlight, the keys, and the knife, so I slipped the flashlight into my robe pocket. My hands shook as I tried to open the car door. Max was barking, and I knew something was coming. The door opened, Max jumped in, I threw the knife and purse on the passenger's seat, and I started the ignition. Then a thought occurred to me. I'd forgotten to check the back seat. My stomach clenched, and I quickly looked back there. Relieved to see no one and nothing but a few fast food wrappers, I let out a breath and put the car in reverse.

Everything was a blur as I sped down the dark road. I was still gasping for breath as I pulled into McDonald's, still dressed in my robe. I contemplated going inside for help, but I knew I would look ridiculous in this getup, and I was sure no one would take me seriously.

Max barked, as if asking me what was going on.

I petted his head. "It's okay, boy," I said soothingly.

As I looked at the passenger's seat, I noticed that the dog was actually sitting on my long-lost phone. I had no idea how my phone got inside the car. I was sure I'd put it in my purse, but I picked it up and without hesitation dialed Jesse.

"Hello?" he said.

"Jesse!" I cried. "Oh my gosh! You aren't gonna believe this."

"What's wrong?" he asked, sounding worried.

I was still so panicked and shocked, I didn't know where to begin.

"I...we...uh...there was this noise," I babbled, "and then the lights went out and—"

"Are you okay?" he asked, clearly confused and concerned by my panic.

“No. My hands won’t stop shaking. Jesse, I’m really not okay.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m sitting here at McDonald’s in my bathrobe, if that’s any indication of how not okay I am! There was something in our house, so I got creeped out and bolted. I’m not sure whether to call my parents or the police.”

“You were home alone?”

“Yeah. My mom and dad are on a date, at a late movie.”

“Okay. Just sit tight. I’ll be right there.”

“Okay,” I said, then hung up.

It seemed like it took forever, but he finally showed up. When he pulled up next to me, I ran out of the car and into his arms. “Oh, Jesse!” I sobbed.

“Taylor, you’re shaking,” he said, holding me tighter. “Don’t worry, I’m here. You’re okay now.”

“I was so scared,” I said, still sobbing.

“What happened? Just try to calm down and start at the beginning.”

I explained the entire story, while he listened intently, never doubting me once. “Do you think somebody tried to rob the house?” I asked desperately. “Maybe the intruder was shocked when he heard me taking a shower. Maybe he wasn’t expecting anyone to be home, so he just ran out and left the door open, and some wild animal came in.”

“Did you notice if the door was open after you took your shower?” Jesse asked.

“I came down the back stairs, so I didn’t notice.”

“Maybe you’re right, to some degree. Maybe you did spook a robber, and he left in a hurry without shutting the door behind him and something got in by accident. But what I don’t understand is why he’d come back. If he was scared off, he shoulda been long gone, so why would he come back and look through the sliding glass doors? If he wanted back in, why didn’t he just use the open door?”

I smoothed out my robe. “You must think I’m crazy.”

“No. Not at all. We’re going to figure this thing out together. I’m here for you, Taylor.”

He gave me a long hug, and I was sure he could feel my entire body trembling. “I know I look ridiculous, but I was too petrified to put clothes on. I just wanted to get out of there. The knife’s still in the car.”

“We should probably go back and take a look at your house.”

I sucked in a trembling breath. “I don’t want to. I’m scared.”

“It’s your house, and I’ll be right there with you. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you—not ever. Unless you’re hungry and want to go inside for a shake or a burger or something.”

“In this?” I asked laughing.

“I won’t judge.”

“Ha, ha. No way.”

“Trust me, I’ve seen worse in McDonald’s after dark. Anyway, if you think you’re up to driving, I’ll follow you back to your place.”

“Okay,” I said, hoping I really was up to going back.

I made it home with Jesse right behind me. We both got out and began walking toward the house, but I noticed Jesse was kind of lagging behind.

“It’s okay,” I said, smiling. “You can come in.”

“Thanks.”

He was so polite, waiting for an invitation. I found it adorable.

“Maybe I should go get the knife,” I said. “In case something is still in there.”

“We’re fine. You’ve got me here now.”

Back at the house, I didn’t notice anything out of place, and my parents weren’t home from their date yet. I held on to Jesse’s arm as he glanced around, using the bright moonlight to guide our way.

“The door is still wide open,” I observed.

We walked into the living room, and I flicked on the switch.

“Hey, at least the lights work now.” I glanced around, not seeing anything out of the ordinary. There was no mud, no footprints, no overturned furniture or broken glass. In fact there wasn’t anything to prove that I wasn’t hearing things or going crazy. Everything looked perfectly normal. There was nothing to support my claim. I shut the door and locked it.

We walked through the downstairs and into the kitchen. Jesse told me to wait at the table while he bravely checked the upstairs. After a minute or two, I heard him yell, “All clear up here.”

He walked back into the kitchen and I shrugged. "You must think I'm crazy."

"Not at all," he answered. "Something was here. I can smell it."

"Think it was a wolf? Because I heard howling, clear as day."

"Definitely a wolf...but there was something else too."

"What?" I asked, not sure if I wanted to hear the answer.

"There were two intruders," he said.

"I thought so. The robber and the wolf who decided to take advantage of an open door."

"It's complicated, but I swear I'm gonna find out what happened," he assured me. "You weren't imagining things, Taylor, and it was smart for you to bolt out of here when you did."

"What if it was Jonathon?" I asked with a shudder. "Do you think it could have been him?"

"Not possible. He's...out of town."

"Maybe he was. But what if he came back?"

"Like I said, it's absolutely not possible."

I sighed. "You're right. If it was him he probably would've killed me in the shower, just like Norman Bates. What if it was that Drake guy at the party?"

"Stalking a girl for no reason isn't his style."

"Maybe he thinks I'm the princess in his game. Who knows?"

"I don't think so. Something else is going on."

A car pulled in the driveway.

When I opened the door and recognized the vehicle, I was relieved. "Thank God. It's just my parents." I was so grateful that my parents were okay. I threw my arms around them as soon as they stepped in the door.

My father looked at me, noticing that I was in a robe and slippers, then looked at Jesse and raised an eyebrow.

"What's going on?" he shouted, absolutely livid. "We leave you alone for one night and you invite a boy over?! Why are you dressed—or rather, undressed—like that?"

"Dad!" I cried.

He looked at Jesse again, his eyes hardening as anger washing over his features.

"Go home, young man," he screamed at Jesse. "Get out of my house!"

"Mom," I begged, "please make Dad stop! He doesn't know the whole story. It's not what you think."

My dad shook his head. "I trusted you, Taylor."

"Let her explain," my mom pleaded.

I touched my dad's arm. "Please, Dad! Jesse just got here. Somebody broke in, so I called him over to help."

"What?" he asked in disbelief. "Someone broke in? With you here by yourself?"

I explained the entire story to my parents. I even told them to go look for the knife in my car.

My dad took everything in and as he looked toward Jesse his demeanor softened.

"I'm sorry, Jesse. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions," he said, before turning his gaze to me. "I-I'm sorry I didn't trust you. "You've been through a horrible experience, and I shouldn't have accused you of anything. I apologize."

"It's okay," I said. "I know it didn't look very good."

My mom looked a little shocked as she came over and wrapped her arm around me.

"Baby, you've had a rough evening," she said, giving me a hug and kissing my cheek. "Would you like me to make you some hot chocolate?"

I squeezed her hand. "Mom, I'm not ten anymore, but thank you."

"You stayed up late with Julie last night watching horror movies," my dad said. "What if you imagined the robber? Are you sure it wasn't just a shadow?"

"The door was left open, and the power went out," I retorted.

"I know hon, but maybe you were tired from work. It's easy for a tired mind to wander and—"

"I would have remembered leaving a door open," I cut in. "I heard a wild animal howling."

"We live in the woods, dear," he said, trying to find an explanation for what had happened. "If the door was left open something probably wandered in."

I swallowed hard. "I didn't leave the door open. Like I said, the power even went out. I had to get the flashlight out of the drawer."

"We're in a remote area, and the wind really picked up tonight," he went on. "It could've easily knocked the power out temporarily."

"I'm gonna go, now that your parents are here," Jesse said.

"Goodbye, Jesse," I said, gazing into his eyes. "Thanks for coming over and checking out things for me."

“Not a problem.”

“Thanks, Jesse,” my dad added, swallowing his pride and his accusations.

My mom gave him a little hug. “Yes, thank you, Jesse. You take care of yourself, now, and have a good evening.”

After Jesse was gone, I turned to my mother. “I was so scared, Mom. My entire body was shaking,” I said fearfully.

She looked at me with concern on her face, the way she had when I was little and had a fever.

“I’ve never seen you this terrified before, sweetheart,” she said, giving me a concerned look before turning to my dad.

“Something scared her. If she says she saw an intruder, I believe she saw someone,” my mom told him. “I’m definitely calling the police and filing a report.”

My dad glanced around. “I’m sure everything is okay now. Nothing seems to be missing or damaged.”

It was as if he refused to believe the obvious. He turned toward me. “Honey, maybe you’re just having a hard time adjusting to such an isolated life out here in the woods, or maybe you’re missing Sean. I know how much you cared about him.”

“Dad, I know I cried for over a month when we broke up, but I’m over him. Besides, this has absolutely nothing to do with him,” I said, trying to make him understand. “Sean breaking up with me was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

My mom wrapped her arm around my shoulders.

“How was dinner?” she asked. “I made spicy chicken. Did you like it?”

“I didn’t get a chance to eat. I was warming it up in the microwave when I saw that man through the glass.”

“That’s too bad, darling. Let me warm it up for you.”

“I’m really not hungry now.”

“How about something to drink?” she offered.

“I’d love that. Surprise me.”

My mom smiled. “Okay. But I’m going to call the police first and have an officer come out. So don’t get scared if you hear a car pull in the driveway, okay? And he’ll probably want to talk to you.”

“I’ll get dressed and just wait down here.”

A policeman came and we went over the entire situation. He filled out a report, asked lots of questions, then left.

I headed up to my room and replayed the entire situation in my head. *Maybe I did overreact, but I know that growl was real. It was so loud!* I was glad I didn’t check it out on my own, or I might not have lived to tell the tale.

With that thought on my mind, I crawled into bed, played on my phone, and listened to music. I usually kept the door closed when I slept, but tonight I left it open.

A few minutes later, my mom stepped in with a steaming mug of cocoa.

“Hey, Mom,” I said with a smile.

“Hi, honey,” she began. “Look, I know you’re not a child anymore, but I also know you still love hot chocolate, especially loaded with marshmallows.”

“I have to work early tomorrow,” I responded, “so I hope it doesn’t keep me up.”

“Just have a few sips. Goodnight, honey.”

“Goodnight. And, Mom...”

“Yes, honey?”

“Please leave the door open, just this once.”

Chapter 13

When morning dawned, I peeked out the window and into the woods. I didn’t see any intruders lurking around. It was actually beautiful outside, complete with all the shining sun and chirping birds the outdoors had to offer.

In hindsight, I felt silly for asking Jesse to meet me at McDonald’s when I was barely dressed and hysterical. I realized now that I should have called my parents and left him out of it. I was relatively certain he didn’t want to date a stark-raving lunatic, but the damage had already been done.

Realizing I couldn’t turn back time, I took a shower, put my uniform on, and left for work.

* * *

Again when I clocked in for work, Jesse was waiting for me.

He looked so handsome in his uniform and with his hair tied back, and I felt a flutter as he pulled me aside. “How did you sleep?” he asked.

“Look, Jesse, I’m sorry I bugged you last night. I’m so embarrassed. I should have—”

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about,” he cut in, speaking with heartfelt sincerity.

“I beg to differ. I was at McDonald’s in a fluffy pink robe. Did I mention I had a butcher knife too?”

“Technically, you were in the parking lot. That doesn’t count as being out in public.”

I smiled at his attempt to make me feel better. “I guess. But anyway, I’ve had enough of the wild animals around here. They’ve gotta do something about their wolf problem.”

He smiled. “I totally agree.”

Ms. Aikers approached us, bid us a quick, “Good morning, folks,” then handed us our assignments for the day.

“Looks like my job is taking care of the birds today,” Jesse said. “I guess that’s all right. I’ve been missing Beauty Queen.”

“Mine’s worse,” I said as I read my assignment sheet. “She put me on cage cleanup.”

“I can get my stuff done pretty quickly, and then I’ll come over and help you,” he offered, ever the Good Samaritan.

I smiled at his sweetness. “That’s so nice of you. Thank you, Jesse.”

“Not a problem,” he said, flashing that gorgeous smile. “I’ll see ya later.”

“Okay. See you after you finish up, say hi to Beauty Queen for me.”

* * *

I was mopping one of the empty cages when screams echoed through the air. I quickly threw down the mop and hurried out to find a crowd of people gathered around the cage across from me. They were screaming in panic about a five-year-old who had somehow fallen into the mountain lion’s enclosure. The child was unconscious and the big cat was quickly approaching. Shouts and cries pierced the morning air, the loudest and most heart wrenching were the fearful howls of the little one’s mother.

“Can you help?” begged the frightened mother, noticing that I was wearing a zoo uniform.

“Uh...” Not sure what to do, I began to scream and yell and try to get the animal’s attention. When that didn’t work, I reached down and grabbed several rocks, and started

throwing them at the mountain lion. The huge cat didn't even flinch, its attention completely absorbed by the child.

Suddenly, zoo workers arrived and entered the pen. They tried desperately to get to the child as the mountain lion snarled at them, stalking the area between them and the small still figure.

Its menacing growls made me shudder, and when I felt a tap on my shoulder, I jumped.

"What's happening?" Jesse asked.

"A kid fell in!" I said. "The fall must have knocked him out, he's unconscious down there."

Without waiting for any further explanation, he took off in a flash to help the other workers. On the way over to help, I ran into my boss.

"Taylor, stay back," she said firmly. "Let the others handle this."

"But I want to help, and—" I began.

"You stay right here," Ms. Aikers commanded. "We're getting tranquilizer guns."

The woman looked frazzled, more shaken up than I'd ever seen her before.

My gaze shot to the pen. Just as Jesse hopped in, the mountain lion lunged at one of the zoo workers and sank its teeth into the bald man's head, causing blood to gush everywhere. Somehow, Jesse managed to pry the animal's jaws open and free the man. The victim gasped for breath and managed to crawl away. That left Jesse face to face, and alone, with the fierce angry cat. The bald man was three times Jesse's size, so I didn't know how Jesse could possibly escape the animal.

"Jesse!" Jeanie shouted. "Get out of there!"

I knew it was better if Jesse didn't run, if he just stayed and confronted it, tried to look big and bad. If Jesse tried to run, the cat would only be instinctively driven to give chase, and Jesse would become helpless prey.

The lion snarled and focused its attention on Jesse. I wondered why Jesse wasn't screaming and yelling at it or lifting up and flailing his arms, all the usual tactics for getting away. Instead, he just looked at the animal and calmly spoke to it, boldly staring into its eyes. Amazingly the mountain lion turned and calmly walked to the back of the enclosure and just waited. The other workers cautiously rushed in and grabbed the child.

When Jesse came out, I ran into his arms. "I was so worried. You're so brave."

Jesse was the most caring, selfless person I'd ever met. He was a hero, with a huge heart, always ready to help others. I'd already been on the receiving end of that more than once. It was yet another of the amazing qualities that drew me to him like a fly to honey.

"I didn't mean to worry you," he said as he gazed into my eyes, "but I had to help that kid."

Jeanie rushed over and hugged Jesse long and tight. "Jesse, you scared me half to death. But, as always, you're a hero. As a matter of fact, a news team is waiting at the office to interview you."

"How did they get here so quick?" I asked.

"They were already here, doing a piece on the grizzlies," Jeanie said.

Jesse bit his lip hard. "Great. Just great."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't like the spotlight. I didn't do anything but what had to be done."

"Are you crazy, Jesse? You saved a little kid and Bob," Jeanie said. "You deserve your fifteen minutes of fame and then some, so quit being so humble."

"Jesse she's right," I said, hating that I was agreeing with Jeanie. "You did something wonderful here today. You saved two lives. If that's not newsworthy, I don't know what is."

He looked at Jeanie. "How is Bob anyway?"

"The EMTs said he's fine. He just needs a few stitches."

"Thank God," Jesse said with a sigh. "That thing had hold of his head pretty good."

"Yeah, and he would be dead if it weren't for you," Jeanie said, her red ponytail swishing from side to side as she spoke. "You aren't going to be able to pull this one off like Batman, lurking around in the shadows and saving people without anyone seeing you. Everybody's got a digital camera and camera phone these days, and the whole thing's gonna be on YouTube going viral in the next five minutes," she said, grinning and adding, "You'll probably get Employee of the Month out of it."

He closed his eyes and exhaled. "I've just majorly screwed up. I gotta go."

"Screwed up?" I asked, confused. "Jesse, what's wrong?"

His eyebrows furrowed into a deep line. "I'm in a whole lot of trouble, that's what."

"With who?"

"I've gotta run," he said, refusing to talk about it.

“Nobody should be mad you jumped in there,” I said, not sure why he was reacting this way. “I think it’s admirable that you’d even take that kind of a risk.”

The only person who I thought he might be talking about was his mother. “If you’re worried about your mom, she should be proud to have such a brave son.”

“She won’t see it that way,” he assured me.

“Jesse, if you need anything, I’m here for you,” I said realizing he was determined to handle things his way.

“Thanks,” he answered. “That means a lot. I’ll call you later.”

He turned and left without another word, not even saying good-bye to Jeanie.

Jesse had a certain air of mystery and moodiness about him. He wasn’t telling me everything, I knew he was hiding something, but I didn’t want to press the issue. I was sure that in time, he’d fill me in on everything. For the time being, I just wanted to be as supportive as possible.

Suddenly, Jeanie’s voice jerked me out of my thoughts. “Jesse’s mom hates it when he’s in the limelight. She’s really weird about it, like she wishes he was a hermit. I think she maybe kidnapped him or something.”

I cocked a brow. “What makes you say that?”

“She won’t let him be in the spotlight for any reason. One time, we did this big campaign for the zoo online, and Jesse’s picture was in it, holding one of the bear cubs. His mom was livid. She marched right down here, demanding Ms. Aikers remove his picture immediately. She caused so much trouble that his picture was taken down twenty-four hours later. Then one other time, after the zoo helped to rehabilitate three geese, after they had been shot with arrows, a local photographer took photos of him during their release. His mother actually paid the guy some outlandish sum of cash for the memory card so he couldn’t publish the pictures.”

“Maybe she’s just a very private person,” I reasoned.

“She goes overboard,” Jeanie replied.

“What does she look like?”

“She’s pretty—tall and thin, with light blue eyes and dark hair like him. Anyway, we better get back to work. I’m sure Aikers isn’t gonna be in a good mood after all this.”

I nodded. “Yep. Back to mopping floors in stinky cages.”

“No rest for the weary,” she said with a grin.

I chuckled. "You got that right!"

Chapter 14

A few weeks passed, and I didn't see much of Jesse. His mother, furious with him after the incident at the zoo, had grounded him and wouldn't let him out for any reason. I didn't get what the big deal was? I found his mom's behavior to be a little odd. Jesse said she didn't like guests either, so he never invited me over. Whenever we got together, it was always at my house or somewhere else. My parents, on the other hand, had met him a few times. While they thought he was very polite and a nice guy on the surface, there was something about him that they just didn't trust. My guess was that he didn't fit up to the preppy image they expected me to date. They hated his shoulder-length hair and labeled him a bad boy just by looking at him.

Meanwhile, the ducklings had grown. They were strong, healthy and ready to be released. Ms. Aikers had given us permission to set them free. In our zoo uniforms, we stood beside Big Bear Lake, admiring the scenery and the sun glistening on the water. After a few minutes, Jesse took the animal carrier out of the company Jeep. He set it on the shore near the water and opened it. The five little ducks hesitantly emerged then waddled into the water, gliding away from us.

Jesse smiled in victory. "We did it," he said.

"We sure did." I agreed.

I'd never felt so happy. It was the most rewarding feeling, and I couldn't stop smiling. As Jesse and I watched the birds swim around the big lake, I felt his hand slip into mine. All over again, that familiar electricity flowed through me. I couldn't believe a guy like him was holding the hand of a girl like me. It was one of those moments that a girl just knows that she'll never forget.

"I see why you love your job so much," I said. "They look so happy out there."

His blue gaze lingered on me as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. When he smiled, his white teeth gleamed.

Bzzzz!

His cell phone rang and he answered it, speaking urgently with whoever was on the other end. After a minute, he hung up and looked at me.

“We have two pressing cases that need our immediate attention,” he explained. “There’s an orphaned baby squirrel that hasn’t eaten in days, and the bird that was trapped inside a tire in that huge puddle of oil is ready to be washed.”

I smiled and shrugged. “Duty calls.”

We jumped into the Jeep and sped off, heading back to the zoo.

* * *

We went straight to work, tending the hungry squirrel first and then the bird. It had a yellow bill and had a bare yellow skin patch behind its dark eyes. The bird was blanketed in black oil, so it was going to be a messy job. Jesse handed me a pair of long, yellow latex gloves, and I also put a waterproof apron around my neck to prepare for the job.

“This is a yellow-billed magpie,” said Jesse as he gently stroked the bird. “What’s unique about these birds is that they don’t leave California. They’re songbirds, part of the crow family. They eat acorns, insects, carrion, fruit, and berries. You can’t tell now because she’s covered in oil, but she’s black and white. One of California’s prettiest birds under all this sludge.” He held up the bird and smiled when it made loud clucking noises. “I think we’ll call her Sally.”

As he talked so enthusiastically about the bird, I couldn’t stop staring into his eyes. I loved his caring nature, his love for animals and his evident need to protect them—just more qualities to admire about Jesse. I could have listened to him every second, every minute of every day, and I never would have grown tired of his voice or of what he had to say. His dedication to this zoo and these animals amazed me. Some of the workers told me he spent countless hours there, even when he wasn’t getting paid. He’d often go in on his day off to feed a baby animal or bird, and he never once complained.

“How do you know it’s a girl?” I asked.

“I’m just guessing,” he answered with a shrug. “She looks like a Sally to me. The only sure way is a blood test.”

“Then Sally it is,” I said with a grin. “When did she get here?”

“About a week ago.”

“Why’d they wait so long to clean her up?”

“Sally had to be stabilized first. At first, for almost a week, she was warmed and fed eight times a day. They also gave her a re-hydrating solution with a feeding tube to help flush out all that oil she’d accidentally ingested,” he explained. “Now she’s ready to be cleaned. Since birds

depend so much on their wings and feathers to function properly, removing this oil is her only chance at survival.”

“I’ve got the warm water.”

“Good. We’ll make her a nice bubble bath with Dawn. This is definitely a two-person job, because she might squirm a little. I’ll hold Sally, and you wash her feathers really well.”

I nodded, indicating that I understood the game plan.

When Jesse approached with the bird, she squawked and flailed, but he managed to keep a good hold on the animal without hurting her.

“Cleaning can be pretty stressful on the bird,” said Jesse as he cooed at Sally to try to keep her calm.

“I can tell. She’s not used to this, so I can’t blame her.”

He looked into the bird’s eyes and told it softly to calm down. Amazingly, Jesse’s soothing voice worked.

I began washing her feathers and wiping off the slick oil. I used a toothbrush and cotton swab to get all that caked oil out of her eyes and off of her little head. As I scrubbed the underside of the bird, I could see her iridescent blue-black color starting to emerge. Her belly, shoulders, and large patches on her wings were bright white. “Ew! The water is getting so black.”

“We move to the next tub, then the third and fourth and so on, until the water is clear.”

Working so close to Jesse made my heart pound, especially when he snuck me little glances and smiles.

“Jeanie told me about her warning that I’m some big bad wolf, but I’m not.”

“Jesse, it’s okay if you’ve dated other girls. I’ve dated lots of guys myself. There’s nothing wrong with searching for the right person.”

“I’ve never felt a spark with others girls like I feel with you, Taylor,” he said with heartfelt sincerity.

“Yeah? Well, I definitely feel a connection between us,” I answered truthfully.

He shot me his gleaming white smile.

As if she was annoyed that we were ignoring her, Sally flapped her wings, splashing both of us.

I laughed as soapy bubbles flew everywhere. “I’m soaked!” I said, grinning.

Jesse touched my face in a soft caress as he wiped the soap bubbles off my face. His blue eyes locked on me, and I couldn't tear my gaze away from him. For just a second, it felt like he was looking not just at me but *into* me.

The door cracked open a minute later, and Jeanie walked in.

"I was assigned to help you guys. And judging by how wet you look, you definitely need me," she said with a laugh. "That little bird is kicking both your butts!"

Jesse and I looked at each other, then laughed too.

I was off the clock at three p.m., but I stayed until eight, and so did Jesse. I never knew I'd take so much joy in helping animals. I didn't even care about the money. All I cared about was being with Jesse and doing something we both loved.

Chapter 15

Julie and I decided to take Max for a walk in the woods. A nice lady I had met had told me about a place that was the perfect spot for dogs. Fred had finished working on our back yard for the day, and he'd overheard me talking to Julie on the phone and had given me the look, so I made sure to invite him too. Julie drove us to the destination in her truck, and the three of us and Max jumped out.

I glanced around. "Are you sure we're in the right spot? I don't see any trails."

"Yeah...we look lost," Fred said.

Julie squinted against the sun. "Well, we're here now. It can't hurt to have a look around."

"Need I remind you of bears, mountain lions, and wolves?" I asked.

Max glanced up at me and barked.

"See? Max wants to go for a walk," Julie said. "This is all public property."

I pushed some large leaves and twigs out of my way. "All right. We'll go a little ways, then come back."

Julie beamed. "Great."

"Okay," Fred reluctantly agreed.

I put Max on a leash. He barked, then hurried off into the woods, dragging me along.

“How about after this, we grab lunch?” Julie asked chasing after us. “I’m craving a big, juicy burger.”

“Mind if Jesse joins us?” I asked.

Fred offered an exaggerated eye-roll.

“That’d be great,” Julie said. “It’d be nice to get to know him while I’m sober.”

I laughed. “Do you remember leaning against him and telling him how pretty his eyes are?”

She cupped her mouth. “No way! Did I really do that?”

I nodded as she looked away in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know how much you like him. I promise I’ll never do that again.”

I laughed. “It’s okay. You were pretty smashed, and we both knew it.”

She grabbed Fred’s arm. “I was sooooo wasted.”

He smirked.

We walked for a little ways and enjoyed the beautiful, serene landscape. Having come from New York City, I knew I’d never take all that natural beauty for granted. Streams of sunshine poured down through the towering trees all around us. Insects hummed and birds chirped.

Max barked, then pulled so hard that I tripped over a log and let go of the leash.

“Max!” I wailed.

Fred offered his hand. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, jumping to my feet and peering ahead, “but where did Max go?”

He pointed. “That way. I hear him barking.”

I shuddered, recalling the last time Max had gotten away. “I don’t know why he does that. He just takes off.”

“He’s a dog,” Julie said. “He’s just acting like one.”

“Well, I’m sick of it. I need to train him better.”

We stopped at wire fence with a “No Trespassing” sign on it. I yelled for Max to come back, but he refused again, just like the last time. Having no other choice, I slipped my leg over the fence and jumped over it.

“Wait. What are you doing?” Fred scolded, pointing at the sign. “That’s private property!”

“He’s right,” Julie said.

I shot her a look. "Since when do you care?"

"Since now," she said, pointing at a long line of skulls dangling from a rope stretched from one tree to the next.

"Are those...human?" I gasped, completely frazzled.

"No," she answered as she inspected them. "Animal."

I let out a sigh of relief. My gaze shot to a long, horizontal rock, about ten by three feet, carved with weird symbols and ancient writing. I traced the engraved letters with my fingers.

"What do you think this means?"

"I have no idea what the symbols are, but the letters are in Latin," Julie said, squinting for a better look at them in the bright sunlight.

"Latin?" I said puzzled.

"Yeah. Maybe it's some kind of memorial or something."

"Think it's a headstone?"

"I don't know, but this whole place is giving me the creeps. I'm not going past that rock, dog or no dog."

"There," I said as I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture. "Now we can Google it when we get back."

"I wanna get out of here," replied Julie with a shudder.

"Wait here," I said. "I have to get Max."

"I'll come with you," Fred said, trying to sound brave and chivalrous.

"Are you two crazy?" she cried grabbing my arm, then Fred's trying to stop us. "You guys can't leave me here in Freddy Krueger's backyard all by myself!"

I sighed loudly. "Then you'll have to come with us. I'm not leaving my dog behind."

"But it's some kind of creepy cemetery, and—" she begged.

"Go or stay," I answered. "It's your choice."

"You expect me to wait here by the skull collection and the hieroglyphic mummy headstone for some chainsaw-wielding maniac to come after me?" she asked desperately.

"You've watched too many horror flicks," Fred said, laughing.

"Well, maybe that's why I'm still alive. Consider it research."

I sighed. "Listen, we'll be right back. You'll be fine. You know I can't leave Max."

"Let's just wait here for a minute," she pleaded. "I bet he comes back."

The place was strange, even more frightening than the mountain lion, and I didn't like the thought of my dog running around over there. My gaze shot to the animal skulls knocking together in the wind. My stomach was in knots. "Look, Julie, we have no idea who owns this land. They might shoot him on sight. Clearly, they've got no problem killing animals."

"Fine. Let's go get your dog," she said, climbing over the fence. "But if I get killed, just know I'll be back to haunt you."

I smirked. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

We walked through the thick woods, calling for Max. I stopped when I heard a twig snap, as if someone was following us. I took a deep breath to settle my overactive imagination, then pushed through some ferns which opened up like a doorway into an Easter-grass green meadow. There, we saw Max, barking at a fire ring made completely out of stones. I cocked a brow, confused.

"Max?" I called.

"He must be barking at a little animal, like a mouse or something," Julie said. "It's probably hiding behind one of those rocks."

I gazed at all the rocks in the large ring, guessing someone had once camped there. Then, as I looked closer, I noticed a pile of boulders in the center, with a black tin box sitting on top of them. I swallowed a lump in my throat. "Oh my gosh," I croaked. "Do you think this is some kind of...altar?"

"Whoa!" said Fred, glancing around and taking in the strange sight. "Do you think they sacrifice animals out here?"

"Or humans," I whispered.

Julie clutched her chest. "What if it's some kind of satanic cult?"

She walked over to the pile of boulders in the center of the ring and picked up the black box. She tried to pry open the lid, but it was too tightly sealed.

"Won't budge. I wonder what's inside?" she questioned. "Whatever it is, they're trying to keep it a secret."

"Dude, you touched it" Fred exclaimed, clearly shocked.

"One, I'm not a dude," Julie retorted. "Two, I'm sure it's just an empty box."

"You don't know that," Fred shot back.

"It's light as a feather."

“Maybe we should just leave it alone,” I said. “If I remember right, Julie, you didn’t even want to come over here.”

She had a gleam in her eye. “I know. But aren’t you curious?”

“Maybe curiosity is what killed all those cats hanging on that clothesline back there,” Fred said.

I nodded. “Yeah, we really shouldn’t be messing with it, Julie. I don’t wanna be cursed or something.”

“Do you really think it’s witchcraft?” Fred asked.

I grabbed the box and slid my hands over it. “Maybe it’s just teenagers experimenting. Let’s just put it back where we found it.” But as I held it, curiosity struck me, and I turned the box over in my hands several times, looking at it even more carefully. When the lid opened, seemingly on its own, I jumped.

“You did it! Julie shouted. “What’s in there?”

The box was empty, but I read these words scrawled in the dust inside the box. “You are the chosen one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Julie asked. “Chosen for what?”

“How would I know?”

“Maybe you’re the chosen one because you opened up the box.”

“That’s silly,” I replied.

“Maybe you’ll get superpowers or something cool like that.”

I playfully slugged her, then carefully set the box down exactly where I found it. Letting out a trembling breath, I secretly recalled that old story of Pandora’s Box, and I hoped I hadn’t unleashed some kind of evil on the world, my friends, or myself.

“Look!” cried Fred, biting his lip and pointing toward the ring. “The altar is surrounded by circular patches of burnt grass.”

“What burned it?” I wondered aloud.

“It looks like they were left by a ring of torches or candles,” Fred reasoned.

“So it was some kind of occult ritual!” Julie said. “Man, I don’t wanna be a *Blair Witch* sequel!”

“Enough with the horror movies.” I then glanced around and gazed up into the trees. I was suddenly overcome by the eerie feeling that we were being watched. The breeze stirred, rippling

through the meadow, and I could have sworn I heard someone whisper my name. I instantly froze in fear.

“Taylor, what’s wrong?” Julie asked.

“I thought somebody called my name.”

“I didn’t hear anything but the wind,” Fred responded, looking around.

I swallowed another lump. “Yeah,” I said trying to sound confident. “I’m sure it was just my imagination.”

All of the sudden, the wind picked up immensely, swirling our hair around our heads and rustling the trees violently, causing them to sway and creak.

“What’s happening?” Julie asked, her eyes wide with fright.

Next, music began to fill the meadow, an ancient melody played by flutes and bells.

“That’s weird,” Fred said.

“Where’s the music coming from?” Julie asked.

I glanced around, darting my eyes in a slow circle, but I couldn’t tell where the sound was coming from. It was freaky, and a chill ran up my spine. I wanted to bolt, but my feet were suddenly glued to the ground, as if some invisible entity was holding me in place.

“Taylor,” a soft woman’s voice spoke lightly in my ear. “You’ve been marked as a petal. Know that you are in danger from my enemies. But do not fear, for you will have our protection until the full moon, the first day of the new year. Know that it is your destiny to free us from our curse.”

“Taylor!” Julie said, her face pale.

Fred softly gripped my shoulders, and I stared into his green eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked concerned.

“Breathe,” Julie said, “and then tell us what’s happening.”

Beads of sweat rolled down my face as I gasped for air. I couldn’t talk. All I knew was that I needed to get away as fast as possible.

Suddenly, I could move my legs again. I bolted toward Max and grabbed his leash. My heart was beating a million times a minute. “Let’s go!” I said between gasps, grabbing Julie’s arm and pulling her along. I gripped Max’s leash tightly with my other hand. We tore through the woods, past the weird rock and animal skulls, then jumped in her truck and quickly locked the doors.

“Go, go, go!” I shouted, glancing out the windows.

“What’s going on, Taylor?” she asked.

“Just start driving!” I yelled. “I’ll tell you on the way!”

“Yeah, let’s just get outta here,” Fred added. “That was freaky how the wind kicked up like that. And what was with that music?”

Julie put the truck in drive and sped away. No one said a word until she reached town and pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant.

“Taylor,” said Fred, what happened back there?”

“I-I don’t know,” I answered. “I can’t explain it.”

“Try,” he responded urgently.

“You’ll never believe me.”

“Sure I would. I’m very open-minded.”

“And so am I,” Julie chimed in.

I glanced up. “Whoever owns that land is obviously practicing some kind of weird ceremonies out there,” I began. “Maybe they summon spirits or something, because someone was talking to me in that wind.”

“Was it a really creepy voice?” asked Julie.

“No. It was a woman. She just sounded...ancient.”

“What did she say?” Fred asked.

“She said I’m in danger, but that she’ll protect me.”

“Sounds like a guardian angel to me,” said Julie. “What’s so spooky about that?”

“She said she’ll only protect me until the new year.”

“What? So...after the ball drops, you’re on your own?”

“Yeah. I guess it’s temporary protection.”

“What kind of danger are you supposed to be in?” Fred asked.

I pondered for a moment, thinking long and hard and trying to remember every word the wind-whisperer had said. “I have no idea.”

“Why would she want to help you?” Julie asked.

“I have no idea about that either.”

“Why didn’t you ask her?”

“I don’t know, Julie. Maybe because I was a little freaked out!” I said, growing a bit frustrated with the interrogation. “She said I was marked as a petal.”

“What’s a petal?” Fred asked. “Like from a flower?”

“I have no idea,” I responded.

“We should tell Jesse,” Julie said flipping open her phone.

I grabbed her hand. “Please don’t! As a matter of fact, let’s forget about lunch. I just wanna go home.”

“Okay,” she replied, “sure.”

“Not a word to Jesse,” I said glancing at Fred.

“Mummy’s the word,” he joked. “What happens in the satanic campground stays in the satanic campground.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Back at home, I felt bad for canceling our lunch plans with Jesse, but I was too freaked out to see anybody. I just ran up to my room and locked the door. With trembling fingers, I uploaded the picture of the rock to my computer. Even when I zoomed in on the symbols, I couldn’t see them all that clearly, but I scribbled the letters and symbols down and started searching the Internet for clues.

An hour later, I’d had no luck. Since Julie had mentioned Latin, I decided to try Google Translate. I carefully entered each letter, then pressed the button, eager to see what the message meant. In an instant, it was right there in front of my eyes spelled out in plain English: “Do not tread on this sacred ground. If you dare to walk on the land of our ancestors, you will die.”

I swallowed hard as I tried to process the message. *Wait...am I gonna die because I stepped foot on some cursed land?* I didn’t really believe in that supernatural hoopla, and I always turned the channel when those stupid ghost-hunting shows came on, but now my mind was running in circles trying to sort out all the possibilities.

Chapter 16

Days passed with nothing strange happening to any of the three of us, or Max, so I decided the whole thing was just a hoax and that there was no reason to get so worked up about it.

When the weed whacker started whirring outside, I jumped up. Peering through the window I saw Fred working in the backyard, so I thought it was the perfect time to tell him about my findings and see what he thought.

When Fred noticed me, he turned off the machine. He was covered in dust and dirt, with a pile of decapitated towering weeds lying at his feet.

I offered him a bottle of water. “How about a drink?”

He brushed off his clothes and smiled. “Thank you, Taylor.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, staring up into his eyes that were as green as the grass he was trimming.

“I’m was just about to take a break. Mind if I spend it with you?”

“I’d love to. I found out some things, and I’d like to talk to you about them.”

Fred was cute and a good friend, so I didn’t see any harm in sitting outside with him for a few minutes. My dad controlled his breaks, but I didn’t see him anywhere around, so I led Fred to the porch swing and sat down with him.

“Taylor,” he said, “you really like Jesse, don’t you?”

I wondered why he cared, and then it dawned on me that he might have a crush on me. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but I didn’t want to lie to him either. “I’m not sure where we stand, but yes, I like him very much. Honestly, I have the biggest crush on him.”

“I’ve been watching him...a lot,” Fred replied.

That surprised me. “Do you like him too? If you do, I’d totally understand. I mean, he’s so hot that guys and girls might both be attract—”

“No!” he replied, shocked I’d jumped to that conclusion. “I don’t like guys, Taylor!”

“Oh,” was my only response.

“It’s just that...well, his whole family has these creepy, light blue eyes.”

“Creepy? I think they’re beautiful.”

“Far from it. They’re hiding some deep, dark secret. Something’s just not right with those people,” he warned. “You shouldn’t be alone with any of them.”

“I’ve been alone with Jesse a lot. He’s the perfect gentlemen, and he absolutely loves animals. How could you think he’s...”

“Some kind of sicko?” asked Fred.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I’ve, uh...well, I’ve seen things,” he said, his eyes widening.

Curiosity struck me. “Like what kind of things?”

He cleared his throat, but not another word came out of his mouth.

“Either you’re just jealous of Jesse, or you know more than you’re letting on. If this concerns Jesse, I want to know what you’re talking about.”

“I caught him reading a book,” he responded.

“Oh my gosh!” I gasped. “A book, you say? I definitely need to stay away from him.”

“No, not just any book. It had all these weird symbols and was written in some language I couldn’t understand.”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“I think Jesse and his family are witches.”

“Witches?”

“Yes,” he responded looking completely serious. “I catch them in lies, and, like I said, I’ve seen things—lots of things.”

“Care to elaborate?” I probed.

“If you talk about these things,” he cautioned, “you’ll end up missing or dead.”

“You can trust me. I promise I won’t tell a soul.”

“Well, for one thing,” he began with a heavy sigh, “I heard Jesse’s sister tell a man to do something I know for a fact he wouldn’t normally do.”

“Is Jesse’s sister pretty?”

“Kierra? Yeah. She’s smoking hot.”

I chuckled. “Well, there’s your answer. Men are putty in a pretty girl’s hands.”

“I know that, but there’s more to it than that.”

“Fred,” I said touching his hand. “I think I know where this is all coming from.”

“You do?” he questioned.

“Yes. That weird altar freaked all of us out. You started thinking about witches when you saw those symbols and now you’re jumping to conclusions about Jesse’s family.”

“I’m not just jumping to conclusions, and I don’t think Jesse’s family are the only ones. I think this town is being run by witches.”

My jaw dropped. “Yes, we found a possible site where ceremonies are held, but that doesn’t mean the entire town is evil. It just means—”

“It means we need to do a whole lot of digging,” he cut in.

My gaze narrowed. “Do you really think the town is hiding something?”

“Yes, and I’m sure Jesse knows what’s going on. Why don’t you do some prying? Maybe you can get him to talk.”

“I know we’ve been together a lot, but I highly doubt he’s gonna spill all his deep, dark secrets to me. Besides, maybe we’re just getting carried away. I mean, Jesse is a bit mysterious, but—”

“I’m just saying that there’s more than meets the eye around here,” he said seriously.

“Now I’m scared to tell you what I found out.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because you’ll get carried away even worse.”

“I won’t,” he assured me. “Tell me.”

I cleared my throat. “I couldn’t identify the weird symbols, but the words are a warning, in Latin, like Julie said.”

“Well?” he said, arching a brow. “What’s it mean?”

“It’s a warning not to tread on sacred ground. It said if we walked on the land of their ancestors, we *will* die.”

“If it’s just some kind of warning, a threat, why was it written in Latin? How do they expect anyone to obey a warning they can’t read?”

“I think it’s a curse,” I said.

“Are you saying all three of us are gonna die just because we had to go after your runaway dog?” he asked skeptically.

“I hope not, I keep trying to tell myself how crazy it is, but I can’t deny the voice that spoke to me. It felt real.”

“You know what I think?” he asked.

“That I hallucinated it?”

“No, not at all. Maybe the witches are putting some kind of spell on us, maybe using their powers to mess with our heads.”

“I don’t know,” I responded uncertainly. “It sounds so crazy.”

Suddenly, the door swung open, startling us, and my dad came out.

“Fred, I’m paying you to work, not flirt with my daughter,” my dad said sternly, not one to mince words. “Taylor, please go do the dishes.”

“Nice talking to you, Fred,” I said. “I’ve gotta go, but we’ll talk later.”

“Okay,” he replied.

I smiled. Fred was a nice guy, but he had the biggest imagination, and I decided I wasn’t going to let it rub off on me. There was no way Jesse and his family were witches and warlocks. I wasn’t even sure if I believed in the Latin curse we’d found. It was all so far-fetched, and I was sure I’d probably imagined the entire thing—or at least I hoped so.

Chapter 17

I was reading on the porch when a black SUV pulled up. I thought it might be Jesse, but Julie got out of the passenger’s side.

“Taylor!” she called.

I smiled. “Hey!”

“Put the book down girl! Let’s go have some real fun.”

I cocked a brow. “What?”

Her eyes lit up, and her face was beaming.

“Go put on your bikini,” she said with a grin. “We’re going swimming in Big Bear Lake.”

My gaze shot to the SUV full of girls. All the windows were down, and the music was blaring. “Who are you with?”

“Just some girls I met in town. You’ll love them. Now go grab a towel and suntan lotion. Hurry!”

“Nah, you go on. I’m not really in the mood.”

“Don’t tell me you’re still freaked out by that voice you heard.”

“I can’t help it. I’m trying to decide if I’m crazy enough for a padded cell or doomed enough to be scared about it.”

She shrugged. “So some ghost talked to you. So what? They were probably screwing with you anyway. After all, we’re all alive and breathing.”

“True. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Yes. If I didn’t, I’d be telling you to put on a straight-jacket instead of a bikini.”

“Wow,” I said, “It’s nice to know my new BFF doesn’t think I’m a nut.”

“There’s just one thing I want to ask though.”

“What?”

She shot me a mischievous grin. “Do you see *dead* people?”

“No,” I answered with a laugh. “I’m afraid my sixth sense isn’t that well-tuned.”

She grinned, glad I’d gotten her movie reference.

“You really need to come with us,” she pleaded.

“Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because Jesse’s already there. I promised him we’d swing by and pick you up.”

Suddenly, my interest in the beach was piqued, and my heart jumped with joy. “I’m in! As long as there’s no talk about animal skulls or mysterious voices.”

“Got it. Your secret is safe with me,” she promised, giving me a nudge. “So hurry and get ready. You’ve got five minutes.”

I hurried inside, threw my curly hair into a tight ponytail, put on my bathing suit, and quickly brushed my teeth. I hurried downstairs and jumped into the crowded SUV.

Julie introduced me to the other six girls. They all shook my hand and smiled, they seemed nice enough.

We drove to our destination and found a nice spot on the shore. I was surrounded by large granite boulders and tall pine trees with a glittering lake before me. Big, fluffy clouds floated lazily by in the vast blue sky. I inhaled deeply taking in the fresh, woodsy scent of the pine filled air. Everything was so scenic and beautiful.

“I love it here,” Julie said.

“Is that China Island?” I asked pointing at a tiny island straight ahead of us in the lake.

One of the brunettes nodded, I didn’t yet remember all of their names.

“Yep,” she said. “Pretty small, huh?”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“See the cluster of boulders over to the left, about thirty feet away from the island?” asked the brunette.

“Yeah,” I said squinting against the sunlight. “Where all those guys are jumping off the rocks?”

“That’s where we’re gonna swim. It’s the best spot in Big Bear Lake.”

“Let’s go!” shouted a blonde girl with a pink streak in her hair.

I slipped my shirt and pants off and adjusted my red and purple bikini. I walked over the stony pebbles and jumped into the cold water, which felt great on such a hot day. I glided forward, using long, powerful strokes. As I got closer to the island, I instantly realized that the next guy preparing to jump off one of the tallest boulders was Jesse. A heartbeat later, he hurtled off the rock, splashing into the water below.

When I reached him near the rocks, he helped me up. My breath froze as I watched the sun glint off his slicked-back black hair. Water beaded on his eyelashes, dripping down his face in glistening rivers. He was adorable in his red swim trunks, but I was almost disappointed that he’d opted to wear a shirt.

“Hey, you,” he said, smiling at me.

I couldn’t stop the smile from curling up on my lips. “Hey.”

“Are you ready for a fun afternoon?”

“Definitely.”

“Hey Jesse, can I see the scar?” asked Julie.

His only response was an arched brow.

“From the bullet wound,” she explained as she inched forward.

He stopped her before she reached him.

“No,” he said with a laugh.

“I get it,” Julie said. “You’re shy.”

“Far from it actually.”

“I thought guys loved showing off their scars?” asked one of the other girls.

“Which boulder do you wanna jump off of?” asked Jesse, changing the subject. “Are you feelin’ like five feet or thirty?”

“The highest one,” I answered.

“Ah,” said Jesse with a grin, as the guys all whooped. “A daredevil after my very own heart.”

I climbed up to the highest point, which offered a perfect view of China Island. Sucking in a deep breath, I braced myself. I made sure there wasn't another jumper jumping from a lower level, everything looked clear below.

"We'll jump together," Jesse said grabbing my hand.

I smirked. "Let's do it."

"Cool. On the count of three. One...two...three!"

We jumped together, holding hands, and landed with a huge *splash*.

"Woo-hoo!" I screamed. "That was awesome!" I glanced at Jesse, blinking the water out of my eyelashes. There was no way I could avoid drooling over those rippling muscles and glittering eyes. I was mesmerized as I stared at his dazzling, breathtaking male beauty, from his beautiful skin and full lips, to the sculptured lines and angles of his forehead, to his amazing cheekbones and chiseled jaw line, to the droplets of water that clung to his face. I could have easily lost myself with that handsome hunk. *Maybe Fred's right*, I mused to myself. *Maybe he is dangerous*.

All of the sudden, he grabbed me around the waist and threw me in the air.

I landed with a *splash*, laughing as streams of water poured down my face. "Oh, I'll get you for that!" I threatened as I started to swim his way. "I'm gonna dunk you!"

"Don't think so!" he teased.

We screwed off for a bit, then swam to shore to rest while the others continued jumping off the rocks. The moisture on my skin created a cooling sensation beneath the hot sun. It was nice to have this time alone with Jesse.

When I turned around, he met my gaze. His eyes piercing mine, the shimmering remnants of the lake giving his skin a glittery shine. He reached up and softly cupped my cheek. The heat from his touch surged through my body, and I could have sworn that the whole crazy world had stopped all around me. If someone had asked me my own name in that moment, I wouldn't have remembered it.

My pulse skipped a beat when he shot me that beautiful grin, with all those bright white teeth, like a gorgeous movie star. Those beautiful baby blues entranced me all over again, staring right into my soul. I cleared my throat and forced my brain into motion. I tried to think of something to say, but nothing came to mind. The light caught in the blue speckles of his eyes and took my breath away. I drew in air, but more blood rushed to my face like a tidal wave. He, on

the other hand, was entirely composed and unaffected, and I knew I was making a complete fool out of myself.

His hot breath rippled across my skin in that unforgettable moment, and his strong arms slid around me and wrapped me close. A shudder ran through me, from head to toe. I leaned against him until I could feel the warmth of his skin against my racing heart. I lifted my arm to touch his flushed cheek. He didn't flinch or even react, he just smiled and kissed my fingers where they touched his lips.

"I'm crazy about you, Taylor," he said. "You're all I think about."

"I felt the connection the second I met you."

"Me too," he whispered back as he stroked my cheek.

His eyes fixed on my lips, and he moved closer to lower his mouth toward mine. Our lips connected in a slow, gentle kiss. In spite of the smoldering temperature, a shiver ran through me. I closed my eyes, savoring his sweet essence. Goosebumps rippled my skin as his strong hands wandered down my back to my waist. I lifted my arms and wrapped them around his neck. He drew me indescribably closer, as I was already standing so impossibly close. His hand moved upward, his fingers tangling in my hair, gently guiding my lips to his. He kissed me passionately, his lips lingering on mine. My heart was drumming so hard I wondered if Jesse could hear it. I wanted him to deepen the kiss. I wanted it to go on forever. When his hot breath touched my skin, I shuddered in excitement. Hot, searing kisses from his open mouth trailed down my neck.

"Taylor! Jesse!" the others called from the boulders.

Suddenly, he broke our embrace and turned in the direction of our friends.

"We're being paged," he said.

I stared into his eyes, unable to move or even breathe. I was completely mesmerized.

"Ready?" he asked with a grin, as he took my hand.

I nodded mindlessly, and he led me back into the water. My head was still spinning, my skin still tingling where his lips had left a trail of moisture. Even though the kiss was over, my heart continued to race. I sighed like one of those girly girls and tried to switch on my brain again, but all I felt was a mushy, hazy feeling that reminded me of staying up late to watch those sappy Saturday night romances.

Jesse submerged and then resurfaced a few feet past me. I cut through the water with expert precision to catch up with him.

“You gotta see Frank dive backward, man,” said one of Jesse’s friends, grabbing his shoulder and leading him toward where the group was gathered.

I smiled as his friend dragged him off.

“I saw you swim off with Prince Charming,” Julie teased. “What happened?”

“He kissed me!” I gasped pulling her aside.

“I knew it!” she squealed.

“He’s so amazing, Julie.”

“Is he a good kisser?”

“It was wonderful, but there was no, uh…”

“Tongue action?” she offered.

I blushed and shook my head. “You guys called us back over here too soon,” I explained.

“It wasn’t me. There’s always next time, or maybe even later today.”

I laughed.

“Taylor!” Jesse’s voice called. “I’ve gotta drive Frank and the others back. Wanna meet up later?”

I walked over to him and smiled. “I had a great time, and yes, I’d love to meet you later,” I told him. “Text me, and we’ll think of something.”

“Sounds great,” he said kissing my cheek. “See ya then.”

“Bye.”

He shot me a big smile, then turned to leave. I watched him dive off the boulder and swim off into the distance.

“Why wouldn’t he take off his shirt?” one of the girls asked.

“He’s just shy,” another answered.

“Why on Earth would a guy like that want to hide that perfect bod’?” asked another of the girls, a strawberry blonde. “Did you see those muscles?”

“Taylor,” the brunette said, “you should have just ripped it off of him.”

I smiled. “Maybe I will next time.”

We all laughed, then swam back to shore and sunbathed for a few more hours. As I lay on my blanket, I couldn’t stop thinking about him, recalling how great his lips felt against mine, like soft rose petals. His every touch was special, and he totally captivated me.

Chapter 18

I pulled into Jesse's driveway in front of his beautiful, contemporary-style home with brick and glass windows, nestled among the towering trees. It was one of the biggest homes in Big Bear Lake, so I was sure his mother was quite wealthy.

After greeting me with a peck on the cheek, which almost sent me reeling to the floor in a whoosh of heat, Jesse gave me the grand tour. This house had everything from a gym, to a recreation room, to the most amazing home theater room with a mounted television that was the largest I'd ever seen in my life. There was a luxury swimming pool with a beautiful patio and terrace. Every single thing was perfectly arranged, the décor and immaculate design elements gave the house character. The whole place was sleek and stylish to the core.

"Did your mom hire an interior designer for this?" I asked. "It's amazing."

"No. She did it on her own."

"Wow," I complimented. "She has fantastic taste."

He smiled as he led me to the room with the giant TV. My mouth dropped as I darted my eyes down in every direction, taking it all in. I tried to pretend like the gorgeous estate didn't faze me, but that was impossible.

Jesse went behind the bar.

"What can I get you to drink?" he offered.

"A Sprite would be great—or anything lemon-lime."

He pointed to the corner of the room. "I've got Sierra Mist, if that's okay."

"Sure. Thanks."

"Why don't you start looking through the DVDs? We have a lot to pick from."

I smiled. "You're letting *me* pick the movie?"

"Yep."

"Hmm. What if I pick some gushy chick flick?"

"As long as I'm watching it with you, I don't care," he said with a grin, placing ice into a glass.

I grinned and shook my head, once again amazed by how different he was from Sean, who always used to fight with me over movies.

"Thanks for that, Jesse," I said.

We snuggled on the couch and watched a Julia Roberts classic, *Pretty Woman*, then wandered out to the terrace to sit and talk. I waited there while Jesse got us some lemonade. As I was staring off into the dark but beautiful forest, he set our glasses down on the deck railing.

“I’m having such a good time,” I said.

“Me too.”

He wrapped his arms around me from behind, lifted the hair off my neck, and softly kissed one of the most sensitive spots on my body. Goosebumps erupted, and I gasped deeply. He lightly stroked and caressed my neck with his fingertips, then slid down along the spaghetti strap of my tank-top and kissed my shoulder, as if he knew it was a great turn-on for me, a sexy move that worked every time.

“Jesse,” I said, shivering with pleasure, “what are you doing?”

He moved up and down my neck, tickling me with open-mouthed kisses.

“What do you think?” he asked.

Each word caused his hot breath to blow across my skin, literally driving me crazy.

“Well...it feels so good.”

“Good,” he whispered in my ear as his fingers glided down my bare arm. “I want you to feel good, Taylor—always.”

Shivers shot down my spine as he returned to the sweet spot on my neck. When he kissed me there again, I thought I might actually collapse because my legs turned to rubber.

All I have to do is turn around and claim his mouth in a mind-blowing kiss, I thought. It’d be that easy, that simple.

My heart pounded even harder as Jesse gave me slow, wet kisses all over my neck, then nibbled my ear with even lighter ones. When I felt his steaming breath as he blew on my ear, I could hardly contain myself.

I spun around and turned to face him. He was wearing a sexy, naughty smile, staring hungrily at my lips. I’d never felt so desirable. I softly traced his lips, circling his mouth gently, a mouth that I knew I could spend an eternity kissing without ever tiring of it.

“I’m home!” a woman’s voice announced, jolting me from my fantastic thoughts.

I stepped away from Jesse and quickly straightened my shirt.

The woman cleared her throat, looking at us suspiciously.

“I hope I didn’t interrupt anything,” she said.

She was beautiful, her slim figure was dressed in a stylish blue pantsuit and her silky black hair twisted into an elaborate bun. In addition to having the same ebony hair, she also had the same nearly translucent light blue eyes as her son.

“No,” I responded, “not at all.”

“I’m Shelia,” she said holding out her hand, “Jesse’s mom.”

“It’s so nice to meet you,” I said taking her hand. “I’m Taylor.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you too,” she said with a smile as she shook my hand. “Jesse has told me all about you, so I’ve been looking forward to making your acquaintance.”

“Well, here she is,” Jesse said.

Shelia sat down on the porch with us, and we all chitchatted for about an hour before I had to get back home. I was sure I’d made a good impression. She seemed to like me and was just as warm and friendly as Jesse, not at all the oddball Jeanie had made me think she was. I had hoped to meet his brother and sister also, but they weren’t home. In any case, things were going well for me and Jesse, and meeting his mom made me feel even closer to him.

* * *

On Friday night, my parents left me home alone while they went to an out-of-state book signing for the weekend. I felt a little safer this time because my dad had installed a security system. When nighttime came, though, I did start to get the creeps. I obsessively stared out the window watching for ski-masked or furry would-be intruders.

Feeling lonely and a bit frightened, I texted Jesse, “I can’t stop thinking of you.”

“If I had a rose for every time I thought of you, I’d be walking through my beautiful garden forever,” read the text I received in reply.

I gushed. *Aw*, I thought. *He’s just the sweetest.*

I texted back, “I love it when you text me sweet nothings, so here’s one for you. If I had a star for every time you brightened my day, I’d have a galaxy in my hand.”

He replied, “Love it! If snowflakes were kisses, I’d send you a blizzard.”

A little while later I was sitting on the couch watching television, with Max curled up next to me, when I heard knocking coming from upstairs.

Oh my gosh! Not again!

My body froze with terror, but I was ready to bolt out of the house again if I had to. At least this time I was fully dressed. When the knocking finally subsided, I exhaled a long-held breath.

I got shakily to my feet. “Max, let’s go upstairs and check it out, boy,” I said to my faithful companion.

I refused to go unarmed, so I grabbed a butcher knife and let my dog lead the way. Again, I had to wonder if I was losing my mind, considering it wasn’t the first time I’d been creeping around my house, brandishing a sharp kitchen utensil. Still, I needed to confront my fears. Inhaling and exhaling deeply, I took a started boldly up the stairs, the wood creaking with every step I took.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I heard the knocking sound again. It was coming from my room. My heart thundered as I clutched the knife in a white-knuckled grasp. I walked to my room, reaching around to flick on the light switch, and then taking a look around. When I spotted the tree branches that were banging against the window, I could finally breathe again. The staccato rhythm of my heart settled down.

My cell phone rang, making me jump. I reached into my pocket, grabbed it, and quickly answered, “Yeah?”

“Taylor? What’s wrong?” Jesse asked.

“I’m freaking out again. The branches were hitting the window...and I...”

“You shouldn’t be alone.”

“Right. Are you busy?”

“I’m going night-fishing with my brother and sister on the boat. Wanna come?”

“I’d love to!”

“Okay. I’ll be there soon.”

* * *

Jesse came right over and picked me up. I couldn’t wait to meet Sam and Kierra. I hoped they would accept me as easily as their mother had. The ride didn’t take long and we were there in no time.

We pulled in and parked at the edge of the lake. As we walked toward the dock, a thin girl with long, black hair and light blue eyes greeted me with a smile.

“I’m Kierra,” she said introducing herself, “Jesse’s big sister.”

She was gorgeous in a red wrap dress, which just reached the top of her knees, the color accentuated her pale complexion.

“Taylor,” I said, shaking her hand. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

“Likewise. I’ve heard many good things about you,” she said glancing over her shoulder. “Sam, she’s here!”

“Coming!” a voice called from the boat.

The guy who emerged was attractive, with the same ebony hair and light blue eyes as his mom and siblings.

“I thought you wanted to look good for your date?” he asked Jesse.

“I look fine.”

“Hmm. Looks to me like you stopped at the zoo and stole the gorilla’s face,” Sam teased.

“Ha-ha,” Jesse said, shooting me a look and adding, “See what I have to put up with?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at their brotherly banter.

“Thank God I inherited the intelligent genes,” Kierra said.

“Right,” Sam said, spinning to face her. “Since you joined the family tree, I’ve been dying to cut it down.”

“Whatever,” she said.

Jesse shook his head. “You’re just trying to embarrass me, Sam.”

“And is it working?”

“Yes, so cut the crap. You promised to be on your best behavior.”

Sam playfully slugged Jesse’s arm right on his tattoo. “Just kidding, lil’ bro.”

“This is Taylor,” Jesse said introducing me to Sam.

He grinned. “She is just as hot as you described her.”

Jesse playfully slugged him back, and Sam nudged him in the ribs.

“Nice to meet you, Taylor,” Sam said. “In case you haven’t guessed, I’m Sam, the coolest of our little trifecta.”

I smiled, then looked from Sam to Kierra. “It’s nice to meet you both.”

He winked. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

“You all have the same pretty blue eyes,” I told them.

“It’s a curse,” answered Sam.

I laughed. “A nice one then,” I said smiling. “I’ve never seen blue eyes that light.”

“It’s not a *nice* curse at all, but I do enjoy getting the ladies’ attention with my weird peepers. Can you fish?”

A cool breeze ruffled my long hair. “Yep. Just wait and see. I’m gonna bring in the big one.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s going to be hard with me on your boat. I’m a regular Captain Ahab.”

“Yeah...with cereal for brains like Captain Crunch,” Jesse teased.

“Just ignore Sam, Taylor,” Kierra said. “He didn’t get enough oxygen during birth.”

“Never a dull moment with my family,” Jesse whispered in my ear. “If he starts repeating everything she says like some cockamamie parrot, we’re outta here.”

“We’ll jump ship if we have to,” I whispered back smiling.

We walked down the long dock, and Jesse helped me aboard. Kierra started the boat, and we sped off to what the trio assured me was the perfect fishing spot. Jesse handed me a fishing pole, then started sorting through the colorful lures in the tackle box. I listened carefully as Sam gave me some fishing tips. The boat stopped and wavered slightly in the water.

“We’re here,” Kierra called to us.

Jesse hooked my lure up for me, and I wasted no time in raising the rod tip. In one swooping motion, I threw out my line.

“I love to fish at night,” Jesse said as he stood next to me. “It’s nice to get away and just hang out.”

I lifted my head and looked up at the black velvet sky, speckled with twinkling stars. “Yeah, it’s so beautiful out here on Big Bear Lake.”

We all chatted for a while. I could tell they were a close-knit family, like my own, and I loved being around them. In spite of Fred’s speculation that they were witches, I felt completely comfortable in their presence.

Suddenly, my pole jerked, and I gave it a quick tug. “I got a bite!” I said. The fishing line screamed out of the aluminum casting reel as a giant fish stole the hook, line, and almost me. Luckily, I caught my balance. I hauled back on my fishing pole, bending it in such a sharp arc that it nearly snapped. I stole a glance at Jesse, shooting him a triumphant smile. “I told you I’d bring in a big one.”

“And you delivered!” he said. “I never doubted you for a minute.”

“Are you sure you didn’t snag a submarine?” Sam asked jumping off the chrome rail of the boat.

“Feels like it. As I reeled in the line, the crank handle spun and clicked like crazy. The tug-of-war went on for a while, and my muscles began to ache from the strain. “I swear this thing’s fighting harder than Mike Tyson!”

Powerful deck lights mounted high above me illuminated the surface of the water. Big Bear Lake pitched and churned like a pan of boiling water. The fish broke the surface in a clatter of spray, thrashing its head as it danced on its tail.

When I caught sight of its black-striped body, my eyes widened. “Look at that!”

Sam whistled and cheered. “Bravo!”

“Wow!” Kierra said clapping. “It’s a largemouth bass.”

“She’s a real beauty,” Jesse said. “I knew coming out here at night would pay off.”

He helped me haul the exhausted, two-foot fish up over the rail of the sailboat.

With a *thud*, the metallic-scaled bass hit the deck. The fish had a big mouth, and its upper jaw extended past its eyes. The fish’s body was dark green, with greenish-yellow sides and a dark stripe running down its side. Its fins shimmered in the silver moonlight. Applause erupted as everyone hopped and twisted to avoid the thrashing monster.

“The only thing bigger than that fish is the smile on your face,” Kierra said, cheering me on, “oh, and Sam’s ego.”

I laughed. Night-fishing under a sky full of shining stars would be on my list of favorite things from that night on. Catching a giant fish was just an added bonus.

The fish wriggled its fins and smacked its body against the deck, and I jumped back as its forked tail slapped across my legs. I wiped the water off my face with my tank-top. “How much do you think it weighs?”

“At least twenty pounds,” Sam answered running his fingers over the slimy fish.

I brushed off my cutoff shorts and straightened my tank-top, then pulled out my camera and handed it to Kierra. “Can you get a picture of me and Jesse with the fish?”

“No way!” she answered with a laugh. “This is *your* moment in the limelight. Don’t let Jesse steal your thunder.”

I smiled. Even though I wanted a picture of Jesse and me together, I couldn’t argue with her logic. “All right. Just me then.” I held the fish and felt my lips stretch into a wide grin. I

couldn't wait. I planned to send the pic to everybody across the entire planet by morning. My biggest regret was that Jesse wouldn't be in it, which would have been a nice touch for the ex.

"Okay. On the count of three. One...two...three!" With that, Kierra snapped the photo.

The bright flash blinded me, and white spots danced in my vision. I sighed and straightened up, then glanced at the LCD screen. "It's perfect! Thanks."

"So...do we keep it for dinner or let it go?" Sam asked.

"We should throw it back," I said. "I just wanted a picture with it."

Sam threw the bass back and it hit the water with a loud *splash*. I was happy to see it swim off. Jesse, Sam, and Kierra caught lots of fish too, but we didn't keep any of them, and none of them were as big as my first catch of the night.

"Let's try a different spot, sis," Sam suggested.

Kierra started up the boat, and we sped across the lake.

Jesse put an arm around me as the wind blew my hair around over and over again. I looked at him, and he smiled the most delicious movie star smile I'd ever seen. The moonlight made his winter-blue eyes sparkle even more than usual, rivaling the stars above us.

"This is a great spot," Kierra said with a smile as she stopped the boat. "I've had lots of luck here."

This time, Jesse and I didn't fish. We just gazed into each other's eyes and talked while Kierra and Sam tried, without success to outdo my catch.

When I looked off into the woods, a flash of white caught my attention. I peered closer and saw another flash of white. Something moved in the bushes, and I smiled as I saw the outline of an animal. It took a few more steps out of the greenery and started to sip water from the edge of the lake. As my eyes focused, I realized it was a buck, white as snow and stunningly majestic.

"What are you looking at?" Jesse asked.

"Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

"That deer over there, a white buck sipping water."

"No," he said squinting toward the shore.

"Huh?" I asked. "I'm looking right at it."

"Taylor, I have excellent eyesight, better than most, and I don't see anything."

"Look! It lifted its head."

“Kierra!” Jesse called. “C’mere!”

“What’s up?” she asked rushing to my side.

“Taylor says there’s a white buck on the shore,” Jesse told her. “I don’t see anything, do you?”

“I don’t see it,” she answered looking intently.

“Me neither,” Sam said, approaching from my right.

Kierra shot Sam and Jesse a look, as if they thought I was some kind of nutcase, making me suddenly wish I’d kept my mouth shut. I had no idea why I was being plagued by hallucinations, but in that moment, I also had to wonder if I’d really heard a wolf in our house the night my parents had gone out and I’d ended up at McDonald’s in my bathrobe.

Maybe all this fresh mountain air is making me chronically lightheaded, I thought.

“You know what that means,” Kierra whispered to her brothers. “She’s been chosen as a petal which means she comes from the bloodline of a...”

“Just keep your mouth shut,” Sam said.

“But she has every right to know,” Kierra argued.

“Do you want your head on the chopping block?”

“Jesse, she needs to know,” Kierra said. “She’s been marked.”

“This weird voice told me I was a marked petal when I was chasing Max in the woods at this creepy place we found,” I said cutting in.

“It’s starting,” Kierra said. “And you know what this means!”

“What’s going on?” I asked, crossing my arms and looking at them, not at all happy about them talking about me like I wasn’t there.

“There’s a legend that those who have been marked as a petal will have guardians to keep them safe,” Jesse answered still gazing toward the water’s edge.

“A petal?” I asked, “And why would I need a guardian?”

“Because you’ve been chosen. And there are people who will try to kill you because of that.”

“Is that why somebody was in my house that night? They were trying to kill me?”

“Possibly. Besides protection, the guardians hand out blessings too,” Sam added. “You caught a twenty-pound bass back there on your first cast. We don’t usually catch anything bigger than ten-pounders.”

“What’s a petal?” I asked. “Please you’ve got to tell me everything.”

“Six petals form the flower for the ceremony,” Kierra explained. “It’s an ancient tradition, practiced every 100 years. I’m not sure on all the details, but I can dig more into it. I wish I could tell you more, but that’s all I know.”

“Pssh. That sounds like something off of *The X Files* or one of those Sy-Fy shows,” I said skeptically. “It’s just a myth, like the bogeyman, Bigfoot, and aliens being kept alive with strawberry ice cream, but what’s this so-called ceremony about?”

Jesse handed my fishing pole back to me and rolled his eyes at his brother and sister.

“Don’t let my siblings scare you. Let’s leave myths in the books and concentrate on fishing.”

“I didn’t mean to freak you out,” Kierra said. “I just got carried away, that’s all.”

“You had me worried there for a minute. It was only a buck,” I replied. “Maybe my imagination just got carried away again.”

We continued talking and fishing, but the mood had morphed into something depressing and somber, almost as dark as the night itself. Something was wrong, and I wondered what they were hiding. It was either that or they just felt sorry for me, the lunatic who had seen an invisible buck.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me: *What if a curse really was placed on me when I opened the tin box? Am I really marked now?* My breath hitched in my throat. *What have I done? Have I really unleashed some horrible curse?* But the woman said she’d protect me, and even Jesse said the myth speaks of protection. I frowned. *But protection from what?* I had no idea. The one thing I did know was that my mind couldn’t take much more of the freaky happenings. I wanted so badly to confide in Jesse, but I didn’t want him to think I was totally crazy. I was sure he had his doubts about me after the McDonald’s bathrobe escapade, and now I was seeing Bambi the friendly ghost. I feared that if I told him about the strange whisperings in the wind, it would be just enough to send him over the edge. I didn’t want him to kick me to the curb.

I didn’t get home until around seven a.m., and Jesse searched the house and said it was clear. After telling him goodbye, I turned on the new security system my dad had gotten and cranked up the air conditioning. I pulled the drapes and made the room as dark as I could, then jumped into bed. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I spent the rest of the weekend looking for that white buck, my potential protector, but I didn't see anything. I even tried to Google myths, but I saw nothing about mortal sacrifices, petals, and white bucks. I didn't know what to make of it.

Fortunately, I wasn't encumbered with any more voices or visions, and everything went smoothly while I waited for my parent's return on Sunday afternoon.

Chapter 19

Fred was working on our backyard. He'd done a great job and it was really looking nice. All the towering weeds were gone, and the place looked a whole lot sharper.

"The place is looking great," I said.

"Thanks," he said, stopping to take a drink of water. "I've been working hard."

"Take a break. You deserve it."

"I've got a present for you," he said, holding out a small box.

I swallowed hard. He was cute—not gorgeous like Jesse but definitely cute. Still, I didn't like him in that way, and I wasn't sure how to handle the fact that he clearly had a crush on me. I had never been good at trampling other people's feelings. Now, I was afraid if I accepted Fred's gift, it might lead him to believe there was more than friendship between us. But if I refused it, it would hurt his feelings.

"I-I can't accept this, Fred," I said softly, trying to lessen the blow.

"Because you're obsessed with Jesse, right?" he asked sounding a little bitter.

"I'm crazy about him, and it wouldn't be right to lead you on."

"This isn't a romantic present," he assured me.

"It isn't?"

"No."

"My apologies then. I just assumed—"

"It's just a present from one friend to another, no strings attached."

"In that case..." I said as I smiled and opened the box. The sun glittered on a silver cross necklace. "Wow, Fred. It's beautiful. Thank you."

"Would you like me to help you put it on?"

I turned around and lifted my hair. "I'd love that."

He clasped the necklace around my neck.

"Thanks again," I said, looking down to admire the dainty pendant around my neck.

"It's so pretty."

"Yeah, but I didn't get it for looks," he said his mouth forming a thin, harsh line.

I arched a brow. "You didn't?"

"It's for your protection."

"Protection?" I asked.

"Jesse's not a witch—or maybe he is—but I now know what his family is hiding," he told me.

"Really?" I questioned.

"Yep."

"I'm glad to hear you've dumped the witch theory. Because that was just wild."

"Yeah. I was completely off base," he said, not sounding glad about that at all.

"It was way out there. Just because we found an altar out in the woods, that's no reason to jump to crazy theories."

"Well, I'm not jumping to my new one. This time, I have solid evidence."

"You're killing me. What is it?"

"I'm not killing you, but they might."

"What?" I asked, seriously confused now.

His gaze narrowed. "They're vampires."

I couldn't stifle my laugh, because this theory was worse than the last one.

"You shouldn't laugh," he said. "You're dating a bloodsucker."

"Excuse me?" I said, unable to keep the sarcasm from my voice. "Are you telling me I'm Jesse's future *ghoul*-friend?"

He rolled his eyes. "This is very serious."

"It's not possible. Vampires turn to ash in sunlight," I argued. "That's a simple fact. They always have and always will."

"Yeah," he admitted. "I haven't figured out how they bypass that."

"Simple. They're not vampires."

"I know they are," he insisted.

“Jesse is outside every day, and the last time I checked, Coppertone doesn’t make 5,000 SPF.”

“Some of the people I’ve suspected that are vampires wear a strange ring, like a daylight ring. It’s why vampires can walk in the daylight.”

“Jesse doesn’t wear a ring like that. And neither does anyone in his family.”

“They’re beating the system. I just don’t know how.”

I raised my brow. “Seriously?”

“His mother had a shipment of blood delivered to her house.”

“His mother acts like a doctor. She nursed him back to health when he got shot. Maybe Sam needs transfusions or something, and she does them instead of a nurse.”

“I’ve got more proof than that.”

“I think I’ve heard enough.”

“You’re in danger, Taylor,” he persisted. “I wish you’d take me seriously.”

“Are you listening to yourself?” I retorted.

“I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true.”

I choked my laughter back. “Is that why you got me this necklace? Because I need a crucifix for protection from vampires?”

“Yes. Where did you meet him anyway?”

“He was hiking...and it was love at first bite,” I joked.

“That’s not funny,” he said, his lips pressing into a grim line.

“Sorry. Just trying to lighten the mood.”

“Keep your day job. You’re a horrible comedian.”

My grin widened. “I will. I work with Jesse.”

“You’re really playing with fire,” he said, shaking his head at me. “Even if you did believe me, you’d probably want to stay with him. What’s with chicks and vampires anyway? They’re fiends who feast on blood and kill people, yet women find them completely irresistible.”

“I suppose they’re kind of the in thing right now. The ultimate bad boy fantasy.”

“I guess, but I still don’t really understand the whole glorified vampire phenomenon.”

I didn’t really believe Jesse was a vampire, but I decided to roll with it and have some fun.

“Don’t you get it? Women want to feel special, cherished, protected, and loved,” I explained.

“Shouldn’t every girl have an Edward Cullen?”

“If I was a girl, I’d prefer Lestat de Lioncourt from *Interview with a Vampire*.”

“I’m more of Team Brad Pitt, so it’d be Louis for me.”

“Nope. Maybe *Buffy*’s Angel or Bill Compton from that Dracula flick, but not sparkly Edward, or whiny Emo Louis. Why are girls so hung up on corpses anyway?”

“They’re the coolest of the paranormal,” I answered.

“Oh yeah?” he asked.

“*Dracsolutely*,” I joked. “A werewolf will tear you to shreds. A zombie isn’t fun to hug when his rotting arms fall off. Mummies stink to high heaven, and ghosts are nothing but air. Really, a vampire is the only way to go.”

“Fine, but when they make out with you, they take a little nibble on your jugular. Gimme zombies any day. Vampires just...suck.”

“They’re both vile, evil, and undead, and they both feed on humans. One is just hotter, smarter, and smells a whole lot better. Truthfully, zombies are stupid. They’ll walk straight toward the barrel of a gun, while vampires race away in a speeding blur if they don’t kill you in one quick bite.”

“Yeah, but the fighting is the best part.”

“You can fight the fanged ones too.”

“Forget wooden stakes. Chainsaws are better.”

I smiled and shook my head. “You’re sick, you know that?”

“What!? What guy doesn’t want to fight off the walking dead with chainsaws, sledgehammers, and swords? Holding up a crucifix and sprinkling water on a bloodsucker is...well, it’s kind of sissy-ish.”

“Is that even a word?” I chuckled. “So, when it comes to the undead, you’re saying men love zombies and women love vampires?”

“Yeah. Zombies are way more manly, not all pretty and stylish.”

“I hate to burst your bubble and break your stereotype, but you’re wrong. I happen to love both.”

“Hmm. I guess you’ve proven me wrong,” he admitted. “But what’s the deal with Jesse? Are you in love with the bloodsucker or what?”

I shot him a look. “No. In lust maybe.”

“I didn’t ask for those kind of details.”

I smiled. "If you don't want to hear the answers, don't ask the questions."

He glanced down for a minute, then looked back up at me.

"I've read that vampires can make you fall in love with them."

I shook my head vehemently. "Jesse hasn't done that. He wouldn't have to," I assured him. "Have you seen him? The guy is a forest fire all on his own, smoking hot. All he has to do is strut his hot butt into a room and smile, and women will swarm to him like—"

"How can you even identify with a creature who won't ever die?" he asked. "You can't. He's immortal, and you can't even begin to understand his deep desire for human blood. Your vamp boyfriend—"

"He's not my boyfriend...yet."

"You need to break off all communication with him as soon as possible, Taylor."

I met his gaze straight on. "If what you're saying is true, maybe I want to tame him."

"You can't tame a savage beast," Fred said standing up and obviously upset. "I don't think I have anything more to say to you."

"Wait, Fred! Come back!" I yelled as he started to step off the porch in a huff. "You said you have solid proof, evidence. How did you come to this conclusion anyway?"

Ignoring me, he went back to work.

"Thank you for the necklace," I said. "I won't take it off. I promise."

When he continued to ignore me, I just shook my head and headed back into the house, rubbing the cross between my thumb and index finger. Fred was more than a little troubled, but I couldn't help but be flattered by his urge to protect me.

Chapter 20

A few days later, Amy, one of Julie's friends, invited Jesse and me on a boat ride. I hadn't given her an answer yet, so Julie wouldn't quit calling. When I saw her name on my caller ID again, I groaned. "Hello?" I said, answering my cell.

"Are you coming or not?" she asked urgently.

"I went night-fishing with Jesse a few days ago. I kinda got freaked out on the boat." The image of the white buck flashed across my mind.

“How many times do I have to tell you it’s all just some stupid myth?” she said with a big sigh. “How can you let them scare you like that anyway?”

“I wasn’t scared—just a little freaked out.”

“I talked to Jesse, and he’s coming. I just hope one of those girls doesn’t ask him out.”

“Julie!”

“What? You know they’ll be all over him like ants on a picnic.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll go.”

“I knew you’d see it my way,” she said, wearing a smirk that I could hear through the phone.

“Ha-ha! Can I bring Max?”

“Sure,” she answered.

“Okay. I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Bye,” she said.

After I hung up the phone, I threw on my bathing suit, slipped a pair of blue shorts with a cute lace tank-top, brushed my teeth and left my hair down. I quickly packed some sunscreen, a towel, some bottles of water, and a few other things I thought I might need.

Outside, I opened the car door, put my sunglasses on, and called Max. He hopped into the passenger’s side and barked, and I put the window halfway down for him.

“Ready to have some fun, Max?” I asked.

He barked again, and I laughed at his answer as I pulled out of the driveway.

At the docks, Julie spotted me and squealed my name.

“We’re gonna have so much fun,” she said.

“Is Jesse here yet?”

“Yep.” Julie said reaching down to pat Max. “Hi, Max.”

He barked and wagged his tail.

I climbed onto the boat and found Jesse sitting on the bow, surrounded by an entourage of bikini-clad, giggling girls. One was showing off her bellybutton ring, and another was asking his opinion on her tramp stamp.

When Jesse met my gaze, he smiled.

Max started barking at Jesse again, and I secretly hoped he’d chase away his fan club.

Jesse left the swarm of girls and walked straight to me.

“Hi, Taylor. You look amazing.”

“Thanks,” I said, almost smiling back at the girls who scowled at me and walked away.

He embraced me in a long hug, then kissed my lips.

“Sadly, ladies,” a brunette said, “it appears Jesse is taken by the new girl.”

Another shook her head. “Yep.”

“Not to worry,” she said with a grin, pointing in the direction of the dock. “My fun boat brings all the boys to the yard.”

I turned and saw a whole herd of guys climbing on board, some in trunks and others bravely donning Speedos.

“Whoa!” Julie said with a grin. “Talk about precious cargo. I got dibs on the blond.”

“His name is Grant,” one of the girls said. “I’ll introduce you.”

“Please do,” Julie said with a giggle.

We all burst out in laughter.

Jesse smiled at me, pulling me into his lap and wrapping his arms around me. I loved being the object of his affection, and I was beginning to feel very comfortable with him.

“With all those animal attacks happening,” Amy said, “I thought this would be a good idea. What could be safer than hanging out in water in the middle of the lake?”

“It’s brilliant!” Julie squealed. “Most animals can’t swim, and as far as I know, there aren’t any sharks in the lake.”

The sun beat down on my skin, but the last thing I wanted was to look like a lobster in front of Jesse. I drizzled sunscreen from the bottle into my hands, then smeared the coconut-scented cream all over my arms and legs.

“I do feel a lot safer here,” I said.

“Me too,” Amy agreed.

Jesse reached for the lotion with a smile. “Need some help?” he offered. “I can get your back if you’d like?”

“Sure,” I said, holding my hair up. “You’ve always got my back, huh?” I punned.

“I have spray-on sunblock,” one of the girl’s said.

“I’m sure Jesse prefers the hands-on method,” Julie said laughing.

Jesse rubbed my back. “It works better if you really rub it in.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Julie said with a chuckle.

My heart sped up as he rubbed the lotion slowly down my shoulders and across my back.

“I can do your back if you want,” I said. “It’s only fair.”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“What’s the matter, Jesse?” asked Julie. “You got a gorilla back like those apes in the zoo where you work or something?”

“Ha-ha,” he said.

A popular tune came on the radio, and some of the girls started dancing. Others laughed, talked, and sipped on drinks they’d taken from the two coolers that were loaded with sandwiches and sodas.

“I heard about the breakup. What happened?” one of the girls casually asked Amy.

“Well,” Amy answered, “he’s doing drugs and getting all possessive.”

“Wow. It’s good you broke it off now then,” Julie said, “especially if he’s hooked on drugs.”

Amy’s brown eyes sparkled in the sun as her long, reddish-brown hair blew in the wind.

“I don’t wanna talk about my pitiful love life,” she said. “Let’s jump in!”

With that, she did a cannonball into the lake. Jesse followed her, and I laughed.

“Oh my gosh!” Amy cried. “It’s freezing in here!”

“Come on in!” Jesse called gazing up at me. “And don’t worry. I’ll keep you warm.”

Taking the offer, which I couldn’t possibly refuse, I dove in, then wiped the hair out of my eyes.

Max barked and was next to jump into the water

“Come on, Max!” I coaxed.

He started dog-paddling toward us.

I then turned to Jesse. “You left your shirt on again.”

“Like Julie said, I’m shy.”

“Liar, liar, trunks on fire,” I said.

He grinned widely.

“I don’t care about your scar, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It’s just—” he began.

“You don’t have to explain,” I assured him.

“Jesse, you need to lose the shirt and put on a Speedo like some of those other guys,” Julie said, right before she jumped in, splashing us. “I think a leopard print would really bring out your eyes.”

The whirring of a boat engine caught my attention as it approached.

“Crap!” Amy exclaimed. “I was so hoping my nutcase ex-boyfriend wouldn’t find me here.”

When the boat got closer, a guy about our age called Amy’s name.

“Hey,” he called to Amy, “I just wanna talk.”

Max started barking and causing a ruckus.

The guy shot us a look.

“Shut the dog up,” he yelled, “before I shut him up for you.”

“Max!” I said, petting his head and trying to calm him. “Shh!”

“I’ve gotta go talk to him for a minute,” Amy said looking toward us, “or else he’ll never leave.”

“Just be careful,” Julie cautioned.

When I noticed that all the guys were drinking something a bit stronger than Mountain Dew, I realized it might not be a good idea for Amy to be alone on their boat. “You oughtta stay here, Amy,” I said. “They all look wasted. They shouldn’t even be driving a boat.”

She ignored me, swimming over, and climbing aboard the boat. It didn’t take long for their calm conversation to turn into a full-blown argument.

“That’s no way to talk to a girl!” Jesse yelled.

“Shut up!” the guy screamed back. “Just mind your own business.”

“Well, it is my business when you pull up next to our boat.”

“Piss off!” the guy replied.

I nudged Jesse. “We need to go get her,” I said, fearing they might try to take off with poor Amy held captive on their boat. “Amy,” I pleaded, “please come back to our boat.”

“You’re right,” she said looking at me, her cheeks crimson with embarrassment. “He’s stubborn and bullheaded, and I don’t want to be anywhere near him!”

I swam closer to the boat as Amy climbed over the rail. Just as she began to jump off, her hotheaded ex-boyfriend grabbed her and pulled her back on deck. She shouted a few curses at the guy, and in the next second, he pulled out a knife and angrily lunged at her.

Next, it was like everything went into slow motion. In a flash, Jesse was on the boat, knocking the knife out of the guy's hand and throwing him about twenty feet. Amy and Jesse jumped back in the water, and we all climbed back on our boat.

"Are you okay?" I asked Amy.

"We're going back to shore," she said, letting out a trembling breath. "I'm getting a restraining order and having Eddie thrown in jail. He tried to kill me!"

As we headed back to the dock, I tried to figure out what I'd just seen. *How the heck did Jesse get on the boat that quickly? He was right beside me one second, then on the boat in the next, like when he disappeared out of my backyard that day I first met him. How could someone disappear like that? And what's with him throwing Eddie around like a rag-doll?* He was in good shape, of course, but I didn't understand how he could be so strong. *Talk about the power of adrenaline.*

Chapter 21

Julie and I went hiking in the woods on one of the local trails along Big Bear Lake, hoping to burn off some major calories. My shorts were getting a little snug, and I wasn't too fond of that.

"Let's grab some tacos for lunch," Julie said. "I'm starving."

"Jules! What's the point of hiking if we're gonna eat junk food? I say we have a grilled chicken salad, with lots of veggies and light dressing."

"Ew," she replied. "I hate rabbit food."

I laughed and shook my head. "What am I gonna do with you?"

"Still thinking about the big kiss the other day?" she asked with a smirk.

I smiled. "Yeah."

"Well, you'd better lip-lock the guy with some tongue action next time. If you don't snag him, I'm next in line."

"Hey!" I said playfully slugging her.

"I want you to hook me up with Jesse's friend, the blond we met on the boat. Grant."

"Wow," I said. "You must really have a thing for blonds."

“Not really. It just so happens that the guy is gorgeous. Hello! Didn’t you notice his gorgeous eyes?”

“Yes. Very pretty.” I glanced at her. “I saw you guys talking.”

“Yeah, we talked. He’s nice. And he’s way too hot for me. The other girls were all over him so I didn’t get much of a chance to get him alone.”

“I’m sure you’ll run into him again.”

“Maybe.”

As we turned the bend in the path, I saw two legs sticking out from the bushes. Julie screamed, and I ran to check for a pulse and discovered that the guy had dark hair. When I rolled him over to feel for a pulse, I saw distinct bite marks on his neck, as if a wild animal had attacked him. His eyes were glazed over, and I could tell by his pale face that he was dead. “Oh my gosh!” I cried. “I know him!”

“It’s Fred,” Julie said sadly.

She started to freak out. I reached into my pocket with shaking fingers and pulled out my cell phone to call 911. I tried to remain calm as I explained the situation, but I’d never been more freaked out in my life and couldn’t speak very coherently. I called my mom. But I couldn’t say much because I was so hysterical. I couldn’t stop gasping for air as I fell to my knees, sobbing.

The police showed up almost immediately, and a female officer pulled me aside to ask me some questions. Another policeman pulled Julie a different direction.

“What happened to him?” I asked, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. “Who would do this?”

“Animal attack,” answered the officer.

“No!” I yelled. “Not Fred.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said sympathetically.

“I-I know who...err, what killed him.” Slowly, I opened my eyes. Memories of the wolves stalking me came flooding back. “I was in the woods a while back with my friends, and there was a pack of wolves stalking us, and—”

“It wasn’t wolves,” she said touching my back, trying to console me. “They don’t bother humans.”

I let out a trembling breath. “No, you don’t understand. These wolves weren’t...they didn’t act like normal wolves.”

“This was a bear attack or maybe a mountain lion,” she surmised, sounding confident.

“Taylor!” When I turned around, my mother was standing right there. She embraced me in a tight hug, and worry flooded her features.

“I rushed right up here,” she explained. “Sergeant Davidson told me the entire story.”

I was suddenly so nauseated that I feared I might throw up right there in front of everyone. “Oh, Mom, it’s so awful.”

“I’m so sorry about Fred, honey,” she said. “The officer said I can take you home now.”

My hands still trembled. “But my car’s here.”

“Don’t worry. Your dad and I will come up and get it later. Let’s get you home.”

* * *

At home, I sat on the couch next to my dad. “None of my friends have ever died before,” I told him. “I just feel so helpless, so bad.”

He wrapped his arms around me. “I know, sweetheart. It was a horrible accident.”

“We were walking on that trail. What if it had decided to attack Julie or me?”

“I know. From now on, until they capture or shoot whatever animal is responsible for these attacks, I want you to stay off those trails.”

“How can this be happening?”

“There was an attack yesterday too,” my mom said. “A tourist. It’s been all over the news. It might be beautiful here, but I’m scared. It’s dangerous out there.”

“It’ll be okay,” my dad said. “When they catch the animal, everything will get back to normal.”

“I think it’s more than one animal, Dad. I think it’s wolves.”

“Honey, remember what I told you about wolves.”

“Yes, you said they rarely attack, but these do.” I stopped and thought for a moment about what Fred had told me. “And Dad...”

“Yes?” he asked.

“Fred said...” I stopped to sob as I thought back on our conversation. “He told me he had evidence of, uh...vampires around here,” I said softly. “Do you think they found him?”

“Honey, that’s silly. Trust me, it wasn’t vampires.”

“I’m sure you’re right. I mean, when he told me, I laughed.”

“Poor Fred was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. He was such a good kid. I can’t believe this happened to him.”

His voice wavered as he spoke, and I could tell my dad was also completely shaken up.

“Taylor,” my mom called from the other room, “Julie is on the phone.”

“Can you ask her if she can call my cell?” I called back. “I’m gonna go up to my room and lie down.”

“Okay. Get some rest honey.”

I hurried upstairs and picked up my ringing cell. “Hello?” I said.

“Taylor, I’m freakin’!” said Julie, sounding nearly hysterical.

“Do you think it was the curse or the animals?”

“I don’t know anymore. Could there really be a curse?”

“I don’t know either, Julie, but Fred is dead. Maybe there’s more to all of this than what we want to believe.”

“Do you think we’re next?” Her voice trembled.

“Maybe, but what can we do about it?”

“We can start by digging up information, talking to people who have lived here for a long time,” said Julie urgently. “Maybe someone will know of an urban legend that will help us figure out how to lift the curse.”

“But it could just be the wildlife,” I said, trying to be rational. “There have been other attacks.”

“Yeah. I heard about that woman the other day.”

“Do you think it’s the wolves?” I asked.

“I don’t know. What I do know is that we’re lucky your blue-eyed Superman spotted that cabin in the woods. What if it was Jonathon? What if he’s some kind of crazed serial killer?”

“But why would he kill his victims like an animal?” I asked. “I don’t think it’s him.”

“You’re right. I bet that pack of wolves demolished him.”

“People can’t keep dying. I love this place, but I’m terrified of all the bears, mountain lions, and God knows what else. At least in New York City, I could walk outside freely.”

“Right,” she said sarcastically. “As long as there were no muggers around and you didn’t wear the wrong gang colors.”

“I guess I’ve still got some things to get used to around here.”

“How is Jesse taking the news of Fred’s death?”

“He’s devastated. We have a date this Friday, but I’m really shaken up.”

“If you cancel, he’ll understand. We’re all heartbroken.”

“It’s so hard... My voice trailed off as grief overwhelmed me.

“Taylor...”

“Well, I’m gonna go now. I want to take a nap, try to calm down.”

“Me too,” she replied.

“All right. Talk to you later, Jules.”

“Bye.”

I closed my phone and laid back on my bed, staring at the ceiling as I tried to straighten out my twisted thoughts. That cabin had been our sanctuary, I was sure now that if Jesse hadn’t spotted it we would have become victims as well.

I went to my laptop and looked up everything I could about vampires. One article even said that sprinkling salt in windowsills and doorways would help to ward them off. *What if Fred really was killed by vampires? Will they come for me next?* The thought had my heart racing and my hands shaking. The whole thing sounded absurd and nutty, and I hoped I was just taking things way out of context. *But would it hurt to throw down a little salt?* As lame and stupid as it sounded, a few minutes later, I found myself grabbing the shaker from the kitchen. When my parents weren’t looking, I inconspicuously sprinkled the white stuff around the house, hoping to create some supernatural barrier.

After hanging bundles of garlic cloves around my room and the rest of the house, I took a deep breath, wondering again if I’d lost my mind. I overheard my name being used in conversation, quietly opening the door, I heard my parents talking about me.

“She’s put salt and garlic everywhere,” my mom said.

“She’s just grieving over Fred, coping with it in her own way,” my dad responded. “Just let it be.”

“There’s no such thing as vampires!” my mom hissed.

“If it helps her feel safe, who cares? It’s psychological. So our house smells like dinner for a while.”

“Fine,” my mom relented. “I’ll let it go for now, but if this nonsense goes on, I’m going to have to take her to talk to someone.”

I shut the door. “Even my parents think I’ve lost it,” I whispered to myself as I fingered the silver cross on my neck. “Maybe I have.” With that melancholy thought on my mind, I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter 22

Fred had died a violent death, and I couldn’t stop thinking about him. Tears ran down my face, I was constantly tormented by the vision of his dead body. The words he’d spoken haunted me. I couldn’t eat or sleep. I was a mess.

I also couldn’t stop thinking about Jesse. I had to wonder if his family had anything to do with poor Fred’s demise. As much as I knew about Jesse, as long as I’d hung around him, he was still a mystery. I was struggling to put the pieces together. *Vampires, wolves, serial killers, and curses?* I wondered if I should keep it all to myself. I knew I couldn’t confide in my parents, and Julie was the closest friend I had in Big Bear Lake, other than Jesse himself. Taking a big, deep breath, I gathered the courage to spill out what I was thinking. I only hoped she wouldn’t laugh at me and try to have me committed.

“I’ve been thinking,” I began.

“Does it hurt?” she questioned, trying to cheer me up.

“Very funny. Anyway, I’ve got this crazy hypothesis. Well, it’s not all figured out, but I’m trying to...um, it’s really crazy, so please don’t laugh at me.”

“Nothing shocks me, girl,” she assured me.

“This might. It’s really out there, but just bear with me.” I took a deep breath and began to tell her what had happened between Fred and I.

“Before Fred was killed, he told me he had solid evidence that Jesse is a vampire and that I should stay away from him,” I admitted, holding the pendant up for her to see. “That’s why he gave me this cross.”

“Whoa,” she gasped. “And then he turns up dead with two bite marks in his neck?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Hmm. I don’t believe in vampires, but something’s going on. What if some horrible hex was placed on us when we accidentally trespassed on sacred land?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I’ve been searching the Internet for info on hexes and curses,” said Julie.

“We can hope it’s not true, but I’m not sure. Fred mysteriously died days after we entered that forbidden place.”

“I know, and that scares me to death,” Julie admitted, swallowing hard. “What if I’m next?”

I stared at her hard, and I could tell how worried she was.

“I don’t wanna die, especially not like that,” she said her mouth pressing into a grim line. “Maybe we could make amends and take some flowers back without crossing the line.”

I shook my head. “No way. I don’t ever want to go back there again.”

“But it might be the only way to keep us alive,” she said, her voice trembling.

“Try and keep it together, all right,” I told her. “I have info that’s a lot worse than curses.”

“Yeah right. Back to the vampire thing. What else did Fred tell you?”

I sighed. “Not much, and I didn’t believe him at the time. In the end, he got mad and walked away.” I pointed to the silver cross again. “He gave this to me to protect me from the undead.”

“Hmm,” she said, gently fingering the pendant. “Maybe he was being overly dramatic.”

“I thought so, too,” I admitted, “but he really seemed to believe it.”

“You think he saw something?”

“He said he did. He said he had solid proof, but he stormed off before we could get to that.”

“Maybe he saw one of them murdering someone.”

“Stop being so morbid. I’m sure he saw something, but it couldn’t have been that. If he’d seen something that vile, he would have told me and begged me not to meet up with Jesse. But I’m sure he saw something. I just don’t know what.”

“Somebody had to kill Fred to prevent him from revealing their awful secret.”

I nodded. “Exactly. I hate to say it, but maybe it *was* a vampire.”

She bit her lip hard and didn’t say anything.

I knew it sounded crazy, so much so that I’d debated telling her about it, but she believed the curse, so I’d presumed vampires wouldn’t be such a far stretch. I placed a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “Do you remember when Jesse was shot?”

She arched a brow. “Yeah. How could I forget?”

“How was he able to throw that bodybuilder around like that?” I asked. “He was weak and losing blood fast. He was burning up with fever, and his face was pale, whiter than a ghost.”

“Have you ever heard of adrenaline? That stuff can make guys strong enough to lift a car.”

“I know, but there’s more to it than that.”

“Like what?” she asked, narrowing her gaze.

“Think about it. How did he find us in the woods in the complete dark? Not even a skilled tracker could’ve done that.”

“Hmm. Now that you mention it, that was weird,” she admitted. “Then again, how did that psycho shooter find us in the complete dark too?”

I shook my head, thinking the same thing. “You’re absolutely right. And why didn’t he come in when the door was ripped off its hinges? He just stood there, staring.”

“Maybe he was still dazed from the punch Jesse gave him,” she reasoned.

“Or maybe he wasn’t *invited* in,” I said in a dramatic tone.

“Oh please! Are you trying to tell me you think he was a vampire?” Julie asked. “Next thing I know, you’ll be claiming those wolves were werewolves. And you think *I* watch too many horror movies!”

I let out a long breath. “I’m just saying...well, maybe there’s something paranormal going on here.”

“I’m not denying that,” she agreed, shaking her head. “You heard that voice, and I believe you, but I think this is about ghosts and spirits—hauntings.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Look, vampires are everywhere—in books, movies, magazines, online, and on television. It’s a popular craze that’s not gonna go away anytime soon. Let’s face it. Women want to be bitten and swept away by a sparkling, 100-year-old, handsome vampire. They want a hot bloodsucker in their life, and they don’t care if he’s a walking, murdering corpse,” she said. “If he’s hot, they’re willing to put aside a little thing called age.”

“This is different from all that pop culture nonsense, Julie—way different,” I told her. “This isn’t Hollywood. It’s the real deal.”

I met her gaze. “Put the pieces together.”

“Are you saying you now believe Jesse is a vampire?” she asked skeptically.

“He has immortal strength and vision. Not only did he find us in the dark, but he saw that cabin in the woods long before we did.”

She glanced away, as if in thought.

“Sure,” she said, “but he also walks in the daylight, eats, and feels warm.”

When she said that, my mind flashed back to my interactions with Jesse. In the woods, when we’d first met, he’d gone to great pains to remind me of predators, and he’d actually mentioned them pouncing on their prey with a fatal bite to the neck. He’d told me that Max had a natural instinct to hate him. The mountain lion had been frightened away by him, and he’d told me it was because of his scent. Likewise, the night of the party, he’d mentioned that there were many dangerous predators prowling around. He’d mentioned the other guys claiming us at the party too.

Thoughts of the party suddenly snapped me back to the present. “Julie, do you think you were bitten at the party?”

“No. Why? I just got hurt from the vase, when the glass broke.”

“You assumed that. We all did. Can you remember anything?”

“No,” she admitted. “I was too wasted. It’s all a blur.”

“Try to think,” I urged.

“Are you trying to say we walked into a party of vampires?” she asked grabbing my arm. My bottom lip trembled. “Maybe.”

“Then why didn’t they kill us?” she asked, her voice rising an octave.

“One of them obviously fed off you,” I whispered.

“Probably the blond chatting me up,” she said with a gasp, glancing down to think. “That Jonathon.”

“Maybe your blood tasted so good that he followed us that night to finish you off.”

“That’s a horrible thought, but while we’re talking about it, why didn’t the werewolves kill us?” she asked. “They coulda jumped through the glass and ripped us to shreds.”

“I haven’t figured that part out yet, but I’m starting to put the pieces together.” I swallowed hard. “That voice told me I was being protected. Maybe the werewolves are protecting me from the vampires. I have no idea why.”

Could my crush be a vampire, or am I just blowing things out of proportion?

As I thought about Jesse, something else dawned on me. “What if Jesse won’t take his shirt off at the lake because there’s no scar?”

“There has to be some sort of scar. He was bleeding all over the place,” she said. “I saw the wound. It was real.”

“I know, but he healed.”

“Don’t vampires heal right away?” she asked.

“Maybe he’s different, not like a normal vampire. If he can walk in the light and eat regular food, maybe it also takes him longer to heal.”

“I bet that’s why he didn’t want to go to the hospital or tell the police,” Julie reasoned.

“When he was shot, he was so sure he was going to be fine. Anyone else would have been worried, thinking they were on their deathbed, but he knew better. He knows he’ll never die.”

“This is all so weird,” she said, clutching her heart. “Just listen to us. We sound like lunatics.”

She gripped my shoulders, looking me straight in the eye.

“Give me more,” she said. “Give me something I can sink my teeth into...uh, no pun intended.”

“Do we really sound like lunatics?” I asked. “I don’t think so. Jesse’s mom tries to keep him isolated for a reason. That’s why he’s home-schooled.”

“Maybe that’s a flat-out lie,” said Julie. “If he’s hundreds of years old, he doesn’t have to be schooled at all.”

“That would be beyond weird,” I said. “What if he’s a thousand years old?”

“What if you’re his bonded mate, like in vampire lore?” she asked.

“I don’t believe in that. We just have an awesome connection,” I said tapping my chin. “It can’t be forced or contrived. It’s real. I can feel it.”

“Are there any other hints we’ve overlooked?”

“Hmm. Well, he did compel a mountain lion,” I said, recalling the incident at work. “I watched him do it.”

“You mean when he saved the kid at the zoo?”

“Exactly. Also, there’s an ankh in his tattoo. Do you know what those mean?” I asked. “I know the Egyptians used them a lot, and Jesse said every symbol in his tattoo has a meaning.”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but we can Google it.”

Julie jumped on her computer and quickly typed the word in the search engine. I peeked over her shoulder and was stunned when I read the screen.

“Immortality,” she said in a stunned voice.

I swallowed hard. “I need to see him.”

“Are you kidding? What if he compels you to forget everything? He compelled Max and that big cat. What if he’s dangerous, Taylor?” she asked. “You can’t just waltz in there and tell him you know his secrets. What if he kills you?”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Break up with him before he; A) decides to pick a vein to and enjoy a nice warm drink, B) makes blood *your* next drink of choice, or C) just flat out kills you.”

“I can’t give him up like that,” I told Julie.

“Don’t vampires use telepathy or something to control their victims?” she asked, her gaze narrowing.

“I’m not a victim.”

“You’re letting him take drag you down a slippery slope,” she said, gripping my arm tightly. “What if these recent attacks were him and not some wild animal?”

A chill shot down my spine. “I can’t imagine him hurting anybody. You should see him with the animals at the zoo, especially the injured ones and the babies.”

“Does any vampire really want to be the way they are?” she questioned. “They’re bloodthirsty and can’t help themselves. We need to go to the sheriff.”

“We can’t,” I said firmly.

“Why?” she asked sarcastically. “Because you’re trying to protect Sir Sucks-a-Lot?”

“Because they won’t believe us.”

“Still, we gotta try.”

“They’ll laugh at us,” I warned her. “All it will do is make us look silly and alert any vampire living here that we know they exist. If we go to the cops, we might be putting ourselves on a hit list—just like Fred.”

“Hmm,” she said, biting her lip. “I didn’t think of that. You’re right. We can’t let anybody know about this, especially when we don’t know who is a vampire and who isn’t.”

“And we don’t know who the werewolves are either.”

“How did we end up in a town like this?” she asked.

“They’re trying to blend in, and they’re doing a really good job. The thing is, if there are vampires and werewolves here, there should be many more deaths occurring. They must be controlling the way they eat so they don’t bring suspicion to themselves.”

“So they’re not dangerous because they’re in *Bloodaholics Anonymous*?”

“Obviously, one fell off the wagon,” I said as I glanced down to see who had left a text on my phone.

“Who is it?” Julie asked.

“It’s Jesse,” I said. “He’s at my house waiting for me.”

“Your parents are gonna be gone all day. You can’t face him by yourself. It isn’t safe. Let me come with you.”

“No. I need to talk to him privately.”

“Then do it at McDonald’s or something, in a public spot,” she pleaded. “We both know we have a serial killer running around Big Bear Lake.” Her voice wavered. “He killed Fred for goodness sake! What if Jesse is the killer?”

I swallowed hard at her comment. No, I refused to believe that.

“It wasn’t him,” I said.

“You don’t know that,” she retorted.

I reached for my purse. “If he wanted to kill me, he would have done it already. He’s had plenty of opportunities.”

“Don’t confront him like this,” Julie begged. “You were clueless to his lifestyle before, but now you know his dirty little vampy secret. If he’s aware of that, he might take you out with one big, giant bite right there at your house.”

“It’s a risk I have to take.”

“Fine, but at least take some precautions,” as she turned and left the room.

“If you’re getting your mother’s gun, I don’t want it!” I yelled.

“Here,” she said returning instead with a Bible and a wooden crucifix. “Vampire repellents.”

“Seriously?” I asked.

“Honey, this is just the beginning. I’m far from done. The Internet has hundreds of tips.”

She ran out of the room again, returning moments later with cloves of garlic from the kitchen.

“Seriously?” I repeated.

“I don’t have any holy water, but I can get some at church this Sunday.”

I tried to hand all the stuff back to her, but she insisted I take it.

“You know, we shoulda figured this out already. Jesse is too hot to be human. Guys like him shouldn’t exist on this planet, let alone in the middle of the woods in Big Bear Lake. Who knew that vampires could come in fifty shades of sexy?”

“Right,” I said.

“Just don’t be seduced by his hypnotizing eyes,” she warned. “Jesse may be handsome and sexy, but remember that he’s always out for blood. You shouldn’t invite him in when you go home. Your house can be your sanctuary, so just stand in the doorway so he can’t hurt you. Promise?”

“I promise,” I assured her. “I guess it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“Or slurped dry.”

In spite of her warnings, I didn’t think Jesse would hurt me. Then again, I wasn’t sure who he really was or how everything would turn out. All I knew was that I needed to talk to him.

“Taylor, you haven’t even asked what kind of hardware you need to take down that bloodsucker.”

“I have everything you gave me.”

“Yeah, but those are just for protection. To destroy him, you’ll need a wooden stake to pierce his heart,” she said dramatically.

“What!?” I gasped. “I’m not killing anybody. Besides, if I did, his blue-eyed coven would come after me.”

“Right. I didn’t think about that,” she admitted. “But if he comes after you, you’ll have no choice but to stake the night-stalker.”

“He walks in daylight, Jules.”

“Oh yeah. But you can’t just let him suck every single red blood cell out of your body,” she retorted. “I bet he gets off on it too, the pervert.”

“That’s it. I’m leaving.”

“I’m coming with you.”

I sighed, knowing I wasn’t going to be able to change her mind again. “All right. I guess in this case, I can use a third wheel.”

“Let’s find some more stuff. If we get the lighter fluid from the basement, we can fry the undead bloodsucker, burning him into a million ashes.”

“I suppose that might work,” I said hesitantly, not wanting to picture it.

I followed Julie to the basement door, and after she stepped in to head down the stairs, I quickly locked it behind her.

“Taylor!” she screamed, pounding hard against the door with her fists. Let me out.”

“I can’t believe you want to fry my crush!” I cried.

“Let me out! You can’t just leave me trapped down here!”

“Your mom will be home in less than an hour,” I told her. “You’ll be okay. I need to do this myself.”

* * *

Halfway home, I pulled off the side of the road. I couldn’t stop gasping for air, and I felt like I was having a panic attack. Since I’d never had one before, I wasn’t sure. I ran a hand through my hair and tried to think clearly, trying to come to terms with the fact that Jesse could be a vampire.

Do I just have some sick imagination? Am I a mental case?

If he was, in fact, a vampire, I would despise what he was, and I would never be okay with him killing people. *But is it my right to judge him? Maybe he just feeds on rodents or shops at a blood bank. Maybe I’m just completely crazy. Or...maybe my heart is just as lonely as his.*

I wanted to scream, so as I sat there in my car and did just that.

Chapter 23

My chest heaved, and I sucked in giant gulps of air as I pulled into the driveway. “Keep calm,” I told myself.

As I walked up the sidewalk, he smiled.

My heart stopped.

Just breathe.

“Hey, you,” he said.

“Hi, Jesse.”

He wrapped his arms around me and lowered his mouth on mine. His warm lips were so enticing, so addictive. His gentle touch was like none I'd ever experienced.

But my feelings about him were all mixed up. I was aware of what he might be, but I didn't care. I couldn't stop, couldn't let go. I wanted to keep moving forward with him. I wanted him more than my next gulp of air. I felt myself sinking away from reality. Any normal girl would have run, but I couldn't. His lips felt so soft and warm, and I loved the way he tangled his fingers in my long, black curls. The thought of letting him go tore at my heart, and I simply couldn't. I simply wouldn't.

Still, I needed answers.

He looked into my eyes, and I was awestruck, my lips still tingling.

"I was thinking," he said. "Why don't I get us a boat so we can go out on the lake, just the two of us?"

"Sounds nice, a chance to escape all the drama for a little while."

"I'd love to have you all to myself," he said, threading his fingers through my long locks, a flirtatious grin fixed on his face.

"You know how much I love being with you."

"How about this weekend?" he asked grinning, as he softly caressed my face.

I drew in a short breath, but the words remained frozen in my throat. I walked over to the railing and stared into the woods.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

He regarded me intently, his hair swaying in the soft breeze wafting in from the silent woods.

"I've got a lot on my mind," I finally answered.

"I'm sorry about Fred," he said coming up behind me and wrapping his arms around me.

I spun around, then pushed the black hair from his face, raking my fingers through it. "I'm so thirsty. How about a soda?"

"Sure," he said, "I'll take a Sprite or Pepsi."

I unlocked the door and stepped inside. "Jesse, we need to have a long talk. Let's have a bite to eat and chat." When I glanced over my shoulder, he was still standing at the doorway.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked.

"Do you have to be invited in every single time?"

“Well, yeah. It’s the respectful thing to do.”

“No need for that,” I said. “I mean, after that fantastic kiss on the lips, do we really have to be that formal?”

“I don’t want your parents getting mad that I came in without permission.”

I slowly walked to the doorway and stared into those eyes that still took my breath away. There was nothing dead about them. “Are you able to come in and get it yourself?”

“I’m not really that thirsty anyway. I’d rather hang out here on the porch.”

Our eyes locked. He was so handsome with those strong, chiseled features, eyes as blue as the sky, and lips sculpted perfectly for kissing. I stared at his sensuous mouth, and he looked so cute with that pouty bottom lip of his.

“Are you coming back outside?” he asked.

“Are you coming inside?” I retorted.

We stared into each other’s eyes for a long moment, and it would have taken a knife to cut the tension between us. The challenge had been issued, and we both refused to give in.

“Something’s changed between us,” Jesse said. “I can sense it.”

I shook my head.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I put two and two together.”

“And what did you figure out?”

“I want to know what you’re hiding from me, Jesse,” I finally blurted out. “What’s going on?”

Jesse stared at me in silence as he contemplated what my words implied.

I inched closer to the doorway. “Take off your shirt,” I demanded.

“I had no idea you were so bold, so kinky,” he said, his beautiful eyes shining as they gazed straight into my own.

My lips pressed into grim lines. “I need to know if I’m crazy, which is a very serious possibility. Take off your shirt right now please.”

“No.”

“No?” I asked.

“No,” he repeated with a smile.

I cleared my throat. “Why not?”

“Why not? Because I suddenly feel very shy. You’re treating me like a piece of meat.”

“Maybe the real reason you don’t want to remove your shirt is because you don’t have a scar from the bullet wound. I’m sure it healed very fast, and that’s why you didn’t want to go to the hospital.”

“Why wouldn’t I have a scar?” he asked, nodding, seemingly impressed with my insights.

“Because I think you’re *special*.” If I was right, he would know what I was talking about. I didn’t want to risk our friendship by flat out calling him a vampire, just in case it wasn’t true.

“Special?” he asked, his voice cutting into my thoughts. “I’m glad you think so. I feel the same about you.”

Boldly, I held up the crucifix. “Cut the games, Jesse. I know what you’re hiding. You’re immortal.”

“Listen to yourself, Taylor!” he laughed. “Do you think a cross can actually stop me?”

“Maybe not, but apparently, you can’t come in without being invited.”

He shook his head.

I continued, “If necessary, I can also kick a leg off one of my mom’s wooden chairs.”

“To stake me?” he asked.

“Only as a last resort, if I need to defend myself.”

“I’m a little curious about how you came to this interesting conclusion.”

The massive lump of dread thudded down into the pit of my stomach like a lead balloon. “I put the pieces together, and they all fit quite nicely. Why don’t you stop trying to hide from me, when I know the truth? You can trust me to keep your secret. My bond is my word.”

“Those were my words,” he reminded me.

“And I mean them,” I assured him.

He gazed deeply into my eyes, then slid his shirt over his head.

My gaze darted from his powerful shoulders to his rippling abs and amazing chest, sculpted with hard muscles. His hair fell in disheveled waves across his forehead, but I didn’t see any scars on his perfect skin.

“I knew it!” I said, gasping. “It’s gone!”

“Looks like we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

I tried to ignore the dry sensation inside my mouth. “How long did it take you to heal?”

“About twelve hours,” he admitted. “It was a deep wound.”

My eyes widened. “What are you?”

“You’ve clearly already decided that. You’re holding a Bible and a crucifix and threatening to stake me.”

“Don’t forget the garlic. My pockets are loaded with it.”

“I love a girl who’s always prepared for battle,” he said narrowing his gaze.

“Are you going to answer me or not? What are you?”

“I think you already know the answer to that, Taylor.”

I fidgeted and tried to look away. “I don’t.” I gazed up as he loomed over me. Shivering, I was thankful for that invisible barrier that kept me safe.

His blue eyes began to glow, like nothing I’d ever seen before. How on earth did his eyes do that?

Oh my gosh!

I watched his teeth turn from normal to pointed fangs, right before my very eyes. My heart lurched, and I suddenly began to gasp for air.

“Yes, Taylor. I am a vampire,” he said.

A cold chill shot down my spine as I stared into those glowing eyes and took in those sharp fangs. I opened my mouth to speak, but no words would come out. Max snarled, then barked fiercely. I glanced up at the blue sky, then down at the lush green grass, then the open patch of woods. They were all real, and so was the creature standing before me.

“Taylor...” he said.

My hand trembled as I rubbed my face, my brain still trying to make sense of his shocking admission. I couldn’t believe my suspicions had been so spot on. I just stared at him, my feet frozen in place. Right there before me was a real, live, modern-day vampire, a supernatural, mythological, undead creature of the night—and, in his case, day. He was a dead person who existed by drinking the blood of the living.

I clenched my jaw and grabbed the doorway, trying to swallow the rising panic I felt.

“It must come as quite a shock to see me this way,” he said.

“It’s more like a punch in the gut.”

I couldn’t stop staring. Part of me wanted to protect him, but the other part was totally freaked out and wanted to call 911.

“You can control when your eyes and fangs transition?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered simply, looking scary, almost deadly and completely unpredictable.

I took a step backward, my heart still racing. “Turn it off then!”

He did, and I was completely baffled as his eyes turned back to light blue and his fangs faded back into normal teeth. I had just eye witnessed a paranormal phenomenon, and I wasn’t even sure how I was supposed to react. It took every effort in me just to breathe.

All of the sudden, my dog decided he could not stay indoors any longer, and he bolted out the door.

“Max!” I screamed.

Chapter 24

Max had run out of the house, and I had no way to protect him. Just like that, Jesse held all the cards, all the power. My breath caught in my throat as Max barked furiously.

Jesse bent down and stared into my dog’s eyes.

“Stop barking,” he ordered, “and stay right here by me.”

Max immediately obeyed and lay down next to Jesse’s feet.

Jesse petted him, then smiled at me.

“Don’t you dare hurt my dog!” I cried.

“Why don’t you come out and get him?” he asked calmly.

“Can you promise me you’ll, uh...drink responsibly?”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he assured me. “I’m not even thirsty.”

We stared into each other’s eyes. It was as if he was daring me to walk past the barrier that was keeping me safe. But then another thought hit me: *Mom and Dad will be home any minute*. I didn’t think he’d hurt them either, but part of me just didn’t know for sure. For all I knew, he’d use them to threaten me to come outdoors. I could only pray he wouldn’t resort to such a horrible tactic.

It was clear that he hated losing any confrontation and that he wanted to have control over the situation, but I needed to let him know I wasn’t an easy mark. It was almost as mentally exhausting as a game of chess. We stared at one another, each wondering what the other’s next move would be. It was a stalemate, with both of us refusing to budge. In the end, I was sure there’d be no clear-cut winner.

He motioned for me to come out.

I glared. "You know why I can't."

"You'd risk your dog's life?" he asked, petting Max behind the ears again, as if taunting me.

"You wouldn't hurt him!" I said. "You love animals."

"But when he first ran out here, you thought I'd hurt him. You panicked."

"I-I don't know. I'm so confused! I can't think straight. I mean, this is a lot to process." My hands continued to tremble. "Why aren't you trying to lie to me and get me off your scent? That's what you should be doing right now. Instead, you're showing me tangible proof that I can't deny."

"I would try to mislead anyone else, but I can't lie to you, Taylor—not you."

"But you...vampires are supposed to be different."

"Different?" he asked, cocking his head in confusion.

I blinked back tears, trying to calm my racing heart. "You walk around in the sunlight. How is that even possible for your kind?"

"I am a descendant of the Leyna, a rare race. The word itself means 'bright and shining light'. We sleep, eat, and walk around in the daytime, but we're still immortal beings. We can heal also, though not as quickly as normal vampires."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"I'm a teenager like you. I'm seventeen years old."

"Right," I said skeptically.

"I swear I'm only seventeen. And so is Sam and Kierra. Our immortality has only just begun."

"Why didn't you tell me all this sooner?" I asked angrily. "I had every right to know."

"I would have, but I was worried word might get out. I can't have all those vampire fans at my doorstep, demanding for me to give them the dark gift."

I shook my head, then continued, "So you were you bitten by the Leyna this year?"

"No," he said narrowing his gaze. "I was born a vampire."

I gasped.

"Our race can bear offspring. There's not many of us, and we're very rare, only 100 in the world."

“Do the other vampires know about you?” I asked.

“Yes, but we take great pains to stay hidden from the human world.”

“Are all the vampires here Leyna?”

“There is a group of us here. The others are regular vampires. The ones you met at the party were from all over the United States, here for a weekend get-together. Most of them are beyond dangerous. You were invited to the party so they could feed on you, but some of them were so drunk that I’m sure they couldn’t have stopped. There were other humans there, too, all of them as clueless as you were about the dangers of a vampire-infested cabin in the woods.”

“And you condone that sort of thing?” I asked.

“Not at all,” he retorted, “but we’re sorely outnumbered, and most of them are hundreds of years old.”

“Why didn’t you get us out of the house right away?”

“If I would’ve dragged you out of there, they would’ve attacked me. I had to play it cool and pretend like I was enjoying the party.”

“Why was that guy chasing us?” I asked.

“He wanted Julie. He has tasted her blood and wanted more. He tried to fight it off because he didn’t want to worry about any fatalities being reported, but he couldn’t stop himself. I got shot trying to protect you from him and his kind.”

“What about the wolves?”

“I don’t trust them,” he said as a serious expression came over his face, “but for one reason or another, they were protecting us.”

“When I tried to leave, one lunged at my foot.”

“They were only trying to keep you inside so Jonathon wouldn’t kill you or Julie. They knew he’d have to leave at sunrise since I took his daylight ring off during the fight.”

“So Jonathon survived the wolf attack?” I asked.

“He’s almost 1,000 years old and very experienced. He had no trouble outrunning them.”

Mixed feelings rattled in my chest. “Will he come back?”

“No. He went back to Washington, and he apologized. I’m sure he’s out hunting where he lives though.”

I just stared at him, almost unable to believe it. “I’ve got lots of questions.”

“And I’ve got plenty of answers.”

“Do you sleep in a coffin or change into a bat?”

“No. Those are just myths. Besides, coffins are too industrial these days, not comfortable at all,” he said, trying to joke, but nothing about the conversation was laughable.

I couldn’t stop staring at him. Even though I’d suspected him for a while, the whole thing was so hard to believe.

“Say something, Taylor,” he said, worry lines crossing his features. “Anything.”

“I-I can’t believe I was kissed by a vampire.”

“Did you like it?” he asked staring at my lips intently.

“Yes,” I admitted. “I’ve never felt anything so...sexy and arousing, and all you did was touch my lips.” I couldn’t even imagine what an open-mouthed kiss would be like. Pushing my fears to the back of my mind, I took a deep breath and tried to focus. “Do you...drink blood?” I finally found the courage to ask.

He inched closer. “Are you asking if I’m dangerous?”

My heart thundered. “Yes. Are you?”

His brow furrowed as he pondered the question.

“I could kill you before you knew what happened,” he said seriously. “Yes, I can be very dangerous.”

“So...what kind of vampire are you?”

“I’m not sure what that means. I’ve already explained that I’m not a regular one.”

“Are you the sexy, brooding type with a troubled soul, seeking forgiveness for your sins, or are you more of the scary type, the one who rips into flesh without conscience, ready to devour the whole town? Are you a manipulative vampire or the kind that sparkles?”

“I’m just Jesse...and I refused to be labeled.”

“Point taken.” I gripped the door frame and met his gaze. “Do you have to kill me now that I know your secret?”

“Why don’t you invite me inside and find out?” he asked with a grin.

My voice went flat. “You haven’t told me what you really eat.”

“Do you really want to know?”

I swallowed hard against my racing pulse and forced myself to stay calm. I realized that I was completely and utterly attracted to a paranormal creature who could easily rip my neck apart, and that knowledge made me shiver. “I do. I want to know. I need to know, Jesse.”

“Come outside, and we’ll talk about it,” he said.

My breath caught in my throat. I wasn’t that dumb. Even though none of it seemed real and I felt like I was living in one of those B-movies I’d downloaded on my iPhone, I wasn’t about to take any chances. “I-I can’t accept this. I’m going through so many emotions right now. Maybe we should take a break for a little while. Trust me, I don’t want to, not for a minute. You mean everything to me, but things are so confusing.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I was stunned. There I was, on my doorstep, dumping the hottest guy I’d ever known. As open-minded as I tried to be, I simply couldn’t handle who he was. I was suffocating, finding it impossible to breathe as he stared at me with those eyes of his.

“Taylor...” he began.

I loved the way he said my name, and that made it all the harder. “This isn’t the movies, television, or a novel,” I said before he could continue. “It’s not just some little road bump. I’ve got a lot to process here. This is huge, and I need some time.”

“You know what?” he asked, his gaze softening.

“What?” I responded.

“Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere. I will wait, and I will only go far as you let me,” he promised.

He held his hand up, and my palm touched his right at the imaginary line. I could feel the invisible shield, yet I could also feel Jesse’s warm hand. Electricity and warmth sparked through my hand, as if I’d touched a live wire. It was weird, something I couldn’t explain it. It was absolutely, one hundred percent paranormal.

I worried that I was being slowly sucked in, compelled by the darkness that I was sure lurked inside every single one of us. He possessed a mystery and darkness that drew me in slowly, breath by breath. Though I was weary, I was drawn in by his tall, dark, handsome beauty. But I had to remember one thing. I had to remember just how dangerous he was.

I stared at him. “You feel...human.”

“We have more human traits than any other vampire. Even still, I drink blood once a week.”

“Does that mean you’ll drink mine?”

He stared down at my neck. “Is that an invitation?”

“I’d rather you just run your tongue and mouth down my neck.”

“You have no idea how badly I want to suck and devour your neck...”

“With your teeth?”

“With my tongue.”

“Will you bite?”

“I’ll lick, suck, and nibble, but I won’t break your skin,” he promised, “You’d enjoy it.”

The way he stared at me tripled the rhythm of my heartbeat. His gaze was so sensual, so sexy that I could feel my body flooding with heat. “I can imagine your mouth against my neck,” I said, meaning every single word.

Desire filled his eyes. “I need you so bad, Taylor.

“I need you worse.” More hunger, more need flooded through me, sending goosebumps all over my body.

“Then let me run my lips up and down your neck and whisper your sweet name in your ear,” he begged. “Let me give you those sparks and fiery passion your ex could never give you.”

My nerves were electrified, dying for his touch, for his kiss.

“I want to kiss your earlobe, then trail my tongue down your jaw and your neck,” he said in the sexiest voice I’ve ever heard. “Just two steps, Taylor. I promise you won’t regret it, but it seems that we have a trust issue now that you know my true identity.”

I couldn’t move my gaze from his face. “You’re a bad influence on me, Jesse.”

Ever so slowly, he leaned as close as he could to the invisible wall.

“I could be the best thing you ever had, but you’ll never know if you don’t give me a fighting chance,” he said with great and convincing determination in his voice.

I couldn’t breathe, and the room seemed to grow hotter and four sizes smaller.

Chapter 25

I stood inside my house with the door open, safe inside my sanctuary. The vampire couldn’t come in because I hadn’t invited him, one part of the lore that was working to my advantage.

“I can hear the loud crash of every single beat of your heart,” said Jesse, staring deep into my eyes.

“What!?” I gasped and clutched my chest.

“I can hear your heart beating, racing, thundering,” he said. “I know you want me too.”

I inhaled deeply to steady my pulse, but it didn’t seem to help much. “What do you want with a mere mortal? Surely entanglements with us are bound to cause you trouble.”

“Yes, we live by a code that requires our existence to remain secret, and I slipped up by getting shot,” he admitted. “But what am I supposed to do? Keep my shirt on for the rest of our relationship? I never had the desire to tell anyone my secret before, but I want you to know everything about me. I don’t want to lie to you, to keep secrets from you. You’re special, Taylor, someone who will keep my secrets safe. Why wouldn’t I want to be with a mortal like you? You’re beautiful, funny, caring, intelligent, and.....Do you want me to keep going?”

“Please do,” I replied. “You’re doing such a fine job.”

“You’re amazing. And it’s just not your physical beauty. You have a wonderful personality. I’ve never met anyone like you before in my life.”

Emotion overwhelmed me. “I’m moved. I really am, but what if this isn’t for me? Will you let me go on my merry way? And how can I when I know what’s out there, now that I know humans are at the bottom of the food chain?”

“What if you were destined to be in my world?” he asked.

“As a human dating a vampire or becoming a vampire?”

“I would never turn you.”

“So if we dated... Tell me what to expect...and please don’t sugarcoat it. Be upfront.”

He let out a long breath. “You’re walking into a major train wreck.”

“I love your honesty,” I said truthfully.

“I’d be lying if I told you everything will be roses and candy. Nothing about our relationship would be typical.”

“You know it will be hell, yet you still want me to walk down the fiery path?”

He towered above me with a desperate look on his face. He peered into my eyes, as if I was his only hope. “It’s your choice, and it won’t be easy, but I can’t stand to be apart from you.”

“Jesse, please tell me you didn’t kill those women I keep hearing about in the news.”

“I didn’t,” he assured me.

“If you say you didn’t, I believe you, but have you ever killed anyone?” I asked. “I have to know.”

“No. I’m not a murderer.”

“That makes me feel better.”

“I’m also not perfect, Taylor. A war rages in me constantly between human compassion and the vampire urges I was born with. I feel like I need to make more changes for you to even consider being with somebody like me.”

“You don’t need to change a thing. You’re the most wonderful person I know. When I see how you act with those animals at the zoo, I couldn’t imagine you hurting anybody.”

He lifted his hand to the invisible barrier, his lips settling into a serious line.

“I’m broken,” he said simply.

I touched his hand that was resting on the invisible wall. “Who isn’t?”

“You couldn’t begin to fix me,” he said with a sigh.

“Who says you need fixing? Perfection is overrated anyway. For me, you’re perfect just the way you are. I want you for you, the guy I’m staring at this very second.”

“But I’ve messed up, and—” he began.

“Who hasn’t?” I interrupted. “Heck, I’ve messed up a million times. When I do, I just get back on my feet and try again.”

“It’s hard to keep moving forward when life has thrown so many disappointments at me. Sometimes I think I’m, uh…”

“Misunderstood?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered, his lips pressed into a grim line.

Our eyes connected, and we held the gaze for a long moment.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you. You’re the only one who gets me.”

“You get me too. We can’t use our mistakes as an excuse to avoid getting back up. We can’t undo the past, but we can always start over again.”

“Let’s forget all about our pasts.”

“And begin again…together?” I said softly. “Do you believe in fresh starts, in new beginnings?”

“Yes.”

“Just remember, Jesse, that life is what you make it. Even if you’re gonna live for thousands of years, you must make every day count.”

“Do you believe in fate?” he asked.

“I do.”

“You and me are already set in motion. We couldn’t stop if we tried.”

I stared into his eyes, and I couldn’t deny the truth of his words. “You’re far more than the charming vampire from Big Bear Lake, California.”

“Do you trust me, Taylor?” he asked.

Emotion flooded his features, and tears welled up in his eyes. I could see how much he cared about me. We were clearly meant to be together. I couldn’t explain it, but I felt it all the way to the core of my being. I knew life would be better with him by my side, in spite of what he was—or maybe because of it.

I stared deeply into his eyes. “Of course I trust you.”

His penetrating gaze pierced my soul, and my knees threatened to buckle.

“Then prove it,” he said.

The intensity between us began to grow. I drew another breath, deeper than before. A thousand flames coursed through me, threatening to consume me. I could actually feel the heat rising. *I’m dying for his touch.* Even still, I knew if I stepped out that door, I’d have no defenses against him. I had promised Julie, my new best friend, that I wouldn’t risk too much, but the inexplicable connection between us was luring me with the fiercest temptation I’d ever felt. *Should I take him up on his dare? Should I take the risk when every logical impulse is screaming for me to run? If I step out that door, am I walking into danger’s arms?*

He had a gravitational pull I couldn’t deny, pulling me in, like a moth to a flame. I was drawn to him in every way. I had never believed in that kind of attraction. I’d always thought it was exaggerated for books and movies because I’d never experienced it for myself. Now, standing there in front of him, I felt helpless against its pull, against that butterfly-flying-to-the-moon-and-back sensation. Jesse was *him*, the guy I’d been looking for. The one who ignited a fire inside of me, the person with whom I felt the strongest, most amazing connection I’d ever felt before.

He held out his hand, and I inhaled deeply. I didn’t know what was going to happen, but I trusted him with all my heart.

I stared at his beaming smile as I stepped through the doorway, into his strong arms. His twinkling blue eyes shone as he gazed straight into my brown ones. The chemistry between us

was electric and mind-blowing, but our bond was stronger than that and was steadily growing. I could feel his heart, his love, his emotion, and his strong affection.

Our eyes locked, and everything around me disappeared. I breathed in the scent of his skin. In a flash, his strong arms lifted me off the ground, and within milliseconds, my back was pinned against the outer wall of the house. An electric shock shot through me as his lips crashed into mine. His body pressed against mine, and I let out a soft moan. His breath was hot on my skin, and heat rushed to my cheeks. I tugged at his shirt, allowing him to deepen our kiss. My entire body ignited. Hunger roared inside me as I burned with desire. He tasted so good that I couldn't stop.

Hot tingles flooded through my body like a giant tidal wave. I loved when his mouth crushed mine, when his strong hands cupped the back of my head as his soft tongue swirled around mine in slow circles. I slid my hands up his back and wrapped them around his strong shoulders. The mesmerizing kiss grew bolder, turning into something so passionate, so intense, so wild and crazy, and everything Jesse represented. The Earth stopped, and everything around me faded other than the beating of my racing heart. I felt like I'd been scorched by a bolt of lightning. When we pulled away, I was gasping for air and breathing heavily. It wasn't every day I met a living myth, let alone kissed one.

I had never, ever been kissed like that before, not even in my sexiest fantasies. I'd heard people talk about fireworks, symphonies, and electricity when describing kisses, but the sensation of our lips meeting was a million times more amazing than anything I'd ever imagined. My heart continued beating faster than the wings of a humming bird. I had him in my arms, and I was never going to let go.

I tangled my fingers through his thick, soft hair as the kiss deepened into a passionate lip-lock—long, fast, and intense. He poured all of his mind, body, soul, and emotion into the mind-blowing moment, then kissed me again. This time, it was slow, tender, and passionate—so perfect, so right, and so romantic. Sparks flew as I opened and closed my mouth to the rhythm, wanting to devour him.

He rested his forehead against mine as we took long, slow breaths, his intense eyes burning as he gazed into my very core, right into my soul.

"You stole my breath," I said, "but I should've expected that. You're supposed to give hot, deadly kisses. It's what your kind are known for."

He touched his forehead against mine, and every inch of my body tingled, desperately longing for his touch.

“You’re trouble,” I said.

His winter blue eyes gazed into mine. “Yet you stay,”

I drew another breath. “I should go.”

“But you won’t,” he said with a mischievous grin.

“When I see something I want, I don’t run just because of a few hurdles.”

“Lucky for me.”

I smiled.

“I’ve wanted to kiss you that deeply from the very second I laid eyes on you in the forest.”

“Me too,” I admitted, caressing his sweet face. “That was amazing. You’re a great kisser, Jesse...for a dead guy.”

“I’m not dead,” he said with a laugh. “Please don’t mistake me for one of those walking corpses.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I kissed his lips again as rays of light passed through the clouds and shone on our faces.

“It’s been cloudy all day...until now,” I said as I pulled away and looked at his beautiful, angelic face.

“See? Even the universe is starting to take notice,” he said, gently weaving his hands through my hair.

I grinned. “Maybe it’s a great and glorious sign that we’re meant for each other.”

“I don’t need signs. I knew it the moment I saw you.”

He kissed my lips ever so softly, mesmerizing me as his warm breath hovered there. “Am I everything you thought a vampire would be?”

“Hmm. You’re missing the white, frilly shirt and billowing, black cape,” I retorted.

“My mom told me to stay hip with today’s styles and not to wear the cape, no matter how good it looks on me.”

I laughed. “And you’re also missing the slicked-back hair, fake blood, the white-painted face with dark circles, and, last but not least, the plastic fangs.”

“Plastic fangs would make me talk with a lisp,” he joked. “Mine are all natural.”

I touched his lips. “Wow. I just kissed the most prolific monster in the history of movies and television and lived to tell about it.”

“Hollywood is so confused about us. I’m far more layered and complex than they’ll ever know.”

“You don’t have an overwhelming desire to bite me, do you?” I asked with a smile.

“Well...maybe, but not for blood.”

“You can control your blood-lust for me?”

“I’m not saying it’s easy. I feed before work, even though I only need to once a week. My mom has a source who supplies us from a blood bank he works at. Eating regularly helps keep me in check. Also, Sam taught me how to keep my urges under control, and Kierra showed me what to do when I feel like I’m going to explode. My mom worked with me a lot to teach me how to be around humans and animals. If I couldn’t keep it under control, I could never work at the zoo.”

“Well, you’re doing a good job fitting in,” I said.

I still didn’t understand how I could crave someone like him, someone who was nothing but trouble. Sure, he was dangerous, wild, and untamed, but I found those qualities as intriguing as the unquenchable desire flooding through me whenever I looked at him. My heart beat a million times a minute every time I was around him, but I couldn’t run. Yes, Jesse was a vampire, but I felt safer around him than I’d ever felt with anyone before.

“I didn’t get this way overnight,” he said. “It was...well, a long process. And it’s still not done.”

I knew he was telling the truth. *Life is crazy*, I thought, *or maybe it’s just fate*. All I knew was that I’d been thrown a major curve-ball, and I had no idea what to expect. Jesse was a puzzle, and I planned to put every piece together until I had the full picture of him. I knew I shouldn’t kiss someone so dangerous, someone with such a dark secret flowing through his veins, but our deliciously wicked kiss played over and over in my head, and I simply couldn’t turn away.

Jesse’s thumb grazed my lips as he stared deeply into my eyes.

“There must be something wrong with my eyes,” he softly said.

“What?” I asked. “Why?”

“I-I can’t seem to take them off you.”

I smiled widely. He was my addiction, my drug, and no force on Earth could keep me away.

I kissed a vampire...and I liked it, I thought of the tune in that Katy Perry song.

A jolt shot down my spine as I gazed into his eyes, still regarding me with that look that told me he couldn't stop thinking about our kiss either.

The problem was, Jesse was a vampire, while I was a mere human. Not only that, he wasn't just a normal vampire, the Dracula sort or one of those baseball-playing, twinkly ones from the movies. No, my vampire was a rare species, a supernatural wonder who could actually walk in the light. When I really thought about that, I was floored.

I still had questions that didn't settle well with me about my new town. Who was the serial killer in Big Bear Lake? Was it another vampire? Was it the werewolves? Was I really chosen? Was I really being protected by ancient guardians because somebody wanted me dead? Was I cursed? Were Julie, Fred, and me cursed when we stepped on ancient land? Was that why Fred was dead? Or did he die because he knew too much? If it was the curse, one we triggered, would Julie and I be next? What was going on? What was happening?

I guess for now, I'd let those questions go, even though they weighed heavily on me. I pondered on my possible new relationship. Will we actually make it? I wondered. Truthfully, I had no idea. I still couldn't fathom jumping into the world of the paranormal, the darkness of vampire legend. I couldn't imagine anything more dangerous. Then again, I didn't care, because I couldn't imagine anything more intriguing either. I knew the high stakes and the risk, but I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anything or anyone.

Yes, I knew he was toxic, but sometimes we can't control what the heart wants—and mine screamed for Jesse with every beat.

To be continued...



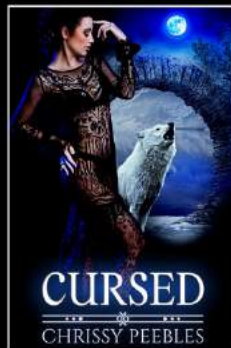
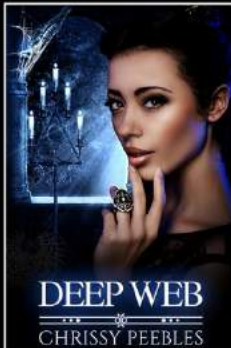
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THE CRUSH SAGA

... ❧ ...

CHRISSY PEEBLES



“Be resilient!”

“Never give up!”

“Be strong and courageous!”

“Be a champion!”

“Be you.”

“Stand tough.”

Life is a struggle...but keep fighting!

When life and death were on the line, I didn't become a victim, I
became a WARRIOR.

I was born to die... But to defy fate is to control your own destiny.
Little did I know that I was entering a world of ritual and magic and
that my blood needed to be spilled so the witches' legacy could be
complete.

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