CRUSH
Chrissy Peebles

Crush

Book 1
The Crush Saga: Book 1

by **Chrissy Peebles**

Copyright © 2013 by Chrissy Peebles

Editor: Autumn J. Conley

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

A huge thanks to Autumn Conley, my editor.

This is a legally distributed free edition from obooko.com
This book must not be offered for sale in any form.

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, a beautiful, quaint little home left to us by my grandmother when she'd 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 and move out to the smog-free middle of nowhere, where we could get lost in the peace and quiet tranquility. It wasn't the easiest place to get to, and only three roads led in and out of the valley.

My parents loved the solitude because they were writers. My father wrote mystery thrillers, and Mom penned romance novels. They hated the hustle, bustle, and noise of the city and were sure they'd be better able to concentrate out in the peaceful wilderness. "It'll be a fresh start for all of us," my mother assured me just after my bad breakup with my boyfriend, "a very healthy experience all around."

I wasn't sure, though, if I could so easily adjust to the simple life after living in New York City, but once we got there, I loved the place. It was a far cry different, going from honking taxicabs and towering buildings to honking geese and towering trees, but I knew my mother was right; it would be the perfect spot to forget about my depressing love life.

I had two brothers and one sister, but they had already moved out of the house, so now I was virtually an only child, with the two most wonderful parents. We were a loving, close-knit family, and I couldn't have been more thankful for that.

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 I'd get everything unpacked and put in its place in one night.

My mother pushed through the maze of boxes, toppling them everywhere. "Pizza's here."

It was past lunchtime, and my stomach rumbled. My German shepherd pranced around in a circle and barked.

"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."

I kissed her cheek. "Of course not."

She pointed to my eyes. "What's with the dark circles?"

"Uh…I'm sure it's just makeup, or maybe 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 wrapped her arm 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 out of the blue, and getting dumped sucked, no matter the reason. I had given him my heart, and he had trampled all over it. The breakup absolutely blinded me, and I didn't see 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 one of us were perfect by a long run. Still, 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 set me up on stupid dates that never worked out, and I wondered if I'd ever find the "spark" again. For the time being, I decided I was done with guys. I was just going to enjoy my fresh start and focus on my passion, painting. The yard was overrun with weeds and vegetation, but my dad had hired someone to fix it up, and when he was finished, it would be the perfect place for me to pursue my art.

I threw my black, curly hair into a messy ponytail, then slid my feet into my white tennis shoes. I wore a white t-shirt and my favorite pair of skinny jeans that hugged my curves so tight they felt like a second skin. I'd washed them so many times that they were faded and super soft, form-fitting in all the right places. The right knee had a large rip in it, but that only gave them originality. Silver and leather bracelets dangled from each of my wrists, and silver rings adorned my fingers. I looked into the mirror and wiped the smeared eyeliner from underneath my brown eyes, then headed outside.

It was so beautiful there. Our yard was surrounded by towering trees that stretched high into the sky. The birds chirped, the sun shone on my face, and a cool breeze ruffled my hair. I loved my back yard woods. 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, 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 whitetail deer sipping from a puddle. My heart melted at the sight of the adorable animal. Max's bark scared it almost to death, and the poor animal darted off into the vegetation. He wasn't used to all that natural wildlife, but I knew he was going to love it there as much as I was, if not more. He barked fiercely, then suddenly bolted through the trees, deeper into the woods, and I guessed he was chasing the deer. 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, but I debated on what I should do. Finally, I decided to just go a little ways into the woods, but I did—if only for a brief second—wonder what the chances were that I'd run into a bear.

I stepped through the vegetation and took a tentative step. Glancing around, I didn't see Max, so I called for him a few times, only to get no response. When I heard a bark in the distance, I took off through the woods that surrounded our property. I pushed aside some green vegetation and glanced ahead and could finally see my beloved and ornery pet. "Max!" I shouted. "Come back!"

He gave me the dog version of the I-see-you-but-I-don't-care look, then started sniffing the ground.

As I walked toward where he was, I seriously considered obedience classes. A thorn grazed my skin, and I bit my lip to stave off the pain. I swore I'd never let that cantankerous canine off the leash again.

I stumbled left and tripped over a pile of termite-ridden, moss-covered, rotting logs, then burst through more towering ferns. Max disappeared into the thick vegetation once again. I couldn't see him anywhere, but I could still hear him barking. Panting, I spun in a slow circle. I was afraid if I went in any deeper, I'd get lost, 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, and I strained to listen. *Was that...Max?*

The *snap* of another twig drifted through the forest.

I peered around the trees and high grass. "Max?" I yelled. "C'mere, boy."

Silence.

I swept an uneasy glance around the trees, my senses on full alert, and I whistled. "Here, Max! C'mon, boy. Let's go home."

The singing of crickets and chirping of 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 struck me; I was sure it was some kind of wild animal. I worried that Max might have been attacked, and I knew one bite to the throat might prove fatal. 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. 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.

Whatever the creature was that I'd seen, it had already seen me, so I knew there was no use hiding. I had to call for Max again, as 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, and 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 starting growling 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.

When the ferns parted, I gasped. I was face to face with a mountain lion, and when it let out its bloodcurdling signature roar, my heart began to pound in my chest like a high school marching band.

I turned around quickly, only to bump into a guy who looked to be about my age. 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 glare. "Are you okay?"

Those 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 summersaults. My eyes slid up his towering body, gliding over his high cheekbones and the dark stubble shading his sharp jaw. He was definitely tall, dark, and handsome, and 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 said when 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, that tousled, just-out-of-bed look that 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 if he was only dressed in a black t-shirt and blue jeans. I took a deep breath to try to calm down, but it felt as if time had stopped.

When our eyes locked, we seemed lost in each other's gaze, oblivious to anything else. I was fixated on his piecing stare, and the explosive chemistry between us was absolutely undeniable.

My ex had told me that sexual attraction and chemistry couldn't possibly be planned, that 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, and I wanted 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 met my gaze straight on. “Predators are always on the prowl. They’ll stalk their prey until an opportunity arrives to pounce, then go for the neck with a fatal bite.”

“I know. The thought of anything biting me anywhere kind of freaks me out.”

“If you are not all right with fangs piercing your skin, you definitely shouldn’t be out here.”

“You’re right. Let’s get outta here before the big kitty comes back.”

He stared deeply into my eyes. “It won’t.”

Max growled at the handsome stranger, then began to bark.

A bit embarrassed that I didn’t have my dog under better control, I patted the furry beast’s head and said, “Don’t worry. He doesn’t bite.”

“Well, tell him that I do.”

We both burst out in laughter; his ice-breaker had worked.

Nevertheless, even with my soothing tone and gentle touch, Max still continued.

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

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

“Nah, he’s just protective and loyal, that’s all. You’re still a stranger to him, and he is trying to look after me.” I glanced around, still rattled by the mountain lion. “We’d better go, just in case that snarling menace comes back looking for dessert.”

“Like I said, it’s not coming back,” he said sternly, then shifted 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 stared at me with those dazzling blue eyes and changed the subject. “Do you always hike unprepared?”

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

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

“I don’t see you sporting a can,” I said with a chuckle.

He smirked. “I don’t need it. I can fight off a black bear with my bare hands.”

I smiled. “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.”

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 keep the words and 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 for his phone number. I didn’t even know if I was his type or not, if he even liked brunettes with frizzy, curly hair and chocolate-brown eyes. For all I knew, he was only into boob-job bleach blondes, and that most definitely wasn’t me.

“You don’t know a thing about me,” he said. “What makes you think you’re safe in my hands?”

“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 said, glancing down at the growling Max.

I 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. “And, pray tell, how’s that?”

Suddenly, his gorgeous grin faded, and worry flashed across his features. He began to dart his eyes around from tree to tree, shrub to shrub, and he listened so intently that I could have sworn his ears perked up like a dog’s.

Max started to bark and snap at the air, but when I peered into the foliage and thick brush, I couldn’t see a thing.

“They’re back,” he whispered, then pointed to Max. “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. He gently tapped Max’s head. “Go home.”

Obediently, Max bolted off.

When the house was in view, I glanced over my shoulder to thank my escort, but he was gone, as quickly and mysteriously as he’d shown up in the first place. I squinted and looked through the dark spaces between the trees, but he was nowhere in sight, as if he’d just vanished into thin air. *Who is he?* I wondered. *Where does he live? Gosh, I’m 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 from me and began inspecting me from head to toe. “Are you okay?”

I sighed. “I’m fine, Dad. Max ran off, and I just—”

“You weren’t supposed to go in the woods,” he said firmly.

“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 your dad,” my mom said.

“I didn’t know he was gonna go so deep into the woods, or I would have,” I said.

My dad’s brown gaze narrowed. “Are you sure it was a bobcat 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 said, 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 and that he had saved me from the mountain lion. My stomach was tangled in knots. “Thanks, Dad, 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.”

“Thanks.”

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

Later that night, when the moon began to shine and the crickets began to chirp and the wind began to whisper through the treetops, I thought about my mysterious stranger. The entire scene played out in my head over and over again in my dreams, and when I woke up the next morning, his beautiful face was on my mind. I had to find him, to see him again, if only once more, and to put a name to the beautiful 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 paddleboat ride. C'mon, dear!"

"Can I stay and unpack?" I asked.

"No, we're all going."

I blew out a breath. "But I don't want to fish," I whined, far more interested in reeling in 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've got an extra you can borrow." She chuckled. "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. I met a friend, and she has a daughter your age. I was thinking you 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."

"Great. We're leaving in a couple hours."

Knock!

When I answered my door, a guy 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, 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."

I suddenly remembered that my dad had told me 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 him, and he came to the door.

"This is Fred," Dad introduced. "He's going to give our back yard a makeover."

"It can 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 well to do a job, and he 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 it going to really hurt living in the Amazon one more day?” I asked.

Dad wrinkled his brow at me, then at Mom, refusing to relent. “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.”

His 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 sneaked 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, Mom and Dad went fishing not too far away. I spread out a colorful towel, applied plenty of Coppertone, and slipped on a pair of sunglasses, then lay down on my back to soak up all the sun 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 and the warm rays and listened 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 tie-dyed bathing suit, with a large, striped beach bag over her shoulder, was holding her hand out for a shake. “I’m Julie. I’ve been dying to meet you. 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. I lay back down and turned my head in her direction. “Where do you live?”

“Not far from you. My parents split, and Mom’s—”

“Divorced?”

“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.

“Meh, it’s fine, and I’ll be fine too. I always bounce back. It’s like I have nine lives. My dad got remarried and lives in Washington, and Mom got a job as a manager for Sleepy Forest Cottages. Where do your parents work?”

“In their pajamas sometimes,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Heh. 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 fairytales,” 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 the Greek god flashed through my head, his black hair wafting in the wind like some majestic stallion’s mane. I grinned as I imagined the intimate touch of his lips on mine.

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

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

“Do tell.”

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

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

I grinned. “Smoldering.”

“What’s his name?” she asked.

“Um…that’s the thing. I don’t know.”

“What!? 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 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?”

“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? Do you even know where he’s from?”

“You mean besides Heaven?”

She laughed. “OMG, 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 lion*s,* as in *plural*?”

“Yeah. Why?”

She lifted a finger. “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. 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 bobcat would come back with her babies. 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. I’ll keep out an eye for him. What does he look like?”

“He’s gorgeous.”

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

“Well, he has black hair to his shoulders.” I smiled 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. When I was a kid, there was this crayon in my box of Crayolas that was called Periwinkle. It was kind of like that, 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.”

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

“I’m not even sure if he lives here,” I said.

“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 in 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.”

She rolled on her stomach to get some sun on her back. “Yep. 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 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 and gave my new friend a fist bump.

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

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

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

“He knocked on my door.”

She laughed. “Hey! 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,” she said.

“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 than a guy who’d ever say something like that to a girl. If he wants a spark, maybe somebody oughtta shove a lighter up his—”

“Hey! Gross!” 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 is a jerk, like you said. He had a girlfriend one day after he dumped me.”

“Idiot!”

I sighed. “Tell me about it.”

She sat up and grinned coyly, as if she was up to something naughty. “So…are you ready to forget about him and have some fun?”

“Definitely.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up tonight. 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 smirked. “I’ve got a feeling we’re going to be really good friends,” I said, and I knew it was the truth.

Chapter 3

Julie’s bright blonde hair was 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, and her black, glittery shirt sparkled from a mile away.

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

“Yeah. Why?”

“You look red-carpet ready.”

“Too much?” she asked.

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

Her eyes twinkled like green jewels. “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.”

“Get in.”

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.

“Are you ready to find Prince Charming?” she asked with a huge smile.

“You know it,” I said.

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?”

“Yeah, basically.” I slammed the door shut. “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. He doesn’t deserve to be missed.”

“I don’t think about him,” 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; 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 everyone’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 the other. Something was wrong, and 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.

When the chatter and laughter resumed, much to my relief, I nudged Julie. “We should leave. I don’t feel comfortable here.”

“Oh, don’t be a party-pooper,” Julie said. “Look at all these hot college guys. Maybe I’ll even snag one.”

“Really, Julie, I think it’s best we leave.”

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.”

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 we got all dressed up, and 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,” I said, “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. “Sure.” When he walked away, her grin grew even wider. “See?” she said. “We fit right in.”

“Meh, 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? “Hear what?

“Only my favorite song in the whole wide world!” She started swaying her hips to the beat of the music.

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

“Thanks,” I said.

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

“Ah! What was that for?” I asked, trying to wipe my face.

He winked. “Gotta pay better attention, little girl,” he said, then began to laugh.

I didn’t see what was so funny, and in a rage, I turned to Taylor. “I’ve been here less than five minutes, and I’m already soaked with beer, smelling like a smokestack, and almost got puke on my shoes!”

She pulled me into the crowd. “Don’t pay him any mind. He’s drunk. Your shirt 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, and 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.”

“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, I sipped my drink.

The next song that came on was a slow love song, and I felt uncomfortable all over again, 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 and short cropped hair. “What’s a pretty girl like you doing here without a date?” he asked.

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

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

“Sure,” I said with a shrug, as if I wasn’t flattered at all.

We danced through the slow song, which was a bit awkward with a stranger, but when the fast music came on, we danced some more. Julie and I did shots, but all in all, she drank far more than I did. After the drinks loosened me up a little, I danced with a few guys at the party and made lots of small talk as the hours waned on.

After a while, she leaned on my shoulder in a drunken stupor and slurred, “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, snatching the drink out of her hand. “Consider yourself cut off,” I scolded, “and you’re definitely not going upstairs with him or anybody else on my watch.”

“What!? Why am I cut off?”

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

“You’re right,” she said. “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 best friend. We girls gotta stick together. And you know what?”

“What?”

“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. An angel. The caffeine angel.”

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

“Really, a blue-eyed angel offered to bring me a cuppajo. 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, the one from the forest. My heart pounded a symphony all its own as I stared into his intense, vivid blue eyes. I couldn’t pull my eyes away from his high cheekbones and that sharply chiseled face. I’d never seen such a beautiful face before, such a masterpiece of strength, contours, and beauty, 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, a well-worn bomber jacket, and I immediately began to envy that cotton, denim, and leather.

He held out his hand and smiled. “Hi. I’m Jesse.”

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

“Nice to officially meet you. Mind if I get your picture?” he asked, holding up a camera.

“Um…sure, okay. But…why?”

“To prove to my friends that angels exist.”

It was a ridiculous line, like one some cliché some sleaze-bag idiot would say in a bar, but coming from his lips, it seemed sincere. I couldn’t help but smile at his blatant flirtations, and the heat in my blushing cheeks scorched my skin. With him, it wasn’t just a pick-up line. He was trying to break the ice, and it worked; again, I was absolutely melting.

“Well, in that case, I need to take yours too,” I said.

“You’re more than welcome, but I don’t show up on film.”

I laughed again.

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, and the white cotton made his shoulder-length hair stand out even more. “Would you like to dance?” he asked like a gentleman, offering me his hand.

I grinned. “I’d love to.”

He shot me his leading-man smile and wrapped his arms around my waist as I placed my arms on his shoulder. My heart jumped into a new rhythm of excitement, dancing to the music drifting around us as we stared intently into each other’s eyes. 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 before, 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.

We swayed back and forth to the music, slow and close, and I rested my head in the crook of his neck. I never would have imagined myself dancing with someone like Jesse, someone so beautiful. I couldn’t believe *he* was holding *me*. I felt l 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 chitchatting with at the party didn’t seem to be fans of his, and I could feel the tension like daggers in my back as they shot me glares. 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, but I wasn't trashed like she was. When I glanced over, I noticed that she was drinking a second cup of coffee, so 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?" I asked.

"Yes, in Big Bear."

Excitement flooded through me when I discovered he wasn't merely a tourist who'd be taking off anytime soon. I smiled up at him, then glanced down and noticed a bracelet on his arm, 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 said. 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 the 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."

"Really!? Me too."

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

"Yeah."

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

"Nah, I'm homeschooled. Like I was telling you a while ago, my mom is a bona fide control freak, and—"

"Taylor!" Julie called. "I feel sick. I think I'm gonna pass out."

When I glanced over, she was 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! Julie!"

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

Chapter 4

When I ran over to my friend and looked down at her wounds, I assumed the shattered vase shards must have cut her during her fall. I only hoped she wouldn't need stitches, because she was bleeding pretty profusely. Someone handed me a kitchen towel, and I applied pressure to the wound. "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."

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

"Positive," she said, 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. There's a medic here, and she's going to help."

“A medic? Wow. Lucky for me. I drank way too much, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s putting it lightly. Do you remember me cutting you off?”

She offered a half-smile. “Yeah, but I still sneaked drinks behind your back.”

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

“Can you give me a hand?” the woman said to Jesse.

“Sure,” he said.

She then went to work to cleanse the wound and put a sterile white bandage on it.

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

“See? Good as new,” Julie slurred.

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

“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 whispered.

“This is so embarrassing, but her car’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.”

“But then how will you get back?” I asked.

“I can walk.”

“No, it’s way too far, Jesse.”

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

I furrowed a brow. “Sneak out? Why?”

“You see that guy she was dancing with?”

“Yeah. She told me his name, but I forget.”

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

I shook my head in disbelief. “Are you sure? That’s insane.”

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

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

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

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

“That’s the plan.”

Jesse wrapped his arm around Julie and helped her walk out the back door of the cabin. Gripping my purse tightly, I followed. A cool breeze blew through my hair, and I shuddered, wishing I’d worn a coat. 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, 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 said, 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 said. “We have to get out of here and back home.”

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

I reached in the back seat and handed her a blue sweater. “Wear this.”

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, and when he glanced at me questioningly, 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.

“A little?” He laughed.

Julie tapped him. “Are you Prince Charming?” she asked.

“What?” he asked, turning the key in the ignition. “Because I helped bandage you up?”

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

My cheeks blushed. “Julie!” I said.

Before he 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, and I suddenly wished with all my heart that my life had a rewind button.

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

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

He grinned back at me. “And so do you.”

I couldn’t stop grinning from the compliment as we sped along the road, until something jerked us forward.

“What the heck?” Julie said, stunned.

“Feels like we blew a tire,” I said as we came to a jerky stop.

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

“We can just walk,” I said. “I don’t think we’re that far away.”

Jesse shook his head. “Absolutely not. I’ll call somebody.” He flipped his phone open and began talking to one of his buddies.

“Julie,” I said, “how are you feeling? 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?”

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

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

“Yes I do.”

“He’s way too dangerous.”

“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,” Jesse said. “You two had no business being at that party out in the middle of the woods with a bunch of older strangers.”

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

He smiled.

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

“My friend’s coming,” Jesse said. “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 said, “and funny too.”

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

“Maybe he’s just as dark and dangerous as they are,” she said in a creepy voice. “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 shot me a sly smile as she gave me a fist-bump.

Grinning, I bumped her back.

“Look at you, all lust at first sight for our bad boy.”

“There’s definitely a connection, but I don’t think it’s lust…and I don’t think he’s a bad boy.”

“That’s too bad. But anyway, 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?”

“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?”

“Meh, 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, then winked.

“Very funny,” I said, then laughed again. “Okay.”

She grinned as I hopped out of the truck.

Outside, Jesse was sitting in 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 jumped into the cab and sat next to him. “Keeping us safe from all the wild animals out prowling around?”

“Lots of dangerous predators hunt at night.”

“Like the bobcat? I know they’re nocturnal.” I smiled, then gazed into his eyes.

“I almost didn’t come tonight,” he said. “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 turned to the left and glanced into the towering woods. “Taylor, get back in the truck and lock the doors,” he said.

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

He didn’t laugh, though, and his face remained stern. “Please get back inside the truck.

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?” Julie asked.

I tried to get a glimpse of some hungry wildlife, but I saw nothing. “He thinks something’s out there.”

“Like what?”

“Like a wild animal.”

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. “Jesse, get your butt in here.”

While we looked out at Jesse, who was pacing the road and staring deep into the dark woods, I began to get really creeped out. *Where the heck is this friend of his?* I wondered, knowing we needed to get back on the road and get home before Julie’s mom did. She had worked the nightshift at the hotel, but she would be home by eight a.m. at the latest. If we didn’t make it home before she did, my own mother would find out, and I’d be grounded for weeks.

BANG!

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

“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 echoed through the darkness.

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

“Somebody’s shooting at us!” Julie said, her voice wavering as she stated the obvious. “We’re being robbed or somethin’.”

The words remained frozen in my throat, and 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. “No signal!” I said.

“Same here,” Julie said, trembling with fright.

“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 said. “Some crazy person is shooting at us, and I’ve kinda got the feeling he’s not gonna stop until we’re dead.”

“No!” Julie said. “I’m not leaving. If we step out of this truck, it’ll be like target practice for our trigger-happy stalker!”

“Julie, if we stay in this truck, we’re as good as dead.”

She met my gaze, her eyes wide with terror. Clearly, she’d been scared sober.

I gripped her hands. “We can hide in the woods.”

“No way! Haven’t you ever seen a horror movie in your life? The hockey mask guy always chases 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 know it’s dark, and there are so many trees and 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?” she snapped. “Humph. Some Prince Charming he turned out to be.”

I tentatively glanced out the window, and another chill shot up my spine when I noticed a puddle on the street, glimmering crimson in the moonlight. “Oh my gosh!”

“What?”

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.”

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 and fumbled around through all sorts of junk, everything from gum wrappers to a tire gauge to coupons for fast food places. “You got a flashlight in here or under the seat or anything?”

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

As she 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, and 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 logs and zigzagged through the towering trees, going as fast as the burning muscles in my legs would allow, with dry leaves and twigs crunching beneath my feet. I continued checking over my shoulder and was glad to see that Julie’s drunk had worn off enough that she was having no trouble keeping up; the moonlight glinting here and there off of her sparkly shirt let her know she was right behind me. I spun and found an alternate route, squeezing through the clustered trees 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 human, bobcat, or some other variety of predator, but I twisted through the overgrown ferns and foliage, running faster and encouraging Julie to hurry.

“Taylor!” Jesse’s voice said.

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

Jesse sucked in a deep breath and held his chest, where blood was dripping from a gaping wound.

I gasped, then took 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, and even if I had known, I was too scared to think clearly enough to play nurse.

Julie took off her sweater and applied pressure. “Stay calm…and whatever you do, don’t pass out.”

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

“He’ll have no idea where were coming out,” Julie said 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 said. “You were shot, for godness sake! You need surgery, medical help, and a lot of prayers.”

I pushed branches aside, took another step into the dense vegetation, then straightened to listen. Barking, whining, and haunting howls echoed in the air. It seemed we’d lost the maniac shooter, but now we were wandering around a lonely forest, a dark labyrinth of trees, possibly being stalked by a pack of wolves.

“We gotta keep moving,” Jesse said.

A deeper, more menacing howl made my hands shake. It reminded me of a bloodhound my neighbor had once owned, but when all the wild canines bayed together, it was beyond freaky and downright ominous.

We kept going, climbing over slippery logs and jagged rocks and 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. Still, my ankle throbbed, slowing me down.

“They’re too close, Taylor,” 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 said as we stumbled along through the thick terrain. “Jesse’s dying, we’re lost in the woods, a crazy 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 as he used us as human crutches.

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

I stumbled on a log again, then regained my balance; I was dressed for a party and wasn’t exactly wearing hiking boots. “Don’t be scared. Wolves are predators, but they don’t attack humans. After my run-in with the mountain lion, my dad gave me a lecture on all the wildlife around here.”

“You still have a lot to learn about these woods,” Jesse said.

“But wolves naturally fear humans,” I said confidently. “Dad said that, but so did this guy on this Discovery Channel special he made me watch yesterday.”

“These don’t,” Jesse added.

“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,” I said. “And we really need to get you to the hospital.”

“Wolves are…predators,” Jesse gasped out between breaths.

I glanced at him skeptically. “My dad said that in the past century, there’ve 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 over my shoulder and gasped at the 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,” Jesse said. He suddenly stopped, then pointed. “There’s a cabin up there. Maybe someone’s home who can help us.”

I glanced ahead but didn’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 and began to come from closer, I hoped my imagination was just playing tricks on me too. *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!” Julie said. “How’d you see it from that far away?” she asked Jesse, but 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 grew louder, and I knew the wolves had captured our scent. I hoped the cabin would offer us safety and a landline; that hope was the only thing that kept me sane and calm.

"Hurry!" Jesse said.

My gaze fixed on my target destination as I put my body into gear. I knew we needed to run, but Jesse was leaning on us for support. *Thirty feet? 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 said.

"The pack is coming!" Julie shouted. "Just break a window!"

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

"C'mon!" Julie shouted, terrified.

"It's locked," I said.

"Let me try!" Jesse said. He threw his shoulder into the door, busting the lock.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but just as I went to rush inside, powerful arms gripped me from behind.

Chapter 6

I gasped when 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 flailed as Jonathon attempted to restrain me.

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

When the fiend's grip loosened, 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," I said.

"The kitchen!" Julie said.

We bolted inside the cabin.

With my heart racing, I glanced around for the light switch. My fingers skimmed over it, and the lights came on. "Is anybody here?" I screamed.

"Help us!" Julie shouted.

But there was no answer.

The cabin was furnished, so either everyone was asleep or it was a rental and was vacant until the weekend. I walked through the living room and into the kitchen with Julie in tow. We frantically rummaged through the kitchen drawers looking for anything we could use to defend ourselves. My fingers curled around a butcher knife, and Julie held a long, sharp steak knife in her hand.

"Why is Jonathon chasing us?" she asked. "If he wants my number, he just has to ask."

"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—"

"No! He's been chasing us. What's wrong with you?"

"Maybe he just wants something," she said, still hung up on the guy.

"He's 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."

“Listen, just stay here, okay? I’ve gotta help Jesse. He’s hurt and can’t fend him off by himself.” I then rushed back to the front door, which was now closed.

Just as I grabbed the doorknob, Julie touched my shoulder, causing me to jump and clutch my chest in an attempt to calm my racing heart. “Don’t go out there,” Julie said.

“I have to help him,” I said. “He needs me.”

“Well, then I’ll help too.” She flicked on the porch light, then peered through the curtains. “I don’t see him.”

I couldn’t breathe.

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

The knife in my hands shook violently. “How’d a party turn into…this?” I asked. “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 said.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“No! Don’t you dare!”

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

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

“It’s a chance I have to take.”

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

As soon as I opened the creaking door and stepped onto the porch, a snarling, drooling wolf lunged for my ankle. I immediately jumped back inside and slammed the door.

With a shaky finger, Julie locked the door behind me. “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, and my heart ached at the thought.

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

“Good. Can we possibly get out that way?”

“Nope. Wolf Central out back.”

“We need to see if Jesse is out there,” I said. “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 said, but I couldn’t even finish the thought, because it turned my stomach. We had to act fast, so instead of arguing with Julie about it, I walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge, only to find 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, Julie. 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?”

The wolves howled even louder, and the hair on the back of my neck stood at attention. “At least they can’t break into the cabin,” I said, trying to sound positive. “And if anyone tries to come in here, they’ll be attacked. Jonathon won’t stand a chance.”

“But you said wolves don’t attack humans.”

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

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. *What if it’s Jonathon, just playing games with us? What if it’s someone who can help? Should we hide?* I knew that might be risky, since our only 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 like a jumping bean on a trampoline.

Outside, Jesse was leaning against the door, and the wolves were 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 when I made out his features.

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

Somehow, the injured Jesse broke his stronghold and lunged at him. The guy rammed his head and shoulders into him, but with a big push, Jesse threw the guy five feet. In a flash, the man grabbed Jesse, lifted him over his head, and threw him like a ragdoll. Jesse crashed straight into the door so viciously that the door flew off the hinges with a loud *bang*.

“Jesse!” I screamed. “Get in here!” I shouted.

“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 stained the hard wood floor.

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

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

“We’re safe now,” Jesse 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, and he’s disoriented, but as soon as he gets his head back in the game, he’ll come in. All he has to do is take one step through the open doorway.”

I snapped the shades shut on all the windows so crazy Jonathon couldn’t see us.

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

“You’re kidding, right?” Julie asked, breathing heavily in quick, shallow heaves. “If we could move that cabinet, he most certainly can. We need to find a landline and call 911.”

I gazed around for a phone but didn’t see one. “While he’s dazed and out of it, let’s grab his gun,” I suggested.

Jesse grabbed my hand. “No, don’t. You step out that door, and you’re dead.”

Pushing the drapes aside, I glanced out the window.

The guy 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, I thought.

Then, he suddenly screamed as two of the snarling wolves bit into his flesh. He flailed with all his might, but the wolves just dug in harder.

“A madman is after us, and we’re surrounded by hungry wild animals waiting to tear us to shreds. Can this night get any worse?” Julie said, then ran a hand through her wild blonde hair. “We have to leave. We can’t just stay in here and wait for those things to make Kibbles and Bits outta us.”

“I know,” I said.

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

“Did they drag him off?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but wolves are still circling,” Julie said. “I don’t think that 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.”

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

I looked at Jesse, who was bleeding profusely. “Let’s get you to the bathroom and 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. You need a doctor,” I said, my voice wavering.

He winced in pain, and his blue eyes watered. “I promise 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 has 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 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, and then we need to take Jesse to the ER.”

“That’s exactly what he wants,” Jesse said. “Our best bet is to stay here until first light.”

Julie peeked out the window. “The place is swarming with wolves. Maybe he’s right. Let’s stay here a few hours and see if the pack leaves.”

I helped Jesse to the recliner.

He glanced up at me and could tell I was concerned. “It’s our best bet. The wolves will move on soon.”

Then a thought occurred to me: *We need to secure the upstairs and make sure no one is in the house.* We could leave nothing to chance. “Hello?” I called up the stairs.

The stairs creaked as I walked up them. My nerves were on edge as we headed down the lonely hallway amidst the shadows that danced on the wall.

Julie pointed to the first bedroom. Holding my butcher knife, I flicked on the switch but didn’t see anyone, much to my delight. As I continued to move carefully through the bedroom, I suddenly saw a figure. 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. We checked the next two bedrooms, and they were also clear.

My labored breathing eased, though my lungs still burned and my head was pounding like a chorus line of stiletto-wearing hippos dancing on it.

Julie motioned me in the master bedroom. “Blue Eyes can rest in there,” she said.

“Jesse, you should lie down,” I said when we walked back downstairs to get him. “There’s a nice bedroom upstairs so you can rest.”

“I’m fine.”

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

His wound 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," 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, but I didn't know how to get past the snarling wolves. No one could hear us now because our cell phones had no signal out in the middle of nowhere, and there was no landline in the cabin. I touched Jesse's arm. "Please lie down."

"No. I have to keep you safe."

"You aren't going to be able to do that if you die on us," I said. "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 and then you'll be more up to protecting us better. 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," he said.

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 applied pressure to his wound. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd be taking care of a gunshot victim," she said.

His eyes fluttered shut, and I gasped. "He passed out," I said. "We can't just sit here and do nothing, no matter what he said," I 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 gonna get us help."

"How are you going to get past the wolves?"

"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 and was glad that his skin was cool and not as sweaty; the fever had subsided. "He feels better," I said.

"He's breathing better too," Julie added. "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." Feeling defeated, I sat down on the vinyl chair and propped my feet on the stool. I watched vigilantly out the window, waiting for the scraggly dogs to leave.

* * *

A couple of hazy, sleepy, silent hours later, when the first rays of light shone on my face, I looked out the window again. "Julie, they're gone!" I said.

"I'll go look out the front," she said.

I rushed over to Jesse. "Let me have a look at your wound," I said.

He pushed me away. "I said I'm fine. We don't have time to waste. Let's go."

"Are you sure you feel all right? Can you walk?"

"Meh, I'll live to tell the tale," he said.

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, opening the door.

Outside, I stared skeptically at the deceivingly calm forest around us. As if mocking our trepidation, the sun was shining brightly, and the birds were chirping happily. When I looked down, though, I saw

pawprints everywhere. It was still hard to fathom that we'd been shot at, chased, and practically held prisoner in the cabin by a bunch of wolves.

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

As we hiked through the woods, continuously trying our cell phones, Jesse actually got a signal for about two minutes and managed 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 us to his friend, Billy.

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

"What!? They're joking, right?" Billy said to Jesse.

"No. He really was shot," Julie said.

"Oh," Billy said.

I looked at him as if he was one Prozac away from a straightjacket. "Uh…that's the best place for gunshot victims," I said. "Now please just drive us there."

Jesse shot Billy a strange look, and he nodded. "Okay," he said, "but I'm dropping you two off first."

"Fine. Then take us to the police station," I said.

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 is out there and survived the wolf attack, he needs to be stopped."

Billy arched an eyebrow at me as if I was the crazy one. "He's dangerous and 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, and—"

"No need for hospitals. My mom is a doctor."

"But—" Julie tried to argue.

"It's just a flesh wound," Jesse said. "I'll be fine."

"Jesse," I said, "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. Leave the police out of it," I said, rolling my eyes.

"It's the best thing, Taylor," Jesse said.

"I'm great at keeping secrets," Julie said. "If my mom finds out I sneaked out of the house to go to a college party and almost got myself killed, she'll freak, and I'll be the one needing a doctor—especially if the police are involved."

"I won't say anything either," I said reluctantly.

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

"Don't worry about your truck," Jesse said. "One of my friends is a mechanic. He can have it fixed in hours."

"My mom will ask about it," Julie said. "Do you promise I'll get it back today?"

"I promise."

"Okay, Jesse. I'll trust you on that, but if you don't get it back before my mom wakes up, I'll be grounded for the rest of the summer or, worse, she'll sequester my truck keys indefinitely."

"I got this," he said.

"Jesse," I said, "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,” he said. “I’ll call you with the official report.”

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

“No time for mushy goodbyes,” Billy said. “I gotta get Jesse home. He’s got an appointment with Dr. Mom.”

Before I could say another word or wave goodbye, the blue car backed up and sped down the street.

As we walked in, I flung my shoes off. My hands were shaky from my ordeal, and nausea flooded my stomach.

When I sat down at the kitchen table, Julie handed me a glass of water. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. Just a little freaked.”

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

“Oh?”

“No more parties with crazy, unstoppable party animals—or wild, furry animals either.”

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

She ran a hand through her blonde hair. “Do you really think they’ll get my truck back in time?” “Jesse promised he would, and up to now, he’s been a man of his word.”

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

“He said his friend’s a mechanic. I’m sure it will 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 asked.

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

“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. “It seemed like no one wanted us there.”

“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?”

“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. There are just a couple deeper spots where the glass must have nailed you.”

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

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.”

“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.”

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

“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. No sense in trying to keep it spotless,” she said, smiling.

"I know, but I want it to look nice for as long as possible."

"You girls are up awfully early," she said.

"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."

She laughed. "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, Mom, 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 can go to—"

"Mom," Julie said, "we're tired, and you worked all night. Can we talk about the plans later?"

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

* * *

A while later, after a nice, long nap, I peeked out the window, only to see Julie's truck sitting in the driveway, good as knew. Even the back window had been replaced. *That was so nice of Jesse,* I thought.

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

"Thanks, Julie," I said. "I gotta go, but it's been…interesting," I said, smiling knowingly at her as I grabbed my overnight bag and rushed out the door.

"Right," she said. "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, and I hadn't heard 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 overwhelmed 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 nicely," 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 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 job at the zoo, and when he told me they were hiring, I filled out an application, interviewed well, and managed to land a part-time 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 Jesse's first day to return after his injuries. 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 across his muscles, not too tight but just perfect, revealing a tribal tattoo around his 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 said.

The little raccoon was furry and had a bushy, ringed tail, as well as 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," he invited.

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

"It's easy. I'll start, and then you can jump in." He set the baby on the floor and held the bottle at a downward angle.

The little raccoon stood on his legs and gripped the bottle with its little paws, 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 and touched my shoulder as I fed the critter. "You're doing good."

The raccoon lapped away at the bottle with its little pink tongue, but 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, touching my hand.

His hand lingered on mine, and I felt a jolt of electricity. I'd never felt such chemistry with anyone else before. No words could describe it. My heart was racing like a rabbit's as his hand rested on top of mine.

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

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

"Hmm. Well, we have 190 animals representing 80 species here, and there are all kinds of exhibits, special events, and educational programs. 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.

"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 paused to look down at the chirping quintuplets, then continued, "We're gonna get them big and strong, then release them back into the wild."

"Gee, 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, and 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 it's 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 the place.

At the aviary, an outdoor enclosure filled with birds, he pointed. "One turkey vulture and two bald eagles live here."

"Ew! Sorry, but 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 with a red, bald head and neck like a turkey's. "I'm sure she appreciates you flirting with her," I joked.

"She came to the zoo as a juvenile with a broken wing," Jesse said. "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?"

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," he said with a smile. "She's a sweet bird."

"I'm gonna love working here," I said.

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

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

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

"These birds are so big," I said, gazing up at his feathered friends.

"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," I said. "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?"

"Sorry, but I'll pass on the wolves," I said, clutching my heart.

"Bad memories, eh?"

I let out a breath. "Yeah."

"I'm so sorry about all of that."

I bit my lip. "You know what? Let's not drudge 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."

All of the sudden, the door opened, and in walked a short redhead with her hair tied back in a ponytail. "Hey, Jesse," she said, "there's a guided tour waiting for you."

He looked at me, then back at her. "Taylor, this is Jeanie, my best friend in Big Bear. We've been through a lot, and I don't know what I'd do without her. She'll show you the ropes while I'm gone. See ya later," he said and walked out the door.

I grinned. “See ya.” As soon as he stepped out of the door, I turned my attention to Jeanie. She had natural red hair and beautiful blue eyes, though not nearly as beautiful as his, for it would have been 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 had already told her my name.

“Great.”

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

I arched a brow but said nothing.

She continued, “It’s best to stay away from him.”

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

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

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

She shrugged. “Fine, honey. It’s your heart that’ll get broken, not mine.”

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

She shot me a serious look. “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’ll keep that in mind,” I said, assuming she was just jealous.

At that moment, our almost-heated conversation was stopped when our boss, Ms. Aikers, walked in and met Jeanie’s gaze. “I need you to check all the enclosures and make sure every animal is in its place.”

“What’s up?” Jeanie asked.

“Somebody was attacked and killed by an animal. 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 top of it.”

“Oh my gosh! Who was killed?” she asked.

“A tourist, hiking in the woods.”

“That’s gonna be front-page news,” she said. “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.” With that, she stormed out of the room.

At that very moment, the wolves crossed my mind, and I feared that the same group of brave, 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?” Mr. Aikers said.

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

Jeanie laughed. “That’s ridiculous,” she said, and before I could say another word, she bolted out the door, with me hot on her heels.

We checked every pen in the zoo and were relieved to find that all of the zoo animals were present and accounted for. Still, it didn’t make me feel much better. Somewhere in those woods, someone had been killed, and 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; hearing him say my name was an adrenaline rush like none I'd ever felt before.

"Yes, this is me," I said.

"What are you doing on your day off tomorrow?" he asked.

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

"Do you like to rollerblade?"

"Sure."

"Cool. I was wondering if you'd like to meet at the Alpine Pedal Path. It's paved path that runs along the north shore of Big Bear Lake."

"I'll be there!"

"Great!"

"Do you mind if I bring Max?"

"Sure. Is two p.m. all right?"

"Perfect," I said.

"Goodbye, Taylor."

"Goodbye," I said, and he 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 a mint trim and a big mint and silver heart, and I had pants to match. I finished the summery look off with a cute white pair of sandals, but then I realized tennis shoes would be better for the occasion, so I slipped 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 mom was generous enough to let me borrow her car, and 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 rollerblades 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 hurried 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 wouldn't stop barking.

"It's okay, Max," Jesse said.

To my surprise, the dog 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'd had a few simple conversations on the phone and via text outside of work, but this was our first official date, and I hoped we wouldn't be encumbered by too many awkward silences and uncomfortable moments.

"You're early," he said, smiling.

I held on to the leash in my hands. "I sooner be dead than late," I said.

He reached for the leash, and I sat on the bench to put my rollerblade 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," Jesse said.

"Yeah. I just need to get something off my chest. I know I told you I don't want to talk about that night, but I kinda need to."

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"I feel like it was my fault that you got shot," I said, almost tearing up from the guilt I'd been harboring.

"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. 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," he said. "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?" he said with a grin, as if imagining it.

I laughed, envisioning it too. "I'm not really into philately, but I love to sketch designs. 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."

"You're very creative."

"Yeah, I've heard that before, but the truth is, ideas can come at 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?"

"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."

"Thanks. When we moved here, I thought I'd have to give up my future career. I mean, when it comes to fashion, Big Bear Lake's not exactly the center of fashion. Still, I'm learning to adjust and taking inspiration from the gorgeous natural surroundings and the wonderful people I've met here."

"It must be nice to get away from all those beeping taxis, all the hustle and bustle. 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 Interwebs too, ya know," he said, smiling.

I laughed. “Right. Maybe I’ll start a huge Internet empire, a dot.com—or maybe I’ll just become a painter instead.”

“You paint too? Wow. Quite the artist, aren’t you?”

A smile curled up on 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 never-ending paintings to sell.”

“Right. You can stay in Big Bear 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.”

“Your dog thinks so too,” he said, nodding toward Max, who looked to be having the time of his life.

I laughed. “He loves it out here. How long have you lived here?” I asked.

“I was born here, and there’s no way my mom would ever leave.”

“And your dad? I mean…if you don’t mind my asking,” I said, realizing it was a touchy subject for some people.

“He left before I was born,” he said.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Meh, we’ve all gotten along without him,” he said.

“Is there someone 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.”

He laughed. “We’re triplets, all seventeen. 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? 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. We’re both the youngest.”

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?”

“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 heli-ski down the Chugach Range in Alaska.”

When Max spent too much time sniffing a flower, I gave him a gentle tug. “Helicopter ski?” I asked.

“Yeah. 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 paraglide over the Grand Tetons and swim with sharks in Florida, without a cage, of course.”

“Maybe you could wrestle a gator in the Everglades,” I said.

“Yeah! I’ll definitely add that to my list. I’d love to drive crazy speeds across frozen lakes in 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 this pretty in the winter?”

“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 that he was talking as if we might actually have a future as friends or even something more. “Wow. I never thought I’d have such a handsome ski instructor—or any ski instructor, for that matter.”

We gradually picked up the pace, taking long, smooth strides, then cruised 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 an 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 all the panoramic beauty, I turned to meet Jesse’s gaze. His thumb brushed across my skin, sending ripples of excitement through me where he’d touched. 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 in his sky-blue 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 ever so gently in his as our eyes locked. I was fixated on his piecing stare; even the sky behind him paled in comparison to the glory of his gaze, 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, as 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 at 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 loving arms and engaged him in a deep 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 place that looked like a postcard, 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.

* * *

Over the next week, I hung out with Jesse every chance I got. When we weren't together, he still lingered in my head. We went for walks, long hikes, kayaking, and even jet-skiing. We chatted on my porch for hours and talked about everything.

One day, I was painting in our back yard, which was its own little paradise, thanks to Fred's hard work. The sun was shining high in the sky like a bright yellow beach ball, and the birds were chirping in perfect harmony, with the crickets singing backup. I set up my easel and paints 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, and, inspired by the breathtaking view around me, my hand with the paintbrush in it just glided over the paper, pouring all my creative energy into a work of art.

My mom approached from behind. "It's stunning, Taylor," she said.

I smiled. "Thanks, Mom, but it's not done yet."

"Are you coming inside for lunch?"

"Sure. Just give me ten more minutes."

"I know very well that your ten minutes is an hour to anyone else," she said, crossing her arms.

I smiled at the woman who knew me so well. "I know. You're right. I'll come now."

As we walked inside, my mother said, "I haven't seen you this happy in a long time, Taylor."

"I just love it out here," I said. "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 grew across her face.

It was evident all over again that I couldn't hide anything from my mother, and I blushed. "Mom! I'm seventeen. 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 out 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."

"Mom, 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. Your father and I love this place just as much as you do."

"I'm finally over Sean. He's nothing but a figment of my imagination."

"I think that has to do with a *certain* boy…er, uh…*guy* you work with at the zoo."

"Mom, Jesse is amazing. 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."

"So…are you guys going steady?"

"What?" I shook my head at her. "Gee, Mom, 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, Mom! Can you imagine a guy like that on my arm?”

“I’m sure he’s adorable, dear, but don’t rush into a relationship. 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. 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 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?”

I smiled. “You *have* to say that. You’re my mom.”

She wrapped her arm around me. “You are a work of art all your own, Taylor—inside and out. I’d say that whether I was your mother or not.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I’d love to meet his parents.”

“It’s just him and his mother, his brother, and his sister.”

She furrowed a brow. “Where do they live?”

“Bear Lane.”

My mother’s eyes widened. “Really? 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 who the amazing person he is.”

“Well, that settles it. 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.”

“Gross, Mom,” 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. 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, Mom. 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, Mom.”

Chapter 10

It was Monday morning, time to go to work. As I ate pancakes with my parents, my dad smiled.

"What?" I asked.

"I've never seen anyone so happy to go to work."

"I love working with the animals."

"I'm sure the animals aren't the only perks," he said.

"Dad!" I said.

"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…"

"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."

"Sean's a jerk," I said. "I'm so over him." I quickly guzzled down my orange juice as fast as I could. I didn't want to talk to him about Jesse or my love life, at least not yet. "I've gotta go," I said.

"You never used to keep secrets from me," he complained.

"Dad, it's no big deal. It's just someone who—"

He smirked. "Is he cute?"

I laughed and rolled my eyes. "I'm gonna be late." I kissed his cheek, then gave my mom a huge hug and kiss. "See you guys later."

"Have a great day at work," Dad said with a 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 New York. They'd only moved there when their books had taken off, at the demands of their publishers, but 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 light 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 when I dragged the kiddie pool inside.

“In the corner,” Jesse said, “but let me help you.”

“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.”

I smiled. “You have no idea what I can handle,” I teased.

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,” I said. “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.

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. Jesse and I laughed as we chased the squawking bird. Just as Jesse picked the stubborn little one up, I reached for his hands and suddenly lost my balance when I slipped in a puddle of water on the ground. In reaction, trying to catch me while still holding on to the duckling, his body twisted, and he tumbled backward. We burst out laughing when the duckling looked at us like we were silly and just waddled away.

Heat rushed to my face as I looked over at him. “Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be,” he answered, pushing a long, curly piece of hair out of my eyes. “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 her in the water. She happily glided through the water, loving her new pool, and the others looked just as happy when Jesse placed them in with her.

“Are you ready to feed them?”

“Minnows?” I guessed.

“Try crickets,” he said as he picked up a Styrofoam 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 said as I tossed the bug into the water.

Jesse tossed a few in as well, and within minutes, the babies started diving and 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, 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. I still had those pesky butterflies dancing around, though, having spent the whole day with Jesse, and that 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. 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 was moving My heart lurched. It was only for a split second, but I could have sworn it was someone dressed in black from head to toe, including a black ski mask.

Max ran to the window and started growling and barking.

I frantically reached for the landline 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 else 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. The moon sliced through the darkness, and shadows shifted in the darkness.

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 shot off into the living room.

“Max!” I cried, but the only answer was silence.

Chapter 11

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. 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, 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 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 have looked ridiculous in that 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.

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, because I was sure I'd put it in my purse, but I picked it up and, without hesitation, dialed Jesse.

"Hello?" he said.

"Jesse! Oh my gosh! You aren't gonna believe this."

"What's wrong?"

"I…we…uh…there was this noise, and then the lights went out and—"

"Are you okay?" he asked, clearly confused and concerned by my panicked.

"No, Jesse, I'm not."

"Where are you?"

"I'm sitting here at McDonald's in my bathrobe, if that's any indication 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. 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!"

"Taylor, you're shaking."

"I was so scared," I said, sobbing.

"What happened?" he asked.

I explained the entire story, and he listened intently, never doubting me once. "Do you think somebody tried to rob the house?" I desperately asked. "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 that the door was open after you took your shower?"

"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. We'll figure this thing out. 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."

"I know. And you just look…cuddly, if you ask me. Let's go back and take a look," he said.

I sucked in a trembling breath. "I don't want to, Jesse. 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, Taylor—not ever." He paused. "Unless you want to go inside for a shake or a burger or something."

I laughed. "In this? No way."

He smiled. "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."

"Okay."

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 but didn't see anything out of the ordinary, no mud or footprints or overturned furniture or broken glass or anything to prove I wasn't hearing things or going crazy. 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."

"You must think I'm crazy," I said when he walked back in the kitchen.

"Not at all. Something was here. I can smell it."

"You 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. 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.

"Not possible. He's…out of town."

"Maybe he was, but what if he came back?"

"Like I said, not possible," he said, sounding absolutely sure.

"You're right. He probably would've killed me in the shower, just like Norman Bates."

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 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!”

He looked at Jesse again, this time with anger washing over him. “Go home, young man. Get out of my house!”

“Mom,” I said, “please make Dad stop. He doesn’t know the whole story. It’s not what you think.”

“I trusted you, Taylor,” he said, shaking his head.

“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.

My dad’s tone softened. “I’m sorry, Jesse. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions. I-I’m sorry I didn’t trust you.” He then turned his gaze to me. “You’ve been through a horrible experience, and I shouldn’t have accused you of anything. I apologize.”

“It’s okay, Dad. I know it didn’t look very good.”

My mom wrapped her arm around me. “Baby, you’ve had a rough evening. Would you like me to make you some hot chocolate?”

“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?”

“Dad, the door was left open, and the power went out,” I retorted.

“You’re tired from work, hon’. It’s easy for a tired mind to wander and—”

“I would have remembered leaving a door open. I heard a wild animal howling.”

“We live in the woods, dear. If the door was left open, something probably wandered in.”

I swallowed hard. “Dad, I didn’t leave the door open,” I said again. “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. It could’ve easily knocked the power out temporarily.”

“I’m gonna go, now that you folks are here with her,” 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 said, swallowing his pride and his accusations.

“Yes, thank you, Jesse,” my mom said. “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.”

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 turned to my dad. “Something scared her. If she says she saw an intruder, I believe she saw someone. Maybe we should call the police.”

“I’m sure everything is okay now,” my dad said. “Nothing seems to be missing or damaged.” As if he refused to believe the obvious, he turned to me and said, “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. Sean breaking up with me was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

My mom wrapped her arm around me. “How was dinner? I made spicy chicken. Did you like it?”

“I didn’t eat,” I said. “I was warming it up in the microwave when I saw that man through the glass.”

“That’s too bad, darlin’. Let me warm it up for you.”

“I’m really not hungry now, Mom.”

“How about something to drink?”

“I’d love that. Surprise me.”

My mom smiled, and I headed up to my room. I 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 slipped into a nightgown and crawled into bed. I usually kept the door closed when I slept, but this time, 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. 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, so I hope it won’t keep me up.”

“It shouldn’t. At least have a few sips. Goodnight, honey.”

“Goodnight,” I said. “And, Mom…”

“Yes, honey?”

“Please leave the door open, just this once.”

Chapter 12

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 robe.”

“Technically, you were in the parking lot.”

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’s for the birds today,” Jesse said. “I guess that’s all right. I’ve been missing Beauty Queen.”

I glanced down at my assignment sheet. “Mine’s worse. She put me on cage cleanup.”

“I can get my stuff done pretty quick, and then I’ll come over and help you,” he offered, ever the good Samaritan.

“That’s so nice of you. Thank you, Jesse.”

“Not a problem. I’ll see ya later.”

“Okay,” I said with a big smile.

* * *

I was mopping one of the empty cages when screams echoed in the air. I quickly threw down the mop and hurried out to find a crowd of people gathered around the cage across from me, screaming in panic about a five-year-old who had fallen into the mountain lion’s cage. The child was unconsciousness in the enclosure, and the big cat was quickly approaching. Shouts and cries pierced the air, especially from the little one’s mother.

“Can you help?” the kid’s mother yelled at me, 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, then started throwing them at the mountain lion. The animal didn’t even flinch, as its attention was completely absorbed by the child.

Suddenly, zoo workers entered the pen and desperately tried to get to the child as the mountain lion snarled at them.

Its menacing growl made me shudder, and when I felt a tap on my shoulder, I jumped like an NBA player.

“What’s happening?” Jesse asked.

“A kid fell in!” I said.

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.

“But I want to help, and—”

“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 animals jaws open and free the man, and the victim gasped for breath and crawled away. That left Jesse face to face and alone with the big, 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 on Jesse, and 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. The mountain lion turned and calmly walked to the back of the enclosure and just waited, and the other workers cautiously rushed in and grabbed the child.

When Jesse came out, I ran into his arms. “I was so worried,” I said. “You’re so brave.”

Jesse was smoking hot, but he was also the most caring, selfless person I’d ever met. He was a hero, with a heart to help others, and 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.

He gazed into my eyes. “I didn’t mean to worry you, but I had to help that kid.”

Jeanie rushed over and hugged Jesse long and tight. “Jesse, you scared me half to death,” she said. “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.

“Great,” Jesse said. “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. You deserve your fifteen minutes of fame and then some, so quit being so humble.”

“Jesse,” I said, “she’s right. 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. “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 smiled. “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 think it’s admirable that you’d even take that kind of a risk,” I said, presuming he was talking about his mother.

“She won’t see it that way,” he said.

“Jesse, if you need anything, I’m here for you.”

“Thanks. That means a lot. I’ll call you later.” He turned and left without another word.

Jesse had a certain sense of mystery and moodiness about him. He wasn’t telling me everything, and 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. She was livid and marched right down here, demanding that 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 cure three geese who 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.”

“She goes overboard.”

“What does she look like?”

“She’s pretty—tall and thin, with light blue eyes and dark hair like him,” Jeanie said. “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.

I chuckled. “You got that right!”

Chapter 13

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, and I found his mom 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, and 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 and healthy and ready to be released, and Ms. Aikers had given us permission to set them free. In our zoo uniforms, we stood beside Bear Lake, admiring the scenery and the gun glistening on the water. After a few minutes, Jesse took the animal carrier out of the company Jeep and opened it, and the five little ducks waddled into the water and glided away from us.

Jesse smiled in victory. “We did it,” he said.

“We sure did.” 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.

“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!

When his cell phone rang, he answered it. After a minute, he hung up and looked at me. “We have two pressing cases that need our immediate attention. 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,” Jesse said. “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. He was gorgeous, but there was so much more to him than his striking good looks. 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.

He shrugged. "I'm just guessing. 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?" I asked.

Jesse slipped on his long yellow gloves and apron. "About a week ago."

"Why'd they wait so long to clean her up?" I asked.

"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 rehydrating solution with a feeding tube to help flush out all that oil she'd accidentally ingested. 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," I said.

"Good. We'll make her a nice bubble bath with Dawn," Jesse said. "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.

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," Jesse said.

"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," I said.

"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 sneaked me little glances and smiles.

"Jeanie told me about her warning that I'm some big, bad wolf," he said, "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."

"Maybe, but I think I might be done searching."

"Huh?" I said, stunned.

"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."

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. That little bird is kicking both your butts!"

Jesse and I looked at each other, then laughed.

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 I loved.

* * *

Julie and I decided to take Max for a walk in the woods, as her father had told her 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."

"All right," I said, pushing some large leaves and twigs out of my way. "We'll go a little ways, then come back."

"Great."

I put Max on a leash. He barked, then hurried off into the woods, dragging me along.

Julie chased after me. "How about after this, we grab lunch. 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 soooo 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," I complained. "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? That's private property," Fred scolded, pointing at the sign.

"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.

I gasped. "Are those…human?" I asked, completely frazzled.

She walked over to more closely inspect them. "No. 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 asked.

“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?”

“Yeah. Maybe it’s some kind of memorial or something.”

“Think it’s a headstone?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but this whole place is givin’ me the creeps. I’m not going past that rock, dog or no dog.”

I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture. “There. Now we can Google it when we get back.”

Julie shuddered. “I wanna get out of here.”

“Wait here,” I said. “I have to get Max.”

“I’ll come with you,” Fred said, trying to sound brave and chivalrous.

She grabbed my arm, then Fred’s. “Are you two crazy? You guys can’t leave me here in Freddy Krueger’s back yard 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—”

“Go or stay. 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 said.

“You’ve watched too many horror flicks,” Fred said, laughing.

“Well, maybe that’s why I’m still alive. Consider it research.”

I sighed. “We’ll be right back. I can’t leave Max.”

“Let’s just wait here for a minute. Surely he’ll come 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 wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said with a smile.

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 that 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?”

“He must be barking at a little animal,” Julie said, “like a mouse or something. 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. But 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 an egg-sized lump in my throat. “Oh my gosh. Do you think this is some kind of…altar?”

Fred glanced around. “Whoa! 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 picked up the black box and tried to open it, but it was too tightly sealed. “Won’t budge. I wonder what’s inside. Whatever it is, they’re trying to keep it a secret.”

“Dude, you touched it!” Fred said.

“One, I’m not a dude. Two, I’m sure it’s just an empty box,” Julie retorted.

“You don’t know that.”

“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.”

“I know,” Julie said with a gleam in her eye, “but aren’t you curious?”

“Maybe curiosity is what killed all those cats hanging on that clothesline back there,” Fred said.

“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.

“Maybe it’s just teenagers experimenting,” I said, grabbing the box. “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 carefully. When the lid opened, seemingly on its own, I jumped.

“You did it!” she shouted. “What’s in there?”

The box was empty, but I read the words scrolled in dust: “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,” she said.

“That’s silly.”

“Maybe you’ll get superpowers or something cool like that.”

I playfully slugged her, then 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.

Fred bit his lip and pointed down at the rocks. “Look! The altar is surrounded by circular patches of burnt grass.”

“What burned it?” I asked.

“It looks like they were left by a ring of torches or candles.”

“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 said, then glanced around and up into the trees, overcome by the eerie feeling that we were being watched. When the breeze stirred, I could have sworn I heard someone whisper my name, and I froze with fear.

“Taylor, what’s wrong?” Julie asked.

“I thought somebody called for me.”

“I didn’t hear anything but the wind,” Fred said, looking around.

I swallowed another lump. “Yeah. 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.

Julie’s eyes widened. “What’s happening?”

Next, music began to play, an ancient melody in 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 said lightly in my ear. “You’ve been marked. 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 said.

“Breathe,” Julie said, “and then tell me 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. 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 breathlessly locked the doors.

"Go, go, go!" I shouted, glancing out the windows.

"What's going on, Taylor?" she asked.

"Just start driving! I'll tell you on the way!" I yelled.

"Yeah, let's just get outta here," Fred said. "That was freaky how the wind kicked up like that. And what was with that music?"

Julie put the truck in drive, and we sped away. No one said a word until she reached town and pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant.

"Taylor, what happened back there?" Fred asked.

"I-I don't know. I can't explain it."

"Try."

"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. Maybe they summon spirits or something, because someone was talking to me in that wind."

"Was it a really creepy voice?" Julie asked.

"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," Julie said. "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," I said.

"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 opened her phone. "We should tell Jesse."

I grabbed her hand. "Please don't! As a matter of fact, let's forget about lunch. I just wanna go home."

"Sure, Taylor."

I glanced at Fred. "Not a word to Jesse, Fred," I said.

He nodded. "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 on my computer and started searching the Internet for clues.

An hour later, I'd still 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. Instantly, it was right there in front of my eyes 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 circles over all the possibilities.

* * *

Days passed, and nothing strange happened 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. I peered through the window and saw Fred working in the back yard, so I thought it was the perfect time to tell him 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.

"How about a drink?" I said, offering him a bottle of water.

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 just about to take a break. Mind if I spend it with you?" he asked.

"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," he said.

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! I don't like guys, Taylor!"

"Oh."

"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. You shouldn't be alone with any of them."

"I've been alone with Jesse a lot," I said. "He's the perfect gentlemen, and he absolutely loves animals. How could you think he's…"

"Some kind of sicko?"

"Yeah, I guess."

His eyes widened. "I've, uh…well, I've seen things."

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, Fred, or you know more than you're letting on," I said. "If this concerns Jesse, I want to know what you're talking about."

"I caught him reading a book."

I gasped. “Oh my gosh! 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?”

He let out a long breath. “I think Jesse and his family are witches.”

“Witches?”

“Yes. I catch them in lies, and, like I said, I’ve seen things—lots of things.”

“Care to elaborate?”

His gaze narrowed. “If you talk about these things, you’ll end up missing or dead.”

“You can trust me. I won’t tell a soul.”

He sighed. “Well, for one thing, 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. “There’s your answer. Men are putty in a pretty girl’s hands.”

“I know that, but there’s more to it than that.”

I touched his hand. “Fred, I think I know where this is all coming from.”

“You do?”

“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, Taylor, 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.”

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.”

“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. Tell me.”

I cleared my throat. “I couldn’t identify the weird symbols, but the words are a warning, in Latin, like Julie said.”

He arched a brow. “Well? 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?” he asked. “How do they expect anyone to obey a warning they can’t read?”

“I think it’s a curse,” I said.

His eyes widened. “Are you saying all three of us are gonna die just because we had to go after your dumb dog?”

“I pray not, and 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?”

“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. 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. Taylor, please go do the dishes,” he said sternly, not one to mince words.

“Nice talking to you, Fred,” I said. “I’ve gotta go, but we’ll talk later.”

“Okay.”

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, and I wasn’t even sure if I believed in the Latin curse we’d found. It was all so farfetched, and I was sure I’d probably imagined the entire thing—or at least I hoped so.

Chapter 14

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 said.

“Hey.”

“Put the book down, girl, and 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. 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?” I asked.

“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 said. “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.”

“So some ghosts 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?” I asked.

“Yes. If I didn’t, I’d be telling you to put on a straightjacket instead of a bikini.”

“Wow. It’s nice to know my new BFF doesn’t think I’m a nut.”

“Just one thing.”

“What?”

“Do you see *dead* people?”

I laughed. “No. 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 said.

“Why?”

“Because Jesse’s already there, and 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 not talk about animal skulls or mysterious voices.”

“Got it. Your secret is safe with me.” She gave 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, then quickly brushed my teeth. I hurried downstairs and jumped into the SUV.

Julie introduced me to the other six girls. They shook my hand and smiled and seemed nice enough.

We drove to our destination and made 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 giant blue sky. I inhaled deeply to take in the fresh, woodsy scent of the piney air. Everything was so scenic and beautiful.

"I love it here," Julie said.

I pointed at a tiny island straight ahead. "Is that China Island?"

One of the brunettes nodded; I hadn't yet remembered all of their names. "Yep. Pretty small, huh?"

"Yeah."

"See the cluster of boulders over to the left, about thirty feet away from the island?"

I squinted against the sunlight. "Yeah. 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 that felt great on such a hot day. I glided forward, using long, powerful strokes. As I got closer, instant recognition hit: The guy about to jump off one of the tallest boulders was Jesse. An instant later, he splashed in.

When I swam to the rocks, he helped me up. My breath froze as I watched the sun glint off his slicked-back black hair. Water beaded his eyelashes and dripped down his face in glistening rivers. His red swim trunks were adorable, 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?" he asked.

"Definitely."

"Hey, Jesse," Julie asked, "can I see the scar?" He arched a brow, and she explained, "From the bullet wound." She inched forward, but he stopped her.

He laughed. "No."

"I get it," Julie said. "You're shy."

"Far from it," he said.

"I thought guys loved showing off their scars," one of the girls said.

"Which boulder do you wanna jump off of? Are you feelin' like five feet or thirty?" Jesse asked me, changing the subject.

"The highest one," I answered.

The guys wooted, and Jesse grinned. "Ah. A daredevil after my very own heart," he said.

I climbed up to the highest point, where there was 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, and everything looked clear below.

Jesse walked over and held my hand. "We'll jump together."

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'm gonna dunk you!" I threatened and started to swim his way.

"Don't think so!" he teased.

We screwed off for a while, then swam to shore to rest while the others continued jumping off the rocks. The moisture on my skin gave me a cooling sensation beneath the hot sun. I stood and saw Julie and the others still jumping off the rocks.

When I turned around, Jesse met my gaze. His blue eyes pierced mine, and shimmering remnants of the lake gave his skin a glittery shine. Softly, he 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, all those white, bright 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, and 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." His eyes fixed on my lips, and he moved closer to lower his mouth on mine.

Our lips connected in a slow, gentle touch. In spite of the smoldering temperature, a shiver ran through me. I closed my eyes, savoring his sweet taste. Goosebumps rippled my skin as his strong hands wandered down my back to my middle. I lifted my arms and guided them around his neck. He drew me unbelievably closer; I was already standing so impossibly close. Tangling his fingers in my hair, he kissed me slowly and passionately on the lips. My heart was drumming so hard within me that 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.

Gripping my hand, he grinned. "Ready?"

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 the water with expert precision to catch up with him.

One of Jesse's friends grabbed his shoulder. "You gotta see Frank dive backward, man."

I smiled as his friend dragged him off.

"I saw you swim off with Prince Charming," Julie teased. "What happened?"

I pulled her aside. “He kissed me!”

“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?”

I blushed and shook my head. “You guys called us back over here too soon.”

“It wasn’t me,” Julie said.

“Meh, 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. Text me, and we’ll think of something.”

He kissed 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’? Did you see those muscles?” a strawberry-blonde girl said.

“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 15

I pulled into Jessie’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 that 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, and 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? It’s amazing,” I complimented.

“No. She did it on her own.”

“Wow. 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?”

“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 my spaghetti strap 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 causing a 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 when Jesse gave me slow, wet kisses all over my neck, then nibbled my ear with even lighter ones. When he blew hot air on my ear, I could hardly contain myself.

I spun around and turned to face him. He was wearing a sexy, naughty smile and staring hungrily at my lips. I’d never felt so desirable. I softly traced his lips, the mouth I could have spent an eternity kissing without ever tiring of it.

“I’m home!” a woman announced, jolting me from my fantastic thoughts.

I stepped away from Jesse and straightened my shirt.

The woman cleared her throat and looked at us suspiciously. “I hope I didn’t interrupt anything,” she said.

She was beautiful, with her slim figure dressed in a blue pantsuit and her silky black hair twisted into an elaborate bun. In addition to having the same hair, she also had the almost translucent light blue eyes that her son did.

“No, not at all,” I responded.

“I’m Shelia, Jesse’s mom.”

I held out my hand. “It’s so nice to meet you. I’m Taylor.”

She smiled as she shook my hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you too. 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 as

Jesse, not at all the oddball Jeanie had made me think she was. I had hoped to meet his brother and sister, but they weren't home. In any case, things were going well for me and Jesse, and I'd met his mom, which made me feel even closer to him.

* * *

On Friday night, my mom and dad had 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, and I obsessively stared out the window to watch for ski-masked or furry would-be intruders.

Feeling lonely and a bit frightened, I texted Jesse, "I can't stop thinking of you."

A few minutes later, he texted back, "If I had a rose for every time I thought of you, I'd be walking through my beautiful garden forever."

I gushed. *Aw,* I thought. *He's just the sweetest.*

I texted back, "I love 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, Max was sitting on the couch with me as I watched television. When I heard knocking coming from upstairs, my body froze, but I was ready to bolt out of the house again if I had to, and this time I was fully dressed. When the knocking finally subsided, I exhaled a long-held breath.

I stood shakily to my feet. "Max, let's go upstairs and check it out, boy."

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 bold step 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, coming from my room. My heart thundered, and I held the knife in a white-knuckled grasp. I walked to my room, reached around to flick on the switch, and then took a look around. When I realized tree branches were banging against the window, I could finally breathe again, and the staccato rhythm of my heart settled down.

When my cell phone rang, I jumped. I reached into my pocket, grabbed it, and quickly answered, "Yeah?"

"Taylor? What's wrong?" Jesse asked.

"I'm freaking out again."

"You shouldn't be alone."

"Right. Are you busy?" I asked.

"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."

* * *

I couldn't wait to meet Sam and Kierra, and I hoped they would accept me as easily as their brother had.

We pulled in and parked.

As we walked to the dock, a thin girl with long, black hair and light blue eyes greeted me with a smile. "I'm Kierra," she said, "Jesse's big sister." She was gorgeous in a red wrap dress that just reached the top of her knees, and the color accentuated her sun-kissed 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 glanced over her shoulder. "Sam, she's here!" she yelled, then smiled back at me.

"Coming!" a voice called from the boat.

The guy who emerged was attractive, also with black hair. He looked at Jesse with his pale blue eyes and said, “I thought you wanted to look good for your date.”

“I look fine,” Jesse said.

“Hmm. Looks to me like you stopped at the zoo and stole the gorilla’s face,” Sam teased.

“Ha-ha,” Jesse said, then shot me a look. “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.

Sam spun to face her. “Right. Since you joined the family tree, I’ve been dying to cut it down.”

“Whatever,” she said.

“You’re just trying to embarrass me, Sam,” Jesse said.

“And is it working?” he retorted.

“Yes, so cut the crap. You promised to be on your best behavior.”

Sam playfully slugged Jesse right in the tattoo. “Just kidding, li’l bro’.”

“This is Taylor,” Jesse said.

“She is just as hot as you described her,” Sam said.

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.”

Sam winked. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

“You all have the same pretty blue eyes.”

“It’s a curse,” Sam said.

I laughed. “A nice one then. 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,” Sam said. “Can you fish?”

I smiled as a cool breeze blew through my long hair. “I’m gonna bring in the big one.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s going to be hard with me on your boat,” Sam said. “I’m a regular Captain Ahab.”

“Yeah…and 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.”

I smiled. “We’ll jump ship if we have to.”

We walked down the long dock, and Jesse helped me aboard. Kierra started the boat, and we sped off to 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, even though I didn’t really need them.

The boat stopped and wavered slightly in the water. “We’re here,” Kierra said.

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.

Jesse stood next to me. “I love to fish at night. 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.”

Sam jumped off the chrome rail. “Are you sure you didn’t snag a submarine?”

“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, thrashed its head, and danced on its tail.

When I caught sight of its black-striped body, my eyes widened. “Look at that!”

Sam whistled and cheered. “Bravo!”

Kierra clapped. “It’s a largemouth bass,” Kierra said.

“She’s a real beauty,” Jesse said. “I knew coming out here at night would pay off.” He then 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 bass was dark green, with greenish-yellow sides and a dark stripe running down the side of its body. Its fins shimmered in the silver moonlight. Applause erupted as everyone hopped and twisted to avoid the thrashing monster.

Kierra sprang from her chair and cheered me on. “The only thing bigger than that fish is the smile on your face—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 day forward. 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?”

Droplets glimmered in Sam’s black hair. “At least twenty pounds.” His finger touched the slimy fish.

I brushed off my cutoff shorts and straightened my tank-top. I then pulled out my camera and handed it to Kierra. “Can you get a picture of me and Jesse with the fish?”

Kierra laughed. “No way! 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 to send it 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 just wanted a picture with it.”

Sam threw the bass back into the water with a loud *splash,* and I was happy to see it swim off. Jesse, Sam, and Kierra caught lots of fish, 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 said.

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.

The boat stopped, and Kierra smiled. “This is a great spot. 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 to outdo my catch, to no avail.

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 at the outline of an animal. It took a few more steps out of the greenery and started to sip the water. 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."

He squinted. "No."

"Huh? 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!"

She rushed to my side. "What's up?"

"Taylor says there's a white buck on the shore."

She looked. "I don't see it."

"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, and I suddenly wished 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.

"Just keep your mouth shut," Sam said.

"But she has every right to know."

"Do you want your head on the carving block?" Sam retorted.

"Jesse, she needs to know," Kierra said. "She's been marked."

"What's going on?" I asked, crossing my arm and looking at them, not at all happy that they were talking about me like I wasn't there.

Jesse glanced toward the shore. "There's a legend that those who have been marked as a petal will have a guardian to keep them safe."

"A petal? And why would I need a guardian?" I asked.

"Because you've been chosen."

"Besides protection, the guardians hand out blessings too," Sam said. "You caught a twenty-pound bass back there on your first cast. We don't usually catch any bigger than ten-pounders."

"What's a petal?" I asked.

"Six petals form the flower for the ceremony. It's an ancient tradition, practiced every 500 years."

"Pssh. That sounds like something off of *The X Files* or one of those stupid SyFy shows. It's just a myth, like the bogeyman, Bigfoot, and aliens being kept alive with strawberry ice cream," I said. "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 deer. 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 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, and I didn't want him to kick me to the curb.

I got home around seven a.m., and Jesse searched the house and said it was clear. After telling him goodbye, I turned on the security system, then 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 no more voices or visions, and everything went smoothly while I waited for my parents to return on Sunday afternoon.

Chapter 16

Fred was working on our back yard, and it was really looking nice. All the towering weeds were gone, and the place looked a whole sharper.

"The place is looking great," I said.

Fred sipped his water. "Thanks. I've been working hard."

"Take a break. You deserve it."

"I've got a present for you," he said, then held 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, which was why I'd stayed with that sleaze ball, Sean, as long as I had. 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?"

"I'm crazy about him, and it wouldn't be right to lead you on."

"This isn't a romantic present."

"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 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 lifted up my hair. "I'd love that."

He clasped the necklace around my neck.

"Thanks again. It's so pretty," I said, looking down to admire the dainty pendant around my neck.

His mouth became a long, thin line. "Yeah, but I didn't get it for looks."

I arched a brow. "You didn't?"

"It's for your protection, Taylor."

"Protection?"

"Jesse's not a witch—or maybe he is—but I now know what's his family is hiding."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"I'm glad to hear you've dumped the witch theory."

"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, 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, Fred. What is it?"

"I'm not killing you, but they might. They're vampires, Taylor."

I couldn't stifle my laugh, because this theory was worse than the last one.

"You shouldn't laugh. You're dating a bloodsucker," he said.

"Excuse me? Are you telling me I'm Jesse's future *ghoul*friend."

He rolled his eyes. "This is serious, Taylor."

"It's not possible, Fred. Vampires turn to ash in sunlight. That's a simple fact. They always have and always will."

"Yeah. I haven't figured out how they bypass that."

"Simple. They're not vampires."

"I know they are."

"Jesse is outside every day, and the last time I checked, Coppertone doesn't make 5,000 SPF."

Fred's gaze narrowed. "You're in danger, Taylor. 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.

His lips pressed into a grim line. "Taylor, that's not funny."

"Sorry," I said. "Just trying to lighten the mood."

"Keep your day job. You're a horrible comedienne."

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," I said. "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. 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," I said.

"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 said.

“Oh yeah?”

“*Drac*solutely,” 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,” I insisted. “They’ll walk straight toward a barrel of a gun, while vampires trace 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,” I said.

“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. 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.”

“Ew! 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. Have you seen him? The guy is a forest fire all 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? 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 ravage beast.” Fred stood. “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 17

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 moaned. "Hello?" I said, answering my cell.

"Are you coming or not?"

"I went night-fishing with Jesse a few days ago," I said. "I kinda got freaked out on the boat." The image of the white buck flashed across my mind.

She blew out a long breath. "How many times do I have to tell you it's all just some stupid myth? 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'll go," I said.

"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. Be there in an hour."

"Bye," she said.

After I hung up the phone, I threw my bathing suit on, then slipped a pair of blue shorts with a cute lace tank-top. I 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?" I asked.

"Yep." Julie reached down and petted 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 of 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. 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."

"Yep," another said, shaking her head.

"Not to worry. My fun boat brings all the boys to the yard," she said with a grin, pointing in the direction of the dock.

I turned and saw a whole herd of guys climbing onboard, some in trunks and others bravely donning Speedos.

Julie smiled. "Whoa. Talk about precious cargo. I got dibs on the blond."

We all burst out in laughter.

Jesse smiled at me, set me on his lap and wrapped 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.

Amy smiled. “Me too.”

Jesse reached for the lotion with a smile. “Need some help?” he offered.

“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.

Julie laughed. “I’m sure Jesse prefers the hands-on method.”

“It works better to really rub it in,” Jesse said.

“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? You got a gorilla back or something like those apes in the zoo where you work?” Julie asked.

“Ha-ha,” he said.

A popular tune came on the radio, and some of the girls started dancing. Others laughed, talked, and sipped on their drinks they’d taken from the two coolers that were loaded with sandwiches and sodas.

One of them casually said to Amy, “I heard about the breakup. What happened?”

She frowned. “Well, 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. Let’s jump in!” And with that, she did a cannonball into the lake.

Jesse followed her, and I laughed.

“Oh my gosh! It’s freezing in here!” Amy said.

Jesse glanced up at me. “Come on in! And don’t worry. I’ll keep you warm.”

Taking the offer 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—”

“You don’t have to explain.”

“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. I was also hoping my nutcase ex-boyfriend wouldn’t find me here,” Amy said.

When the boat got closer, a guy about our age called Amy’s name. “Hey, I just wanna talk.”

Max started barking and causing a ruckus.

The guy shot us a look. “Shut the dog up before I shut him up for you.”

“Max!” I said, petting his head and trying to calm him. “Shh!”

Amy looked at us. “I’ve gotta go talk to him for a minute, or else he’ll never leave.”

“Just be careful,” Julie said.

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, swam over, and climbed 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 said. “Just mind your own business.”

“Well, it is my business when you pull up next to our boat,” Jesse said.

“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.”

She looked in my direction, her cheeks red. “You’re right. 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.

She let out a trembling breath. “We’re going back to shore. 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 back yard that day I first met him. How could somebody disappear like that? And what’s with him throwing Eddie around like a ragdoll?* 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 18

Julie and I went hiking in the woods on one of the local trails along 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!” I said. “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. I hate rabbit food.”

I laughed and shook my head. “What am I gonna do with you?”

“Still thinking about the big kiss yesterday?”

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 playfully slugged her.

“I want you to hook me up with Jesse’s friend, the blond who drove us home.”

“Wow. 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?”

“Yeah. They’re the same color as Jesse’s. I wonder if they’re related, cousins or something.”

She laughed. “Heh. If we end up with them, we might be in-laws.”

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 man had short, 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 green eyes were glazed over, and I could tell by his pale face that he was dead. “Oh my gosh!”

“Who is it?” Julie desperately asked.

“It’s Fred, that cute guy who did yard work for my dad.”

My shaking fingers reached into my pocket, and I 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 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.

“What happened to him?” I asked, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. “Who would do this?”

“Animal attack,” she said.

“No!” I yelled. “Not Fred.”

“I’m so sorry,” the policewoman said.

“I-I know who…er, 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—”

The officer touched my back, trying to console me. “It wasn’t wolves,” she said. “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 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 when Julie called me. 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. 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 just feel so helpless, so bad.”

My dad wrapped his arm around me. “I know, sweetheart. It was a horrible accident.”

“I was 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.”

“Dad, how can this be happening?” I yelled.

“There was an attack yesterday too,” my mom said. “A tourist. It’s been all over the news. It might be beautiful here,” she said, “but I’m scared. It’s dangerous out there.”

“It’ll be okay,” Dad said. “When they catch the animal, everything will get back to normal.”

I looked up at my dad. “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?”

“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,” my Dad said. “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 completely shook 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’m gonna go up to my room and lie down.”

“Okay.”

I hurried upstairs and picked up my ringing cell. “Hello?” I said.

“Taylor, I’m freakin’!”

“Do you think it was the curse or the animals?” I asked.

“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?”

“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. Maybe someone will know an urban legend that will help us figure out how to lift the curse.”

“But it could just be the wildlife. There have been other attacks.”

“Yeah. My dad just told me about that woman the other day.”

“Do you think it’s the wolves?”

“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 don’t think it’s him.”

“You’re right,” she said. “I bet that pack of wolves demolished him.”

“People can’t keep dying,” I said. “I love this place, but I’m terrified of all the bears, mountain lions, bobcats, and God knows what else. At least in New York City, I could walk outside freely.”

“Right. 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.”

“So what’s going on with you and Jesse?”

“We have a date this Friday. I’m dying to see him, but I’m really shaken up.”

“Just invite him over and watch a movie.”

“Yeah. Well, I’m gonna go now. I want to take a nap, try to calm down.”

“Me too.”

“All right. Talk to you later, Jules.”

“Bye.”

I closed my phone and laid on my bed, then lay back and stared at my ceiling as I tried to straighten out my twisted thoughts. That cabin had been our sanctuary, and I was now sure that if Jesse hadn’t spotted it, we would have been 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, hoping to create some supernatural barrier.

After tying garlic up around my room and around the house, I took a deep breath. I wondered again if I'd lost my mind. I overheard my name being used in conversation, and when I opened the door, I could hear 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. 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. 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 19

Fred had died a violent death, and I couldn't stop thinking about him. Tears ran down my face, and I was constantly tormented by the vision of his dead body, and 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, and as long as I'd hung around him, he was still a mystery, and 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."

"This might. It's really out there, but just bear with me."

"Before Fred was killed, he told me he had solid evidence that Jesse is a vampire and that I should stay away from him. That's why he gave me this cross," I admitted, holding the pendant up for her to see.

"Whoa. And then he turns up dead with two bite marks in his neck?"

"Yes.

"Hmm. I don't believe in vampires, but something's going on. What if some horrible hex was placed on us when we accidentally treaded on sacred land?"

"I don't know."

"I've been searching the Internet for info on hexes and curses."

“We can hope it’s not true, but I’m not sure. Fred mysteriously died days after we entered that forbidden place.”

She swallowed hard. “I know, and that scares me to death. What if I’m next?”

I stared at her hard, and I could tell how worried she was.

Her mouth pressed into a grim line. “I don’t wanna die, especially not like that. 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 have info that’s a lot worse than curses.”

“Yeah right. Back to the vampire thing,” she said. “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.”

She softly fingered the cross. “Hmm. Maybe he was being overly dramatic.”

“I thought so, too, but he really seemed to believe it.”

“You think he saw something?” she asked.

“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 brown. “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.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Like what?”

“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. 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.”

“Or maybe he wasn’t *invited* in,” I said in a dramatic tone.

Julie laughed. “Oh please! Are you trying to tell me you think he was a vampire? 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.”

She shook her head. “I’m not denying that. 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. 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. 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?"

"He has immortal strength and vision. He saw that cabin in the dark woods long before we did."

She glanced away, as if in thought. "Sure, 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, and the party, he'd mentioned the other guys claiming us.

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. I was too wasted. It's all a blur."

"Try to think."

She suddenly gripped my arm tight. "Are you trying to say we walked into a party of vampires?"

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."

She gasped, then glanced down to think. "Probably the blond chatting me up."

"Maybe your blood tasted so good that he followed us that night to finish you off."

She gasped. "That's a horrible thought, but while we're talking about it, why didn't the werewolves kill us? 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. *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."

Julie slowly touched her chin. "I bet that's why he didn't want to go to the hospital or tell the police."

"When he was shot, he so sure he was gonna be fine. Anyone else would have been worried, thinking they were on their deathbed, but he knew better. He knows he'll never die."

She clutched her heart. "This is all so weird. Just listen to us. We sound like lunatics." She gripped my shoulders. "Give me more. Give me something I can sink my teeth into…uh, no pun intended."

"Do we really sound like lunatics? I don't think so. Jesse's mom tries to keep him isolated for a reason. That's why he's homeschooled."

"Maybe that's a flat-out lie. If he's hundreds of years old, he doesn't have to be schooled at all."

“That would be beyond weird.”

“What if you’re his bonded mate, like in vampire lure?”

“I don’t believe in that. We just have an awesome connection.” I tapped 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 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 know the Egyptians used them a lot, and Jesse said every symbol in his tattoo has a meaning.”

Confusion crossed her features. “I don’t know, 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? 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, sips on your vein for a nice, warm drink, b, makes blood your next drink of choice, and c, just flat out kills you.”

“I can’t give him up like that.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Don’t vampires use telepathy or something to control their victims?”

“I’m not a victim.”

“You’re letting him take drag you down a slippery slope, Taylor.” She gripped my arm. “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? They’re bloodthirsty and can’t help themselves. We need to go to the sheriff.”

“We can’t.”

“Why? 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. 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 was.”

She bit her lip. “Hmm. 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,” I said, “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 *Blood*aholics 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. 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.” When I didn’t answer, she continued, “What if Jesse is the killer?”

“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, Taylor. 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 the house.”

“It’s a risk I have to take.”

“Fine, but at least take some precautions.” She turned and left the room.

“If you’re getting your father’s gun, I don’t want it!” I yelled.

She returned instead with a Bible and a wooden crucifix. “Here. Vampire repellents.”

“Seriously?”

“Honey, this is just the beginning. I’m far from done. The Internet has hundreds of tips.” She ran to the kitchen and came back with cloves of garlic.

“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. 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 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,” Julie said.

“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.”

“What!? I’m not killing anybody. Besides, if I did, his blue-eyed coven would come after me.”

“Right. I didn’t think about that. 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.”

“That’s it. I’m coming.”

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.

She pounded hard with her fists. “Taylor! Let me out.”

“I can’t believe you want to fry my crush!” I said.

“Let me out! You can’t just leave me trapped down here!”

“Your mom will be home in less than an hour. 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, that was exactly what I did.

Chapter 20

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. “Breathe,” I told myself.

“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.”

He threaded his fingers through my long locks, his flirtatious grin fixed on his face. “I’d love to have you all to myself.”

“You know how much I love being with you,” I whispered.

His smile eased into a big grin, and he gently caressed my face and softly kissed me. “How about this weekend?”

I drew in a short breath, but the words remained frozen in my throat. I walk 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.

He came from behind and hugged me. “Like what?”

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. 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.

“No need for that. 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,” he said.

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 asked.

“Meh, I’m not really that thirsty anyway,” he said. “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.

His beautiful eyes shone as he gazed straight into my eyes. “I had no idea you were so bold, so kinky.”

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.”

He gazed deeply into my eyes. “No.”

“No?”

He smiled. “No.”

I cleared my throat. “Why not?”

“Why not?” he repeated. “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,” I said.

He nodded, seemingly impressed with my insights. “Why?”

“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.

His voice cut into my thoughts. “Special? 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.”

He laughed. “Listen to yourself, Taylor! 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?”

“Only as a last resort, if I need to defend myself,” I retorted.

“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.”

“And I mean them.”

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 perfect 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,” he said.

I tried to ignore the dry sensation inside my mouth. “How long did it take you to heal?”

“About twelve hours. It was a deep wound,” he said.

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.”

His gaze narrowed. “I love a girl who’s always prepared for battle.”

“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. 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 circle around 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 said. 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.

He blinked. “Yes.” He looked 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 21

Max had run out of the house, and I had no way to protect them. 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 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!"

"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. I'm not even thirsty," he said.

We stared into each other's eyes. It was 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."

He petted Max behind the ears again, as if taunting me. "You'd risk your dog's life?"

"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."

He cocked his head in confusion. "Different?"

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…really?"

"Seventeen."

"Right. And you've been saying that for how many years to get teenage girls to fall in love with you?"

"I'm really only seventeen, Taylor. And so is Sam and Kierra. Our immortality has only begun."

"Why didn't you tell me all this sooner? 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 me to give them the dark gift."

I shook my head, then continued, “So you were you bitten by the Leyna this year?”

His gaze narrowed. “No. 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?”

“Yes, but we take great pains to stay hidden.”

“Are all the vampires here Leyna?”

“There’re only a handful of us in this town. 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?”

“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. I was only there to sneak you guys out.”

“Why was that guy chasing us?” I asked.

“He wanted Julie. He had a taste of 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?”

A serious expression came over his face. “I don’t trust them, 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.”

“So Jonathon survived the wolf attack?”

“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,” he said.

“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 tried 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.

Worry lines crossed his features. “Say something, Taylor. Anything.”

“I-I can’t believe I was kissed by a vampire.”

He stared at my lips. “Did you like it?”

“Yes. 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. Yes, I can be very dangerous.”

“So…what kind of vampire are you?” I asked.

“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 doorframe 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?”

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. The realization was that I was completely and utterly attracted to a paranormal creature who could easily rip my neck apart, and that 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. I just…I’m not sure what’s going on between us, if anything.”

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 blue eyes of his.

“Taylor…”

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. “It’s not just some little road bump. I’ve got a lot to process here. This is huge, and I need some time.”

His gaze softened. “You know what?”

“What?”

“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 held his hand up, and my palm touched his right at the imaginary line. I could feel the invisible shield, yet I could 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, 100 percent paranormal.

“You feel…human,” I said. 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, and that was just how dangerous he was.

“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. 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.

His eyes flickered with desire. “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.” When the words froze in my throat, he continued. “Let me give you those sparks and that 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 stared at my mouth. “Just two steps, Taylor. I promise you won’t regret it, but it seems we have a trust issue now that you know my 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 22

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.

Jesse looked into my eyes. “I can hear the loud crash of every single beat of your heart.”

“What!?” I gasped and clutched my chest.

He stared at me intently. “I can hear your heart beating, racing, thundering.”

I inhaled deeply to steady my pulse, but it didn’t seem to help much. “What do you want with a mere mortal?” I asked. “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. But what am I supposed to do? Keep my shirt on for the rest of our relationship? I’ve never desired to tell anyone my secret to 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…” He smiled. “Do you want me to keep going?”

“Please do. 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?”

“No. I want to grow old, Jesse, and you’re not gonna want me when I’m eighty. I know I’m taking it to extremes, though, ‘cause we probably wouldn’t even last that long.”

“Who says?”

“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,” Jesse said.

“I love your honesty.”

“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.”

He sucked in a breath, then let it out slowly. “I didn’t.”

“If you say you didn’t, I believe you, but have you ever killed anyone? 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,” I said. “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.”

I touched his hand that was resting on the invisible wall. “Who isn’t?”

He took a deep breath, then continued, “You couldn’t begin to fix me.”

“Who says you need fixing?” I said. “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—”

“Who doesn’t? 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?”

His lips pressed into a grim line. “Yes.”

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,” I said. “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, Taylor. 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 best friend, that I wouldn’t risk too much, but the inexplicable connection between us was luring me with fierce temptation. *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, like a tractor beam, pulling me in. 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 if I was going to die or not, 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 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 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’d met a 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 longed for his touch.

“You’re trouble,” I said.

His winter-blue eyes held mine. “Yet you stay.”

I drew another breath. “I should go.”

A grin creased his face. “But you won’t.”

“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,” he said.

“Me too,” I said, caressing his sweet face. “That was amazing. You’re a great kisser, Jesse…for a dead guy.”

He laughed. “I’m not dead. Please don’t mistake me for one of those walking corpses.”

“Sorry.”

He smiled. “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 when 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.

He smirked. “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. 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,” he said. “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 bloodlust 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 every day 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. 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 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.”

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 curveball, 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? 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 to the tune of 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, but 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.

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.

Taylor's story continues with Book 2: *Crash,* available November 2013

If you enjoyed this story, please let others know by adding your star rating. This helps others find new authors that they may have never heard of before, but may enjoy. Thank you, I appreciate it so much. Thank you for your support.

Thank you so much for sharing Taylor's journey. It was a pleasure having you along. I hope you enjoyed the story just as much as I enjoyed writing it. Connect with me online!

Chrissy's blog: http://chrissypeebles.blogspot.com/

Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=vb.351121651567296&type=2#!/pages/Chrissy-Peebles/351121651567296

My Facebook Timeline

If you like vampires, then you might like zombies. :) I also wrote:

The Zombie Chronicles by Chrissy Peebles

BOOK TRAILER: http://youtu.be/ociUHiL1g70

Book 1 is FREE at Obooko! This series is available at all major e-Book retailers. It's also out on paperback and audio.

Val was bitten by a zombie and now she's scheduled for lethal injection. Breaking all the rules, eighteen year old, Dean Walters snags an experimental serum. But it can't be tested until Val turns into a zombie: something authorities won't allow. Her execution is scheduled to happen before transformation is complete, giving Dean only hours to break her out.

When their helicopter crashes straight into the heart of Zombie Land, his rescue mission becomes a fight for survival…and giving up on Val is NOT an option.

This is a legally distributed free edition from
www.obooko.com

The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form.