

# Ice Moon

## Kristy Quinn

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As the Ice Moon dwells amidst a sea of darkened clouds, night befalls the earth. Frozen whispers fill the shadows with fear and trepidation.

Matthew 10:16

Behold. I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.

*Preface*

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that one day I would wake up to find that everything in my life was a lie. To have my eyes opened to the truth should have been a breath of fresh air; instead it felt like I had inhaled acid into my lungs. The truth was far beyond my worst nightmares. I wasn't ill as I had been told. *I was a monster.*

I sat there lifeless, running my nails back and forth over the rope bound tightly around my wrists as I pondered these truths. The madman's left eye twitched uncontrollably while he fumbled through his bag, his eyes on me-- the prize. I watched as he pressed his lips together, no doubt contemplating what to do with me. I could feel my thirst screaming to be quenched; having avoided drinking for days I was beyond parched. Thoughts of Taylor began flooding my head like a raging river. Would I ever see his perfect face again? The madman cackled slightly, enjoying my misery, and something inside me snapped. Anger began rising deep within my soul; its viral atrocities spreading rapidly through my veins, forcing me to give in to the new me. I broke free from the restraints and pounced, releasing the creature within.

## *1. Feelings*

Looking into my full length mirror, I couldn't help but wonder who was staring back at me. I recognized her straight chestnut brown hair gently resting on her delicate shoulders. I knew her misty green eyes well. It was the reflection of the woman as a whole that caught me off guard. Her beauty was indescribable.

My breath caught in my throat as my eyes danced in astonishment at just how beautiful I looked in my evening gown. The shimmering floor length tanzanite satin dress hung softly on my newly found curves. I moved my hair slightly, revealing the tiny tanzanite diamond earrings my mother had loaned me for tonight. No matter how long I stared into that mirror, I just couldn't understand how I had changed from a young girl into a woman without ever noticing. As I continued to drift off in my thoughts there was a knock at my bedroom door.

Slowly the door opened and in walked my brother, Taylor, not yet dressed for the evening ahead. Looking at him in his faded jeans, white tee shirt and dark brown boots, you would have never known that our prom was only a couple of hours away. I watched as Taylor gracefully approached me, his face beaming. He said nothing as he smiled approvingly and handed me a small package wrapped in silver with a tiny white bow adorning its top.

"For me?" I asked, surprised by his gift.

Taylor's dimples spread across his masculine face lighting up his clover green eyes as he smiled and told me to open it. Not wanting to rush the moment I unwrapped the package slowly, anxiously awaiting my surprise. When I opened the long, black velvet box I gasped, mesmerized by what lay inside. Lying gently in front of me was a beautiful tanzanite and diamond pendant hanging from a delicate white gold chain. My heart began to race at the sight of it. Before I could ask, Taylor's hands surprised me as they gently came around my neck with his beautiful gift. I watched in the mirror as my brother, my best friend, lifted my hair and fastened the necklace's clasp. The coolness of his hands on my neck made me inhale deeply.

"Thank you," I said fighting tears. "It's perfect."

"It's nothing, really." Taylor said smiling right as the sound of familiar voices erupted, filling the stairs of our house.

Taylor excused himself and hurried down the hall into his room so he could get ready. Trying to compose myself, I walked towards the stairs where two of my best friends, Kiernan and Jenny, were bickering.

"Come on, luv, ya know ya want me." The sound of Kiernan's Irish accent filled the house.

"Oh, for real, Kiernan, you have got to give it a rest. I am *not* gonna go out with you no matter what you say," Jenny bounced back. "Besides, you couldn't handle me."

Kiernan's hearty laughter resonated joyfully as he took a seat on my pastel pink loveseat. "Wanna bet?"

Jenny rolled her eyes and huffed. "You, little man... have issues."

I laughed as annoyance covered Jenny's pretty face. Kiernan stared at her, beaming. He was in heaven. As long as she was paying attention to him, he was happy.

They were a funny pair. Even though they were only friends, it was our little leprechaun's mission to change that. Jenny however wanted no part of it. According to her, there was no cootie shot big enough.

Kiernan had quickly become a surrogate member of our family when he and his mother moved to Billings from Seattle after his father ran out on them. At nineteen years old he was a senior attending the same school as Jenny, Taylor, and I. Because of his past he had to miss a pretty big chunk of school to take care of his mom when his father left them. This made him a little older than most of the seniors at West High. Looking at him, no one would ever be able to tell just how hard his life had been. His short height along with his short strawberry blonde hair matched his jovial personality perfectly. No one was immune to the effects of his giddy humor and gleeful attitude towards life. My parents fell in love with him immediately. When they found out that he and his mom were struggling with money they gave him a part time job tending to our cattle. Kiernan loved being around the animals and my family so much that he continued on with his job even after his family's finances got better.

Jenny and I on the other hand, had known each other since elementary school. Her family moved to Billings from Los Angeles when her father had a job transfer in the middle of First Grade. Unlike Kiernan, Jenny's parents were still married. Her life had never been hard even though she would disagree. Jenny's only stumbling block had been her awkward stage when her looks were by no means her best asset. Thanks to puberty that didn't last long. Back when we were in Junior High Jenny had a small head, overly large teeth, and huge blue eyes making her resemble a bright-eyed bug. Even though she was slightly shrunken-headed in appearance and always looked high on caffeine, her boisterous personality won just about everyone over, except the boys. That quickly changed during our sophomore year of high school when it seemed as if someone whispered to her head that it was time to grow and catch up with her big beautiful eyes. As luck would have it, Jenny was extra blessed and every other body part took heed and followed suit. She was one of the prettiest girls in our school. Her short corn silk hair framed her round face beautifully. Even though she was a petite 5 feet 2 inches, she definitely didn't go unnoticed. Her big smile and huge personality had her at the center of attention, no matter where she was. It still amazed me that her petite figure could house such a big personality.

I was suddenly brought back to reality by a loud gasp. Jenny was circling me like some weird animal. I looked at her as if she had lost her mind when she let out another gasp and told me how beautiful she thought I looked. She went on for five minutes about how I was hardly recognizable before she finally decided to get her dress from my closet. She had begged me to keep it at my house so that her father didn't freak out when he saw it. He was old fashioned and preferred floor length dresses that covered every inch. Jenny however did not, and her cute knee length prom dress showed that.

Jenny jumped up, opening the door to my walk-in closet where her prom dress waited patiently hidden in its bag. I had hung it all the way in the back next to my mahogany armoire for safe keeping. Jenny had always been envious of my larger than average closet with its crazy amount of shelves. To the left they housed my shoes and on the right there was ample space for all my clothes and accessories.

Jenny grabbed her dress and walked back over to my bed where she laid the bag. "Thanks for letting me keep my dress here. My father would've never let me out of the house in

it," she said rolling her eyes. "If it were up to him my dress would've been all frilly and down to the floor," she moaned, cringing.

"Ah, a little scanty yer dress must be, me little bunny," Kiernan said excited.

"I am *not* your 'little bunny'" Kiernan. And yes, if you must know, it is a little too much for my father to see. But it is perfect nevertheless. I even had a matching one made for Haylee."

I laughed out loud at the thought of Jenny and her Boston Terrier, Haylee, wearing matching prom dresses.

"What?" She piped up. "You can't imagine how perfect she looks. I took tons of pictures and I'm gonna Photoshop them in with the ones your mom takes of us tonight."

Kiernan couldn't contain himself and immediately began razzing Jenny about her dog being *only a dog*. He knew it was a sure fire way to keep her attention focused solely on him for at least ten minutes. As they began bickering like an old married couple, I excused myself to head off to my closet in private. They were so engrossed in their newest disagreement that I knew I had plenty time to be alone.

I shut my closet door behind me and closed my eyes. Leaning my head up against the door in an attempt to prepare myself for tonight, visions of familiar strangers began flooding my mind. Memories of the bizarre reoccurring dream I had been plagued with the past few months were yet again right in front of me, staring me down. Suddenly I was back there, in that strange place somewhere in my mind, standing in the corner of an unfamiliar room.

Large reddish-brown bricks covered the walls from one end to the other. The musty smell of the dwelling reminded me of an underground cave. None of it fit with the people in the room. The meager surroundings were beneath them and it was obvious by their clothing. The man was in a dress shirt and the woman was in a semi-formal dress. It was obvious to me that they were hiding from something. Their faces were plastered with uneasiness as they paced back and forth across the floor. Lost in the bizarre dream world, I watched quietly as the woman clothed in the long brown dress stopped to hover over a tiny baby in an antique wooden cradle.

"They won't find us here," the tall dark haired man said from the far corner as he looked at his pocket watch. He looked as if he were royalty from a place and time I was unable to recognize. His black button down shirt and black pants were pristine. His hair was placed neatly in a pony-tail, hanging perfectly on his back. "Nanny is due to be back at any minute. We will have her proceed as planned then."

"But they know about her now, Landon. It's too late. They found us at the party and they'll find us again. Someone told them," the woman said softly through her tears.

The man walked over to her and placed his masculine hand on the small of her back. "Serene dear, all that matters is that we're here now. They don't have her. They never will."

The woman laid her head against his arm, her long straight brown hair hanging delicately as they both gazed lovingly at the infant before them. He kissed her head and walked towards the other side of the room as he looked again at his watch.

"Mama, I'm hungry," a little girl no older than two years old whined from the burgundy French provincial sofa as she sat in between two boys, who looked about seven years old.

"Stop whining," the eldest girl standing behind the couch said. She appeared to be about ten.

"Enough," the father demanded lifting up his hand to silence the children. "I will not have this, not now."

I watched as the man sniffed the air and then tilted his head towards the door as if he were listening for something. Three synchronized knocks at the door came and he quickly opened it. A plump, elfish looking woman with fear plastered on her round face nodded at the man before rushing past him and heading quickly towards the baby.

"It's time," the man said sternly.

He walked over to the distraught lady in brown who was now holding the baby in her arms and crying as she swayed back and forth. She shut her eyes as she rested her lips on the tiny child's head.

"You *must* let her go, love. It is for the best," the man said softly.

The woman nodded as her tears continued to fall like soft rain. She handed the little baby over to the short plump woman and turned away, covering her mouth, as she began to cry harder. The little elfish woman took the child and hurried towards the door at the back of the room. I watched as she swung it open and entered what appeared to be a hall, as fast as her little legs could carry her.

It was the next part of the dream that disturbed me most. Only seconds after the little woman and baby were gone, the father's posture stiffened and his face became expressionless. He reminded me of a stone pillar.

"There is no more time. Get the children out of here," he demanded, "Now."

Before the woman could send the children down the hall, the front door fell down with a thunderous bang and in came three large, red eyed men wearing black cloaks. Fighting broke out instantly between the father and the dark men. The mother scurried around frantically trying to gather her children. They all resembled deer startled by the headlights of an oncoming car.

I cried silently in the corner, frozen in fear, while the tear stricken mom tried to force her children down the hall where the chubby woman and baby had just gone. The oldest girl pulled away from her mother and rushed towards her daddy as she screamed. Her little sister followed closely behind while the mother pushed the boys through the door, demanding they run for help. Following their mother's orders they ran as fast as they could and never looked back. The mom turned around just in time to see one of the overly large men swoop up both of her daughters and leave. I listened fearfully to the woman scream as her husband fell to the floor and then I woke up. I never saw the mothers face but her cries echoed in my heart.

I shook off the dream as best I could and locked the closet door behind me, exhaling deeply. Still bothered by the visions that previously consumed my mind, I forced myself to clear my head and focus on the ornate lock before me as I blinked the visions away. I stared silently at the brushed silver lock while I continued to steady my breathing. The one of a kind lock had been placed there by my parents when I was a child. It was there to protect my privacy and allow me to live a somewhat normal life.

I had been born with a rare condition, one my parents had worked very hard to conceal. Over the years they had gone to great lengths to protect me, no matter how outrageous or costly. When I was just a baby, they installed an extra little room hidden behind my closet. It was now my secret place where a quaint couch, a few books, and my nourishment awaited me.

My nourishment was the secret my parents had spared no expense to conceal. I had to have it or I would die. My nourishment was . . . blood. It was this need that had been my secret all these years. This secret had become my life. My parents had explained to me when I was a small child just how rare my condition was and how it would frighten other people if they knew. I was forced to tell no one, not even Taylor. This had been a huge burden on my soul, yet I knew my parents were right. My condition was far from normal and it needed to be kept a secret. The older I got, the harder that secret was to keep.

I remembered one time when Kiernan wondered out loud where my parents disposed of all the blood from our cattle he had helped slaughter. It was hard not to tell him right then but somehow I kept my secret.

I knew my time was limited before Jenny would get bored with Kiernan and come knocking so I rushed to the back wall where my armoire stood. Opening the doors, I hurriedly moved my coats out of the way, found the key pad, and entered the code: V-A-M-P-I-R-E. The code was my idea of a joke that both dad and I found funny. Mom however, never saw the humor behind it.

A secret door opened to reveal the room that held my nourishment. I opened a small refrigerator filled with individual containers of my life source. I normally preferred to heat it but today I had no time for such luxuries. I selected a container and sat down on my couch carefully opening it as not to spill on my gown.

I had been increasingly thirsty lately which had me questioning whether or not my condition was getting worse. No time to ponder, I took the first sip. Feeling it slide down my throat gave me such pleasure that I guzzled the rest immediately. I was left wishing I had time for more. Even though I had dealt with this condition for as long as I could remember, it still confused me. In order to live I had to consume food as well as blood. Not one *or* the other but instead both. My need for blood was why my parents purchased so much land and cattle. The constant breeding and slaughtering of those animals was for more than our family's livelihood. It was humbling to think that those cow's lives were for one purpose . . . to save mine. Noticing the time, I realized that I needed to leave my secret room and join the others.

Making sure the room was locked; I repositioned the coats in front of the hidden door and closed the Armoire. Quickly I unlocked my closet door and stepped back into my bedroom. I was surprised to see that I returned to an empty room. On my way to find Jenny and Kiernan, I stopped for just a second to look at the plethora of pictures my mother had hung on the wall of our hallway in between my bedroom and Taylor's. I glanced over the pictures quickly and began to walk off when one of our family pictures caught my eye. Leaning in towards it, I looked at Taylor and then back at me. Suddenly I noticed how different he and I looked.

The differences in our facial features had always been obvious. It was evident even as babies. People always questioned if he was adopted but we never thought twice about it. We were fraternal twins. We weren't supposed to look alike. Taylor looked like distant relatives from our mom's side, relatives we had never met, and I looked like our father.

I had always considered myself somewhat ordinary looking even though I had been told otherwise. My eyes were green like Taylor's but they were nowhere near as pretty. Mine were like light green storm clouds. His were like fields of clovers on a Spring day. My hair was the color of chocolate and was straight as a board. It was fine and soft to the touch; two qualities my mom said would have every girl envious. I however, didn't share her enthusiasm.

It was a known fact that I looked like my father's sister. We shared the same color eyes and feisty personality. "Dynamite in a small package," my father called her. Taylor and I had only heard stories of our aunt. She and her best friend left America shortly after graduating from high school. Neither one of them ever returned home. Dad didn't speak of her often and when he did the pain in his eyes was almost unbearable. She had died around the time I was born but that's all I was ever told, other than the occasional comment that I reminded him of her.

Taylor, on the other hand, was anything but ordinary in his looks. His dark brown hair, deep emerald green eyes and dimple framed smile gave him a boyish charm that girls at our school found hard to resist. Taylor's perfect features and soft-spoken nature brought him a lot of unwanted attention. It eventually turned him into somewhat of a hermit. His good looks were undeniable to anyone who laid eyes on him. Taylor, of course, had no clue what all of the fuss was about. Because of this he spent most of his time outside of school playing piano or drawing; anything to avoid attention.

I stood in our upstairs hall, my eyes still dancing over the many pictures, until I became focused on a recent picture of my parents. They were a cute couple exuding beauty in their looks as well as personalities. They reminded me of Barbie and Ken except my parents hair colors were backwards. My father's short light brown hair framed his handsome face perfectly. To this day my mother still swooned over him.

No one ever guessed that my parents were in their late-thirties. They both still carried a child-like glow and love of life that had all of our friends wanting to hang out with them.

My mom was adorable. Her semi-short, relatively spiky, a strewn dark brown hair and light hazel eyes were intoxicating when accompanied with her loving personality. She was a petite

5feet 2inches tall, just like Jenny, giving her a pixyish appearance. You could normally find her in a skirt and a cute form-fitting blouse which showed off her petite figure, unless she was at home lounging around in one of dad's tee shirts and pajama pants.

Neither one of my parents were about money. Even though they were what some would call well off, it was never obvious by talking to them. Acquiring the majority of their wealth from the ranch, they had made enough money to pursue their dreams of becoming realtors, working together.

As I was lost in thought, Jenny glided out of the guest bathroom, looking like a pink pearl. I turned to face her so I could get a better look. She was nearly childlike in beauty yet she exuded the confidence of a stunning young woman. It was a striking mixture. Her knee-length, pastel pink dress was accented perfectly by her ballerina type shoes. The pink satin ribbons laced ever so slightly up her ankles stopping mid-calf. She appeared almost fairylike. Her straight blonde hair barely hung below her ears lightly caressing her neck and her pink diamond dangle earrings.

Jenny's modeling moment was quickly ruined with the sound of Kiernan's laughter coming from my brother's room. Jenny shot a look of disgust at Taylor's door. I could only assume she was praying that Kiernan would accidentally lock himself in the bathroom tonight before we left and miss the prom altogether. I just ignored her. Although Jenny acted like she couldn't stand him the majority of the time, I knew better. She had a soft spot for Kiernan no matter how hard she tried to deny it, which of course, only fueled his fire for her. I wondered if he would ever find someone to truly love him the way he deserved. Would I? Would I even be alive long enough? Fear of the unknown had been a constant companion of mine recently. My thirst for blood wasn't getting better as I got older. If anything, it was increasing, making me its slave. If my condition *was* worsening, did it mean that I could be dying? That thought scared me more than I cared to admit.

A knock at the front door thankfully interrupted my depressing thoughts. I assumed it was Michelle, a childhood friend of mine. She and her boyfriend were doubling with my boyfriend and I. My first reaction was to call down the stairs for her to let herself in but considering who I was dealing with I changed my mind and made my way to the door. I yelled towards Taylor's room to tell him that I thought Michelle was here and that I would get the door while Jenny and I walked down the stairs. Right as I was about to open the door I heard Kiernan ask Taylor where the bucket of water was because the wicked witch had arrived. Taylor laughed at Kiernan's joke and I couldn't help but smile. Jenny didn't crack a smile. Looking at her face, it was pretty obvious that she hadn't heard Kiernan's remark or surely she would have joined in.

It's not that Michelle was an evil person by any means, she was just . . . Michelle. She had always known what she liked and never had any remote interest in the things she didn't. She also didn't have a problem with letting anyone know the difference between the two. That tended to irritate some, Jenny and Kiernan included. I tried to ignore Michelle's short comings, even if they did grate on my nerves from time to time.

If it was up to me, everyone would get along. That included my boyfriend Derrick, his best friend Sean, and my brother. Sean was Michelle's boyfriend and that definitely didn't give him any points. If truth be told, the fact that Michelle was dating my boyfriend's best friend was probably the only reason she and I were still on speaking terms. I had become quite annoyed with the cloud of darkness that seemed to follow her everywhere she went. Taylor didn't like Sean *or* Derrick. He never said too much about them but I could feel him tense up whenever they were around. Even mentioning their names bothered him.

I opened the door and Michelle walked in looking like a creature of the night. The contrast of her pale skin and black hair would have been frightening if she weren't so beautiful. Her floor-length, jet black cocktail gown matched her long thick onyx hair perfectly. She looked as if tonight she would be setting off in search of her next victim. For a moment I thought that maybe I should be a good host, offer her some of my stash and save a few lives. As I stifled a

laugh from my own mental humor, I saw Jenny force a tiny smile at Michelle and walk right past her into our living room. Michelle rolled her blue eyes at Jenny and then smiled at me.

Michelle and I walked side by side following Jenny into our living room. Waiting for us on our fluffy cream leather couch was my mother looking like a pretty little bird. Jenny sat down next to my mom who was complementing her on her outfit.

My mom looked over at Michelle and I and smiled, "You girls both look stunning." She opened her mouth to speak again but stopped suddenly as she looked behind us, smiling proud.

I turned around to see Taylor standing in his tux only a few feet away. He stood still smiling back at my mother and then he looked at me. My eyes met his and the oddest thing happened; my heart began to speed up. Cold sweat spread across my forehead and suddenly my knees buckled from under me. In milliseconds his strong arms were cradling me. I laid my head on his neck as he carried me to the couch. He gently set me down next to my mom and stepped back. I closed my eyes and concentrated on my breathing. When I opened my eyes, my mother was cradling my face between her small soft hands. Her face was drenched with concern.

"Haden, honey, you can stay home if you're not feeling well. No one will be upset with you," she said staring at me.

I was sure she could see the pain and fear in my eyes. By the look on her face, I wondered if she knew I was dying and wasn't telling me. I assured her I would be fine and that Derrick would be livid if I cancelled on him.

"You have no idea," Michelle grunted.

I tried to ignore Michelle's sour comment and just kept concentrating on my breathing. As I hung my head down, my eyes closed again, Taylor's voice broke the silence.

"If you chose to stay home, I'll make sure that Derrick understands. I'll even stay with you, if you want."

Even though that's what I really wanted to do, I shook my head and said no. I didn't feel well at all but I had waited for this night all of my life. I wasn't about to miss it. If I *was* dying I wanted to experience all I could before my time was up.

I tried to shake off my dizzy spell and asked my mom for some crackers in hope that I was having some weird blood sugar issue. Jenny jumped up and volunteered to get them. She was back in minutes with a plate full of crackers and cheese. My mom got up to get me some water and Jenny took her place. Kiernan was instantly sitting on the other side of me.

"Eat 'em, me lady," Kiernan said, "You owe yer best Irish buddy a dance tonight and I don't want ya passin' out on the dance floor. Ya might make the other lassies think me love potion's a wee bit too stout."

"Oh, barf," Jenny said.

"Don't be knockin' me love potion. It's quite the treat for a fair lassie like yerself."

Michelle laughed from across the room as she saw the look of pure annoyance plastered all over Jenny's usually perky face. Jenny shot her a look of disgust and challenged her to a game of pool. Michelle grunted, shaking her head no and Kiernan laughed, making a sly comment about how she only said no because she knew Jenny would beat her. Michelle quickly changed her mind and left the family room. I watched as she walked across the large foyer into the game room and sighed. Some things would never change. Kiernan clapped his hands and jumped off the couch heading for the door. I looked up to see Taylor watching me and smiled. I knew he was worried about me so I did my best to convince him with a measly forced smile that I was alright. He helped me off the couch and put my arm through his as we followed our friends into the game room where I was ordered by my brother to sit and rest.

Here I was, only minutes away from Derrick showing up, and I was stuck to a couch. Taylor walked over to my mother to get my drink. I sat still, admiring his perfect features. His cheek bones were set high like mine, giving him a chiseled look. Even with all of that beauty he had no date. He and Kiernan were going to prom together. Jenny had informed both Taylor and I early on that Kiernan hadn't been able to get a date. Kiernan had a hard time finding a girl to



look at him in any other way than a friend, especially when Taylor was around. Taylor's daunting perfection made it impossible for girls to notice Kiernan. As for my brother, he was the best friend anyone could have. In his mind no girl would ever be worth seeing his friend left out. Family came in all shapes and sizes in our home. In his mind, it was never a blood-thing. Kiernan was as much family to Taylor as I was.

Dreading Derrick's arrival I looked nervously around the room and then at my mom who was texting my father happily. Her diamond wedding ring glistened as she walked over to the pool table and thoughts of she and my father made me smile. My parents were high school sweethearts married just after their senior year in High School. They wed only one week after graduating. Their story was the one every little girl dreams about while playing with her Barbie's. Once I asked my mom why they got married so soon after high school and her response caught me off guard. Her response was simple. She said that it was because she liked to sleep. I stared at her in confusion until she explained what she meant.

She said, "Haden, when you are in love, it's as if you can't breathe when you are away from the one you love. Your dad and I spent every waking moment we could together but we respected God, our parents, and ourselves. So we went to our separate homes each night. Saying goodbye to him or hanging up the phone with him was like being kicked in the stomach. It nearly knocked the wind out of me and then the aching feeling in my heart would start. That ache didn't let up until I saw him the next day. That happened every night. So as you can see, I got no sleep my entire senior year."

As she took a breath to continue her story she played with her wedding band, lovingly twirling it round and round on her delicate finger. She smiled at me and continued "When your dad proposed to me, he explained why he felt we should get married right after graduation. He had been dealing with the same pain I had every night. Yet neither he nor I told the other for fear that we would break our vows of abstinence due to our intense feelings for each other. So you see, we both needed sleep, we needed each other. We have never slept apart since our wedding night, not even once."

Remembering her story made me incredibly sad. I wanted *that* kind of love. I wanted to find someone who needed me as much as I needed him. The reality of tonight came back like a flash of light when I heard footsteps outside our front door. Taylor's eyes looked towards the door and then back at me.

"Since you won't stay home and play Scrabble with me," he winked, "I want you to know that I'll be keeping an eye on you all night, especially at Derrick and Sean's party later at the hotel if you still feel up to going."

A sense of annoyance washed over me. Derrick hadn't bothered to tell me about any hotel party. I sighed and braced myself as I heard my mom greet Derrick and Sean. Before I got up to go meet them I turned to Taylor and thanked him again for my beautiful pendant. I told him just how perfect I thought it was.

Squeezing my hand he whispered, "Nowhere near as perfect as you."

In that moment there was no question that I had the most amazing best friend in the world.

## 2. *Prom*

I took a sip of my water and set it down on the table next to the couch before I stood to greet our guests. I could still hear voices coming from outside. Michelle, Derrick and Sean were

brain-storming about something. I didn't try too hard to listen. I knew I would find out what they were plotting soon enough.

Brad, Taylor's other best friend next to Kiernan, was the first to enter the room. He was uber gorgeous—looking like GI-Joe in a tuxedo. His short, spiky, light brown hair gave him the air of a marine. Jenny ran up to him and kissed his cheek. Grabbing his hand she led him over next to the pool table. Brad stood absolutely still with his arm around Jenny, wearing a much more cheerful expression than normal. Brad was generally a happy guy. He just hadn't been the same since losing his parents and baby sister barely six months before.

That night would be etched in all of our minds forever. Brad's parents and six year old sister were returning from visiting his aunt in Helena on a rainy night when the driver of an eighteen-wheeler fell asleep at the wheel. He crashed into Brad's parent's car and threw it off the bridge. They all died instantly. Taylor spent the first month after their death staying with Brad and his uncle until Brad turned eighteen and got his inheritance. With the help of family he put their house up for sale and moved into an apartment where he lives now. His parents left him an impressively large sum of money when they died. His father was a successful investment banker originally from Dallas, Texas. They moved to Billings his freshman year in High School to get away from the big city. Brad and Taylor had a few classes together their freshman year and hit it off instantly. They were both loaners and enjoyed being alone together.

Something died in Brad the night his parents died, and no matter how hard we all tried; we just couldn't seem to help him through his pain. He smiled every once and awhile but the smiles never lasted more than a few seconds. We all knew he wished he had died with them.

He looked really great standing next to Jenny. It was she who had asked him to prom. She couldn't bear to see him alone while all of his close friends were celebrating this important milestone in our lives. It didn't hurt that Brad was really attractive, either. His tall muscular build and short brown hair had impressed Jenny for years. She would have never admitted that his looks had anything to do with her decision to ask him to prom but we all knew better.

I felt Taylor's hand on the small of my back and suddenly I realized how tense I was. Derrick entered the room with Sean and Michelle behind him and I could feel Taylor's muscles tense as he let go of my waist and walked away. Derrick looked me up and down thoroughly, his eyes not hesitating in showing his approval. I could have sworn I heard a growl come from Taylor's direction, but I convinced myself that I was just still feeling odd after my dizzy spell.

Derrick looked handsome in his black tux and tanzanite colored cummerbund that matched my dress perfectly. His cocky stride made it obvious to those around him that he knew he was a sight for sore eyes. Being the captain of our football team had him reaping even more attention than his good looks alone. His shaggy, dirty blonde hair and blue eyes made him one of the heart throbs of our school. We had only been dating for a few months. In all honesty, I wasn't much for dating. I was a sucker and had a hard time telling anyone no. That went for Derrick too. He had a flair for the extravagant and thrived on attention. One day he showed up at school with flowers for me, making a huge show before asking me in front of everyone if I would go to dinner with him. With Taylor and Jenny's eyes boring into me, I sheepishly said yes so as not to hurt Derrick's feelings. My only stipulation was that we were never alone. Whenever we went out we always doubled with Michelle and Sean.

Before I could give it another thought, Mom was organizing everyone for photographs and Derrick had his arm around my shoulders. After what seemed like an eternity of flashing lights, we were out the door. Derrick had rented the longest stretch limo to be found in Billings and there it was, screaming prom, stretched out in the front of our house. With one foot in the limo, I looked up to find my brother already in his car with the windows down and one of Kiernan's rap CDs blaring. He winked at me and was gone.

I was so thankful that Jenny and Brad were riding in the limo with us. I had been dreading the ride with Sean and Michelle. Their constant public displays of affection bothered me immensely. Not even five minutes after we were all in the limo, Sean and Michelle's hands

were all over each other turning my stomach. I couldn't help but wonder what thoughts were going through Derrick's head as he watched them grab at each other. Derrick looked at me and smiled devilishly making me uneasy. Derrick knew my thoughts on pre-marital sex but still tried to push the envelope every now and then. I was an odd-ball or what some might have considered an insane person who was saving sex for my husband. I had never really cared what others thought. If they didn't care about catching venereal cooties then that was their business, but as for me, I'd pass on taking that ride. Besides, I had seen true love and that's what I dreamt of. I had watched the love my parents shared everyday which only fueled my strong convictions. Derrick on the other hand didn't share my feelings on abstaining but he had been patient with me *for the most part*. I did my best not to be alone with him so the temptations were kept at a minimum. We had only kissed but nothing intense, only little pecks here and there. It wasn't that I had some issue with kissing. Real kissing just hadn't felt right with Derrick, so I avoided it. I knew that when the time was right, I would know. What I didn't know was how long I could hold Derrick off.

No matter what, I had made up my mind to have a good night. After all, if I didn't have much time left to live, which I was beginning to believe, I really did want to savor every moment. Brad ingeniously started up a conversation with Derrick about last year's Football season and that thankfully forced him to stop staring at me.

Dinner was better than I expected even though I felt uneasy inside about the upcoming party. It wasn't like Derrick not to tell me something like that. I took another bite of my steak and felt Taylor's eyes on me. A strange chill went down my spine and I looked away right as Jenny spilled her glass of tea on Michelle. Kiernan started to laugh until Sean stood up and stared him down. Sean was notorious for his short temper and Kiernan knew better than to mess with him so he suppressed his laughter fast.

Shortly after Jenny's tea issue everyone seemed to have their fill of food and forced conversation. I was right there with them. Dinner came to an end abruptly with Jenny's little accident which threw Michelle into one of her wicked witch moods where nothing made her happy. Trying to carry on a decent conversation with Michelle had me exhausted and ready to find the nearest exit.

I sighed, shaking my head slightly as I listened to Michelle gripe about how her dress was ruined when I felt someone staring at me again. I looked towards the stare and met Jenny's huge blue eyes. She was playing with her napkin nervously while she looked at me. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders slightly. She returned a smirk and tilted her head towards the door. It was pretty obvious to me that she was more than ready for the next part of our night. I knew all too well that she was counting the minutes until she could happily unleash her inner party animal at the dance. Before I could say anything, Derrick was standing. He grabbed my hand pulling me away from our friends. I turned to see Jenny not too far behind me pulling Brad along with her. The rest of our group followed behind. Michelle and her boyfriend kept their distance trailing in the far back. She was still griping.

I looked down and admired my new shoes as we walked the short walk from the restaurant to the dance. My beautiful satin, strappy tanzanite colored heels weren't as comfortable as they were pretty, but boy were they pretty. I had bought them months prior to prom, before I even had a clue what dress I wanted. It was love at first sight. I knew the minute I saw them that I had to have them. My dress would come later. Walking and I were becoming enemies fast thanks to my new strappy friends. Our love relationship was quickly turning to hate. Pretty or not, they were starting to make my feet *very* miserable.

Brad got to the huge wooden double doors first opening them for the rest of us. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of all the balloons. Hundreds of pearl champagne and cream colored balloons hung everywhere. The DJ table was set up in the back of the room with huge black speakers dispersed all over the large room. Derrick quickly spotted some football buddies of his which gave me some time to mingle with my friends. He was in entertainer mode

so I didn't see him much at the dance except when he wanted to show me off to his friends. Even with my feet hurting more as time went on I couldn't complain. Derrick wasn't staring at me like he had been earlier and I hadn't had to have one conversation with Michelle since dinner ended. It seemed my night was definitely improving.

The evening seemed to be flying by at the speed of light. Pretty soon I would be snuggling under my covers at home where I wanted to be. Until that time came I tried to ignore my aching feet and listened to Jenny who was talking up a storm. Michelle and Sean continued to make my stomach turn, but as long as I focused on something else I was fine. I was never much for dancing but I loved listening to music. I was more of a PJs kind of girl on Friday nights. To me there was nothing better than a couch and a movie but as far as dances went this one was pretty cool. Derrick and I danced a little and so did his right hand which kept waltzing its way to my butt. By the grace of God, I got out of dancing with him to every song because my feet hurt. I was beginning to wonder if maybe my shoes weren't still my friends after all.

I watched as Brad twirled Jenny around the dance floor and was happy with how great they looked together. Jenny's crush on Brad was to be expected. Brad's southern drawl and raging hotness had melted many hearts. My gaze turned into a tired blank stare right as my first yawn approached. Derrick interrupted my daze informing me that it was time for us to leave and go to the real party at another hotel. *Oh joy*, I thought, and within seconds, Taylor was at my side.

"Are you sure you're up to it? If not, I'm positive that Derrick wouldn't mind at all if I take you home," he offered, his expression serious as he turned to look at Derrick.

Before I could answer, Derrick pulled me closer to him and told Taylor that I was a big girl. Derrick smirked at Taylor and the same soft growl I heard earlier rang in my ears. This time there was no doubt in my mind where it was coming from. Taylor was growling at him. It was so low that Derrick didn't hear it. With as acute as my hearing had recently become, I couldn't miss it. Taylor's eyes narrowed and focused on Derrick's face.

A chill of fear ran down my spine as I tried to assure Taylor that I was okay. "If I start to feel bad again, I'll find you so you can take me home, I promise"

"No need, baby girl, I can take you home whenever you're ready. I'm sure your brother might want to head on home anyway and curl up in bed with a good bedtime story." Derrick seemed completely oblivious that Taylor had turned to stone.

Taylor hadn't removed his eyes from Derrick as he spoke. Fear sent a sickening ripple through the pit of my stomach as Derrick taunted Taylor with his words. A beautiful smile crossed Taylor's perfect face as he continued to stare at Derrick. Taylor was like still water, it ran deep and so did his emotions. He wasn't one to show his feelings on the outside, but I knew him well, and I knew that smile. It meant trouble for Derrick if he didn't stop antagonizing him.

Taylor's eyes narrowed even more, staring intently at Derrick's face. Through clenched teeth, Taylor spoke softly so that only Derrick and I could hear him. "It is not *I* who will turn into a pumpkin after midnight tonight if he does not watch his step." Taylor patted Derrick's shoulder and was gone.

He knew that simple comment would upset and confuse Derrick the rest of the night. "Was he calling me a pumpkin?" Derrick asked, the confusion already setting in. I couldn't help but want to laugh.

"Never mind that, we have a party to go to, right?" I said. I didn't want the rest of the night to be ruined if Derrick decided to be pubescent and antagonize Taylor even more. I knew Taylor wouldn't necessarily stand there and take it if there were a next time.

Derrick picked me up and kissed my lips, way harder than normal as he held me tightly against him. I was caught up in trying to breathe when a familiar voice saved me.

"Haden, *bello*," Jenny laughed.

Derrick let me down and I took a deep breath. Once again tonight I was thankful Taylor had miraculously missed another of Derrick's weird moments with me.

I asked Jenn what was up when I accidentally caught sight of Sean and Michelle sucking face in the corner. Jenny looked at them too and then made a repulsed face before informing me that she and Brad were going to catch a ride with Taylor and Kiernan in Taylor's newly acquired black satin Maserati Gran Turismo. If Michelle and Sean hadn't been so gosh awful to watch I would have assumed Jenn was trying to find a reason to ride around in Taylor's new car. He had been saving money for his car since he was thirteen years old, working odd jobs here and there as well as his job at the book store. Our father was so impressed that he used some of Taylor's savings and paid the rest. I looked at Jenny's cute face and recognized the apologetic look in her eyes immediately. I told her not to worry. Although I would see her soon at the after party I hadn't been told about, I was wishing I could escape with her.

Back to the limo we went, this time without Brad to hold Derrick's attention. Michelle stopped sucking face with Sean long enough to open her tiny black purse. I couldn't see what she pulled out but by the look on Sean's face, he was excited about whatever it was. He opened his mouth and she put something tiny in. He swallowed and leaned back. She put the same thing in her mouth and then smiled at Derrick as she held her hand out to him. He looked at her and then at me and told her maybe later. She rolled her eyes at him and said whatever before getting as close as humanly possible to Sean.

Derrick pulled me closer to him and pressed his lips to my neck. I pulled away and looked at him like he was crazy.

Michelle took a break from suffocating Sean, shook her head and looked at Derrick. "She should take one. It would loosen her up. Riding low makes her a big fat bore."

Derrick shook his head at Michelle and then whispered to me telling me to ignore her. I had no clue what gibberish was coming out of her slutty mouth. She didn't make sense and I really didn't care to decode her words so I let it go and went back to staring out the window.

After another borderline X-rated limo ride, we finally got to the hotel. My thoughts had been jumping all night from worrying about my impending death to wondering why I was still friends with Michelle, who had grown up to have some severe issues. At this point in the evening, I was really embarrassed to be seen with her *and* I was tired of slapping my boyfriend's wandering hands. All I wanted was my favorite stuffed bear, my nightly nourishment and a romantic movie on our family couch.

The limo stopped in front of the Wingate Hotel and I couldn't get out of the car of torture fast enough. I almost fell as I struggled to jump out of the limo in my long gown. Derrick laughed finding humor in my clumsiness. I didn't wait for him to get the door for me. I opened it and let go quickly, hoping it would slam shut on him. When I entered the front room I stopped short in front of the information desk and rested my hand on their deep brown leather couch while I caught my breath when I realized that I had absolutely no idea where I was going.

Derrick grabbed my hand. Still laughing at me he led me past the front desk towards the elevators. In seconds I was stuck in an even smaller space with Michelle and Sean who by now had repulsed me immensely. I wanted to be nowhere near them for the rest of the night.

When the elevator doors opened, I flew out of there and listened. I could hear the music coming from down the hall. I didn't bother to wait for Derrick to lead me again. My mind was made up. I was going to find Taylor and ask him to take me home. I knew my night with Derrick was going nowhere I wanted to go. I walked down the hall as fast as I could, Derrick's laughter echoing behind me. As I grabbed the door, Derrick's big hand was on top of mine, opening it for me. He apologized and took my hand, kissing it. I sighed in defeat and accepted my fate. I was his for the evening and I would do my best to survive it. I couldn't see how it could get any worse.

Once we were inside the room Derrick's parents rented for his party, Derrick excused himself to go get us drinks. I instantly spotted some friends of mine, Mike and Becky. Becky saw me and began waving. She and Mike walked over to where I stood all smiles.

"Hey! Some party! Your boyfriend really knows how to throw them," Mike yelled over the music.

"Yeah, he sure does. It's a shame none of us will have voices left tomorrow," I laughed.

"What did you say?" Mike joked, yelling again at the top of his lungs.

We all laughed and talked until Derrick got back and grabbed my hand, rudely pulling me away from my friends. I rolled my eyes, smiled at them, and mouthed sorry as Derrick lead me away.

"Here, drink this," he said. "It will make you feel better."

*Whatever works*, I thought. So what if it was just Kool-Aid. Taking my first sip, I quickly noticed it had a weird bite to it. I was in shock that anyone could mess up Kool-Aid. Of course, if anyone could, it would have been Derrick and his friends. After the first sip I realized just how thirsty I was and downed the rest in one gulp noticing my chest felt hot. I inhaled deeply and handed Derrick my glass. A smile a mile wide stretched across his face as he watched me. Taking my glass, he left to refill my drink as soon as he saw Jenny and Kiernan coming towards us.

"Hey, love birds," I teased ignoring Kiernan's glare as he watched Derrick leave.

Kiernan smiled a huge smile and grabbed Jenny's hand, pulling her closer to him. I laughed as I watched Jenny roll her eyes and pull her hand away from his.

"I came over here to ask you a favor," she said, clearly annoyed, "but now I can see you'll be no help."

"Aw, come on, you know I was just picking," I hurriedly apologized.

"Okay," she said, her bouncy tone returning as fast as it had gone.

Straining to talk over the music, she tilted her head towards Kiernan and said, "This is serious, Haden, so don't laugh."

Of course I knew that meant I had better bite my tongue not to laugh because it could be very funny.

Poking her lower lip out and looking pouty, she finished what she was saying. "Kiernan won't stop asking me to marry him! Would you *please* tell him it's not going to happen? When I say no he grins as if I've said yes," she huffed.

Kiernan stood next to his fairy princess, his eyes twinkling like the stars, and I said straight-faced, "I think you should accept."

Kiernan burst into laughter and did his favorite little Irish jig as Jenny stuck her tongue out at me and waltzed off.

"She'll come around, she will," he said, smiling, and off he went surprisingly in the opposite direction of Jenny. I was pretty positive that he was giving his princess some time to pout before he graced her with his presence again.

When Derrick finally returned with my drink, I was still thirsty so I immediately guzzled it. That glass of Kool-Aid was worse than the first but I didn't care. I was parched. I was debating on asking Derrick to add more sugar when he grabbed my hand and pulled me to the dance floor. I was starting to feel a whole lot better, thankfully. Even my feet weren't hurting as bad as they had been. All I wanted to do was smile. I was turning eighteen in a few weeks. I had a terrific family, great friends, and a hot boyfriend who smelled *really* nice.

The better I felt, the happier I was with dancing. The more we danced, the thirstier I got. After my fourth glass, the Kool-Aid tasted so much better. *They must have had a girl fix it*. I laughed to myself. Next thing I knew, a slow song came on and Derrick's body was pressed against mine. Normally I would have pushed him away, but not tonight. Tonight I liked it. He softly kissed my neck and I heard the all too familiar growl once again.

"May I?" the angelic voice said as I felt my body being pulled from Derrick's tight grasp.

Derrick grunted, reluctantly releasing me.

"Hey beautiful, you okay?" Taylor's voice tickled my ears.

I opened my eyes to see the most perfect face God ever created staring back at me. I fell immediately into the large green eyes while being pulled into his arms. As Taylor began to dance

with me I felt myself relax even more. Dancing with Taylor wasn't anything at all like dancing with Derrick. With Derrick I was stiff. It felt like I was dancing with a wall, a tall cute wall but a wall nevertheless. With Taylor I was free to be me. Our connection was obvious, our movements in sync. Taylor oozed charm naturally but when he danced it flooded about him causing people to stare at him even more than normal. Multiple eyes around the room rested on us. I stopped for a second and took off my shoes. Holding them in my right hand I continued dancing with my brother. When Taylor spun me the first time I lost my balance and accidentally fell into his chest. He spun me again and I inhaled deeply enjoying his embrace way more than I should have. Trying to snap myself out of the sudden weirdness I answered him.

"I'm great! Better than great, I'm . . . . The greatest star . . . I am by far . . . but no one knooooows it," I sang, laughing.

Taylor's lips turned up into a smile but it didn't mask his concern which I decided to totally ignore. I felt fabulous and I was going to enjoy every second of it.

"Hey Tay," I giggled. I never called him Tay but tonight it seemed right. "Do you love me?" I asked looking into his dark, emerald green eyes.

"Of course, I do."

"No . . . do you *really* love me?" I asked again as I nuzzled my head on his shoulder, inhaling his glorious scent with each of my shallow breaths.

He repeated his answer straight faced as our dancing slowed.

"Yes Haden, I love you."

Taylor's eyes locked with mine and I froze. Strange chills shot down my spine. I replayed his answer over and over again as we danced. His yes sounded different, more serious. I tried to study the look on his beautiful face when I noticed how dark his eyes were. "Why are your eyes so dark?" I asked trying hard to keep his face in focus.

Before he could answer I was back in Derrick's arms, drinking more of the best Kool-Aid I had ever had. *They really got it right with that last batch*, I said in my head as I stared into my glass before taking another drink. I definitely wanted to find the Kool-Aid makers and thank them.

"Haden, I think it would be best if you were to go home with me," Taylor insisted.

"No thanks. I don't need to. I'm faaaaabulous," I assured him taking another sip.

"No you're not, you're drunk." I could hear the concern flooding his voice.

"Haden, please, come with me." The soft, pleading sound of Taylor's voice tugged at my heartstrings. I knew that all it would take was just one look in his beautiful eyes and I would do whatever he asked, so I purposely avoided any eye contact with him.

"K, so I *may* be drunk which would totally explain what was up with the Kool-Aid, but if I am, I'm already there and there's no changing it," I smiled, looking down into my glass again, wondering who had stolen my Kool-Aid. I knew there was some in there only moments before.

"Besides, I wanna dance so I'm gonna stay. Please don't be mad Tay Tay," I said behind a chuckle followed by a hiccup.

"Fine," he gave in, "but I'm taking you home in the next couple of hours, and no more Kool-Aid." He took my glass and walked off, defeated. Derrick huffed at Taylor and pulled me into his arms for more dancing. It didn't take any effort on my part to convince Derrick to sneak me another glass of Kool-Aid. When I was done with that glass I was feeling great.

"Come on," Derrick said after he snuck me yet another drink. "I've got a surprise for you."

I loved surprises and was totally psyched to see what it was. He held my drink-free hand and led me out of the party room and down the hall until he stopped at another door. He dug in his pocket as I continued to play with the straw in my drink while swaying to the music in my head. He opened the door and we walked into a plain-looking hotel room. Just then confusion set in.

"Um, this is just a hotel room. Where's the surprise?" I asked, totally lost.

"This is it. Well, I do have one present for you. But first, take another sip of your drink and let's dance," he said, shutting the door behind us.

On any other night my sirens would have been going off, but for some reason tonight I just didn't hear them if they did. I wanted to dance. I wanted to live. The music was soft and slow, just like Derrick's breathing. Once again I was right next to him, my head on his shoulder as I balanced on my tip toes. He smelled really good, better than normal but nowhere near as intoxicating as Taylor had smelled tonight. I kept nuzzling my face closer to his neck, feeling the warmth of his skin and trying to get closer to that scent. Something on him smelled so good that I didn't bother to slap his wandering hands.

We danced as he moved us toward a table by the window and handed me a beautiful red gift bag overflowing with white tissue paper. Derrick watched me intently while he licked his lips. Eager to see my surprise, I tossed the tissue paper to the floor, reached in, and grabbed something small, purple and lacy.

"What's this?" I choked as I held it up, both embarrassed and terrified.

"It's just a little something I bought for you."

*Oh my God*, I prayed trying not to overreact. I sat on the bed and focused all my attention on my shoes attempting to ignore the spinning room. When he saw how frightened I was he took the lacy nightmare out of my hand, set it down, and apologized as he pulled me back into his arms. Once I began to calm down, my head found his neck and that scent again. I watched closely as one of his veins pulsated, fascinating me. In one smooth motion we were lying on the bed. I could feel him on top of me, kissing my neck and then my arms. I didn't care. All I could think about was that smell. I couldn't help myself when I licked his neck, right where that vein was. The next thing I knew he was ripping his shirt off. I detested what he was doing to my body but I wanted *that* smell. I wanted his blood.

So many things happened so fast. My lips found his neck and I instinctively licked the spot where my lips landed, enjoying every second of it. I started off nibbling and then slowly I began to sink my teeth into his neck when he moaned full of pleasure. The next sound I heard was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It threw me back into reality before I had a chance to drink any of his blood. The sound of a zipper startled me, forcing me to try to move out from under him.

"No!" I yelled.

My insides were burning for his blood but my defenses kicked in, taking over.

"Don't fight it, Haden. I can feel how hot you are for me." His hand was moving slowly up leg, under my dress.

"I said 'No!'" I yelled again, trying to push him off of me.

Before I could there was a loud crash and the door was lying on the ground. Derrick was off of me in an instant. I started to cry confused and relieved all at the same time.

"Oh God, Haden, are you okay," Jenny choked sitting on the bed next to me. She was gently moving my hair out of my face and I tried to open my eyes.

I struggled to raise my heavy head. Wooziness rushed at me full force causing me to fall back down. My head felt like it weighed a ton. Jenny caught me and helped me sit up. What I saw next shocked me to the core. Taylor was pinning Derrick against the wall, Derrick's feet hanging in mid-air.

Standing beside Taylor was Brad, talking to him calmly, never taking his eyes off of Taylor's face. I couldn't understand or hear what Brad was saying because of the loud banging in my head but I could see that his lips were moving faster than normal as he talked. Brad looked like he had seen a ghost. The usual softness of Taylor's face had vanished instead being replaced with an unrecognizable harshness. Brad put his hand on Taylor's shoulder and continued talking. I strained to see Taylor's face clearer when Kiernan spoke up.



"Lemme at 'em," Kiernan demanded. "When I'm done with 'em he won't know his head from his butt." For once the teasing humor was gone from my friend's voice, replaced by a fury I'd rarely seen.

Jenny was still sitting beside me analyzing my every movement making to make sure that I wasn't hurt.

"I ... I'm ok," I mumbled trying to calm Jenny down while never taking my eyes off of Taylor.

I squinted my eyes and concentrated harder on what Brad was saying. His deep, calm voice was urging Taylor to forget about Derrick for the time being and focus on getting me out of there. Nothing was working. Even though I knew Taylor had to be hearing what Brad was saying, he was still holding Derrick up against the wall, staring deep into his eyes . . . growling. I bowed my aching head asking God to make this all go away when suddenly there was a loud thud breaking the silence. I looked up to see Derrick lying motionless on the floor.

Kiernan stood over Derrick's unconscious form, shaking his head. "He'll be out for a good while. Where's a dress when I need one? This one should look like the prissy pants he is."

Not a moment too soon, I was wrapped up in Taylor's strong arms. He crushed me to his body as he whisked me out the door. I kissed his neck softly and whispered *I love you, Taylor*. He stopped short but only for a moment, kissed my forehead and continued on. I could feel his speed as he carried me through the halls and down the stairs. In minutes I was safely in his car.

The car ride home seemed instant and the next thing I knew we were already in my bedroom. Taylor had carried me from the car to the back of the house up into my room where he gently set me down in my big pink chair without letting my parents hear us. I watched as he fumbled through my dresser drawers looking for pajamas for me. He handed me a pair and said he would be back momentarily. Taking my dress off was way easier than putting my pajama's on. I fell to the floor as I tried to maintain my balance while putting my foot in the first leg. Finally after what seemed like an eternity of playing weeble-wobble, I was successful and somehow made my way from the chair to the bed stumbling the entire way. Falling onto my bed, I found the comfort of my pillow. In seconds there was a knock at the door. I inhaled smelling Taylor and told him he could come in. He sat down next to me on the side of my bed and handed me a glass of water, demanding that I drink. When I did, he put the glass on my bedside table and looked down at the floor.

"Taylor," I said trying to focus on his face.

"Yes."

"Back there at the hotel."

"Yes," he answered again, waiting for me to finish.

I yawned and moved closer to his leg where my head came to rest.

"I meant what I said." I closed my eyes and hugged his leg like a teddy bear, not caring how freely my thoughts were escaping my mouth. "I love you, Taylor. Promise you'll never leave me." I inhaled deeply enjoying the feeling of his leg next to my cheek.

He began running his fingers softly through my hair and whispered, "I promise . . . I love you too . . . more than anything."

In that moment I knew the depth of his love for me and fell asleep.

The next morning I woke up to the worst headache *ever* and a doting mom. I spent most of that Sunday in bed trying to sleep off one of the worst nights of my life. That dreadful Sunday both Taylor and my Mom took turns watching over me. My mom never left my side except for the occasional bathroom break. Taylor had told her some of what happened and she was determined to baby me. My father came to check on me only once. He made sure to tell me that I would survive this miserable experience and come out on top. I was pretty positive that he figured my mom already filled my ear with plenty talk of how I should have been more careful and how shocked she was that I didn't know what was in the punch. Thankfully, that Sunday flew by faster than I expected. Before I knew it, I was back in school Monday morning, wishing

graduation would hurry up. I was having a really hard time keeping my thoughts on school when they were flooded with what I could remember of Saturday night

Although Saturday ended with a bang of an unfortunate kind for me, it was Derrick who really had it rough. The buzz all over school was that when Derrick was found he was wearing the little purple nightgown covered in lace he had bought for me. Someone had even put some pink lipstick on him. As sick as it was, it gave me more satisfaction than I would have imagined. That little deed had Jenny and Kiernan's names all over it. I never talked to them about it. I decided to let them have their little secret.

As for Michelle, she called me Sunday night, griping at me. She told me over and over again how ungrateful I was to have selfishly ruined the very special night Derrick had planned for me. After a couple minutes of her crankiness, I hung up on her and didn't look back. I was over her. Soon I would be eighteen years old and I could definitely feel that my life would be changing, I just didn't know how.

### *3. The Letter (Dad)*

"She's my daughter too Sidney," I said through clenched teeth, already regretting the tone of my voice. "Baby, she needs to know about this. We can't keep lying to her. Besides, what if they come for her?"

"Jake, how can you be such a fool? For one, there's no such thing as vampires or werewolves! There are only crazy people who think they're real and that is exactly the type of person who wrote that letter. I am *not* going to give it to her," my beautiful wife retorted through a steady stream of tears.

"But honey think about it," I said grabbing her tiny hand placing it in mine.

"Think about how she came to us. Sid, think about her ... condition... about Taylor's." I said those painful words as slowly as possible hoping it would lessen the blow.

With a look of pure pain my wife screamed through her tears demanding that I not bring our son into this. Nothing I was saying was coming out the way I wanted it to. It seemed I was doing more damage than good. Stumbling over my words was only digging my hole even deeper. Sidney was convinced that the letter was nothing but a cruel joke and that it was just a rare condition just like we had told ourselves all these years. Her mind was made up and I had somehow, unbeknownst to me, become the enemy. She shot me another look of pure anguish as she went into our bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

Sitting on our bed I held in my hand the letter that turned our otherwise bright and happy day into a day of misery. Slowly opening it tears filled my own eyes as I began reading those disturbing words yet again.

*Dearest Sidney and Jacob Le Leux,*

*First, on behalf of Aramis and Alexandra Kenton I would like to thank you both for the excellent care and protection you have so graciously given our beloved Haden. I personally have kept a close eye on this very special child as I was her family's Nanny. I loved her and her parents dearly. They were my family before their untimely death.*

*I'm sure you disposed of the last letter you received from us on the night we left her with you and for that our people are grateful. I am so sorry that the letter was vague but please do understand that it was for Haden's protection as well as your own. The vampire world is unlike yours; different in ways I was unable to explain to*

*you at that time. It was better for you that you knew as little as possible. We have seen how you loved Haden as your own. You never let her differences affect how you treated her. Thank you.*

*As you both know, Haden is approaching her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, the time when her first change will be at its peak, the time when she will become more of who she is destined to be. She will require even more blood than normal. It is now time for her to know the truth. It is time for her to know her destiny.*

*There is much to be told to you my dear friends but we feel it is Haden who deserves explanations first. She has much work ahead of her and there isn't time to waste. If you will, please give her the letter I included with yours that I addressed to her. It will explain some very important things that she needs to know. Also enclosed for her is a plane ticket. She will be flying to Europe to meet the Kenton's, her parents' best friends. They have requested to see her. I do hope you understand how important the matter at hand is. I thank you for your most gracious time.*

*In love and peace,  
Nanny Lena*

When I finished the letter for the third time, I was even more confused than when I first read it. I had never thought there would come a time that anyone would come looking for Haden. The letter we received the night she was left with us stated that Haden's parents had died. My sister and her husband had been murdered, leaving Haden to us. I had never heard of the Kenton's. I didn't understand who they thought they were, sending for her as if she were some sort of possession. Haden may have been my niece by blood but she was my daughter in my heart. Surely if they cared about her at all they would have left her alone whether she was what they said she was or not. No good could come of her finding out that Sidney and I weren't her real parents.

I glared at the cream envelope where her name was so elegantly written *Haden*. It was sealed with the same dark red ink seal that the first letter we received had been sealed with. I could still hear my wife crying softly in the bathroom when she suddenly opened the door, her eyes all puffy and her cute little button nose slightly swollen from crying. She was deeply saddened and so frightened that it made my heart ache.

I held my hand up and motioned for her to come and sit next to me. Once she sat she laid her head on my shoulder and sighed. I took a deep breath inhaling her strawberry scented hair.

Finally her breathing began to slow, becoming more in sync with my own. It pained me to see anyone hurt but when it was Sidney who was the one suffering it felt as if my heart was being ripped out. She was the most loving, nurturing, energetic ball of fire I had ever met. She could enter a room, sense a sad person and somehow, almost magically make them happy. She could calm the angriest of people and bring life to the lifeless. Yet now, here in my arms she was so fragile and afraid; afraid of losing our only daughter.

It never mattered to her that Haden was my niece. Instead, she took her in as her own and never mentioned the letter ever again. It had been our secret until now, until my sister and her husbands' best friends decided it was time to open Haden's eyes to the deceit that her mother and I had entangled her in. Would she understand how much we loved her, how much I loved her?

"Jake," Sid sighed, "I just can't give her that ... that letter," she said tears once again streaming down her rosy cheeks. "She's our daughter, not those peoples and she's not an object, she's a person. Plus who in their right mind believes in vampires?"

She looked towards the window and back at me. She took a breath and began trying to explain her side to me, again. With pain flooding her eyes, she reminded me just how much she used to love vampire movies when she was younger, especially if it were a love story. Ironically enough she used to beg me to watch one in particular with her when we were first married. It

was one where the Prince went off to fight the war, returning home victorious, only to find that his wife had taken her life. It caused him to curse God. I could feel her shiver as she spoke.

"Then he becomes a vampire, miraculously finding his true love again years later. His intense love for her makes him see how evil his life was. Her love enlightened him so much that before he dies he asks God to forgive him," she said searching my eyes.

She wanted so badly for me to understand her point. She looked seriously at me and once again insisted that no matter how romantic that movie was, it wasn't real and neither are vampires.

She shook her pretty little head and said, "God never said anything about them in the Bible. They are fiction."

"Yes love, I see your point but God also never said that they didn't exist either," I challenged her.

I could feel her temper rising as I spoke. She looked up into my face and asked me if I honestly believed it was really possible that they were more than that of make believe. She wanted to know if I actually thought that vampires existed and were walking the earth somewhere at that very moment. My answer was yes.

"Sid, I can't honestly say that I believe 100% that they exist. All I know is that over the years I heard some really strange stories about my own ancestors, having been some sort of mystical creatures. My great-grandfather swore by them. To me they were just fun stories he would share with us but to him, they were much more, they were true. I never thought much about it until Haden came to live with us. It seems that to some, mystical creatures are indeed real. Please think about this with me, not against me," I begged. "After all, I love her too."

She grabbed my hand and apologized for losing her temper. Love dripped from her voice like honey as she spoke, telling me how frazzled and confused she was as she hugged my arm. We sat in silence for awhile, neither one of saying a word and then as if a light bulb went off in her cute little head. She popped up looking at me, her eyes wide, and asked me what creatures my great grandfather used to speak of. I assured her quickly that they weren't vampires. I could feel her start to relax yet she continued to stare at me somewhat puzzled.

"They were just werewolves, no big deal," I replied laughing.

Jumping up she slapped my arm.

"Ouch. What was that for?" I asked her knowing good and well why she had hit me.

"Jacob Leleux, this is no time for laughing! How can you find it funny that your great grandfather claimed you were related to werewolves? Are you insane?" she griped as her tears started to fall again making me feel like a jerk.

I tried to wash the taste of my foot out of my mouth with numerous apologies. My humor hadn't helped our situation one bit. By the grace of God, my sincere apologies had.

Once she was calm again we both sat there quietly, staring off into space. Breaking the seemingly never ending silence, Sidney grabbed my hand and told me that our main responsibility was to protect our children to which I agreed whole heartedly. Then squeezing my hand ever so slightly she said we should read the letter addressed to Haden in order to protect her. Part of me realized how wrong that would be. Haden was a bright girl and would no doubt talk to us about it. It was that other part of me, the father part, which spoke louder, silencing my first feelings of guilt with new ones of intense love and protection for our daughter.

"I think you're right," I told my beautiful wife. Rubbing my hand on her cheek I reminded her that she and I were a team and could make it through anything.

"You read it," she pleaded, "I just can't."

I agreed and opened the envelope slowly, leery of what lay inside.

"Oh Dear God," Sidney cried as I finished the letter, her tears now turning into heaving sobs. I just held her close, squeezing her as tight as I could, not bothering to fight my own tears.

## 4. *Instincts*

With school and graduation now only an echo of my past I could focus on my future. I was seriously thinking about talking to my parents about seeing a doctor. I was starting to hope that maybe there was some radical new technology that could help cure me and if not cure me, at least slow it down.

"Haden," Jenny called as she galloped towards me quickly bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Shhh," I whispered, "You're gonna get me fired."

"Oh my gosh, I totally need your help. You are so not going to believe this. It's just awful." Jenny's expression made me want to laugh.

Although I could tell how serious she was, it was still so darn cute and funny how her nose crinkled up like a little accordion when she was upset. I didn't know how anyone could take her seriously when she looked like that. I bit my tongue trying not to chuckle while I wondered what my best girl friends newest dilemma was.

"Don't laugh," she said preparing me for the news. "I tried to kiss Brad," she whispered, her eyes big as silver dollars while she looked around slowly, almost as if she was expecting paparazzi to jump out from around the corner and take her picture.

I stopped short and turned to look at her, confused. "You did?"

Her big blue eyes welled up with tears as she struggled to maintain her composure. Brad had turned away from her and she was devastated.

I smiled at her softly and went back to organizing the books on the shelves, trying like heck to remove the look of pure shock I knew was plastered all over my face. I knew I wasn't being the most helpful friend in the world but I was totally at a loss for words. Quickly trying to fill the deafening silence I put my hand on her arm.

"Well maybe he didn't know that's what you were doing Jenn. Maybe he heard something and turned away right when you made your move." It was all I could come up with so darn fast.

"No," she frowned, "He definitely knew what I was doing. Gosh, I was so stupid," she said through clenched teeth. "He and I had a really great time at prom before Derrick had to model his new nighty for everyone."

Just hearing her mention that night gave me chills and I was suddenly wondering where my boss was hoping he would come and force me to get back to work. Thankfully she moved right along past that embarrassing night that surely would haunt my dreams for years to come.

Jenn sat on the floor next to me while I worked and began telling me about what she had originally thought was their first date. She had quickly come to realize that just because he asked her to go see a movie with him when she got off work today did not mean that at all.

I continued to listen as she rambled on even though my own mind was trying to wander. Hearing her claim that she had never spent much time thinking about Brad as anything more than a friend was ridiculous. I knew good and well that she was trying to convince herself of something that wasn't true, but I didn't say anything and let her whine. Once she was done beating herself up I asked her what happened after her hit and miss. Her response was typical Jenny. She pretended that it never happened. They finished the movie and he took her home. He was polite and gentleman-like as usual.

I laughed and she glared at me. "That doesn't sound terrible," I tried to assure her.

"What do you mean that doesn't sound terrible?" she bit back getting louder with every word.

By the look on her face and the decibels her voice had just reached, I just knew that I was going to get in trouble with work if I didn't get her out of the bookstore and fast. She was in

rare form and was sure to bring me attention I didn't want. I gave her a quick hug and told her that I had to get back to work.

After I promised to help her figure her mess out she got up reluctantly and turned to leave stopping short. She looked at me with her lower lip out pouting and made me promise to call her. She had never been dissed by a guy before and she was freaking out. I did my best to reassure her that it would all be okay. I reminded her how absentminded guys could be. It was possible he wouldn't even remember what happened by tomorrow. At least I could hope ... for her sake.

With a slight smile she was on her way out the door finally. I couldn't believe she had tried to kiss Brad and even though I had done my best to reassure her that he might not have realized what she was doing, the intelligent side of me knew that he was way too smart of a guy not to have known. Even though I wasn't much for gossip, I couldn't wait to tell Taylor. This bit of information would be sure to peak his interest. He had been trying to bring life back to Brad's eyes for months and no one had more life than Jenny.

Right as I looked at my watch there was an announcement over the intercom. *Haden, your service is requested in the coffee shop.* The sound of my name over the intercom shocked me. I wondered if Jenny had been too loud after all. Hopefully it was nothing more than the managers calling a last minute meeting.

As I walked up the few steps into the coffee shop it surprised me when I saw no manager; only a few people sitting, drinking their coffee. *Taylor?* I questioned in my mind, wondering if it was him who had me paged. If so, that would have been the first.

Right as I said Taylor's name in my head he looked at me from behind the counter as if he had heard me. Just then the assistant manager of the coffee shop walked over to where I stood no doubt looking like a confused puppy. He informed me that Taylor had asked him to page me and he would be with me in just a minute. I tried not to worry even though my mind was already running amuck. I thanked him and sat at the nearest table waiting for my brother when I glanced up at the clock and noticed that my shift was almost over. I began to straighten the sugar holder on the table when Taylor walked up to me.

"Hey gorgeous," he grinned instantly calming my heart. I could tell something was bothering him but it didn't seem like life or death so I was happy. "Want to walk home with me? It's a beautiful day."

I knew he wasn't scheduled to get off work that night until close but I said nothing. By the look in his eyes, something was definitely up and it had trouble written all over it.

I told him I'd be happy to walk home with him. I would just continue to play dumb to his new schedule arrangements and pray that nothing major was wrong. Ignoring the butterflies in my stomach, now that would be a challenge. I went to clock out and met him outside.

The possible reasons for Taylor's change of schedule were doubling, then tripling in my head before I could even process them, a side effect of being an over thinker. I couldn't understand why he would leave work early. It was totally uncharacteristic of him. I was just praying that I was right and no one had died.

After I clocked out, I grabbed my purse and a bottled water out of the machine. We walked for awhile with only the occasional sound of my sips to keep us company when I realized that we were at the park right by our house. *Someone must have died.* I thought, getting worried. Of course, maybe no one did and my overactive imagination was at it again. Maybe Taylor did know about Jenny's advancement towards Brad. Maybe Brad's gay! That had to be it. Maybe Jenny's kiss forced Brad to come out of the closet and Taylor was worried about him. Coming to this conclusion made me feel a bit of relief. As long as no one was dead, I was happy.

I broke the silence and asked him if he was okay.

"Yes, I'm fine," he answered, not at all believable. "Look," he sighed as we sat on a park bench towards the very back of the park. Thinking about his next words he bit his lower lip. I

couldn't help but imagine what the girls in the coffee shop that I had seen staring at him would have thought if they had seen how cute he was doing that.

"I'm just going to have to spit it out. I've been having weird dreams. Well not necessarily dreams as they happen anytime really. They're more like visions." He stopped for a moment and looked down at the ground and then into my eyes. "I'm worried about you."

I was at a loss for words. "So Brad's not gay?" It was the first thing that came to my mind rolling off my tongue carelessly before I had time to think. The look of confused pain on Taylor's face had me feeling guilty instantly for my dumb outburst.

"What?" Taylor asked sitting straight as a board looking like he wasn't sure what he had just heard me ask him.

The look in his eyes made me feel like an idiot. Here he was pouring his heart out to me and all I could do was be shocked that Brad wasn't gay after all. Apparently my brain had taken a vacation without informing me. I would remember to thank it for that later.

He was still staring at me with that awful look. I told him I would explain my untimely outburst later. For now, I wanted to know what visions he was having about me. Taylor wasn't the one with the overactive imagination. That was my department. The look of pain on his face startled me. I straightened up and focused on his words.

"I keep seeing you on a plane asleep with some strange guy hovering over you. You don't look like yourself. Your color is all gone and no one we know is with you. You look really sick in it," he said looking as confused as I felt.

Taylor never overreacted. He was the calm and collected one. Looking into his deep green eyes I smiled softly. Maybe he too was sensing me dying. It would have only made sense. My mother always said that our connection surpassed anything she had ever seen. According to her it could cut through time and space. I closed my eyes and imagined me lying in a hospital bed with him at my side when all of the sudden he gasped, jumping up.

"Are you ill, Haden?" he questioned me, his eyes probing mine for answers.

That was twice that it had seemed like he was in my head. Sitting back down he took my hand and asked me to be honest with him. When I saw his eyes glistening with tears my voice stuck in my throat. That stupid lump was back again. Not wanting to lie, I answered as best I could.

I told him that I hadn't exactly been feeling the best but as far as I knew I was okay. He didn't look convinced. I searched for words to reassure him that there was no need for him to worry but the right ones never came and it was blatantly obvious by the look still plastered all over his face. I choked back tears and told him what a hard time I had sleeping since *that* night.

"I'm sure that's all it is," I said trying to convince us both. "I wouldn't worry about your visions. They'll probably go away as soon as I get some much needed sleep. Like mom always said, you and I are different. We're connected. You're probably just sensing how tired I am." My words seemed empty. I wondered if he felt it too.

He nodded his head in agreement, but I could see that he wasn't fully convinced. He leaned over and hugged me. The guilt of not telling him the full truth would have overwhelmed me had I not become intoxicated once again by the sweet smell radiating off of his skin. He smelled of cloves and cinnamon. He smelled like the first day of Autumn, like a good book on a cold night with a steaming cup of spiced tea. He smelled like heaven.

I was starting to bother myself again with strange thoughts of the yummy smell coming off of Taylor when I felt him push me back a just a little so that he could see my face. *Oh God, please tell me he didn't just hear my thoughts.* My mind was racing. He looked intently into my eyes as if they were filled with oceans of his favorite piano concertos when he gently placed my face in his cool hands. As my eyes rested on his perfect face, I felt a chill trickle down my spine. He leaned forward, my breathing becoming erratic as he slowly kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes savoring the moment when I realized I could hear his heart and it too was all out of whack.

In that very instant, I was no longer his sister. I was someone I didn't know, someone new ... someone on fire. All rational thought was now gone from my head. I was so caught up in being close to this person, this stranger. He wasn't my brother but who was he? I knew him. With every soft kiss he placed on my face I could feel my body heat rising. I wanted more. My eyes still closed, I envisioned his beautiful soft lips on mine. When I opened my eyes he was staring at me with a look I had never seen, one of such intense need. I was frozen yet on fire staring at this man in front of me. I laid my head on his shoulder letting my lips lightly graze his neck. I could hear his heartbeat as if it were a horse in a race. I was so lost in his glorious scent and the glass like feel of his soft skin against my lips. When he moved me back, repeating the kiss on my forehead it made all sensible thoughts unrecognizable.

By now my whole body was tingling. With my eyes still closed I felt the most amazing thing in the world. Taylor leaned closer to me, his face right in front of mine, our breathing both shallow and in sync. He was so close I could almost taste him and then I did. He gently pressed his soft lips to mine. He was delicious, even better than he smelled. Our lips moved rhythmically. Who was this stranger before me? My body ached in a way I wasn't familiar with. Very gently he picked me up setting me on his lap as if I were as light as a feather, neither one of us saying another word.

"Haden, please wake up."

I opened my eyes to see Taylor staring down at me with a look of fear plastered on his tear stricken face.

"What happened?" I croaked.

"I don't know. I kissed your head and you passed out. Are you okay? You tell me not to worry and then you black out on me."

"Oh, I'm sorry I scared you. I, uh, I don't feel so great. I think maybe I should go home." Without another word Taylor swooped me up into his strong arms and whisked me home.

After I somehow convinced my mother that I was alright I was left alone in my bed once again with only my thoughts to keep me company. Something was severely wrong with me. I knew this now. No one in their right mind would envision kissing their brother. No matter how many times I tried to convince myself that the person in my dream wasn't Taylor, I knew better. It was him, only different. I grabbed my head and tried to think of anything else I could. Thankfully I drifted off to sleep.

I awoke to the sound of the phone and my dad sitting next to my bed.

"Hey dad," I said through a yawn trying to remember how I got in bed.

"You gave your brother a pretty good scare young lady, your mom too," he grinned.

"Not you?" I asked seeing his amusement.

"Nah, I know how strong you are. Here, drink. I brought you some of your nourishment. It's fresh, just the way you like it," he smiled putting my fears at ease.

I thanked him and grabbed the tall glass not hesitating. I drank until it was gone.

"There, that should make you feel better honey." My father's words were just what the doctor had ordered.

Still extremely confused I asked him why he wasn't worried about me when clearly everyone else was. He smiled his genuine smile and grabbed my hand. Apparently he wasn't in agreement with my mom who insisted I was getting sick. He set my glass down on the bed-side table and went on to tell me that he wasn't the slightest bit worried about me. He knew that I was almost eighteen and growing. He made sure that he pointed out that my body was changing at a rapid pace. Unlike my mother who thought plenty of rest and chicken soup would fix my issues, my father believed that all I needed was more liquid nourishment. His solution to my recent dizzy spells was simply to drink more blood.

"Now that you say that, I *have* been way thirstier but I haven't been drinking every time I felt the need to," I admitted sheepishly.



"See, just as I'd thought. Maybe I should have been a doctor instead of a realtor," he teased. "I had better get going and let your mother know you're awake. Oh and you might want to call Jenny. She's called nonstop today. I would bet that last call was her too. Your mom said she was having some boy issue."

I leaned over to hug him and tell him just how much I loved him. After he said he loved me too, he was gone to find mom whom I was sure was downstairs cooking up a storm. Cooking when nervous was one of my mom's favorite stress relievers. In her mind, food could comfort the soul better than just about anything and right then the smell of roast permeating through the house was making my stomach growl in agreement. All I could think about was eating.

I knew though that before I could even focus on food, I would have to call Jenny. Surely she was freaking out. I could just see her right now pacing back and forth as she stared at her phone huffing while she waited impatiently for me to call her back. When I started to get up to grab my cell phone from the bed side table, I jumped in shock at the sight of Taylor sitting on the end of my bed.

"How'd you do that?" I asked thinking I had lost my mind once again.

"How'd I do what?" he chuckled lightly shrugging his shoulders.

"Um, sit on my bed without me seeing you do it?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Dad said you were better Haden but after that question, I'm not so sure," he teased.

Maybe he was right, maybe I was a little crazy but I was sure that I hadn't seen him come in my room.

"How are you feeling Princess pass out?" he asked laughing, showing his perfect white teeth framed by his huge dimples. Right as I started to answer him my dream of he and I at the park rushed back at me, flooding my mind with visions of him kissing me. I closed my eyes and grabbed my head in an attempt to shake the crazy pictures out of my memory. I didn't know what to think. Part of me wanted to throw up at the thought of having those feelings for Taylor and yet a different part of me knew that the Taylor in my dream wasn't really my brother. I opened my eyes and inhaled slowly. I didn't know what to do. Dealing with it head on would do one thing for sure. It would provide me with answers and possibly save me a lot of grief. Maybe if I looked at him closely I could prove to myself that it was *just* a dream and I could get over it... but what if it wasn't? What if I looked at him and I felt the same way I had in that dream, then what? I didn't know if I could live with that. So I decided to pretend it never happened.

In a weak attempt to remove the previous steamy Taylor visual from my overfilled head I excused myself to go to the restroom. I turned the faucet on and splashed cool water on my face in hopes of washing my issues away. I slowly rubbed the back of my neck and tried to visualize something other than my brother's gorgeous face. I needed to think of something simple and pointless to help me regain my composure. *Ice Cream*, I thought. With my eyes closed I pictured a waffle cup with two scoops of Mint Oreo Ice Cream. When I had myself good and hungry for the tasty treat I knew it was safe for me to go back into my bedroom.

Before I had taken five steps towards him he did it again.

"I was thinking, you look like you could use some fresh air and I'm suddenly in the mood for some Mint Oreo ice cream. What would you think about us grabbing some together?" he said completely serious.

With my jaw on the floor I mumbled the word sure barely loud enough for him to hear. He didn't seem to notice that my voice was full of wonder. He was way too interested in scoring the ice cream he was now craving.

"Terrific, Kiernan wants to hang out anyway. Jenny's with him right now and I believe that she would appreciate some of your time with the way she has been calling nonstop today."

"Sounds perfect," I whispered, "I'll meet you downstairs after I freshen up."

I know that my words didn't sound too excited about our little outing but I was in full fledged shock. Had he heard my thoughts? Was that even humanly possible?

Taylor left the room so I could have some privacy while transforming into someone presentable. Rummaging through my clothes I decided on a simple fitted tee-shirt and my favorite pair of jeans, faded ones with holes over both knees. With a quick stop in front of the mirror so I could toss my hair up into a quick upturned ponytail, I was almost ready to go. I put on my pink pearl stud earrings, slipped on my light pink flip flops and made my way out of my room. I was ready for some ice cream.

I decided I'd go check for my personal mind reader in his room before heading downstairs. When he didn't answer my knock I let myself in. His smell engulfed the room with such intensity that I unintentionally stopped and inhaled deeply, filling my lungs full with his amazing scent.

I had always loved Taylor's bedroom. His passion to be surrounded by beautiful things was obvious. Straight ahead against the wall sat his queen size brushed metal bed. It was so beautiful that it never ceased to take my breath away when I really stopped to look at it closely. It wasn't just a bed. It was a piece of art work straight out of Taylor's imagination. Draped with a shimmering black bedspread it fit Taylor's personality perfectly; strong and beautiful. Both were gifts from our parents. When our father first saw Taylor's rough drawing of the bed he immediately showed our mother. Her response was legendary in our family. She took one look at his sketch and her face lit up like the stars in the nights' sky. In that moment she decided that she and dad would start looking for someone to bring Taylor's drawing to life. After months of looking, they finally located someone willing to construct Taylor's masterpiece and the rest is history.

His room was decorated in black, platinum and silver; his walls covered with framed sketches he had drawn. Looking around his room I still didn't see any sign of him so I decided to sit at his black grand piano. Right as I set my hand on the keys his hand was on mine.

"Fancy seeing you here," he teased, knowing good and well that I couldn't play.

Although I wanted to learn, I just never took the time to. Instead I would sit for hours listening to him practice.

Trying not to look directly into his eyes I glanced at my watch and told him that we had better get going. I knew it wouldn't be long before Jenny got ancy. I was sure she was in no mood for Kiernan to be proposing to her over and over again.

I turned to look at my brother and took a deep breath out of my nose. I had been holding my breath in hopes of avoiding any weirdness in my head. Deciding I was being silly, I purposely inhaled as deep as I could. I was going to prove to myself that I wasn't insane. Instantly I smelled blood, fresh blood. My eyes spotted it immediately. It was on Taylor's shirt.

"Did you cut yourself shaving?" I asked concerned.

"Not that I know of, why?"

I moved in closer to inspect it. Frozen in fear I pointed to the blood on his shirt. He stiffened instantly, his face now unreadable.

"Taylor, are you bleeding?"

"It seems so. I . . . must have cut myself shaving," he said standing up.

His face was expressionless. He looked at me carefully; our eyes locking momentarily. When he turned away from me I jumped up and grabbed his arm, asking him if he was alright. He spun around and threw my hand off of him so fast that I lost my balance and fell to the floor. Shocked at his sudden burst of anger he pulled me up just as fast as I fell. This time his face was plastered with remorse. I looked down wishing I was somewhere else when he grabbed my chin, softly lifting my face so I could look directly at him.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

I shook my head no. He didn't need to be sorry. It was obvious that he wasn't comfortable with blood like I was and wanted his shirt off as fast as possible. Even with

knowing that my assumption was probably right, I still had a nagging sensation in the pit of my stomach that told me something was wrong. His burst of anger wasn't characteristic for him. I didn't know what was bothering him but I knew I was no one to judge. It was me who was the crazy one after all. I looked into his dark green eyes and felt a chill down my spine yet again.

We stood facing each other, my heart racing as he stared into my eyes. He looked as if he was lost in thought. I kept waiting for him to speak but he said nothing. Instead he pulled me into his chest and held me there briefly before kissing my head and vanishing into his closet.

He was back in what seemed like seconds, dressed like me in a tee-shirt and ripped jeans. He was his usual calm self and ready to go. I however was a mess mentally. We hopped in his car and were at the ice cream shop in no time at all. I was thankful for that. Oddly enough it was possible that I needed Jenny's chatty self more than Jenny needed me tonight.

Sure enough Jenny and Kiernan were already there. They were sitting outside waiting for us. I could see Jenny's arms flailing about. She was surely telling Kiernan about Brad. Seeing us she took a breath said hi and sighed, "I was beginning to think that you didn't care," she pouted looking at me.

After explaining that I hadn't had the easiest time recently I begged her for forgiveness and all was well. I knew that even though she was upset with me, she was more upset with Brad dissing her. I guess I had him to thank for her letting me off the hook so easily.

Jenny went on with her story about Brad to Kiernan while Taylor and I sat listening patiently. At one point I looked over at Kiernan. He looked like he was about to explode when his face suddenly perked up.

"Well I think the boy's gotta be gay, shyin away from the likes of you. Only logical explanation really," he offered amused with his assumption.

As I took another sinful bite of my ice cream I nodded in agreement. Kiernan shot me an approving smile while Jenny's face lit up at that thought.

"Not to butt in," Taylor said looking confused, "but may I ask who is gay?"

"Why of course ol' buddy. It's none other than Brad, whose bulging biceps, bypassed the best of braids," he said grinning at Jenny.

Mesmerized Taylor asked if he was referring to our friend, Brad.

"The one and only," Kiernan blurted out amused. He looked over at Jenny and asked her permission to tell Taylor the part of the story he had missed. Once she agreed she went back to sipping her strawberry shake. Kiernan sat up straight on the edge of his chair; his face full of excitement as he got ready to tell the story.

"Seems we've had a fruity among us and never knew it." His words were bright and vivid, as if they had been waiting to explode out of him. "Come to think of it, I did catch him takin a look at me sexy back, but who could blame em. I'm one sexy sexy beast," he laughed.

Jenny and I joined in laughing at Kiernan's verbal antics but Taylor was only smiling, a look of confusion still on his face. He finished his bite of ice cream, looked at Jenny and I and asked if someone would please tell him what Kiernan was talking about? All he was hearing was gibberish.

Before Kiernan had a chance to fight to be the one to finish his story, I embraced the moment and jumped in. I told Taylor about Jenny trying to kiss Brad and how Brad turned away. Listening intently he nodded as I spoke.

He told Jenny he understood her pain. He also informed us all, that he knew for a fact Brad wasn't gay. He said Brad was no more gay than he was. He laughed and shook his head as he found comedic relief in our attempt to solve the puzzle.

"Well if he ain't then ya best be explainin why I caught him lookin at me back side," Kiernan said letting out a huge belly laugh.

Taylor shot Kiernan a look of pure amusement. "Was that possibly the day you were wearing your new jeans that you had *Kiss Me I'm Irish* put on your um, backside as you put it?" he asked him.

"Maybe so, but still, ya know he liked it," Kiernan said laughing even louder.

"Hello?" Jenny whined. "Who cares about your stupid butt Kiernan? This is a big deal."

Kiernan was quick to point out to Jenny that his butt was indeed a big deal and that it wasn't stupid by any means. It was his opinion that his butt was rather smart. He nodded at her and then winked, trying to look sexy and failing miserably. A laugh escaped my mouth and Jenn shot me a look of disbelief.

"Geez, can you ever be serious Kiernan?" she said giving him a worse look than the one she gave me.

Just as the two of them were about to start quarreling again, Taylor spoke, his voice silencing them both.

He could see that she was really hurt and didn't want her to take it personal. He reminded her that Brad was still grieving from the loss of his family. Something about the way Taylor spoke was so calming, like his words were melodies caressing the air. He assured her that it wasn't her that Brad was refusing. It was all women. He had temporarily lost the ability to love in that way. He was in a sense, empty. Taylor told her that Brad just needed time to heal.

A couple moments of silence passed before Kiernan piped up. "Maybe Mr. beautiful is right, maybe our dear Brad isn't a fruity but that's not saying he wasn't a darn fool, turning away from a gift of beauty such as yours."

Jenny thanked Kiernan without one hint of sarcasm, surprising us all.

With all the excitement I hadn't realized that I needed to use the restroom. Smiling to myself I thought I would try a little experiment. Closing my eyes just for a moment I pictured Taylor's face and then thought about how bad I needed to use the bathroom. When I opened my eyes he was looking at me all weird. He chose his words carefully before asking me if I needed to use the restroom. Shocked that it actually worked, I said yes. Jenny looked at him like he was a weirdo but thankfully kept her mouth shut. Taylor offered to walk me to the bathroom. I was pretty positive that he was just worried I would pass out again but I assured him that I was fine going alone. He got up and pulled my chair out for me when I heard some girl behind me ask her friend where she could get her a boyfriend like that? The other friend began conspiring with her. They were now planning on talking to Taylor while, "his girlfriend," as they referred to me, was gone. I chuckled knowing how it would annoy Taylor. I also knew that because of his manners he would be kind to them. I thanked him for pulling my chair out and he told me to be careful. It was more of a demand than anything but I didn't let it get to me.

"You too," I laughed and he rolled his eyes. I wondered if he had heard them too.

Slowly I walked out of the bathroom towards the glass door that led to the patio. Those girls hadn't wasted any time. One was sitting in my seat leaning over talking to Taylor while the other one stood in between them. I saw Kiernan get up and bring their chairs over to our table. Kiernan's face was glowing with excitement at the presence of two new females to give his attention to. Jenny wasn't nearly as pleased. She was beyond annoyed. Her audience had just been rudely stolen from her.

I don't know who looked happier to see me when I returned to the table, Taylor or Jenny.

Taylor introduced me to our guests, Shannon and Holly. I smiled politely trying not to laugh as Jenny rolled her big blue eyes. Our new friends weren't nearly as sweet to me or Jenny as they were to Taylor and Kiernan. The one that wasn't attempting to overrun my brother's personal space was actually enjoying Kiernan's company. She sat close to him engulfed in his flirting. I was happy for him but truth be told, Jenny didn't look too thrilled with his new friend. Jenny and I were texting each other trying to plan an escape when Taylor grabbed his phone looking at it.

After reading his text message, which wasn't from me, Taylor told us that Brad wanted to know if we were up to hanging out at the park for awhile. I shot a look at Jenny. She nodded yes at me while she played with her phone. I told him I was cool with going if everyone else was.

Suddenly Jenny sat up straight with a look of pure panic on her pretty face. She said that she thought that maybe we should stay at the Ice Cream shop a little longer to get to know Kiernan and Taylor's new friends a little better. Both Taylor and I looked at her as if she had lost her mind. I knew with that suggestion that she had to be crazy embarrassed about seeing Brad.

Kiernan was totally oblivious to her womanly crisis. He said he had an even better idea. He turned to his little flirty friend and asked her if they would both like to go to the park with us.

Both of them jumped at the opportunity. The one who had her eyes on Taylor tilted her head to the side like a puppy waiting patiently for a treat and asked him, as sexy as she could, if they could ride with him. I almost choked when she put her hand on his leg. Before Jenny or I could throw out our opinions on where they could stick themselves Taylor beat us to it. He nonchalantly stood up letting her hand fall and politely told them that he only had enough room for Jenny and I. Before he could finish Kiernan was telling them that he and Layla would be happy to give them a ride.

With looks of pure confusion they asked who Layla was. Kiernan's eyes lit up and he took his new friends hand.

"Ah me lady, Layla's me lucky leprechaun mobile. 'Tis me girl," he said proud.

"It's his 1998 Forest Green minivan slash *love* machine," Jenny piped in laughing hysterically.

"Don't listen to the likes of her. She's just a tad bit irked that everyone thinks her car's a big piece of pink gum," he laughed.

Jenny's light pink VW Beetle was always an object of Kiernan's teasing.

"See you guys there," Taylor said as he grabbed me and quickly tossed me onto his back carrying me to his car.

Once inside Jenny growled loudly from the back seat. "I can't stand girls like that! They're so obvious and cheap looking! Ugh, I mean are they so blind that they can't see how *not* into them you are? Barf! And Kiernan, he's just plain stupid! I really think he believes he has a shot with them," she rambled on. She stopped only to take a breath and began again, "What on earth was he thinking inviting them to go with us? Eww if I still believed in cooties I'd be scared."

Jenny was in rare form and neither Taylor nor I could get a word in. I could hear her digging in her purse and turned around to see her shove a piece of gum in her mouth before taking out her mirror and checking her reflection. As she applied her lip gloss she complimented Taylor on how clean he kept his car. I sat back and leaned my head against the head rest while Jenny griped about Kiernan's new friends. She was sure that they had spotted Taylor's Maserati and were using him to ride in his car. According to her they were only after his money. In her opinion, his looks were just a bonus. He ignored her and kept driving.

I changed the subject when I saw him look in his rearview mirror before punching the gas. "Taylor loves speed," I said as I grabbed the roof pretending I was scared and needed to hold on.

He looked at me and smiled. "Speed is my high."

I knew that all too well. He had told me more than once about the dreams he had where he would be racing a black panther.

I looked at him and winked. "I think I'm gonna start calling you panther."

Jenny looked at me like I was crazy so I told her about his dreams. She put her hand on his shoulder and told him approvingly that she had no doubt he'd win any race in his car. When I told her that he had raced the large cat on foot she got a big grin on her pretty face and said cool before sitting back.

Not wanting to say anything, I noticed that we had already passed the street we needed to turn on at least four times. I knew it wasn't our fabulous conversation that kept Taylor from making the right turn. Instead I was pretty sure that he was praying that if we were late then the girls would ask Kiernan to take them home.

In an attempt to get his mind off of them I asked him to tell Jenny who won the race.

"Honestly, I did," he said showing his perfect smile, brightening the pitch black interior of his car.

"Now *that's* hot," Jenny said.

Ironically I had been having familiar dreams myself where I was alone in the forest running for miles. I was never racing anything but I was always chasing something. I just didn't know what.

The next time he came to the street he actually turned down it. I could see his grip on the steering wheel tighten. I told him that we could just skip it and go home so he didn't have to feel famous all night. I hoped he would say yes but no such luck.

All he cared about was how much I loved swinging on the swings at night. He said he could just deal with the attention for me. Taylor told us that he was hoping we would be lucky and Kiernan would have convinced them to see a movie with him instead of hanging out with us.

"No such luck Romeo," Jenny said sounding as disappointed as we all felt. "Layla's parked right there next to Brad's 4x4."

Silence filled the car as we all stopped talking to listen.

"Is that the Polka?" Jenn asked shocked.

I laughed out loud. Kiernan was too much. Music was pouring out from the opened rear end of his van. There he and Holly stood dancing together. I could see Brad and it looked as if Shannon and was zoning in on him. Kiernan was lost in his own fun world with Holly, not caring that he looked like a dork. Taylor let out a long breath and I smiled at him, reassuring him that I'd be right there. He nodded and out we went.

I walked over to Jenny and whispered in her ear that if I were her, I would just pretend nothing happened. With a quick nod I watched as she put the familiar glow back on her pretty face and ran to meet Kiernan and Holly yelling hi to Brad over the music. Brad said hi back all smiles before turning his attention back to the drooling girl at his side.

Taylor nodded at Brad as he and I walked to the swings. In no time Shannon and Brad were there with us. I practically threw up in my mouth when she asked Taylor to push her. Her uber flooziness was really starting to gross me out. Her voice was as sweet as rotten honey, making me want to run and hide. I shut my eyes and pushed off the ground harder, tilting my head back, feeling the wind through my hair. I was going to do my best to ignore the growing anger in my soul every time I heard her say Taylor's name.

The music was now some fast paced Irish song and Jenny and Kiernan were dancing up a storm to it while Shannon and Holly talked to Brad. I was actually thinking about joining them when the sound of glass breaking echoed through the park. I turned instinctively toward the sound. Taylor's car was being broken into. Two guys dressed in dark jeans and hoodies were on either side of it. The one on the driver's side had broken Taylor's window and was now unlocking it, jumping in while the other lifted the hood.

As the engine roared to life I realized that they were planning on stealing it. The guy under the hood jumped in the passenger's seat and I froze. It all happened so fast. Before I could even think, Taylor flew by me. The next thing I saw frightened me more than prom night. Taylor was crouched in front of his car looking like the panther from his dream. By now Brad and Kiernan were running to help. Even though I wanted to do something I knew I would just get in the way so I just stood still and watched in awe.

Shannon, Holly and Jenny were all by my side in seconds.

"He is so manly," Shannon said her voice sickly sweet again. Jenny made a repulsed sound loud enough for both Shannon and Holly to hear but neither one said anything.

When Brad and Kiernan got closer to Taylor they slowed down and then stopped, giving him his space. He hadn't moved from his crouched position and looked as if he were ready to attack at any minute.

Taylor had given the thieves only two choices; they could either, get out of the car and run for it, or they could run him over. There was no way for them to back up with all the trees behind them. There was forest everywhere.

To my surprise they revved the engine and floored it. They were aiming to hit him. We all gasped as we saw Taylor run and jump on the hood of his car as if he were in the scene of a movie. The car's tires spun wildly while Taylor crawled on the hood of his car digging his nails into the hood. He quickly made his way towards the driver's side where he jumped in on top of the driver through the broken window. Before any of us could react, the car came to a complete stop and one guy after another was thrown out of the passenger's door onto the cement.

With my heart pounding uncontrollably, I watched fearfully as Taylor jumped out and ran over to the thieves, kicking them in their ribs over and over again as they tried to get up. Everyone ran towards them including Sally and Susie or whatever their names were. I was about done with them and their constant repulsive babblings. I inhaled deeply as Shannon began to speak again.

"He's so dreamy." Her words made me ill but it wasn't until her next statement that I totally lost it.

Looking straight ahead as we walked she said, "I'm gonna have his babies, Holly."

All sense of right and wrong vanished from my mind. I turned around and punched her. She fell to the ground with a thud. I told her to stay where she was if she knew what was good for her. Her tag along friend stared at me shocked and then knelt next to her.

"That was freaking awesome. I had no idea you had it in you," Jenny said laughing.

"You have no idea," I said keeping my eyes on Taylor. If she only knew the monster I was she wouldn't be saying I was awesome. I was sure of that.

I hurriedly looked back in Taylor's direction praying that he had let the guys go. My prayers were in vain. He was still beating them up and every time Kiernan or Brad tried to step in he stopped them. Mr. in control had lost it all. Brad tried again to pull Taylor off of them and with one quick turn Taylor threw Brad back as if he weighed nothing. My heart rate continued to rise as I stared in disbelief. The thieves had no chance of getting away unless someone calmed Taylor down. If he didn't stop he would kill them both. Brad now sat useless on the ground watching the show like the rest of us. Kiernan was no help. He was steadily egging Taylor on.

"Kick em where it hurts Taylor! Yeah take that ya shmucks. See what trying to steal the Bat Mobile brings ya," he laughed enjoying the show.

"Kiernan shut up!" Jenny yelled.

When I saw the look of horror on Brad's face as he got up I knew it was bad. He grabbed his side where Taylor hit him and shook his head in disbelief.

Not knowing what to do exactly I prayed. Then as if an angel whispered in my ear, I had some hope. Having nothing to lose I closed my eyes and spoke to Taylor. I could only pray that it worked and he would hear me. *Please stop. You're really hurting them. Think of mom and dad and God. Think of me. You don't really want to hurt them.*

When I opened my eyes I thanked God because surprisingly he was backing away from them slowly. Brad ran over to where they lay and helped them up but not before Kiernan kicked them both in their ribs.

"Take that ya pansies," Kiernan yelled joyfully as he went to kick them again.

Brad pushed Kiernan out of the way in an attempt to help them up off the ground. Once he got them to their feet he told them to run and get out of there. They both limped away as fast as their beaten bodies could carry them; both were holding their stomachs while they watched Taylor until they reached the road.

I rested my eyes on Taylor as he walked towards the woods opposite his car. Kiernan started to go after him when Brad held out his hand stopping him and then shooting me a look of concern. I nodded letting Brad know that I understood. Before I could figure out what I was going to do, Kiernan spotted Shannon and Holly sitting on the ground right where I left them.

"Hey, what the heck happened to those two?" Kiernan said looking at Shannon as she held her nose.

"Haden knocked her out," Jenny answered proud. "You should have seen it. Brilliant I must say." Jenny's words were crisp like the night air.

Looking at the girls with his head cocked to the side Kiernan laughed, "Well ladies, I think it's time we best be getting ya home. Seems you two have had quite the full night. See ya tomorrow lads and lassies," he called as he helped them get into Layla, all the while whistling.

I walked over to Brad who was off in thought. After finally convincing him that I could handle Taylor on my own, he took Jenny home.

I waved goodbye and took my time walking over to where Taylor sat quietly. I stood for a moment and then sat next to him, placing my left arm through his right and laying my head on his shoulder.

"You okay?" I asked already knowing the answer.

After a few minutes he nodded and said, "Let's get you home," to which I had no objections.

We walked arm in arm sharing the silence on the way to his car. I tried not to be obvious as I looked him over to make sure he wasn't hurt too bad. Blood was splattered all over his shirt and jeans. The smell was making my throat burn from my own thirst. The smell was so strong that I forced myself to breathe out of my mouth in hope that I could silence my thirst until I got home. What I saw when I looked at his face and hands was unbelievable. He didn't have even the tiniest scratch on him, nothing. He opened the door for me and I slid in taking a deep breath inhaling the night and longing for the morning.

## *5. Irish Brother's Coffee*

The next morning at breakfast, Taylor didn't say a word other than Amen after the blessing. Lucky for him mom had a lot on her mind and did most of the talking. Taylor just sat there quietly eating his eggs, French toast and bacon. Only God could know what was going through his head. It was pretty obvious to me that he was pondering last night's craziness. The long look on his face gave away just how tormented he felt inside for losing control.

I excused myself from the table to start clearing the dishes when dad cleared his throat loudly, sitting up straighter in his chair.

"Your mother and I have been praying about something and we wanted to know what you guys thought on the matter," he said happily.

Mom handed me her orange juice glass and smiled at my father. Her facial expression spoke volumes about what my father was fixing to say. According to the look on her face, she didn't need to pray. She had already made up her mind. Watching her eyebrows lift accompanied by her fake smile, I knew all too well that whatever he was about to tell us was solely my dad's idea. She was just going along for the ride.

I finished clearing the table quickly and sat back down next to Taylor who now was focusing on our father's face.

Dad stood up and walked over to the drawer by the refrigerator. Opening it he grabbed what looked like 4x6 pictures and sat back down. He handed Taylor and I each one. I skimmed over the card and looked at my mom confused. She just smiled and shrugged.

"An Irish Brother's coffee coupon," Taylor said more as a question than a statement.

"Yes," dad answered gleaming.

Narrowing my eyebrows in utter confusion I turned the card over and analyzed the back. I knew I had to be missing something.



Dad laughed enjoying the moment when mom spoke up. "Your father and I are buying it," she said trying to sound enthused. "We believe it would be a smart investment."

"Oh . . . well that's cool," I said coming out of the haze of confusion previously surrounding me. I nodded in approval while giving the card another look. "I personally love their coffee." I turned to my father and asked him when it would be ours. Sudden thoughts of free Irish Mocha's began swirling around in my head making me instantly giddy and I couldn't help but smile.

Seeing my excitement dad grabbed mom's hand and kissed it. "If you both like the idea, it will be ours by the end of the week. All I have to do is make one phone call and get the paperwork going."

I looked at Taylor who was now nodding yes. "Sounds like a smart investment to me. That place is always rockin," he said, agreeing with our father while he smiled at our mom. I was sure he was trying to calm her worried nerves.

"Taylor's right. That place is always busy. The twins that work there are awesome. Personally I think that people go there just to see them," I laughed. "They are some of the nicest guys ever."

Mom let out a small laugh which sounded more like a calming release of stress than anything. The more Taylor and I told her how much we liked the idea, the more she relaxed. Dad's energy alone was huge. His anticipation filled the room with so much life that my spirit felt just like a hot air balloon lifting off the ground. As soon as he knew both Taylor and I were on board, he was on the phone making the arrangements.

I got up to leave and mom grabbed my arm gently pulling me aside. "With all the excitement your father forgot a few details," she said quietly as not to disturb his phone call. My mom motioned to Taylor to come and stand with us.

"As part of the franchise agreement we will all have to put in some time there this week before the paperwork is final. This will be a family endeavor," she said looking more excited than before. "I hope you guys are okay with that."

Neither Taylor nor I had any issues with the arrangements. He and I were both coffee junkies. Now I really couldn't imagine what Jenny would say. Surrounding Jenny with unlimited coffee would be heaven for her.

When my father got off the phone he was glowing. "Well guys, it'll be a done deal this afternoon after your mother and I sign the papers." He went up to our mom and put his arms around her from behind kissing her cheek. "So which one of you wants to meet our new employees tonight?" he asked as he rested his chin on the top of our mother's head.

"I'll go," I volunteered. "Can I bring Jenny?" I was praying they would say yes. If they did it would quite possibly be the highlight of her entire life so far.

"I'd go if I didn't already have plans," Taylor interjected.

I turned sharply to look at him. As weird as it was, he and I always knew what the other was doing yet I had no clue what plans he had.

Mom looked at him sadly. "Aw, I was hoping you would go with Haden so she wouldn't be alone. We don't know those guys that work there and your father and I have prior plans so we're out," she said looking back at my dad. "Well I guess you will definitely need Jenny tonight then."

I was still staring at Taylor who for some reason wouldn't look at me. I could feel how tense he was and it bothered me immensely. He didn't want me to see the pain in his eyes so he avoided all eye contact with me. I hated how mad he was at himself. He just didn't seem to get that everyone loses control at one point in time. He was human even though he acted like he wasn't.

He looked at me quickly and then back at our parents. Being the great brother he was he told our parents that he would check on Jenny and I. He reassured them that he would be accessible if I needed him so they wouldn't have to worry.

Our parents were happy with the verdict. I however was annoyed with how closed off my brother was being. If I was the one hurt he would be driving me crazy trying to get me to talk. In a childish moment I decided to let him have his pity-party tonight. If he wanted to be like that with me . . . then so be it.

When our family meeting was done they excused us to go our separate ways. I ran up the stairs as I imagined what Jenny was going to say when I called her. I couldn't wait to tell her our new family plans. She had been eyeing a guy that worked at Irish Brother's Coffee for weeks now. She was definitely gonna freak out.

Once I was in my room I grabbed my cell phone, plopped down stomach first on my bed and dialed Jenny. She picked up after only two rings.

"Holla," she answered.

I laughed. "What's up yo!"

"Not much, just finished getting the best pedicure ever," she said happy with herself.

"Awesome, cuz you're gonna need it for tonight." That caught her attention immediately.

"Oh really, and why would that be?" she asked impatiently.

I proceeded to explain our family news and what plans she and I now had for the evening. Before I could finish she had already squeaked on the phone with me multiple times.

"No freakin way! You have got to be kidding me. That is just about the best news ever! Holy cow, I wonder if Zach is working tonight," she said her voice sounding like it was about to jump through the phone.

I couldn't help but laugh. She was more thrilled than I had anticipated. Her excitement was absolutely contagious even though I didn't find Zach quite as attractive as she did. I hung up the phone and immediately scanned my closet for a cute outfit.

The day flew by as fast as I had hoped. In no time at all Jenny and her pastel pink Volkswagen bug were parked in front of my house waiting for me as she honked impatiently.

I hopped in her car and waved at my mom who was peering out the window. Jenny looked over at me smiling, put the top down, and turned up the radio. I guessed we were going for the windblown look tonight.

"Well don't you look cute," I shouted over the music. She was wearing a pale pink form fitting *Irish Brother's* tee shirt with knee length cut off shorts and sandals. Oddly enough she and I almost matched. I too, was wearing cut off shorts and an *Irish Brother's* shirt. Only my shirt was pale yellow.

"Thanks. So do you hot mama," she said punching the accelerator. She threw a piece of gum in her mouth changed the station until she stopped on an old school rap song. "Zach's working tonight," she giggled.

"How do you know that?" I asked laughing.

"I have my sources," she said laughing with me.

Jenny was insatiable. One of the many things I loved about her was how she went after what she wanted. I had no doubt that tonight would be one to remember.

Jenny's car flew into the parking spot. All heads turned our way and I chuckled. She really should have been an actress. She hopped out of the car and flattened her hair as we walked towards the coffee shop. I spotted Zach's truck and laughed on the inside. It was almost as if she had this all planned. Prancing her way to the walk up window I couldn't help but admire her free spirit. She was like a bird ready to fly anywhere. I myself preferred to keep my feet on solid ground. I had no doubt that God had put us together for a reason. My rational brain had saved her more than once while her free spirit had helped me use my wings and fly multiple times.

Just as luck would have it, Zach was manning the walk up window. His boyish face shined instantly when he spotted Jenny and I. He looked us both up and down with an approving grin as Jenny pretended not to notice. She was already working on reeling him in.

He was a charming guy for sure. The spark in his eyes lit up his already bright smile. With his short, dark, wavy hair and tall, slender build it gave him somewhat of a q-tip appearance.

Even still, it was easy to overlook his unkempt hair with all of his other extremely attractive attributes. All anyone had to do was look into his dazzling hazel eyes and any girl would easily be rendered helpless. Even though he wasn't a big guy physically it seemed as if he bathed in testosterone. Its' delicious scent called to any woman within a five mile radius. They flocked to him like a cat to cat nip. I had seen it the many times I needed a chocolate coffee fix. He loved women and they loved him right back.

"Well hello," he said looking like he had just won a free trip to Disneyland. "And what can I get for you two lovely ladies?"

Jenny leaned over resting her elbows on the counter. "I'll have a vanilla freeze and my friend here will have an Irish Mocha on ice. Free of charge of course," she said, her eyes twinkling.

As Zach tried to process the petite blonde girls order of free drinks, one of the twins walked up to the window and gently shoved Zach out of the way.

"We can do both of those drinks, just not free," he smiled. If Jenny would have only gotten Collin instead of Patrick she might have gotten her free drinks like she wanted.

Patrick and Collin were identical twins, both sporting somewhat of an organic bear-like look. They were average height, slightly overweight Irish brothers. Both had dark brown hair and wore dark rimmed glasses with three quarter of an inch gauges in their ears. Each one often sported a little facial hair giving them their rough teddy bear-like appearance.

It was extremely easy to tell them apart even though they were identical. Collin was the crazier of the two which was even obvious by how they wore their hair. Patrick had his cut short whereas Collin sported dreads. Collin sometimes hid them beneath his crocheted Tam hat making him resemble a thick, white skinned Bob Marley. Patrick on the other hand normally had a baseball cap on. Both wore vintage tee-shirts and dark jeans which hung low.

Before Jenny could say anything else to embarrass me I told him we would gladly pay for our drinks. Unfortunately Jenny ran her mouth again anyway.

"My friend's father is the new owner of your lovely coffee shop," she said proud.

Patrick looked at me apologetically and told me the drinks were on the house. I refused and paid anyway. As I handed him the money I was startled to see Zach in between us.

"Well then, it would only be right for me to escort you both into our fine establishment and give you a tour," he said lacing Jenny and my hands through his arms.

I caught Patrick in my peripheral vision rolling his eyes at Zach and I smiled at him. He smiled back warmly, comforting me. I was definitely going to like this guy and so was my father.

The inside of the coffee shop was filled with the tantalizing smell of coffee and sounds of fun, funky tunes. It was a small little building where there was only enough room inside for its employees and its coffee making supplies.

Customers could get their coffee fix through one of two drive-through windows or a walk up window in the very front of the building.

It didn't take long before Jenny had worked her magic on Zach. In no time at all the two of them took to flirting with each other and then the dancing started. They danced around half the night while they served customers, amusing them with their antics. The air in the coffee shop was light and full of energy. It had a fun feel to it but even still I found myself missing Taylor. I tried my best not to think about him by taking customers orders which seemed to work, at least for a little while.

The next song came on and I gave in to my body's pleading, letting it move to the music. Jenny laughed dancing around me. The only one not dancing was Patrick but it wasn't long before I caught him nodding his head to the beat.

Patrick's twin brother Collin showed up briefly on his chopper but only long enough to get money from his brother and introduce himself to us. After he left I looked at my watch wondering where Taylor was. He wasn't doing a very good job of checking on me. As if he knew I was thinking about him my phone went off with a text from him.

*"You high from all that caffeine yet?"* he asked.

*"Not yet, but Jenny might be,"* I typed laughing as I looked at Jenny.

*"Not surprising. If you need me, text and I'll be there in seconds. Have fun,"* he said ending our short conversation. As much as I wanted to make him feel better I knew that all he needed was some time alone. I was sure he'd be back to his old self by tomorrow. It looked like he was already feeling better and that made me breathe a little easier.

Another awesome song resonated out of the speakers and we all started dancing again. Two Irish Mocha's later, I was wired. Zach went to the restroom to change and came back in shorts, barefoot. It appeared he lost his shoes somewhere on his way to the restroom. He grabbed my hand and swung me around, pulling me into his arms and kissing my cheek before releasing me. I laughed carelessly enjoying the moment.

There was no question in my mind as to why there was a waiting list to work here. It definitely didn't feel like a job. As odd as it seemed to me, at one point in the night we even had people getting out of their cars to dance in the parking lot. Now I knew without a doubt why some people thought caffeine was a drug. After all, it had me dancing in a coffee shop with strangers. It had to have some affect on ones rational thinking.

Out of breath, I decided to sit on a bucket and rest for a minute. I watched as Zach bounced around filling the coffee house with craziness when I noticed a huge tattoo of a grey wolf showing its teeth on his left calf.

Patrick saw me staring at Zach's skinny tattooed leg and laughed, "Pretty cool huh."

I nodded smiling.

He pulled up a bucket next to me. "You like wolves?" he asked.

Never really having given much thought to wolves I told him sure, they were okay.

"Just okay," he laughed. "They're *way* cooler than okay."

Zach stopped dancing long enough to notice we were staring at his leg, "Sexy eh. It's my wolf . . . Edzachary."

Patrick laughed shaking his head as he got up to take the next order at the window.

The name of Zach's wolf was interesting but I wasn't biting. I knew his type all too well. The, anything to get attention, type.

Jenny couldn't help herself, "Edzachary?"

"Yep, you see his sharp teeth? That is edzachary what people will get if they make me mad," Zach said laughing as he tilted his head up like a howling dog.

Jenny laughed along with him just like a little school girl while Patrick and I sighed together.

Before too long our exciting caffeine filled night came to an end. It was time to leave. As much fun as I had I was ready to go home and take a hot bath filled with tons of glorious white bubbles. Jenny however looked like she was anything but ready to go home. I saw Zach slip her his number right before we walked out the back door.

Trying to give them a little privacy I hurriedly stepped into the cool night and inhaled deeply, feeling my lungs burn from the crisp air. Jenny wasn't too far behind me.

I turned around one last time to see Zach laughing at Patrick. Strangely enough it almost sounded like he was howling. My insides laughed too, relishing in Zach's giddy humor. He was obviously obsessed with wolves; to each his own I thought.

Looking at Jenny's zoned expression, it was obvious to me that she was even more love struck than when we first arrived. Even I couldn't deny Zach's charm.

With Jenny looking like she was off on planet La La, I grabbed the keys out of her hand and slid into the driver's seat so she could concentrate on visions of Zach in her head. With the key in the ignition, I put a cd in and drove us home while she swooned.

## 6. *Fresh Air*

The next morning I awoke to the delectable smell of fresh coffee permeating through the house. Stretching, I yawned, ridding myself of any leftover exhaustion from the fun night before. Sitting up slowly I rested my feet on the plush white carpet enjoying its pillowy softness in between my toes.

Inhaling the morning air I looked around my room and smiled. I loved everything about my bedroom from the moonlit wall color with its elegant frame of snow white crown molding to the massive window behind my bed. Its large size was perfect for inviting the morning sun into my haven, shining its light on all my treasures. Treasures like the key carved out of rose quartz sitting on my bedside table. It was a present from my parents. According to them, it held the path to true love.

My bed was my second favorite thing in my room.

It was the one place I could go and close my eyes escaping my life. It was nowhere near as special as my brothers. Instead it was just a simple queen size bed with a delicately carved white headboard. Lying on top of it was another treasure of mine, a gift from my mother, a hand-made quilt. Its light pink flowers gave my room the constant feel of Spring which I relished.

Looking at the clock I stood up and stretched one more time. Before I had a chance to walk to my closet to get my robe and slippers there was a soft knock at the door. There stood Taylor freshly showered and ready for his day unlike me who looked like an unkempt mess.

Looking me over with an amused grin he told me my presence was requested downstairs. I squinted my eyes and peered at him through tiny slits, in hope that it would make his beautiful face plastered with that aggravating expression look smaller.

"Have a rough night," he teased as he gave my ruffled hair another once over.

Sticking my tongue out at him I told him that I didn't find him funny.

"I don't know Haden, I actually think you pull that hair style off," he said before turning around and leaving.

Shutting my door I went straight to my mirror. My reflection made me jump. He was right to snicker. My hair looked like a birds nest. Huffing I made my way to the bathroom where I hurriedly brushed my hair and put it in a pony tail.

Being the last one to make it to the table I apologized for taking so long and sat down next to a grinning Taylor. I slapped his arm softly giving him a dirty look and poured myself some coffee.

As soon as dad was done giving thanks for our food mom stood up to serve everyone. "So your father and I were thinking," she said with a sneaky twinkle in her eye. "We would really love to celebrate y'all's birthday at Swan Lake this year. And she continued as her grin got even bigger, "we've taken it upon ourselves to invite some friends of the family to come and celebrate with us. What do you guys think?"

Taking a sip of my steaming coffee I looked up at her sparkling face and smiled. Even though the last thing I wanted was a huge birthday party I thought her idea was nice. She was so pleased that she clapped her hands together and then turned her attention to Taylor who was scarfing down his eggs.

"What about you honey? How does it sound to you?" She studied his face while he chewed.

Taking a drink of his water after he finished his bite he looked her in the eye and said it sounded perfect. Mom grabbed dad's hand and took a sip of her coffee, letting her excitement spill out of her words.

"Wonderful!" she said, her voice raising an octave.

If I didn't know better I would have thought she was somewhat nervous when dad spoke up.

"Your mother and I were actually wondering if you two would consider making a little vacation of it by going early. I'd really like to spend some one on one time with your mom," he said looking at us.

Taylor turned his head towards me catching my eyes in his stare. His expression was deep and unrecognizable. Instant chills ran down my spine making me feel as if I were in some sort of trance. I was beginning to think Taylor hadn't heard our father when he slowly turned away and answered him.

"When would you like us to leave?" he asked taking another slow sip of his water.

Dad's answer startled me. "Tomorrow afternoon."

He reminded us that in two days it would be the anniversary of when he and mom met each other, a day they celebrated each year. It was pretty obvious that they wanted us out of the house as soon as we could leave.

Taylor offered for them to go to the cabin instead of us and mom snapped, blurting out the word, "no" as if it were life and death. Both Taylor and I turned our attention to her.

Quickly regaining her composure she apologized for her outburst saying that it was important to her that he and I get some fresh air before the big party, that we deserved a vacation. When she realized that he and I weren't buying her story she told us that she had last minute preparations that needed to be done before the party and she really needed us out of the house. She assured us that they would be more than fine staying home.

Even though I found her little outburst weird, I said nothing. If they wanted us out of the house, I was game. The more I thought about it, the more I thought she was right; I could use some fresh air.

Neither Taylor nor I said anything else about why she wanted us gone. We both loved our family cabin and it didn't take any arm twisting to get us to go there. If anything, my brother looked extremely content with the idea of leaving soon. I was pretty sure that he was ready to get away just as much as I was if not more. His wounds from two nights before were still fresh on his heart even though he was doing a better job of hiding it now.

After I cleared the breakfast table Taylor and I walked up the stairs together. Following me into my room he didn't say anything. He just sat on my chair and stared off into space.

Trying to bring him back mentally I asked him if he was going to invite Kiernan and Brad to come early. Just as I had hoped, his eyes were no longer staring into the distance but were once again on me, this time with much less intensity. Not wanting to seem too interested in his answer I got to work fixing my bed hoping he'd say no.

He stood up and walked towards the edge of the window behind my bed before giving me his answer. It seemed he was still in deep thought. He tilted his head to the side and looked up at the sky. I didn't say anything to try to bring him back from where he was. I knew he would answer me when he felt like it.

Continuing to stare off into space Taylor told me that Brad already had plans visiting his aunt. So he wouldn't be there before the party. With as busy as Brad had been with his mom's family it was likely that he might not even make it to the party according to Taylor. I knew better though. Brad was like a brother to Taylor and I and he wouldn't miss our birthday celebration for the world. In his eyes, *we* were his family.

"And Kiernan, are you going to invite him?" I figured at this rate I would have to ask him until he answered if I really wanted to know.

Taylor opened the portion of the window by him and took a deep breath. "I love how it smells outside."

Not knowing what to say to that, I stood frozen wondering what had happened to him to cause him to be so weird. Right as I was about to come to the conclusion that he might need to seek help he finally answered me.

"Mom and dad need him here as far as I know. Besides, I'm pretty happy about having some quiet time at the lake to read and as we both know, the word quiet and Kiernan do not go together," he said.

Right then I realized I had stopped fixing my bed to stare at him. In seconds he turned towards me and smiled catching me off guard. In hopes my face wouldn't give my startled heart away I went back to pulling the sheets up. Before I could think, he was right next to me and his hand was on mine. My body froze as my heart began to race. He turned me to face him. Neither one of us spoke. He just stared into my eyes with such intensity that I could almost feel my body elevate off of the floor. He rubbed my cheek gently with the back side of his hand causing me to sway some. In seconds his hands were on the lower part of my back, pulling me closer to him in an attempt to keep me from falling. Inhaling deeply I tried to maintain my balance. I was so caught up in the moment that I jumped, moving far away from him when the sound of whistling filled the stairs.

"Well if it ain't Batman and Catwoman," Kiernan laughed grinning from ear to ear as he entered my room.

Completely oblivious to the awkward moment and totally not caring that I was in my robe and pj's he continued. "I was thinking, what do you two super hero's think about putting on a show? We'd all be rich. You two already are, but me . . . now I'd be rich for the first time," he said smiling as he stared off into space as if he was watching it all play out in the air.

Even without looking in his direction I could feel Taylor tense up, "That night was a one-time thing Kiernan. It will not repeat itself," he said as a matter of fact.

"Aw, Batman is only sad because he had no Robin; that and the fact that Catwoman wasn't wearing her sexy suit. "Rawr," he said clawing the air in my direction.

"Kiernan, ew," I said laughing. I didn't know whether to be thankful my little crazy friend showed up when he did or be mad. Either way I was happy to laugh.

"Sorry Haden me girl, sometimes your beauty just overwhelms me heart." Kiernan turned to face me and bowed.

"There is *no* Batman, *no* Catwoman and *no* need for a Robin," Taylor insisted, his temper starting to rise.

Taylor rarely lost his temper about anything and even when he did, Kiernan ignored it.

Rolling his eyes Kiernan nudged me, "Looks like ol' Batty boy woke up on the wrong side of the bat cave this morning. Alright Mr. cranky pants but if ya change yer mind, I already bought the costume," he gloated.

"You didn't?" I laughed hysterically at the thought of Kiernan in a Robin costume.

"Sure did, wouldja like to see Princess Kitty Cat," he flirted.

"No she does not want to see," Taylor bit back with a look of jealousy on his face.

"No need to be jealous me cape crusader," Kiernan continued to joke, "if ya'd like I could put on me sexy jeans ol' fruity Brad was checkin out me backside in for ya," he winked.

"Will you please refrain from calling me Batman?" Taylor pleaded.

"Why of course I'll just flirt with your sister instead . . . prrrr," Kiernan said doing that weird air clawing thing again.

Taylor immediately turned to Kiernan and told him to stop purring at me, his words cutting through the air like a knife.

Noting that Taylor meant business, Kiernan did what he did best; he changed the subject.

"Looks like yer in need of a cigar my friend," Kiernan said pulling one out of his pocket and handing it to Taylor.

Taylor took the cigar and looked back at Kiernan confused. "You don't smoke. What are you doing with cigars?" he asked, the look of annoyance on his face slowly being replaced with amusement.

Kiernan was quick to inform Taylor that it was a new habit he had recently picked up."

"They make me look older *and* taller," he said, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

I laughed so hard my cheeks hurt. When I regained my composure I asked him how on earth he thought smoking cigars would make him look taller. A tiny voice answered my question from the hall before he had a chance.

"Because when a guy is as small as Kiernan is, and someone sees him puffing on a stinky stick they will know he's not twelve," Jenny said gleefully as she entered my room holding Haylee.

Jenny plopped down on my bed and smirked at Kiernan hoping to annoy him. Instead his smile got even bigger at the sight of her. He walked over to where she sat and took her hand, kissing it.

"If it isn't my one true love, Ai how my heart skips a beat at the sound of yer lovely voice," he said to Jenny while petting Haylee's head.

"Her name is Haylee stinky stick smoker," Jenny laughed pretending he was talking to her dog.

Taylor shook his head and smiled at her. "You know, you two act like an old married couple."

"Me? Marry Linky the leprechaun? Psh, never," Jenny said, rolled her eyes while smiling.

"Never say never," Kiernan interjected. "Ya just never know what our Good Lord has in store for us."

Jenny huffed throwing her head back in denial. "You're not my type Linky . . . you smoke," she laughed, amused with her wit.

Clearly having his mind elsewhere, Taylor excused himself to go speak with our father. Kiernan followed him after quickly bowing in front of Jenny and winking at me.

I went into my closet and tossed my luggage onto the bed next to Jenny.

"Whatcha doing with your luggage out?" she asked curious. "Are we going somewhere?"

Opening the larger of the two suit cases I told her how Taylor and I would be leaving first thing the next morning for Swan Lake.

"Mom and dad want some alone time. They're going to meet us there Friday in time to get ready for our birthday party on Saturday. I'm assuming you were already in on the party part," I said as I walked back to my closet to get some jeans.

"Yep but I had no clue about the pre-party, party. I wanna come." Jenn said her eyes wide with excitement.

Stopping dead in my tracks I quickly tried to figure out how to hold her off for a few days. "How about Thursday?" I asked nonchalantly.

She jumped off the bed and put her I-Pod into my stereo turning on some POD. "That works," she agreed.

Thanking God I had dodged that bullet, my mouth suddenly ran amuck. "Cool, Taylor and I will have a couple days to be alone," I accidentally said out loud.

She turned to look at me, her eyes huge. Silence filled my large room before she slowly opened her tiny mouth. "How long have we known each other?" she asked looking at her nails.

"Um, I don't know . . . forever." My words quivered as they left my lips. I knew exactly where this was going and I couldn't quite figure out how to get out of it.

"You know I love you right. Like you're my sister," she said her eyes still wide as she searched my face.

Gulping I told her that I knew she loved me. What I didn't understand was why she was asking me that question. I was hoping that if I questioned her it would throw her off track. Looking at her face I saw immediately that I was doomed. There was no way to get out of what I had accidentally said. The cat was out of the bag.

"Well it's just that . . ." She paused as she walked over to my door and shut it. "Have you ever wondered if you and Taylor weren't really related?"



There, it was out. She had asked it and here I was frozen not knowing what to say. I had never lied to her but suddenly I was thinking about it. Watching me closely, her eyes finally began shrinking back to their normal size.

"Be honest," she prodded.

Sighing, I sat on my bed by my luggage and crossed my legs. She had won. The truth was about to come out. "Yes, sometimes I wonder."

"I knew it!" she screamed.

"Shhh," I said looking back at the door praying no one heard her outburst.

"Sorry, it's just that to hear you say it was like it made it real. Gosh Haden, you two look nothing alike. I bet he wonders too. I mean come on, the way he looks at you sometimes, it's as if you're a steak he's fixing to take a huge bite out of. In a good way of course," she said giggling as her excitement beamed off of her.

I was quick to inform her that we were not adopted. There was no way our parents would have lied to us even though there were many times I wondered it myself.

"So me being the steak and Taylor the fork or whatever you said would be incest and really gross," I informed her.

If she had only known the recent feelings for him I had been battling inside my heart, she would have freaked.

"Well, I'm totally not convinced. I think he's adopted. Seriously, it can't be you. You look too much like your dad but Taylor resembles no one. So what if it *is* incest? You two could move to some inbred city and no one would care," she teased.

"No thanks," I muttered starting to feel depressed.

"You're not mad at me are you?" Jenny asked worried.

"No, of course not, I've questioned it too remember."

"Well it's totally obvious that Taylor is madly in love with you and you with him. Now we just need to prove that you two aren't related so you don't gross yourself out and if by some weird chance you really are related we can move far away and get you counseling. We could go to Miami. The guys there would be the perfect distraction for you."

I could see her brain working as she continued to plan our imaginary trip. The fact that we were even having this discussion was crazy to me. If anyone heard us they would put us in a mental institution for sure.

Coming back to earth she walked over to my full length mirror and ran her fingers through her blonde locks. "Anywho, it's all settled. Mission, *Truth about Taylor*, has begun," she grinned proud. "If I'm right, you'll owe me," she teased.

It took everything I had in me not to tell her about all the strange feelings I had been having over the past few weeks. Like how I became weak in the knees or how I passed out if Taylor's beautiful face got too close to mine. Even worse, how I had laid in bed many a night praying that he and I weren't related.

I grabbed more pajamas out of my dresser drawer and placed them neatly in my suit case while I wondered if there could be any truth to Jenny's assessment about Taylor having unusual feelings for me too. I knew better than to trust Jenny when it had to do with matters of the heart. She thrived on romance so I figured it just had to be her crazy imagination running wild. Even still I couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement in my heart as I continued to pack.

When I was done, I walked Jenny to her car. Walking his dog across the street was an old friend of ours, Craig. He was a couple years older than us. Jenny had had a huge crush on him for as long as I could remember. Our eyes met and he waved, smiling at me.

"Hey Craig," Jenny yelled jumping back out of her car. She immediately entered flirting mode as he approached us. She bent down and pet his husky when suddenly her eyes lit up.

She sprung up like a pogo stick. I knew exactly what she was thinking. Jenny thought my birthday parties were her own personal social functions. She cocked her head to the side like a cute puppy and asked him if he had any plans for the weekend.

He smiled at her, clearly taken in by her cute charm. When the word no came out of his mouth she began reeling him in just like she had Zach.

"Wonderful, then you have to come to Haden and Taylor's eighteenth birthday bash at their cabin up at Swan Lake," she insisted.

He looked at me questioning my best friend's insistence. I reassured him that Taylor and I would love for him come if he was free. I smiled at Jenn and told Craig that I had some stuff I needed to finish before I left so I would let her give him all the details.

I waved at both of them and turned towards my house. I knew Jenny like the back of my hand. She had no doubt invited him for a couple of reasons. One, because she thought he was cute but more importantly she wanted him to there to keep her busy so Kiernan would leave her alone. What I didn't understand is how she thought her crazy idea would work. Kiernan wasn't intimidated by anyone.

I laughed to myself when my father and Taylor pulled in the driveway in my father's BMW.

"Hey good lookin," my dad yelled out of his window.

"Hey dad," I said walking towards the driveway.

"You all packed?" he asked as he stepped out of his car.

"Not yet, someone's been keepin me busy," I said tilting my head in Jenny's direction.

"Well you better get crackin," he teased. "Since I have you both here, what would you guys like for dinner?"

"Whatever Haden and mom wants is fine with me," Taylor answered.

"Um, steak would be great. Yeah, a big, juicy, bloody steak," I said staring to salivate. They both looked at me, their faces frozen.

"Um, hold the blood," I laughed trying to make a joke out of my slip up.

They both smiled and dad said, "But wherever shall we find the beef?"

Taylor kissed my cheek, swung me on his back and carried me in the house. I waved at Jenny and Craig who was now holding Haylee.

"Her and that dog," Taylor laughed setting me down next to mom who had been waiting by the front door.

"Ladies, if you will excuse me," Taylor said now kissing moms cheek and then heading up the stairs.

"Aw sweet Romeo," mom said watching him leave. "He's going to be a wonderful husband some day," she said proudly.

I don't know why I said what I said next exactly. I could blame it on a slight twitch in my brain but that would be a lie. In all honesty I have no clue why I said what I did. All I know is that it bothered my mother way more than it should have.

"Speaking of Taylor being a good husband," I said watching her closely. "Would you believe that Jenny thinks he and I aren't really brother and sister? Her crazy head has come to the conclusion that he and I aren't related at all."

There was a look of utter shock frozen on my moms' face. It looked as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Funny huh," I said hoping she would snap out of it.

Just then dad walked up, "What's wrong?" he asked looking her over.

I told him what I said and the same look of shock was on his face. The only difference was that he regained his composure quickly whereas mom's lower lip was now trembling.

"We'll talk about this later," dad said to me, leading mom into the living room.

Their reaction was not at all what I had expected. I thought mom would have denied it, possibly even found it funny but by her facial expression I was way off. Looking at the two of them, I knew I wasn't the only one in need of some fresh air.

## 7. *Swan Lake*

The next morning I was awoken by the sounds of imaginary birds from my alarm clock. After a tasty breakfast of way too much food, Taylor and I were saying our goodbyes and were out the door. I was happy I had convinced him to take my Accord. I knew that he would be too tempted to speed in his car and I honestly didn't think my stomach could handle it.

Once we were on the road I leaned my head back and shut my eyes. Mental exhaustion had been my constant companion recently. I was beyond tired.

"Would you like me to drive slow so you can sleep?" he offered.

"Nah, I'm good," I said yawning. "I just have a lot on my mind."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really but if I change my mind, I'll let you know." I smiled at him, closing my eyes again.

I inhaled relishing in the smell of his cologne. The last thing I remembered was him putting in a piano cd. Within seconds I was drifting off.

"We're here sleepyhead," Taylor said bringing me out of a dream.

I apologized for drifting off. "How long was I asleep?" I asked trying to un-cloud my tired eyes.

"Only about two and a half hours," he said grinning, pleased with himself.

"You drove the speed limit the whole way?" I questioned shocked.

"Yes ma'am, you looked like you needed your rest and I figured if you had a nap you wouldn't pass out on me," he teased.

*I wouldn't count on it*, I thought. Getting out of the car I stretched, coming back to life as I breathed in a huge breath of fresh Montana air. Opening the cabin door, the smell of cedar flooded my nose.

"Oh gosh I've missed it here," I said sitting on the couch.

"Me too," Taylor agreed sitting next to me.

I had always loved visiting our cabin, especially when I was a child. It was a home away from home; no phone, no cable and no internet, just endless peace and the sounds of God's creatures. The cabin itself was quaint, nestled deep in the woods. It was a relatively small one story, three bedroom home; only a short walking distance from other cabins and the lake where we had spent many a summer day fishing while growing up.

After I was done unpacking, I made my way towards the other hidden room in my life when I stopped short. *I'm so tired of this*, I thought. My thirst was there but it wasn't unbearable so I decided to nix my need for blood at that moment. Something new had erupted within me, hope. Maybe I could wean myself off of it while we were at the cabin. Here I had no stress, only peace and quiet. It would be a terrific birthday present for me. By the time I would go home, I would be normal just like everyone else.

That got me thinking. I couldn't remember the last time my parents had taken me to the doctor. Technically I could have been cured and no one knew it. Maybe the only reason I had passed out was because I was lacking iron in my diet. What if it was only a serious type of anemia? That would definitely explain why drinking blood helped me to feel better. I decided right then I would run to the store and pick up some iron as soon as I got settled in. I was ecstatic with my new revelation and couldn't wait to test it out.

After unpacking my suitcases I hurried back towards the kitchen where Taylor was hovering over the island in the center of the room. My eyes were immediately drawn to the slate grey apron he was wearing. I squinted trying to read the words written on it a little better.

*Warning: Stud Muffin Cooking* ran across its' front in big black letters. It was the perfect kitchen accessory to his jeans and black tee shirt. Smiling at his cute apron something else caught my eye. Barely peaking out under the arm of his short sleeve tee-shirt was some black thing.

He looked up and smiled at me. "Mom," he said through a laugh. "They left presents for you too. I put them on the kitchen table."

"Thanks," I said trying to see his arm as he was cutting what appeared to be lettuce.

"I'm making us a grilled chicken salad with balsamic vinaigrette dressing and some homemade sweet tea," he grinned.

"Sounds delicious," I mumbled moving closer to see his arm.

He started nodding the closer I got to him. "Yes, it's a tattoo," he laughed showing his sparkling white teeth.

"You got a tattoo?" I gasped. "Do mom and dad know?" I asked gently moving his shirt sleeve up to get a closer look.

"Not yet."

"Oh Taylor, it's beautiful!" I said as I stared at the ornate black cross on his right arm. "How did you get it? You're not eighteen yet."

"The guy who did it was a friend of Brad's. Do you like it?" he asked, tossing the lettuce into a bowl.

"No, I don't like it. I love it," I exclaimed.

"Aren't you even the least bit interested in your presents?"

"Oh yeah," I laughed, "I had forgotten all about them when I saw your tattoo." I walked over to my presents and grabbed the card. Opening it I read it silently.

*Haden,*

*Seems like it was just yesterday that we were able to bounce you on our knee and now you are a beautiful young woman. We have been so blessed to watch you blossom in front of our eyes. You are our heart and will always be our little girl no matter what. Happy early birthday to our sparkling sunshine*

*We love you,  
Mom & Dad*

I finished my parents' letter and picked up the little baby blue box opening it to find a tiny white gold locket bracelet. On the front was an etched cross which shimmered when the light caught it just right. I opened the locket and let my eyes rest on the picture of my family and I that lay on the right side next to three simple words on the left, *Family is Forever*. I was speechless. It was beautiful. Without hesitating I placed the locket on my wrist.

Next I moved on to my other present. This one was wrapped in the same paper but was a little larger in size. Next to its' bow lay a card telling me that it was just from my father. Inside the wrapped paper was a book. My eyes froze on the cover. It was no kind of book I had ever seen before. The background was dark black and in the center of the page was a picture of a creamy white rose, a very abnormal rose. Drops of blood dripping from one of the petals had my heart pumping faster. Startled I read the title, *Love Amidst the Darkness*, Author unknown. I was still in the dark until I read the preface.

*Being a vampire I had lived in solitude for the last one hundred years of my life, hating who I was. I was a creature I wanted no part of. I hadn't chosen the life of darkness. It chose me. Hiding from my kind as well as humans I feasted on animals feeling guilty for even that. I lived a life of solitude and sadness, never wanting to*

*emerge until Alec. Alec brought light where there was darkness. He taught me to love even though I felt dead; to use my crosses in life to help others including those I feared most... humans.*

*I have lived amidst my people and humans alike now for years bringing God's light to others through my decision not to let darkness rule my soul. I have written this book in the hope that others like me, those walking in darkness, know that they do have a choice; they too can choose the light.*

The book slipped out of my hands falling to the floor as I sat in shock. In seconds Taylor was right beside me.

"Are you alright?" he asked looking me over.

I couldn't answer him. I just stared off into space.

Taylor picked up the book trying to figure out what had caused me so much anguish.

Gently he sat the book down and asked me the same question that was running through my head, "Why would dad buy you that book?"

He spoke so softly that I couldn't really tell whether he was asking me the question or merely wondering out loud. I didn't have a response so I didn't answer him.

I wanted to believe my father had given me that book for no real reason but something else, a nagging sensation in the pit of my stomach told me that wasn't true.

"It sounds like an interesting read. I might have to borrow it," Taylor said breaking the silence. Studying my face he could tell I was still shaken up. "Maybe it's a love story, Haden. Dad knows you love those."

I ignored him trying to make sense of such a weird gift.

"Just because someone thirsts for blood doesn't mean they're evil you know," he said, his eyes staring intently at me.

His words caught me off guard. What was he saying? Had someone told him about my condition? I looked at him confused but still said nothing. No words would come.

Smiling at me he picked the book back up, turning it over to look at the back again. "Hey, maybe the guy's a human and he falls in love with the vampire," he suggested playfully.

"Doubtful," I sighed.

Seeing that there was no getting my mind off the fact my father had given me a vampire book for my birthday Taylor tried to change the subject.

"How about some lunch and then we can go lie out in the sun and read for awhile?" he asked catching me off-guard when his eyes locked momentarily with mine.

I agreed to his lunch offer, hoping that filling my stomach would silence my brain for a little while. I followed him to the kitchen table where I stuffed myself full of delicious salad.

Once we were outside I shut my eyes for a second and enjoyed the sun on my face. Right as I opened them Taylor took his shirt off and laid back on the lawn chair. My heart began to race as I stared at him. His body was unbelievably beautiful. His broad shoulders had me breathless. His jeans hung lightly on his waist allowing the very top of his boxer shorts to show. My eyes caught his tattoo again. It was painted perfectly on his muscular arm, moving slightly as he flexed while he leaned over to put his cell phone on the ground in-between the chairs.

I looked away quickly hoping he wouldn't catch me staring at him when my thirst made itself known again. The burning feeling deep down was beginning to rise, making itself almost impossible to ignore yet I refused to give in. I would hold off no matter how hard it was. Within the next couple of hours I would take a drive and pick up some iron. Right now I wanted to enjoy the fresh air. Looking into the forest I thought that maybe a brisk walk would do me good.

"I think I'm going to take a walk," I told Taylor swallowing the burning sensation in my throat.

"Want some company?" he asked lowering his sunglasses to look at me better.

"No thanks. You stay here and read. I won't be gone too long," I assured him.

I was having a hard enough time battling my thirst without having to try not to stare at him with his shirt off. He smiled softly at me before laying back in his chair. The sun reflecting off of his perfect skin had me in somewhat of a trance when he startled me, asking me if he could read my book. I told him to go for it. At this point my heart was beating as fast as a race horse. I needed to get out of there. I was quickly losing all the strength I had mustered.

"What's mine is yours. See you in a little while," I said turning to leave as fast as I could before he decided to come after me.

Entering the forest I took a deep breath relishing in the crisp air. There were no words for Swan Lake's beauty. I could feel God's presence in every tree and in every sweet song the birds sang. I continued to walk while I wished my thirst away. The further I got, the more my throat burned. Walking through the forest surrounded by huge trees I felt so small. Out here it was just me and my God.

I came across a rabbit and the scent of its blood tickled my nose. I quickly shook it off. *Vampires . . . psh whatever.* I knew all too well that those were only creatures in fables created by people with very vivid imaginations. I was no vampire. It was silly to have let that book bother me.

After walking for awhile I decided to rest under a tree enjoying the perfection of its majestic trunk. Wondering how long that tree had been there, suddenly my body froze. Flaring my nostrils I took a deep breath in... *Bear.* In that very second, something unexplainable happened to me. I jumped to my feet and crouched down. All I could think about was that smell, that overwhelmingly delicious smell! I heard rustling of leaves behind me but I didn't turn. I was no longer Haden. I was the hunter and *I was thirsty.* I began running faster and faster until I found the bear feeding on some small unrecognizable animal. Quietly I watched and then leapt like the elusive black panther in Taylor's dream.

I landed on top of the tall bear. It was no match for my strength even with as weak as I felt. I bit down, my teeth piercing through its paper-like skin, draining it of its life-source. I closed my eyes and drank, filling myself with strength. I finally stopped when I was so full that I could drink no more. Leaping off of the bear I licked my lips unaware of anyone watching me. I turned around slowly to find Taylor standing only a few feet from me with a look of pure shock on his face. My body began to shake with the reality of the moment. *Oh God, What have I done?* I thought to myself as I stood frozen, covered in blood.

I didn't know what to do. I could feel the strength the bear's blood had given me pulsating through my veins. It was exhilarating and yet I was totally confused as to what had just happened. Taylor watched me for a second and then he walked slowly towards me. I was frozen in fear. Shock covered my body like a blanket. He continued to walk towards me, stopping only inches away from my face. His eyes never left mine. What he did next shocked me even more than my own previous actions. He lifted his hand and wiped my lower lip with his index finger. Staring deep into my eyes, he licked the blood off of his finger and smiled. Then with one quick swoop I was on his back and he was running us back to the cabin. He was so fast that the trees were nothing but a blur. I closed my eyes and held on tight.

He set me down gently once we were inside. Staring up at him I got lost for a second in his eyes, chills running down my spine. I started to speak when he softly touched his finger to my lips.

"Shhh," he whispered.

He stood there staring at my face as if he had just found a missing puzzle piece. "We will have plenty of time to talk. Go wash up and change your clothes. I'll be waiting for you," he assured me, his eyes on fire.

I nodded, fighting back tears and went into my room closing the door behind me where I allowed my tears to fall like rain. I walked over to the sink so I could wash the blood off of my face. One look in the mirror and I was horrified at what I saw. Blood covered my face, neck and clothes. I scrubbed harder and harder as I stared at the stranger before me.

The hot water from my shower felt so good on my muscles. I closed my eyes enjoying the water caressing my face while trying not to think about what I had just done. Instead I visualized Taylor's face. *I love you*, I thought, hoping he would hear me.

Feeling refreshed after the shower I was more than ready to talk. I felt better physically than I had in years. While in the shower I came to realize that it was time I tell Taylor that I didn't think he and I were related. I would confess my love for him no matter the consequences. No more secrets.

I could smell the ribeye steaks that he had been marinating all day cooking and I was ravenous. So much time had passed in the forest and yet it felt like only minutes. Hunger engulfed me in more ways than one. I was hungry for him to know the truth about me... for us to find the truth together.

Walking out of my room I stopped dead in my tracks. I could hear voices coming from the living room. We weren't alone.

Kiernan's voice rang out like a loud bell in a quiet night. "I hope ya don't mind me bringing Amber along. She was free and Jenny bunny wouldn't ride with me. Somethin about tryin to find Haylee a sitter," Kiernan said.

*Amber? Oh God, not Amber. Not Taylor's ex-girlfriend.* I couldn't believe that Kiernan had brought her here.

Turning around I headed back into my room and started looking for my cell phone. Shaking, I dialed Jenny's number.

"Hey hottie," she answered as chipper as usual.

"Hey," I said starting to cry.

"Are you crying? Oh no what's wrong?" she asked.

"Kiernan's here and you're not going to believe who he brought with him?" I said through a flood of tears.

"Who?"

"Amber, of all people; he brought Amber," I said starting to hyperventilate, now hiding in my closet.

"What a total moron. I told you that little person has no brain-- no brain what so ever. Ugh, um ... okay. It's all good. No worries. I'm on it. Go dry your tears and just don't leave her alone with Taylor. I'll call you in few.

"Thanks, Jenn," I replied sniffling.

Once I regained my composure I decided to quickly change my outfit. No jeans tonight. Skimming through my closet I found a beautiful pale-blue cotton dress. Its small sleeves hung slightly off the shoulder exposing just a little of my skin to the nights air.

I put it on feeling it slide over my newly found curves until it touched the floor. Turning towards my mirror I admired my new dress that my mother had insisted I buy. It was perfect, not too fancy and not too plain. I pulled the clip out of my hair allowing it to hang freely on my shoulders. I was ready to face our guests when suddenly the phone rang.

"How much do you love me?" Jenny prodded happily.

"A lot," I answered wondering how she could possibly fix such a bad situation.

"Good because I'm on my way to pick up Craig. He and I will be with you in a few hours and then I'll handle Kiernan and Amber," she said excited.

"You're so good to me, Jenn."

"Yeah I know," she teased. "See ya soon."

Hanging up the phone I had a new sense of excitement pulsating through me. I stopped for a moment before leaving the room and leaned my head up against the wall. I closed my eyes and remembered how Taylor looked at me before I took a shower. Love swam in his eyes as he stared into mine. I had nothing to worry about. No matter what, I knew how much he loved me. I opened my eyes and took one step and then another until I was walking down the hall towards the voices.

When I reached the living room Taylor stood up. He exhaled looking at me with such love that my knees almost buckled.

"You look beautiful, Haden," he said staring into my eyes. Clearing his throat he spoke slowly, never taking his eyes off of me. "We have early guests as you can see. You remember..."

"Amber," she said when it seemed Taylor was having issues remembering her name.

I politely smiled and told her it was nice to see her again before she apologized for showing up unexpectedly. As she spoke she glanced over at Taylor whose gaze hadn't moved off of me. I smiled blushing and he turned away, still not looking at her.

Forcing a smile I told Amber she was welcome to stay. If my parents had taught me anything, it was manners even if I didn't like someone and this girl I didn't like.

Dinner seemed to drag on forever. Amber ate while focusing intently on Taylor who looked dazed and confused most of the night. He would politely smile back at her as she spoke but mostly he was off in his own world.

I sat there wishing Jenny would show up when out of the blue I thought I heard Taylor say I love you. My head popped up wondering who he was talking to but all I saw was him talking to *her*. Kiernan had gone to get their luggage and then I heard it again but this time followed by, *you*.

*Me?* I questioned in my mind looking at him. He turned his head slowly towards me and smiled ever so slightly before focusing on Amber again.

Thoughts of what a crazy person I was becoming began swirling in my head and suddenly my stomach was sick. I was making myself ill. I was so deranged that I now thought my *brother* was telling me that he loved me, and not in a brotherly manner. I needed help and I needed it soon.

"If you'll excuse me," I said standing up and grabbing my plate.

Taylor looked at me confused, "Is everything okay?" he asked standing up with me.

I forced a smile avoiding eye contact with him at all costs. "Everything's fine. I just want to get started on the dishes. It won't take me long," I said trying like heck to push that stupid lump in my throat back down.

With each dish I scrubbed, my mind ran amuck faster and faster. Something was severely wrong with me. I had to be either sick or insane or worse . . . both.

What kind of a loon was I, pretending that Taylor was talking to me when he clearly wasn't? I was so disgusted with myself. I had to be sick mentally. There was no other explanation.

"Who is sick me lady?" Kiernan asked blissfully standing behind me startling me. I hadn't realized I had been talking to myself out loud.

"Ya know, I'm gonna be a doctor one day so why dontcha tell yer ol buddy Kiernan yer problems. Wanna sit on me knee?" he teased as I put up the last dish.

Smiling I declined both offers much to his dismay.

I smiled at Kiernan and touched his arm lightly. "When Amber and Taylor come in will you tell them I went to bed? I'm not feeling so great," I told my sweet friend.

"Anything ya wish princess. If there's anything I can get for ya, just let me know."

"Thanks," I said hugging him. I walked slowly towards my room feeling unbelievable lost and empty. I dialed Jenny with no luck, getting her voice mail. I didn't bother to leave her a message. Instead I put my pj's on, got ready for bed and cried myself to sleep.

## 8. *Awakening*



I awoke the next morning to the sound of a frantic knock on my door. Getting out of bed I groggily stumbled to the door, unlocked it and headed back to my bed where I planned to spend the day hiding under the covers.

"Wake up sleepy head. We've no time to hide. The sun is shining and the little birdies are calling our names," Jenny said gleefully.

"No thanks, I'm staying right here until I die," I groaned.

"None of that beautiful," she said bouncing on my bed.

"Where were you last night?" I pouted barely exposing my head above the covers.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here but it couldn't be avoided. My car broke down. It was such a mess," she whined. "But oh the muscles Craig has, you should have seen him in action."

I rolled my eyes and ducked back under my covers.

"Outta there Missy," she said attempting to pull the covers from my death grip. "I'll tell you all about my car issues later but now we need to get you dressed. I've totally got this Amber thing under control by the way," she said pleased.

"Sure you do," I frowned as she continued to fight to get the covers off of me.

"Don't make me call Taylor in here," she threatened with a look of deviance in her eyes.

"You wouldn't!"

"Wanna bet," she said starting to get up off of my bed when I grabbed her stopping her dead in her tracks. "You know you're still hotter than Amber even with bed head, she laughed.

"Fine, you win. I'm up," I moaned tossing the covers off of me.

"Fabulous! So his name is Justin."

"Huh?" I asked her wondering if I was still dreaming.

"Justin's the tow truck driver silly. He's twenty-two and *hot!* He brought Mike with him. So now we girls are outnumbered. This way Amber will have more to choose from than just Taylor and Kiernan," she babbled on.

"Who's Mike?" I asked beginning to get scared.

"Oh yes, Mike, well he's not so hot but he is pretty funny. He's tall, skinny, has short black curly hair and an overly large nose."

"At least he's funny," I said cringing at her description.

"Haden, don't be a snob. Ugly people need love too. Anyway, he's Justin's friend and the one that worked on my car after Craig pushed it two miles. I couldn't *not* invite him too. It would have been rude. Besides he likes attention and has already put his sights on Amber."

Visualizing ducking back under my covers I shook my head in confusion. "I don't want to be the party pooper Jenn but why are there two strange men in our cabin?"

"Don't be silly Haden, there are four," Jenny laughed. "Mike brought his brothers. I don't remember their names though."

"What?" I asked in shock.

"Look, you wanted Amber away from Taylor and I provided you with the tools for just that kind of a job, four very manly tools. Well three at least," she giggled. "Taylor may be ultra gorgeous and we both know that it's him she originally had her sights set on. Now with all of those hunks here, that's gonna change," she said proud of herself.

"This could prove to be interesting," I admitted.

"No could about it. It will definitely be more than interesting. We're all gonna hang out at the lake after breakfast. I overheard Justin ask Amber if she was going too and she said yes. So see, it's working already," Jenny said triumphantly.

"You also might like to know Sulking Sally, that Taylor looks quite withdrawn himself on this glorious morning. I wonder why," she said dancing around the room with my bear. "Maybe it's because the love of his life won't get out of bed," she teased throwing Mr. Bear at me.

Catching him one handed while not even looking in her direction I said, "I'm not his princess Jenn, she is."

"Whatever. Think what you will but she was sitting with him talking up a storm and all the while he was staring off into space."

Thoughts of the night before began floating around my head. He definitely didn't look interested in her conversation. Either way, it was better for him that she was here. He didn't need me and my messed up issues clouding his vacation.

Jenny put her face right in front of mine noticing I wasn't fully paying attention to her.

"What," I retorted while pulling my jean shorts up. "Maybe he just realized that he still has feelings for her and is thinking about asking her back out."

"You have *got* to be kidding me Haden! If you think that you're blind," she said rolling her eyes. "Anywho, could you please hurry up. I bet we've already missed breakfast and I'm starved. You know how I get when I haven't eaten. Of course with Kiernan being the one cooking it, we might be the lucky ones," she laughed.

I followed my ever bouncy friend begrudgingly out of my room into the living room where we found no one.

"So nice of them to wait for us," she griped looking around.

I sat on the couch slouched down wanting to hide; my little vacation having turned into a nightmare.

"I'll grab us some food," Jenn volunteered as the back door opened.

"She's back there," she said happily.

In moments Taylor was standing next to the couch looking as perfect as ever. I sighed and looked away fighting tears.

"How are you feeling?" Taylor asked looking me over.

"Catch you guys later. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Jenn giggled as she headed outside to join the others.

"I'm great," I answered, my tone short.

Taylor sat next to me, put his elbows on his knees and rested his chin on his hands turning to look at me sadly.

"I missed you last night. I laid in bed wondering what I did to make you upset." He turned to face me better and continued. "I hope you know that I had no idea they were coming. I would have never invited her. I even thought about sending her home. I did a lot of thinking last night and I..." he said pausing, sorrow dripping from his words like honey.

I sat up straighter and turned towards him. Saying nothing I looked deep into his light green eyes. Slowly I reached my hand out to touch his pained face with my finger tips. He grabbed my hand softly with his own and kissed it, sending shivers down my spine.

"We need to talk," I said as I tried to maintain my composure.

"I know," he agreed holding my hand to his face.

"Taylor, do you ever . . ." I stopped for a brief moment, questioning whether or not I should continue. *Now or never* I thought to myself. Inhaling deeply, his sweet scent warmed me to the core and I continued. "Do you . . . I mean. Oh this sounds so weird."

My next words caught in my throat as I tried to release them. I needed to set them free. My heart could no longer hold them hostage.

"Have you ever wondered if we're really brother and sister?" I asked choking on my words.

*There, it was out.* I pulled my hand out of his grip and looked down at the floor, ashamed of my crazy question and scared of his response.

Silence filled the air making my nervous heart tremble in fear. Right as I had decided to get up and run into my room he spoke the words that would live in my soul forever.

"Yes, everyday," he whispered looking over at me.

Replaying his answer in my head I finally looked back at him. "So you don't think I'm crazy?"

"Not one bit, Haden," he said pulling me into him. With my head on his chest I took a deep breath inhaling his skin and yet again my breath began to repeat the same shallow pattern as it had last time before when I had passed out.

"I don't *feel* like your brother," he said softly resting his head on mine.

"And I don't *feel* like your sister," I said trying to steady my breathing.

Moving me back so that we were now face to face he stared into my eyes for what seemed like an eternity and then his strong cool hands cupped my face, bringing his face in front of mine. I stopped breathing momentarily, having to force myself to start again; the closeness of his lips had sent me into some sort of shock. Right as I began to breathe again he gently pressed his soft lips on mine, not moving them. Instead he held them still, connecting us . . . making us one.

My body was frozen in time. I was somewhere I had never been, somewhere I never wanted to leave. I reached around his neck and pulled him closer to me pressing my lips hard against his.

"Taylor? Whoo Hooo Taylor baby," Amber called breaking the silence.

I jumped off of the couch faster than humanly possible while Taylor just slid down some.

"Oh, hey Haden," Amber said forcing a smile, "Have you by any chance seen your brother?"

*My brother*, I never wanted to hear those words again. "Um, nope he must be outside," I lied silencing my immediate guilt.

"K, thanks," she said looking confused before going back outside.

Just seeing her face made me want to scream in agony but before my mind had a chance to let jealousy reign, Taylor stood up and grabbed my hand leading me back to my room. As he shut the door behind us I started to cry.

"No tears. It will all be okay, better than okay. I promise," he said trying to reassure me while catching one of my tears in his hand.

There would be no convincing me of that. He and I were brother and sister until proven otherwise and I was in love with him. I needed him like the moon needed the sky. Without him I had no home.

I looked up into his beautiful eyes and choked out the words I had wanted to say for so long. "I . . . I'm in love with you," I cried starting to feel light headed and losing my balance.

Catching me before I could fall flat on my face, he carried me to my bed where he sat down placing me right next to him. The next words he spoke shocked me even more than my own.

"You might not believe me Haden but I have always felt as if I was adopted," he said, his breath cool on my face.

Watching him closely I saw a tear fall down his cheek and drop to the floor. Moving to where he was facing me he looked deep into my eyes with his hypnotizing stare and whispered his next words so softly that it felt as if my heart would melt at the mere sound of them, "I have *always* been in love with you."

Before I knew it I had wrapped my arms around his neck and had my lips pressed against his again. This time I wouldn't let go. I would inhale him until I died. His hands were playing with my hair as our lips danced when my door opened unexpectedly.

I jumped practically falling off the bed when Jenny apologized for busting in the way she did. With a giggle and a smirk she hurriedly shut the door.

Taylor helped me up as I tried to get my bearings. He couldn't help but laugh at the sight of me. I was delirious, still high from his kisses.

He grabbed my hand smiling. "We will talk about everything after the party," he promised, his lips resting on my forehead as he spoke. I meant what I said. "It's always been

you," and with a gentle caress of his lips one last time on mine he was gone, leaving me so I could attempt to compose myself before joining our guests.

The next few days flew by like a crazy dream practically giving me whiplash. They were filled with food, laughter, and numerous stolen kisses under the moonlight from Taylor. Letting anyone other than Jenny know our love for each other would have been a death sentence until we had proof that we weren't related. Taylor promised me that he wouldn't stop until he found out the truth. Jenny on the other hand had been Googling nice distant places to live where no one knew us just in case we were wrong.

My heart was so full that I feared it might burst from the crazy amount of love it housed. I had never been happier in my entire life.

Jenny's plan to keep Amber away from Taylor was working to some extent. There was no denying that Amber had found new, "man meat," as Jenn referred to them, to be quite appealing but it was still Taylor who she was determined to catch. I had to refrain myself from knocking her to the ground a few times. Lucky for her all it took was one grin from Taylor and I would walk away refraining my anxious fist.

Today however Amber almost wasn't so lucky. A bunch of us were by the lake hanging out. At this point even more guests had shown up. There were at least twenty people out there with us. Jenny had made a few phone calls and people I barely new began showing up with tents and sleeping bags in tow. Everyone loved Swan Lake.

I tried not to obsess over what Taylor was doing even though my heart hurt not being right next to him. I knew our secrecy was a must. Catching him staring at me every now and then always calmed my nerves. That is until one very disturbing part of the day when I was sitting next to the lake with Jenny. I just so happened to look over towards the picnic tables and saw Amber sit on Taylor's lap, kissing his cheek while she put her arm around his neck. Not thinking twice I jumped up and started walking towards them. Jenn was almost as quick as I was. Before I was could move two feet forward she grabbed my arm.

"Whoa there Susie, wait a sec. You don't want to cause a scene do you? After all, everyone here but me still thinks you and Taylor are brother and sister," she said cocking her head to the side looking at me like I lost my mind.

Quickly she aimed me towards the public rest rooms. Turning my head behind me I saw Taylor move Amber off of his lap and then get up. As I continued to head for the bathroom I tried to control my breathing forcing my heart to slow down. It was difficult but necessary.

Jenny pulled me into the bathroom dragging me to the sinks where she insisted that I splash my face with cold water. I focused all my energy into clearing my head but it wouldn't erase the image of her sitting on his lap. I looked at myself in the mirror and then punched it with everything I had, shattering it.

Jenny stood back staring at me when others started to come in. She ran over to them shoving them out of the restroom.

"There's nothing to see here," she said pushing them until they were gone.

Walking over to me she grabbed my hand as I continued to let my breathing rise.

"Girl, I don't know whether to be impressed or scared," she laughed. She pulled me to the sink without all the broken pieces in it and turned on the water. "We better get you cleaned up. If Taylor sees you like this he's gonna freak for sure."

I couldn't say anything. I just stared at my hand wishing I would have hit Amber instead. Luckily my cuts weren't that deep so it didn't take long for the bleeding to stop. Jenny wrapped my hand with paper towels and stood back looking me over.

"You're freakin crazy, you know that. Do me a favor would ya? Remind me to never tick you off," she said amused.

Looking at her face I couldn't help but laugh. She laughed with me as we walked back to the lake where Taylor was now standing talking to yet another unexpected guest. Jenny's body

perked up immediately at the sight of Zach. Craig had taken an interest in Amber, but thanks to Zach, Jenny definitely wouldn't be complaining.

The rest of the day the four of us spent most of it together playing dominoes and splashin around in the water.

Even with all of the little Amber moments that had caused me anguish there was one moment that overshadowed everything else. That night after almost everyone was in bed I decided to go to my room for some nourishment and a hot bubble bath in my garden tub.

Jenny had decided to sleep in my parents' king size bed since she and Zach were still talking when I decided to go to bed. After my bath I put on some light classical music, setting my stereo to shut off within the hour once I was asleep and then snuggled under my covers, relishing their softness and the memories of the day.

I laid there imagining the most perfect face in the entire world when I heard my door open slowly.

"Are you asleep?" Taylor whispered walking towards my bed.

"No I was just . . . thinking," I mumbled, feeling my heart begin to race again.

I started to reach for the light when he stopped me.

"I can see if you can," he said softly.

I smiled and nodded. It was hard to believe he was in my room. I was tempted to pinch myself when his voice pulled me out of my loud head.

"I was hoping I could lay with you for awhile. Would that be alright?" he questioned as he stood at the foot of my bed.

Trying to contain my excitement I told him yes. We had slept together as kids off and on. I always begged him to let me sleep in his bed after watching a scary movie. It never failed. I would always lay as close as I could, holding his hand with a vice grip.

Tonight was different. I wasn't that scared little girl and he wasn't my brother. His shirt was off and the feel of his cool skin through the back of my pajama shirt felt amazing. I wanted to turn and face him but I knew that was a temptation I had better avoid.

"You smell delicious," he sighed moving closer to me, his face on the back of my neck.

Not knowing what to say that wouldn't put me in a messier situation I thanked him quietly and let out a fake yawn as I laced my fingers through his, pretending to be tired. It wasn't Taylor I didn't trust. It was me. There was no doubt in my mind that I had issues with self restraint around him so my little charade would just have to do for now.

Softly he began humming the most beautiful melody I had ever heard. I laid there never wanting the moment to end but unbeknownst to me I must have really been tired because the next thing I knew there was sun shining through my windows and my little bird friends were singing me a good morning song.

"I never realized just how beautiful you look when you sleep," Taylor said smiling, sitting in the pink chenille chair next to my bed.

"And I never realized how great you look in pink," I teased rubbing my eyes. Sitting up I noticed he looked freshly showered. "How long did I sleep?" I questioned still tired.

"Not long, it's only 8:00am. I've been up all night. I held you until around 4am when I left to get ready before everyone else was up. Then I made a crazy amount of breakfast, talked to mom and dad and now here I am, admiring your beauty," he winked.

"How are mom and dad?"

"Great. They're on their way here. They've decided to come early. So I guess you better open their third present," he said handing it to me.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes again before unwrapping my gift. After a much needed stretch I opened the box to find a cute white shirt with *Birthday Girl* written in black on the front.

"You have got to be joking," I asked somewhat laughing.

"No ma'am, I got one too but the colors are reversed and mine says *Birthday Boy*, he said, once again flashing the one smile in the world that could make me weak. It was in that instant that I was extremely thankful I was still sitting.

"So," he continued, "It seems that our party has been moved up to tonight. Mom and dad said they had some things they wanted to discuss with you this weekend at home if you were up to it after the party."

Knowing it was probably about college I was in no hurry. I was pretty sure I was going to take a year off of school before starting back. After all I had no clue what I wanted to do with my future, or how much of one I would even have.

"Well gorgeous, it's time you get showered and put your party shirt on," he winked.

"You first," I said smiling.

Stopping short as he was walking to my door he turned to face me, "If I never live to see another day Haden, I would die happy. Having you in my arms last night was heaven."

He smiled lovingly and set a tiny wrapped package down on top of my small bookshelves by the door.

"From me," he said softly. "Enjoy your shower."

Rushing over to the bookshelves I grabbed my gift. It was wrapped so pretty that it was hard to disturb its beautiful wrapping paper. Slowly I sat Indian style on my bed and began opening my present. What I saw when I opened the box had me speechless. It was a white gold ring with tiny diamonds in the shape of the initials T H. They had been connected together, making them one initial. They were connected as if they had become one letter. I held it next to my heart and kissed it before putting it on my right ring finger. *Oh God please don't let me die*, I whispered praying through my tears as I read the card that was with it.

*You are my heart... forever.*

*Happy Birthday*

*~Taylor~*

## *9. The Party*

My parents showed up with even more people than I had could have imagined and enough food to feed a small village. It was an overwhelming sight for sure. I didn't care though. I was living in my head where visions of Taylor danced playfully in my mind.

Throughout the day I constantly caught Taylor's beautiful eyes look my way which only fueled my decadent daydreams of he and I. No matter how hard I tried to focus on anything else, thoughts of last night and his arms around me consumed my every thought. As much as I wanted to run to him, I knew that the memory alone would have to satisfy me for awhile so I made sure I stuck close to Jenny who was always in the middle of something.

With mom and dad now at the cabin Jenn would be sleeping in my room again, making mine and Taylor's stolen alone time alone a thing of the past. In the meantime, I would look at my ring anytime I wanted him close to me. I had decided not to show it to Jenny but that didn't stop her from spotting it. The next morning at breakfast she grabbed my hand and held it up to her face right as I went to take a bite.

Instead of saying anything to me about it, she looked directly at Kiernan who was staring into his orange juice glass and said, "Hey you, if you ever want to know how to get with a lady, *this* is how you do it. You swoon her with jewelry," she said quickly waving my hand at him.

It took him a minute before he realized that she was talking to him. "Are you telling me you would like a ring me bunny," he asked grinning from ear to ear.

Jenny's postured straightened and she leaned over her plate to stare at Kiernan who was sitting across the table from her.

"Don't flatter yourself Linky. I was merely trying to give you some advice," she said rolling her eyes. "Okay, I'm probably *so* going to regret asking this question but I've got to know. Why do you always refer to me as your bunny?"

Kiernan smiled at her question as he shoved a huge bite of pancake in his mouth. "Tis simple really. Yer soft an fluffy an ya got quite the bounce to ya," he said glowing.

Knowing Jenny like I did, I knew that response wasn't gonna fly. He would be lucky to make it out of there alive.

Jenny stood up looking intensely at him, her hand now on her hip. "Did you say I'm fluffy . . . as in fat?"

"Aw there ya go, thinking all crazy again," he laughed telling her to sit back down.

Looking up at Jenny I could practically see the steam flooding out of her cute ears.

"You think I'm fat and it's funny?" she asked raising her voice an octave.

"Nope but I think it's funny ya think yer fat," he chuckled amused at how upset she was getting.

I think his last remark confused her because she smiled at me and left not saying another word to Kiernan who continued to laugh while he got up to follow her outside.

With my two crazy friends now gone I was left at the breakfast table with mostly older friends of the family that I barely knew. It seemed everyone under the age of forty had already retreated to the outdoors for some fresh air including Taylor who was helping my father with something.

Even though I had accepted that my time with Taylor was few and far between now, it didn't stop Amber's forward attempts to get Taylor's attention from driving me batty. Poor little Amber was getting annoyed with how uninterested he had been with her since her arrival so she had decided to up her game, trying to make him jealous by flirting with Craig. When that didn't work she reverted back to being his shadow which drove me even more insane.

Before I knew it, the night of the party arrived. Just as my mom had hoped, it started without a hitch. The entire cabin both inside and out was decorated in Happy 18th Birthday banners, balloons and pictures of Taylor and I. It was a little on the embarrassing side but I knew my mom did it all out of love. Seeing how happy she was made all of the attention I had to receive worth it in some messed up way.

In an attempt to show how grateful I was for all my parents had done, I did as asked, and mingled with the guests. Eventually though, the noise started to get a little overwhelming so I snuck away to my room where I could touch up my make-up and breathe for awhile.

As I walked down the hall after leaving my room someone grabbed me, pulling me into the bathroom and shut the door, pushing me up against the wall. Before I could speak his lips were on mine and I fell into him immediately. He kissed me harder. I began digging my fingers into his back grabbing a chunk of his shirt with both of my hands as I leaned into his chest. He seemed even taller, more muscular; more perfect the closer I got.

He pulled himself out of my grip and apologized

"Taylor," I breathed, my eyes closed; my knees weak from his kiss.

"I just couldn't stop myself. I smelled you coming down the hall and I lost all control. I shouldn't have," he apologized.

As much as I wanted to think he was crazy for apologizing, I knew he was right. Both of us had just crossed the line.

I shook my head in embarrassment, agreeing with him. I didn't really know what came over me but I did know that I would need some help if I wasn't going to let it happen again. I felt helpless when he was around. All I could think about was being close to him.

Ever since our parents showed up, he and I had been avoiding each other. The mere sight of him drove me out of my mind. I was in love and my lack of brain function proved it.

I started to tell him how much I missed him when he tilted his head towards the door.

"Shhh," he whispered. "Mom and dad are looking for me. I had better go."

He grabbed my hand with the ring on it and looking at our initials he whispered, "Forever." Lightly kissing my nose he was gone again leaving me alone in the bathroom. My breathing was still so erratic that I decided it would be smart to hang out there for a bit until I could get my hormones under control.

After I splashed a little water on my face I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror. The person staring back at me was a far cry from the girl I had seen in the tanzanite dress only recently. This was no girl in front of me. Instead it was a woman; a woman with a hunger.

"Well aren't you lovely," mom said when I finally joined the others.

"Yes she is," someone agreed, their voice was one I didn't recognize.

Standing to my mother's right stood the tallest guy I had ever seen.

"Long time no see," the stranger said as I tried to block the sun with my hand so I could get a better look at his face. Before I could figure out who he was my father showed up.

"Ah I see you two found each other," he said putting his arm around my shoulders. "It was the craziest thing really. I was out buying some last minute party decorations for your mom when I bumped into Don Jackson, my old buddy. We got to talking and he told me that Matt was in town for a couple weeks. So I asked them to join us," he said smiling as if he had just given me another present. "You remember Matt, sweet heart?"

*Boy do I*, I thought, my mind wandering into my past. Matt was my first crush. Even though we were only in Jr. High at the time I thought the world of him until one day he just vanished without as much as a note to explain.

"Wow," I said. "You got so tall! How tall *are* you?" I asked making everyone around me to laugh.

"6feet 7inches," he smiled amused.

"Isn't Matt just so handsome?" mom asked grinning at me.

"Yes he is," Taylor's deep voice answered in my place, his hand stretched out to shake Matt's. "Nice to see you again, I thought you had moved away for good," Taylor said staring harshly into Matt's eyes.

Even though Matt was taller than Taylor, the look on Taylor's face would have had me intimidated,

"I didn't know you two knew each other that well," I interrupted confused with the anger radiating off of Taylor.

Matt smiled at me and said, "We did a *long* time ago. You probably just don't remember. We can't say we know each other now though."

Looking away from Taylor, Matt stretched his hand out towards me. "May I have this dance?" he asked taking my hand in his.

Looking at my parents who were grinning from ear to ear and then back at Taylor who was obviously not amused, I shrugged.

"Sure," I said following him to the dance floor. "I didn't remember you being such a good dancer," I teased.

"That's because I wasn't," he laughed. "We were young back then. I sure have missed your beautiful face Haden. I made a promise to myself that I would come back here to see you again one day," he said pulling me closer to him. As I tried to move myself back a little, I heard a very familiar low growl coming from behind me.



He didn't attempt to pull me close again and for that I was thankful. We danced as we caught up on what we had missed in each other's lives. He was the same fourteen year old boy I cared so deeply for, only older. Right before I was about to leave to get a drink, the band began playing our song from Jr. High and I laughed as the memory of our 8 grade dance came flooding back.

"I requested it. I hope you don't mind," Matt said exuding boyish charm out of his tall body.

"Not at all," I smiled.

Enjoying the fact that I was suddenly back in Jr. high with no cares in the world I closed my eyes when out of the blue Matt's hand grabbed my butt.

"My turn," Taylor said pulling me away from Matt's grip.

Taylor's eyes avoided any chance of meeting mine as he began leading me around the dance floor.

"I can handle myself you know," I said laughing.

"Oh is that so?"

Getting on my tip toes I tried to make him look at me with no such luck. "Are you jealous of Matt," I asked amused as I inhaled his sweetness wanting so badly to kiss him.

"I have no doubt that you can handle yourself but do me a favor and please refrain from being alone with him again."

He looked at me with such seriousness in his eyes that he made me nervous.

"Promise me, Haden," he said, his body tense with anger.

"Okay I promise, but why are you worried about him? He's harmless. He was stupid in thinking he could cop a feel, but harmless nevertheless."

"Don't worry your pretty little head over it. Just trust me please," he begged, the softness returning to his face.

"As you wish, kind sir," I said saluting him, chuckling.

Hoping to get his mind off of Matt, I leaned closer to him and whispered in his ear. "You look so hot in your birthday boy shirt by the way."

By now a new song was on and I noticed that we were the only ones dancing. Apparently while I was teasing him someone had put the spot light on us.

He noticed it right as I did. "Ready to dance and show these people just what all those lessons mom made us take can do?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"You bet," I said ready.

We had grown up dancing. Mom and dad both had thought that it would be important for us to know many styles of dance. They said it was another way to communicate without using words. So off we went, round and round on the dance floor. The faster we danced, the closer he would pull me into his chest. At one point he lightly nibbled on my ear sending chills down my spine.

"Think anyone saw that?" he teased. "How about this?" he asked before kissing my neck as he continued to twirl me faster and faster.

Slowing down he whispered, "I would marry you right now if I could."

People started clapping and we both bowed before being pulled away, each into separate directions by our friends.

The rest of the evening flew by in a blur; my mind finally succumbing to the ever growing mental exhaustion from not letting my feelings for Taylor show. Both my mind and I needed a break so I told Jenny that I was going for a walk. I didn't need anyone sending out a search party for me.

Not being overly hungry with thirst I assumed the forest would be safe. So off I went, carrying a small lantern to light the way. Coming across a beautiful tree I sat down inhaling the cool night air. I sat there quietly thinking about just how confusing my life had become in a matter of weeks. I was a girl now having a relationship with her brother, praying that he really

wasn't and asking God for forgiveness if he was. My condition had gotten worse and I had no clue why. My brain was flooded with a whirlwind of thoughts. Some were so loud that I didn't know how to silence them. I just kept trying to reassure my aching heart that something had to give when suddenly I heard footsteps.

"Hey there stranger," Matt said coming out of nowhere. "Oh hey," I said forcing a smile.

"Mind if I hang out with you for awhile?" he asked politely as he sat down beside me. "I hope you're not mad that I followed you. I just thought it would be nice to do some more catching up."

"Sure, make yourself comfy," I told him hoping Taylor was just being over protective when he asked me to stay away from him.

For now I would just have to take Taylor's warning for the jealousy that it probably was. I kind of liked the idea of him seeing how it felt when jealousy took an unexpected bite at your not so funny bone like it had mine recently.

"Sure is a pretty night," I said smiling at the thought of Taylor being bit by the jealous bug.

Without a warning Matt grabbed my hand and told me that it was nowhere as pretty as I was. Taken back with his forwardness I didn't know what to do. Part of me wanted to pull my hand away and then another part of me wondered what it would be like to ache for him the way I did for Taylor.

"I've missed you in my life," Matt said inching closer to me; his lips now only inches away from mine. The closer he got to me, I could smell his blood with such an intensity that I debated on breathing out of my mouth for fear of losing control.

I watched quietly, not hearing another word he said as the vein in his neck pulsated. The more I stared the more my thirst began to rise. My last drink hours before the party, was wearing off faster than I had anticipated. I held my breath as he placed his face directly in front of mine.

"I don't think this is such a good idea Matt. I . . . I . . . I'm not that kind of girl," I choked out fighting the burning pain in my throat.

A look of horror registered on his face and he pulled away, standing up.

I jumped to my feet quickly, thankful he had moved. "I'm sorry," I apologized trying to make sense out of what was happening. "You've been gone for years and we were so young back then."

Moving towards me once again he caught me off guard when he grabbed my face and pushed his dry lips to mine. Grabbing his wrists I pulled his hands off of me.

A look of shock crossed his face. "I suppose you think you're too good for me just like that stupid brother of yours."

I shook my head at him in disbelief. "I'm going home," I said turning away from him to grab my lantern.

I heard a sly laugh before I was suddenly being lunged forward. I watched helplessly as my body was thrown into the huge tree I had just been sitting under.

A loud cracking sound filled the night air as my face slammed into the tree. I grabbed my throbbing head in disbelief. The smell of metal filled my nose as blood began pouring down my head. I rested my hand on the gash trying to see how deep the cut was when he grabbed me again, this time throwing me to the ground.

"You know you still love me Haden. I came here for you and I will have you. Tonight," he said as he ripped my shirt down the center.

My head hurt so bad I almost couldn't think. I lay there cold and bleeding, until I took a deep breathe through my nose and smelled blood. Not the smell of metal like mine but the sweet smell of Matt's blood.

Suddenly I felt no real pain. I leapt up off of the ground, throwing him off of me and smiled. I was hungry. There was something about the pain in my head mixed with my anger and

the smell of his blood that took all rational thought and did away with it. I wanted his blood and I wanted it now.

I stared at him not moving my eyes from his neck, crouching low and ready to attack.

"Haden what's wrong with you?" he asked, a look of horror on his face.

"What's the matter Matty boy? Now you don't want me," I laughed. "That's okay cuz *now I want you*," I said in a soft seductive voice I didn't recognize, "mmm you smell *good*," I said licking my lips ready to pounce when I heard my name called.

Taylor's calm, deep voice rang out in the night's air like the stars lighting up the sky. "Haden, you don't want to do this. Let him go." His words were slow and precise.

"Nope," I said never taking my eyes off of Matt. "He wants me, dontcha Matt," I laughed. Inching closer to him I could see fear covering his previously cocky face. "Aw, why the scared face Matty? You like what you see. I know you do," I said angry as I pointed at my black bra and torn shirt half hanging off of me. "Well you know there's a price for everything," I said staring hard at him.

Then came Taylor's voice again but now it was in front of me. Taylor's back was facing me, blocking me from my prey.

He spoke soft and slow as he looked at Matt while making sure I wasn't moving. "Matt, I'm gonna do you a favor and let you leave. You will not utter a word about this to anyone or I swear I'll let her hunt you down and have her way with you. Now go!"

Matt did as he was told and ran as fast as he could towards the house. In the blink of an eye Taylor turned around and pulled me into his arms and in mere seconds my tears began to fall.

"I'm sick Taylor. I'm really, really sick," I cried.

"No you're not. I have something to tell you that will make you feel better about all of this," he assured me as he tried to get my shirt to close.

"But I could have killed him," I said hysterically.

"So could I but we didn't and that's all that matters."

"T?" The sound of Brad's voice carried through the forest.

"Are you okay, Haden?" Taylor asked looking me over. Taylor quickly took off his long sleeve button-up white polo shirt and handed it to me. "Here put this on. We'll sneak you in through the side door and no one will notice. They'll think you got cold," he whispered.

I assured him that I was okay even though it couldn't have been further from the truth. I had no choice but to lie, with Brad only feet from where we stood. I was weak and my knees were trembling.

"Hey guys," Brad said his eyes narrowing in confusion when he saw the blood on my head. "T, I need to talk to you later when you have some time."

Brad knew he had stumbled on something he probably shouldn't have. Even still, he said nothing about it.

"I figured you two were out here hiding from the crowd," he smiled staring at the blood on my hand and head.

"Yeah, she needed a break from all of the attention but I didn't want her out alone this late," Taylor said winking at me while he continued to wipe off some of the blood on my face with a piece of my shirt he had ripped off.

I stood silently with my arms crossed, shaking uncontrollably as they talked.

"Want a ride?" Taylor asked, looking at me while pointing to his back.

"Yes," I said trying to fight back new tears.

My piggy back ride was longer than normal and for that I was thankful. Taylor had kept his pace consistent with Brad's which was lucky for me. Brad knew something wasn't right even more so now than when he stumbled upon us but he wasn't the type of person to put his nose where it didn't belong. Instead he said very little and walked slow.

When we got to the house Taylor gently set me down and asked me again if I wanted him to walk me to my room. He made sure I knew that he would talk to Brad later if I needed him to. I of course told him no. It was obvious by the look on Brad's face that he needed a friend. I needed a bubble bath.

I tried my best to sneak by the few guests that were left, waving at my mom who was talking with some friends. I wasn't about to have my mom start freaking out from the sight of my bloody head so I made sure I walked with the gashed side facing away from her.

It seemed like forever before I reached my room thanks to my pounding head. Every step was pure misery. I opened my bedroom door to find Jenny flipping through a magazine in my pink chair that had housed Taylor so beautifully just this morning.

"Wow what happened to you?" Jenny asked leaning off the chair to get a better look.

"Let's just say that my night ended a little crazy," I answered rolling my eyes casually.

"No kidding, you look *rough*," she said her eyes wide.

"Gee thanks Jenn."

"Did Taylor see you like this?"

"Actually yes he did," I answered regretfully.

"I bet he liked this look on you," she teased coming over to touch my hair.

"Ouch," I winced.

"Oh gosh I'm sorry. Is that blood?"

"Yep," I grimaced.

"Dang! Where was I? What the heck happened?" she asked in shock.

"It's a long story that I'd rather not relive at the moment if that's okay. I'll tell you tomorrow."

Jenny wouldn't leave it at that. She had to make sure that I knew it looked bad. "Okay, but wow that really looks awful. Did you tell your parents?"

"Nope and I'm not going to so let's just keep this between us," I begged.

There was a knock at the door and I inhaled deeply knowing exactly who was behind it before I grabbed the door knob.

"Hey ladies," Taylor said smiling, his eyes stopping on the deep gash on my head. Looking like his puppy just died, he handed each Jenny and I a crystal rose my mom had used as decorations for the party. He knew they were my favorite roses; they were timeless.

"Will you marry me, Taylor?" Jenny teased as she pretended to inhale her flower.

He smiled at her and then turned to me.

"How's your head feeling?" The guilt in his eyes was evident. He was beating himself up from not getting to me sooner. "I should have been there with you tonight," he whispered as Jenny sat back down in the chair.

"It could be worse," I said trying to hide the pain behind my smile ignoring what he had said.

Taylor focused on my face and then said, "Brad had a favor to ask me but I told him that it all depended on how you were feeling. From the looks of you, I have my answer."

I knew the only way he would believe that I was alright is if I were to look him in the eyes and tell him. So I tried my best to swallow the intense pain in my throbbing head and heart and told him I was fine.

"What's the favor?" I asked hoping he would believe that I was indeed okay.

Walking to my bathroom and coming out with a wet rag he began cleaning up my head again. "Well Brad's aunt called. His mom's family is going to get together to divide all of his parents belongings. They want him to be there and he doesn't want to go alone so he asked me to go with him. We would have to leave from here tomorrow," he said looking torn. "I absolutely will not go if you don't want me to. I'll gladly stay and take care of you," he offered, his eyes looking pained at the thought of leaving me.

"Dang, they're just now going through their stuff," Jenny said confused.

"Yes, Brad didn't really want to have anything to do with this but his aunt and uncle insisted he go."

"How long will you be gone?" I asked trying to bury the ache in my heart.

"For a few days, no more than a week," he promised. "You and I have a lot of talking to do when I return," he smiled continuing to clean my cut while I tried not to cringe from the pain.

Looking into his smoldering green eyes I told him I would be fine and reassured him that if I needed him I would call. I would miss him beyond words but I knew how much Brad really had to need him to ask such a favor.

With Jenn staring at us as if we were in a movie, he tossed the rag in the bathroom and walked over to me again. He wrapped his arms around me tightly before kissing the part of my forehead that was left undamaged.

"Jenny, you have my cell phone. Call me if you think she needs me," he said as he started to leave.

"Hey," I called out to him.

He froze and then was at my side before I knew it.

"Whoa that was fast," Jenny said, neither one of us paying her any mind.

"I never got to give you your birthday present from me," I said handing him a small square box.

He opened it slowly and holding it up he said, "This is the exact watch I wanted but I never wanted to spend the money on it."

"I know. I saw you looking at it in a magazine," I admitted happy that I had bought the right one. "I also got something engraved on it this week."

"How'd you manage that? I never let you out of my sight," he laughed.

"Let's just say that a little bunny helped me out."

"Oh gosh, not you too. I'm *not* a bunny people. I'm more like a cuddly puppy," Jenny laughed.

I watched his perfect face as he read my engraving, *Counting the minutes*.

"It's perfect. I will use it to count the minutes until we see each other again," he said pulling me carefully into his arms, this time softly kissing my lips just once but holding me there until we heard, "erm mmm," and a cough.

"I love you and will see you very soon. Take care of her," he told Jenny putting his watch on as he left.

"Girl! With you two in here you might want to think about installing a few more fans. It's so hot in here now," she teased, pretending to fan herself. "Seriously though," she went on, "There is no way he's your brother. None! Although, if he was. I wonder. Would your kids have three eyes or three ears? I bet as beautiful as you two are the little incest love babies would still turn out cute."

"Ew," I said giving her a sick look.

"Fine, two noses maybe . . . or . . . I know . . . webbed feet," she said through her laughter.

"I'm gonna go take a bath," I mumbled walking to the bathroom.

Lying in the bath tub I let my mind run through the last week. Just thinking about everything made my head hurt worse but somehow I was going to have to make sense of it all. The more I thought, the more I realized how I might benefit from being alone for a few days. With all the quiet I would have I could think in peace and since Taylor would be out of town helping Brad there was no time like the present. Right then it was settled. I wasn't going home just yet. I leaned my head back on the tub, shut my eyes and decided that I would tell Jenny right after I got a good night's sleep.

The next morning when I woke up there was a note waiting for me under my door. I picked it up and put it to my nose taking in a deep breath. *Taylor*. I opened it quietly trying not to disturb Jenny.

*If I were a star in the sky, I would give my place to be with you.*

*Counting the minutes,  
Taylor*

"He is *so* romantic," Jenny exclaimed from over my shoulder startling me.

"And you're *so* nosy," I teased

"Yep, you got that right, especially with your life. I can't help it if it's movie worthy," she laughed.

I laughed with her thanking God for my life.

After almost everyone had left I told my parents my plan of staying a little longer that morning and thankfully they were fine with it. They just made sure that I knew they wanted to talk to me when I had time. They said it could wait until I was ready to come home.

Unfortunately I had to text Taylor to tell him the news. He and Brad had left before the sun came up. He wasn't real happy about my decision to stay alone but he didn't give me too hard of a time. I was pretty sure he was regretting leaving but he knew there was nothing he could do about it now.

"You ready to go?" Jenny asked looking around for my suitcases.

"Actually I think I'm gonna hang out here for a few more days. I could really use some time alone to think."

"I think that's a great idea," she said excited, surprising me with her response.

"You do?" I said shocked. In all honesty I had prepared myself for her to fight to stay with me. I assumed she would think I was being a recluse and avoiding life. Avoiding life was never something Jenny agreed with. That was more my style. In my opinion I thought a little life avoidance was healthy every once in awhile.

"Yep I do," she grinned. "Just call me if you need me. My bug will grow wings and fly. I'll be back in a flash."

"Thanks, you're the best friend ever," I said hugging her before she left.

"I know," she sighed and then laughed. "Call me in a few."

"I will," I promised closing the front door behind her.

## *10. Last Will & Testament*

Lying on my back with my feet resting on the headboard of my bed in our quiet cabin, I stared into space.

*Lord, what did it feel like to die? You knew you were going to... you even knew when. You were frightened, yet you faced it head on with such dignity. I think I'm dying too and I am freaking out inside. I don't know what to do. Please help me.* I prayed.

I closed my eyes feeling my thirst burning in my throat. *Father, I didn't choose this . . . whatever it is. I feel it growing in me and I'm scared. Please guide me. If I do live, let my suffering be useful to you.* I held the tiny crucifix my father gave me when I was a young girl tightly in my hand. Jesus' dead body was draped on it as a reminder of His ultimate sacrifice for me. *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. The kingdom, power and the glory are Yours. Now and forever, amen.*

After I finished the prayer my thoughts went to Jesus at Gethsemane. This was the place where He poured out His heart to His heavenly father asking for His cup to be removed from Him. It was there where His agony was like mine... human. There He was, knowing he was about to die when he asked his friends to stay awake and keep watch for the people coming to torture and kill Him. Instead of doing what He asked, they slept. He cried while he prayed . . . *alone.*

A steady stream of tears began to fall from my eyes because I was like Jesus. I may not have been the Son of God but I too was in agony and I wanted my heavenly Father to remove my cup from me. When I was done praying, I placed the crucifix in my bed-side table drawer.

Engulfed in silence I closed my eyes and let my mind wander. Suddenly there I was again, alone in the forest, enjoying the beauty of God's creations when in an instant I was consumed by the memories of the smell of that bear. Trying hard to concentrate I closed my eyes even tighter and tried to remember exactly how I felt at that very moment. I would prove to myself that I was stronger than my craving for blood. Immense desire consumed every fiber of my being in seconds. Just the picture in my mind of that day had the fire from my thirst growing stronger, causing me to crave a feast as filling as that one.

Opening my eyes I could feel my heart pounding hard inside my chest. My hands were full of sheets, clenched tight. I knew right then that my sickness was just as serious as I had thought. A simple memory had thrown me into a frenzy of uncontrollable thirst. Completely disturbed with the reality that was my life, I sat up and put my running shoes on. I suddenly had a date with the forest. Somehow I would control this growing animal inside of me.

Before I was out of my room the phone rang. Frozen I looked over at my dresser where it sat. The longer I waited, the louder it got. I didn't move. I just stared at it hoping it would stop ringing.

Not long after it stopped, it began again. Slowly I walked over to my phone to see Taylor's number flashing across the screen. I picked it up, held it in my hand and then set it back down and left. Talking to him wasn't an option for me today. I had business to attend to in the forest. My life depended on it.

Once I was outside I sat on the bench by our back door for just a minute, contemplating my next move. I was ready for my little experiment and yet there was still a small part of me that wanted to run and hide. I told myself that there would be no more hiding today. It would be just me and the forest.

As I stood up and began to walk off I turned my head back towards the cabin and noticed something shiny in my reflection on the window. It was coming from the birthmark on my shoulder peeking out from under my sleeveless shirt. I had never paid much attention to the crescent shape on my left shoulder blade. Normally it was just like any other birth mark, light pink in color and barely visible but today peeking out from under my tank top it was incandescent. I moved my shirt out of the way as I looked at its shining reflection in the window. The more the light shined on it, the more it glistened.

Shaking it off as my mind playing tricks on me I turned away from the window and began running towards the forest. I didn't have time for crazy mind games. I needed to prove to myself that I was stronger than whatever was growing inside of me. It was my goal to control my thirst no matter how hard it would be on me. The more I ran, the better I felt about my chances of succeeding.

When I got to the forest I took a deep breath, feeling the oxygen fill my lungs. I walked for what seemed like hours never crossing paths with any animals other than small ones who showed no interest in being around me whatsoever. Every little animal seemed to scurry away from me as if they were all frightened of me. I decided not to let it bother me and continued on my search. I wouldn't be going home until I proved to myself that my inner strength was stronger than my strongest weakness.

Darkness began to fall and I leaned up against a tree. Right as I was about to give up and go home I smelled it, another bear. This time I didn't immediately crouch but instead I took an insanely deep breath, inhaling the bouquet of ecstasy coming from just north of me. *I can do this.* I told myself, feeling my thirst burning my throat fiercely. *I could* restrain myself but did I *want* to? My fists were clenched tight.

This was the moment I had been waiting for. Feeling my strength surface I smiled and began breathing through my mouth so I could no longer smell the bear. I turned away from where the delectable scent was coming from and forced my feet to move, one in front of the other.

Then accidentally on purpose I took one miniscule breath through my nose and froze. I could feel my muscles tense as I began to salivate. In seconds I was questioning what the difference was between a fresh mouth watering bear and a cow in a glass. I took another breath, this one deeper, my nostrils flared and my head tilted back.

My acute sense of smell told me exactly where the bear was. I stood still remembering just how delectable that banquet had been. The memory of the way my teeth cut into its flesh so easily had me licking my lips. How the bear's blood slid down my throat strengthening me with every drop began to consuming my thoughts. I went from standing to a crouched position ready to hunt in seconds. Yes I could stop myself, control the urge, but I didn't want to. I wanted to feed.

I found the bear in no time. He was no match for me. I had him down in a split second, reveling in his sweet blood as it slid down my throat. I took my time savoring every drop as if it would be my last. When I was done I noticed that my shirt was covered in blood. I didn't care. I felt great. I felt powerful. There was a creature of darkness in me, one I was unfamiliar with, but I was too engulfed in enjoying the moment to allow any morbid thought to ruin how I felt. I was no longer weak and scared. I was strong and powerful. I was me, whoever that was. I wanted to feel this way forever. I wanted to feed, no glasses, no secret rooms, just the animal and I. I wanted to hunt.

Consumed by this new sense of self I decided to go back to the cabin and take a quick shower. I purposely avoided my reflection in the mirror. Now was no time for fear. After my shower I put on a clean pair of jeans and a tee shirt and headed back into the forest but this time I went even further.

Walking East I found what I was looking for, elk. I was ready. It was almost too easy. I sprung so fast that it didn't have time to run. I sunk my teeth into it, moaning with pleasure as I drained its life, nourishing my own. I could feel myself growing stronger with every drop. I pulled away and touched my top teeth amazed at how easily they did the job. *Fangs* I chuckled to myself. I had some sort of fangs. I kept my fingers pressed to them even more confused at who I was. I had never before noticed how sharp my teeth were.

My feeding frenzy went on for three days straight. I would feed, shower and then feed again surviving solely on blood. I didn't want food. I wanted blood and blood alone. Occasionally my stomach would growl from the lack of human food I was consuming yet I ignored it. I wasn't human like everyone else so I thought it was pointless to pretend I was.

I was so caught up in my new world that when my phone rang just as my third day of hunting was coming to an end it startled me. The sound of its ringing stopped me dead in my tracks. Clumsily I reached into my pocket pulling it out and dropping it on the forest floor. By the time I picked it up I had missed the call. The number on the screen threw me back into the



reality I had been trying so hard to run away from. My heart ached as I stared at the number. *Taylor.*

Covered in blood I couldn't bring myself to answer his call. I stood still, staring at my phone as if it was the enemy. Holding the phone to my ear, I listened to his message. *Hello beautiful, it's me. I just wanted to check on you and tell you that I should be home in a few more days. It's taken a little longer than I hoped but I'll be back as soon as I can. I'm counting the minutes. I love you.*

I dropped the phone and with it fell my tears. Hundreds of tears ran free from the eyes that had held them hostage for three days straight. I sat on the forest floor and cried. The reality of the past few days hung over my head like a storm cloud, ready to rain at any minute and rain it did. I kept telling myself over and over again that I was a monster; that I would never be good enough for Taylor and that I was going to die. I knew I couldn't live like this. Drenched in blood and tears I curled into a tight ball and cried, releasing all of the hurt and anger I had in me until all that was left was sadness. Emptiness engulfed my very being. I decided that I would have no more blood, none. I just couldn't. I didn't want to become something dark and unrecognizable.

I ran back to the cabin covered in misery and blood. I was dying. There was no question in my mind at this point. Grabbing some paper and a pen I wrote three goodbye letters. The first letter I wrote to my parents apologizing for all of the trouble I had been and asking for their forgiveness. I wrote them five long pages telling them how much I appreciated them, how much I loved them and how sorry I was that I had to die. I didn't care how garbled it all sounded. I just continued to write what I felt, letting the words flow at their will. Next I wrote Jenny and thanked her for being the craziest, most perfect friend ever. I sat there listing what I would miss about her. Four pages later, her goodbye letter was complete.

When I moved on to Taylor's letter I hadn't even written two words before the tears came back full force. I closed my eyes and pictured his angelic face, his perfect features, his light green eyes that had warmed my heart so many times without a word and his soft lips that had only recently warmed my soul. I saw him casually lick his lips and smile his perfect smile framed by his dimples.

When I opened my eyes and tried to move my pen it wouldn't move. Focusing, I tried again. I needed to tell him how much I loved him. I needed to tell him how he had always been my heart. I needed to tell him goodbye but my pen wouldn't move. I couldn't write it. I couldn't let go of him. I wanted more time with him. I *needed* more time with him. I crumpled up his letter and threw it in the trash. I threw them all in the trash. I was going home.

## 1 1 . Secrets

My thoughts flew to Taylor as I punched down on the accelerator. *He would be impressed with how well my car was handling at 100mph,* I thought to myself as I sped home. It was doubtful though that he would feel the same way if he knew that I was the one experimenting with this. I didn't care. I was impatient and I wanted answers from my parents. I wanted answers about my condition and I needed their help controlling it.

Letting my nerves get the best of me, my fidgety fingers began moving on the steering wheel producing a beat that would make any drum major proud. Quickly annoying myself I began fumbling through the glove box looking for some gum. Moving the papers around, my fingers hit the jack pot. I pulled out one crumpled looking pack of gum. Thankfully it had one piece of cinnamon gum left in it-- just what the doctor had ordered.

Watching the trees fly by in my rear view mirror I chewed my gum vigorously while I tried to figure out how I was going to start the conversation with my parents. *Umm I have a*

*question, more like a hundred. Why do I have fangs like some freaky creature out of a Dracula movie? Or . . . So who are Taylor's real parents anyway?* Knowing I would never talk to my parents like that I tried to shut the uninvited voice in my head up but it didn't want to go away today. I was angry and it knew it, giving me many a suggestion as to what I should say. Trying like heck to ignore it I grabbed my phone to call Taylor but changed my mind immediately. I wasn't ready to talk to him. I knew that he would sense my nerves were a mess and find a way to come home. I also knew that Brad needed him so instead I dialed Jenny.

"Hello," she answered bubblier than ever.

"What are you up to?" I asked thinking I heard Kiernan in the background.

"Is that Haden me girl?" His Irish accent filled my phone.

"Jenn are you with Kiernan," I asked shocked.

"Yep," she sighed. "His stupid boogie mobile broke down and I'm giving him a ride," she complained.

I could imagine her rolling her eyes while he smiled on.

"Boogie Mobile?" I questioned forgetting my own issues for a second.

"Yep, I've decided that his van looks like a big green boogie," she laughed loudly.

"And yers m'love looks like Peter Cottontail's mama's backside dyed for Easter." I could hear Kiernan loud and clear as if he was on the phone with us.

"Wow Kiernan, *that* was creative," Jenn bit back.

"I like Peter's ma's backside especially all pink an fluffy. She reminds me of you. Ya know I love me bunny," he said enjoying her attention.

"There you go again. I am *not* a bunny. You're fixing to get out and walk. Who knows, maybe you'll find a pot of gold leprechaun boy," Jenny griped.

"Already have," he replied followed by his usual whistling.

"I'm so sorry Haden," Jenny said huffing as she retuned her attention to me. "What did you say? Linky's gonna finally be quiet."

Trying to stifle the first laugh I had in days I said, "It's cool, I hadn't really said anything yet."

"Well I'm sorry anyway. I'm all ears," she said apologetically. I could hear Kiernan laugh followed by what sounded like a slap, then a chuckle and more whistling.

Knowing all too well that if I waited for Kiernan to be quiet to tell Jenny why I called her I would be waiting a very long time so I just spit it out. "Can you meet me at my house in like thirty minutes?" I asked quickly. "It's important."

"Shoot let me toss Kiernan out and I can be there in ten," Jenn said with a laugh.

Trying to hear myself think over Kiernan whistling in the phone I slipped and told her I wouldn't be home for another thirty minutes, maybe twenty since I was driving so fast.

Of course Jenny wouldn't miss my last comment. It really wasn't her style. "Did you just say that you're driving fast?" she questioned amused after telling Kiernan to be quiet. "How fast might fast be Haden?"

Choking on my words before they made it out of my mouth I blew a bubble with my gum and begrudgingly answered my best friend. "Only about 100mph," I mumbled. Totally shocked at her response I stared at the road and listened intently through the phone.

"If you don't stop I swear I will toss your stupid butt out of my car. Don't test me Linky," Jenny said sounding like a parent reprimanding a child.

Not wanting to spend the rest of my drive home listening to Jenny and Kiernan bicker I cleared my throat hoping she would take the hint which she did. She apologized for being rude and told me she would see me at my house. Thanks to Kiernan, I had luckily missed her teasing me about my new form of driving.

For the next thirty minutes I blew gum bubbles in my mouth. Finally pulling onto my street I felt a rush of relief when I saw that no one was home. I wasn't the kind of girl to avoid confrontation. I just wanted this one to be done right. Relishing in the fact that I still had time to

get my thoughts together I unlocked the front door and walked in. The smell of fresh cut flowers began calming me down instantly. I grabbed a drink out of the fridge and headed up the stairs stopping short in front of Taylor's bedroom. I slowly put my hand on his door knob debating whether I wanted to go in when I heard the sound of Jenny's car pull into the driveway.

Turning, I ran back down the stairs and opened the door. There stood Jenny in front of Kiernan who was smiling like a little boy who just got his first light saber. Jenny's big eyes were screaming that she was done with Kiernan today. Annoyance was plastered all over her cute face.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized stiffly as she walked past me. "Linky here insisted he come; something about having work he needed to do. Some cow something or another," Jenny griped.

Kiernan smiled brightly at me as he walked past me with a limp.

"Why are you limping?" I asked Kiernan while looking at Jenny with a look of accusation.

"Aw ya know me bunny. She's a feisty gal, that one," he said pinching her cheek.

Jenny rolled her eyes and pranced into the kitchen. Grabbing a drink out of the refrigerator she headed to the living room and plopped down on the couch. I decided to leave Kiernan's physical issue to my imagination. I could only imagine what she had done to make him limp.

"Here," she said handing me a note she grabbed off of the table before she reached across the table for the remote.

*Haden, your mom and I will be gone overnight. We'll be back tomorrow morning. Love you, Dad*

"Well that explains the empty house," I said aloud.

"What does?" Jenny asked as she snacked on some red hots mom had in a candy dish on the table.

I handed her the note when I felt my stomach growl reminding me that I needed to eat. She looked at my stomach and then at the note. When she finished reading it time my stomach growled again louder. She smiled handing me the bowl of red hots.

"Wanna stay up late and have a movie night?" Jenn asked sitting on her feet all excited.

Loving her idea I jumped on it when as if on cue Kiernan chimed in.

"Sounds fantabulous to me ladies," he bellowed from the kitchen.

"Oh no you don't," she hollered back. "You are *so* not ruining our girls' night Linky Leprechaun."

I shook my head at Jenny and told her I saw no harm in it. As far as I was concerned the more people the merrier. The last thing I wanted was to be alone.

"It's settled then," Kiernan gloated. "I'll stay and camp out on the couch."

"Oh brother," Jenny grunted. "You can be such a girl Kiernan, you know that?"

Grabbing the remote out of her hand he winked at her and sat down in my parents' recliner.

Huffing, she told him she just remembered that she and I had to talk so he couldn't stay. He looked at me to see if she was being honest. I shook my head no and told her that my emergency could wait. She and I would have plenty of time to talk before my parents came back.

"In that case, I'm going to make us some popcorn," Kiernan gleamed.

Right after he got up Jenny walked over to the chair he was in and took the remote back, changing the station. I threw some more red hots in my mouth when Jenny huffed again. Some infomercial about losing weight was on.

"These make me sick," she said irritated. "I mean seriously — loose forty pounds in fourteen days with *MiracleButtsRus*? How ridiculous is that, and to think, innocent people buy this junk every day."

"I've heard it really works," Kiernan said coming back from the kitchen while tossing some popcorn in his mouth.

"Yeah like who do you know? We're your only friends," she teased.

Sitting down beside me he put the bowl of popcorn in front of us. I grabbed a handful and shoveled it into my mouth hoping it would silence my loud stomach.

"That's by choice luv," he winked. "Seriously though, me ma has a friend. She was a big girl but she lost a lot of weight on that rid-a-butt stuff. I seen it with me own eyes."

"Well I think that's great for her," I said grabbing the TV guide to look through it.

Beings there was nothing on we settled on re-runs of *Little House and the Dairy*. As fate would have it both Kiernan and Jenny loved it.

"I want a dairy," Jenn said all dreamy. "Cows are so cute."

"As you wish," Kiernan promised not removing his eyes from the television. Jenny smiled at him and for once had no comeback.

"Can y'all imagine growing up back then when most homes didn't even have running water?" I asked wishing there was more popcorn in the bowl.

"Heck no Haden, that's downright wrong. That reminds of those Amish people who actually *choose* to live like that," Jenny said with a shiver.

I had always known that Jenny was a bit on the prissy side but I loved her anyway.

Chuckling, I told her how I admired the Amish. "I would love to live like them. Their life is full of simple beauty in a not so simple world. Everything they do is surrounded by God. They don't even dress different from each other. No one is better than anyone else. I personally find them fascinating," I smiled stealing some of Kiernan's pop corn he had in his hand.

Jenny shook her head in disbelief. "I don't need to live without ac to know God. You my dear friend, can find them fascinating all you want. I find them downright weird." Jenn said putting her hand out to shake mine.

"Heck I'd join ya if you became Amish," Kiernan offered whole heartedly.

"Yeah, I know you would," I laughed while shaking Jenny's hand.

Our night was perfect, just three good friends, food, talking and of course the occasional love bird bickering.

After our last movie I got Kiernan a blanket and pillow and headed upstairs to meet Jenny who was already getting ready for bed. I didn't really feel like talking anymore but I knew it might be best if I finally shared my secret with her. Who better than my best friend to console me?

After Jenny and I were ready for bed she didn't waste any time in asking me what would bother me so badly that I would speed home like I had. Looking at her closely I made her promise that what I was fixing to tell her had to stay just between us. I told her that not even Taylor knew yet which immediately got her attention. Once the promise was made I began telling her about my condition. I started back from when I was young up until my newest issue of how my body was suddenly requiring more blood than it used to.

Watching her face closely as I spoke I was impressed at how well she did. She handled what I was saying like a trooper. You would have thought I was telling her that I had some addiction to Twinkies. She wasn't fazed at all. That is until I got to the part about my secret room. That's when she got all crazy and jumped off of my bed.

"Are you kidding me?" she asked with a smile. "So let me get this straight. You have some condition that requires you to drink blood?"

I nodded yes.

"Always have as long as you can remember?"

I nodded yes again.

"And you have a secret room in your armoire where you drink it?" she questioned staring at me with a giddy smile spread across her face.

"Yep," I said nodding again.

"That is *so* unbelievably cool Haden! I have *got* to see it," she said heading for my closet without waiting for me.

"Hey," I called. "I wasn't done telling you everything," I said right before she reached the closet door.

"How much more can there be?" she asked turning around to look at me. Seeing the serious look on my face she sat back down on my bed next to me and listened.

Swallowing hard, I told her about me attacking the bear at Swan Lake and Taylor finding me covered in its blood. I told her how I enjoyed it and how scared I was that I had. I went on to tell her about my recent stay at the cabin and how I hunted non-stop for three days. I left no detail out. Not for one second did she appear frightened. If anything she was hanging on my every word. Especially when I told her I had fangs.

"You have *fangs*?" she asked whispering.

"Yep, I think I always have. I noticed them when I was fixing to . . ." I didn't finish.

"Are you a vampire, Haden?" she asked staring into my eyes.

Thinking hard about my answer I took a deep breath and said, "Honestly, I don't know."

"Have you ever wanted to eat *me*?" she asked still whispering, her eyes big.

"No I've never wanted to eat you," I said looking at her as if she had lost her mind. "You do smell pretty good though." She and I both laughed before I continued talking. "Really I have no clue what I am. All I know is that I crave blood and a lot of it. I thought about not drinking anymore blood. I figured I'd die, kind of like starving yourself I guess. Yesterday I was even writing goodbye letters to you, Taylor, and my parents but I just couldn't go through with it. So I decided to come home and confront my parents about everything," I said waiting for her response.

"Okay, so you're a vampire who is in love with her brother. You *are* a freak," she laughed.

"Be serious," I told her as I threw my pillow at her. "I am so confused. I mean vampires are dead right and I'm definitely not dead. Plus I eat food, real food. I sleep. I drink. Oh and I grow," I added.

"Hmm this is quite the predicament you're in. Your points are all very valid so you probably aren't one," she said in deep thought. "Do you like garlic?"

"Yes."

"Can you be around crosses?"

"Of course," I said tilting my head towards the cross above my bedroom door frame.

"Does your skin burn when you touch Holy Water?" she asked starting to sound like she was in some weird movie.

"Um, no."

"Well then there's only one sure fire way to see if you're a vampire or not."

"And what's that?" I asked dying to hear what she was going to say next.

"One question first. When was the last time you drank *blood*?" she asked, putting an emphasis on the word blood.

"Last night," I answered not following where she was going with that question.

"So you're thirsty right?" Her eyes were as big as silver dollars.

"Yes you could say that." I shook my head slightly in confusion.

"Perfect! Let's sneak downstairs. You go sniff Kiernan. If you want to drink his blood then we know you're a vampire. I say just take a big ol' bite out of him. I'm sure he wouldn't mind," she laughed, clearly enjoying her idea.

"Have you lost your mind?" I griped. "This is serious Jenn. I could hurt him and besides, that's gross."

"Well aren't you a party pooper," she huffed jumping off the bed.

"Off to the secret room we go," Jenny sang as she practically skipped to my closet again.

I got up and was at the armoire in seconds waiting on her. Jenny's face was covered in awe. I explained to her that I could move faster than I normally did. When I was around people I

would consciously walk slower so I would appear normal. The last thing I wanted was to stand out. I punched in my code as she watched closely. Her eyes danced in amazement as I showed her my private room.

"This is awesome," she gasped looking around. "I can't believe it's been here this whole time."

"Pretty cool huh," I agreed.

"Not cool Haden, This is unbelievable!"

I opened my fridge and grabbed a pint of blood. I snuck a quick look at Jenny's face before I walked over to the stove to heat it.

Without hesitation she walked over to where I stood. "Looks like V8 juice. Can I try some," she grinned.

"Sure," I said amused. "Just let me heat it first." Even though I had been praying that Jenny's response wouldn't be one of fear, I was shocked at just how easily she handled the news that her best friend drank blood.

"Yeah I can only imagine how nasty *cold* blood is," she chuckled.

I poured the warm blood out of the pot into crystal wine glasses and handed her one.

"Cheers," she said before slowly taking a sip. I stood there watching her make faces, moving her tongue all over as she took another sip. "It's not my favorite really," she laughed.

"Mine neither. I prefer bear," I said smiling before I drank my glass of blood.

We laughed together while I refilled mine downing it in one gulp.

"Amazing," she said as she watched me.

"Thank you for being so understanding," I said choking on my tears.

"Oh Haden," she said coming to hug me. "I'm so sorry you felt like you couldn't tell me. You're not alone anymore. I'm here for you. I think you should tell Taylor but no matter what, your secret is safe with me."

I hugged my friend back and cried on her shoulder until she broke the silence, "I honestly don't know how you can drink that stuff. It tastes awful."

We both busted out laughing at the honesty of her words. I wasn't about to tell her how good she smelled to me. I just pulled away and refilled my glass a third time.

We left the room and brushed our teeth before getting back into bed. Jenny made me laugh again as she grabbed a mint from her purse and tossed it into her mouth.

"Want one?" she offered me before putting her purse back on the floor. "I just can't seem to get that taste out of my mouth," she laughed.

I told my friend no thank you and hugged her before rolling over and shutting my eyes. The feeling of relief I had now that my secret was out was so freeing. I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off of my chest and I loved it.

Just as sleep started to come to me, a text came through on my phone. I opened it slowly letting my eyes rest on the message from the other half of my heart. *Counting the minutes*. I read Taylor's words over and over again before shutting it. I held my phone to my heart and sighed.

"You know, you really should tell him," Jenny said through a yawn.

"I know but he'll think I'm a monster," I grimaced.

"I doubt that and either way, he loves you. You need him Haden."

"Yes I do," I agreed. "He just doesn't need this."

"You know," she continued, "Brad thinks something's up with Taylor too."

"Like what?" I questioned feeling my heart begin to speed up.

"Well between you and me, he said that Taylor growled at Derrick that night at the hotel."

Jenny's words hit my heart like a ton of bricks. I knew exactly what she was talking about. I had heard it too but I had forced the memory out of my mind.

"Jenn, people growl," I said trying to make light of it when in reality my sirens were going off. Brad was right. Something was wrong.

"Not the way Brad described," she continued, "not like an animal. Brad said there was more that bothered him but he wouldn't tell me. I guess he didn't want me to freak you out," she said through another yawn. "Haden, I have just one more question before I go to sleep."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Are you gonna eat me in my sleep?"

"Only if you snore," I teased.

"Good thing I don't snore but I bet Kiernan does. Maybe I should open our door," she giggled.

"Night Jenn," I laughed.

"Night, vampire girl."

The next morning we woke up to bacon frying and the sound of Cajun music playing.

"Mmm I love your mom," Jenn said inhaling deeply.

"Me too and I love that music. One day I would love to take a trip to Louisiana to see where mom and dad grew up before moving to Houston."

"I've never had much of an urge to see that state," Jenn muttered. "I heard that place has mosquito's the size of small animals. *No* thank you. You'll have to leave me out of that trip."

From the sour look on Jenny's face you would have thought that she smelled someone's feet. Jenny had a perpetual fear of all flying insects large and small. She could be around scaly creatures all day long but if something flew by her head all hell would break loose.

"Aw, the mosquitoes can't be that bad," I said feeling my stomach growl. "Boy I bet their food's good down there. Dad told me of a little bakery in a town called Crowley where they make everything from scratch. That has to be so good,"

"*Sure* they do," Jenny said rolling her eyes. "Haden, no one makes everything from scratch anymore."

Jenny's pessimism was starting to get the best of me until I outsmarted her. "No seriously, this place does. Dad said that the last time he and mom visited this bakery the same Grandma's from when he was younger were still in there baking up a storm. Best jelly rolls ever," I exclaimed. "Dad brought some back a couple years ago."

"Did you say jelly rolls?"

Just like I had assumed, I hit Jenny's weakness right where it hurt . . . with homemade jelly rolls.

"I might have to reconsider tagging along one day then," she laughed.

Once we were dressed and I had a little morning nourishment we made our way into the kitchen. Dad was sitting at the dinette table and mom and Kiernan were playfully dancing to *Hip Et Taiaut*, a popular Cajun song.

"Good morning girls. Breakfast's on the bar. Scrambled eggs, bacon and homemade waffles," she called over the music.

Grabbing a huge helping I instantly felt empty without Taylor being there. Normally he would be the one dancing with mom.

Popping a piece of extra crispy bacon in my mouth I smiled at my father who was reading the morning paper at the breakfast table.

"Good morning sunshine." Dad set his paper down and took a sip of his coffee. "Sorry your mother and I weren't here when you returned. We had a little business of our own to attend to," he winked. "Seems we needed to look at some Real Estate we're thinking about purchasing."

Right as the words were out of his mouth mom's eyes caught his. Their eyes locked briefly on each other sending warning signals off in the air. Suddenly it seemed like someone had sucked all of the air out of the room and it was hard to breath.

I looked from my mother to Jenny. I wanted to know if I was the only one that noticed the weird way my parents were looking at each other. I didn't have to ask Jenny. It was pretty obvious that she had noticed too. I watched while she finished her food in record time, barely chewing. When she was done she grabbed Kiernan's arm and pulled him with her towards the

door. She muttered that she was sorry they had to leave so fast and waved goodbye as she hurried out of the room. Kiernan just followed her like the love sick puppy he was and smiled clueless as she dragged him behind her. In only minutes my parents and I were alone.

*Here we go*, I thought, still not sure of what I was going to say. Mom pulled up a chair and sat down beside me. Before the words were out of her mouth I could feel my heart begin to accelerate. Something inside me was screaming that this wasn't good. I just didn't know what.

"We were going to wait for Taylor to come home so we could talk to you both about this but since you're here and we're so excited we don't see why we should wait," mom said forcing a smile. By sound of her voice I knew that her smile wasn't the only thing she was forcing. If she was excited . . . my name was Fred and I was a frog. I didn't know what she was trying to pull but I did know one thing. My mother was an awful liar.

Dad must have seen that I wasn't buying it so he grabbed my mother's hand and finished what she was trying to say.

"Your mother and I were thinking that it might be time for a change for our family." He smiled at her and squeezed her hand as he looked back at me. "What do you think about moving to a new state?"

I replayed my father's question in my head thinking that I had heard him wrong. "Move... out of state?" I asked totally confused. So many thoughts were flooding my head that every time I tried to speak nothing came out. I looked at him in disbelief until I could find the words I was searching for. "I don't want to move," I protested.

"Darling, don't you think it would be an adventure to see a new place?" mom asked, her lower lip beginning to quiver slightly.

Now I knew for sure that something was very wrong. Watching my mother fight crying showed me that whatever it was they weren't telling me was bad. Not only did everyone, including them, love it here but they had just purchased Irish Brother's Coffee. They would never do that and then move.

I took a deep breath and looked into my father's eyes. "Sure, I would love to see a new place. The thing is . . . when you want to see a new place you go on a vacation. You don't move." My words gave an instant chill to the air making me wish I was back in bed under my covers. I looked back at my mother to see one tiny tear escape her eyes.

Dad took a deep breath leaning back in his seat. I wanted so badly to scream at him. I knew something was wrong. I could feel it and yet they weren't telling me. I knew he loved it as much here as I did. Nothing made any sense.

"Haden, what it boils down to is that your mother and I think it's best. We would really like it if you liked the idea but even if you don't, we are still moving," he said in a serious tone.

In less than five minutes my parents had changed their mind from possibly moving to definitely moving without even caring how I felt or talking to Taylor about it. A shiver overtook me as the cold empty feeling in the room spread to my heart.

"When are we leaving?" I asked in disbelief.

"Honey, we'll need to start packing as soon as possible. We should close on our house next weekend," Dad said, his face serious.

"What?" I choked. "This is a joke right?"

After watching my father shake his head no I whispered, "Where?"

"Houston," he said casually as if it were no big deal.

By this point mom was crying softly in her chair.

"Houston, Texas?" I asked feeling my heart tighten as it reduced the blood supply to my brain. It felt like I was in a weird dream. *If only someone would wake me up*. I thought helplessly.

My father nodded as he handed my mother a tissue.

"But y'all said you didn't like Houston's heat or the hurricanes." I added hoping I could persuade them to change their mind.



"Nothing we haven't dealt with before," Dad smiled taking another sip of his coffee. "Besides we'll be close enough to where I grew up so that I can take you for some crawfish," he said looking at mom who just nodded in agreement. This time she didn't even attempt to smile. She didn't like the idea any more than I did. Montana was our home.

I couldn't get past my mom's tears. It was all so messed up. Even though dad was acting as if he was happy about it, I knew better. Mom's silent tears gave that away. She was crying the tears I was sure my father was holding back. He loved Montana more than we did. Instantly I was upset that they hadn't waited to share this information until Taylor was home. He had a right to be here for this just as much as I did. It wasn't fair that they weren't including him. Of course it didn't sound like our opinions would have changed our parents' minds anyway.

I sat there frozen in time debating on what to say. So many words were flying around in my head and yet I couldn't make a complete sentence. They were all so entangled in anger and confusion that I could barely breathe. My brain was working so fast it felt like it was inhabited by bees. I saw no end to the nightmare that was quickly becoming my life.

## 12. *Answers*

Finally after sitting in silence for what seemed like an eternity, I couldn't take it anymore. "Are you going to wait for Taylor to come home or are you just going to pack his stuff for him?" I asked, letting my anger flow from my mouth like poison.

I closed my eyes and shook my head, regretting my bitter tasting words immediately. I knew my parents better than that. They didn't want to move anymore than I did and they weren't going to pack up Taylor's stuff. Something was definitely wrong and I was gonna find out what it was.

When I was done apologizing for my disrespectful outburst my mother dried her tears. She smiled lovingly at me and then got up to pour me a cup of coffee. At this point I wanted so badly to come out of this crazy nightmare but for now a cup of my mom's hot coffee would just have to do.

Dad sat up straight in his chair as he began telling me the plan. I listened intently, trying hard not to interrupt even though I wanted nothing more than to call his bluff. He described Houston as if it were the most perfect city ever. I hadn't been this confused since the Christmas when I was five years old. I had had a dream about the Easter bunny bringing our Christmas presents and not Santa. My dream had been so real to me that I argued with Taylor all Christmas day about it until my parents made me stop.

When mom brought my coffee to the table I took a sip, enjoying the heat on my throat. I listened patiently as my father went on about all the pros of moving to the South. When he was done he asked me if I had any questions. I knew now was the time so I jumped right in.

"Actually yes I do have some questions, just not about the move," I said watching my father's expression change from determined to confused in a matter of seconds.

Before I could say anymore mom did it again. She gave dad that same, *we're busted*, look I had seen on her before when I told her that Jenny thought Taylor and I weren't related. Trying to ignore the sudden weirdness I began my impromptu speech.

"My questions might sound stupid," I said holding my breath, "but I have given them a lot of thought and prayer. I prayed a whole lot before coming to you two."

Dad's facial expression didn't change. He was as solid as a rock. I didn't know whether to be envious or irritated. Mom blamed his ability to appear unaffected during times of stress on some Cajun genetic thing. She believed that there were two different kinds of Cajun French

people. There was the soft spoken, still water runs deep kind, which was the category my father fell into and then there were the others-- the feisty firecrackers, which is the category my mother fell into. Both were to be feared when angry or when a loved one was hurt. Even our last name had an edge to it.

Trying to stop my mind from wandering, I took another sip of coffee hoping it would buy me a little more time to get up the nerve to spit out what I wanted to say. Both of my parents stared at me waiting.

"Umm, "I said praying for the right words. "There have been some really weird things happening with me lately and I was wondering if you two could tell me more about my condition." I could feel my mother's body tense up.

Dad reached across the table and grabbed my hand. "Have you been drinking all the nourishment we talked about?" he asked gently.

"Yes sir, and then some. A whole lot actually."

Mom gasped but I didn't let her shock stop me from continuing. I had never been one to lie or withhold information from my parents. I respected them way too much. They deserved honesty, so I took a deep breath and began with prom night. I swallowed hard and told them how I had bit Derrick. Even though my teeth had just barely broken the skin, I knew it was a bad sign. My poor mom put her little hand over her mouth and stared at me in horror.

"Should I stop?" I asked my father who had now pulled my mother's chair even closer to his so he could put his arm around her.

"No, no . . . go on. Your mother will be fine," he assured me.

*She sure doesn't look fine*, I thought. But then again I was telling her what a monster her daughter was. With another deep breath I continued spilling my guts. I told them every detail that led up to today. I even told them that I could hear the blood pumping through their veins. Mom sat there frozen in horror, unable to move.

"It's time we tell her dear," he whispered softly in her ear.

She shook her head no while she stared at their hands intertwined in her lap.

"Love, you know we have no choice. We did our best to protect her but now she *must* know."

I didn't know what he was talking about. Protect me? I didn't need protecting. I needed answers.

My mom shook her head and said yes so softly that I almost couldn't make it out. With her permission he began explaining all of the bizarre things that I had been questioning. He was about to answer my prayers. After all these years I was finally about to learn the details of condition. Excitement began to fill my soul as the anticipation of his words washed over me.

"Haden, as you've just heard and probably assumed, there is something that your mother and I have been keeping from you for a very long time," he admitted. "You know how she and I both feel about deceit so please try to understand why we kept the truth from you all these years."

"The truth," I said letting the word roll off of my tongue accidentally.

There was no doubt in my mind that I wanted the truth no matter what it was. What I didn't know was that there was a huge difference from wanting to know and finding out. It's like opening a door you can't ever shut again. What lies behind it will alter your life forever. Once that door is open... there is *nothing* you can do to close it back. The truth is like that. My door was about to be opened and I too would never be able to shut it again-- even though I would spend many nights trying to.

"Honey would you go get the letters?" dad asked my mother.

She got up slowly from the table looking like she had just lost years from her life. I had never looked close enough to notice, but now it was plain as day. The door of truth had been opened for her and she was drained from knowing what it held behind it. Now it was my turn. After looking at her drawn face I wasn't so sure I wanted to know anymore.

My mother handed my father a cream envelope and then sat down next to him. He held it in his hands and said the words that would lead up to one of the most painful moments in my life.

"What I'm going to read to you Haden might scare you but don't let it. We don't even know the full truth behind these letters or who sent them but when I'm done reading you will understand why we must move . . . and soon."

I sat there scared and speechless as he continued.

"Haden honey, you are not biologically our daughter," he said, tears welling up in his eyes.

I could hear my mom sniffle as more tears fell from her swollen eyes.

"From the minute they dropped you off you have been ours," he continued while he wiped tears from his eyes. "We have always felt like we were your real parents. We have loved you more than anything in this world and always will."

My head was spinning as I tried to dissect what I had just been told. I'm adopted? . . . not Taylor?

"But I look like you," I said through my own tears as they began to fall.

"Yes baby you do look like me because you are my niece. Haden, you are my sister's daughter." His words cut me like a knife.

*How could that be?*

This new revelation hit my heart like a ton of bricks. "My aunt was really my mother," I contemplated aloud. Not able to process what was happening I sat there quietly for a moment until it sunk in. Somewhere out there in the world I had a different father. "I can't believe you're not my dad," I choked out through the flood of my tears.

The pain on my parent's faces was almost unbearable. "Who's my real father?"

"We have no idea," my dad said hesitating for a moment. "I never met him. My sister Serene moved to Europe with her best friend when I was still in High School. I knew nothing more than that she wrote our parents a letter telling them she had met someone and wouldn't be coming home. She had chosen a new life and our parents were devastated. We all were. She was my best friend, Haden." I watched as my father's memories rushed back at him bringing with them fresh pain.

"She included a note for me with her last letter," he said trying to refrain from crying. "In it she told me that she wouldn't be able to contact me again but she wanted me to know that I would be in her heart always. We never heard from her again. Then years later you showed up on our doorstep with this letter. I would like to read it to you when you're ready," he said looking into my eyes.

"I'm ready now," I whispered, lying to my father. I wasn't ready. It was already too late. I had no choice but to face the fire in front of me.

"This is only a copy of the original," he informed me as he removed a piece of white paper from the envelope that had hidden the secrets of my past from me all these years. "We were asked by the sender to burn the original letter as soon as we were done reading it. They warned us that it was for your protection and if we didn't do as asked, we would be putting you in grave danger. They claimed that the paper was special traceable paper that would give off your location. Even though your mother and I didn't believe in such things we decided it was better to be safe than sorry. So I did as they asked and burned it. I knew you would want to read it when the time was right so I copied it and hid it deep in our attic until recently.

I sat silently, watching my father as his eyes rested on the simple looking sheet of paper. He took a slow, deep breath and began reading the letter. With each word he read, I could feel God showing me the key that would unlock the very door which had been hidden from me for so long. Now less than five feet away from me was the key to the truth my heart had been searching for since I was a child.

*Dear Jacob and Sidney Le Lux,*

*We hope this letter finds you both well and in good spirits. I am writing you on behalf of Landon and Serene Kenwood. You see, there is a war among our people and both of their lives were taken from them tonight while trying to protect their baby girl, Haden. Serene spoke of you often Jacob but chose not to contact you for your own safety. Now it seems we have no choice but to involve you with our kind. The less you know the better, but there are some things you must know in order to protect Haden, your niece, whom I am leaving in your care.*

*Haden is very special. She is half vampire. Vampires are not merely a figment of one's imagination as you might think. They do indeed exist and you must never forget this fact in order to keep her safe. There are vampires who want to hurt her. They want to take her life. These are the ones that killed your sister tonight.*

*Haden is the child they are tirelessly searching for. She is the one the prophecy speaks of... the child born under the Ice Moon. They will stop at nothing to find her. Upon Haden's 18th birthday I will send for her to come to her homeland but until then I beg you to raise her as your own. She will need blood as well as human food. Animal blood only as it was her parents' beliefs. You will also notice a pink birth mark on her left shoulder blade. Never allow her to expose it in front of anyone especially at night or under a full moon. This will lead them to her. She will have special powers. What powers, we do not know for sure but they will become stronger as her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday approaches-- so will her thirst for blood. She must be told not to go hungry at this time. Her craving for blood will become almost unbearable and she will search for it anywhere. Her need to hunt will be at its peak. You must tell her before that time for her safety, as well as others. Please do not speak of this with her until then. Also, please burn this letter. There must be no traceable connection from Haden to us through this paper. One last thing, her parents had set aside a large sum of money for her should this day come. I have placed it in another envelope under her bedding in her basket. Use it to make her life comfortable and to help her fit in with your kind. Please only allow her blood out of glasses and remember for her safety, don't speak a word of this to her until it's time.*

*God Bless you and thank you for your understanding and compliance,*

*Nanny Lena*

I sat there speechless as dad folded the letter, setting it down on the table.

"I'm a vampire," I said stumbling over my words.

"Yes we believe so, half anyway," dad answered as if the half part was supposed to make me feel better.

"Maybe you're not honey," mom piped up trying to smile. "We don't know who this Nanny Lena is. Besides, I don't care what anyone says. You're *our* daughter," she reminded me.

"But you're not *really* my parents. I don't get it," I hissed, immediately angry for my loose mouth. I could see the pain on their faces.

"No Haden, not by blood we're not, but you are our daughter in our hearts," my father added. "We wouldn't have loved you any different if you were biologically ours."

Feeling awful for hurting them I apologized for my mouth again.

Reaching my hand across the table I asked if I could see the letter. My father didn't hesitate in handing it to me. He knew it belonged to me. I read it silently to myself twice, soaking its words into every fiber of my being. Truth flooded through my veins limb by limb, opening

my eyes to the world around me-- to the world I had seen through rose colored glasses until now.

It's funny how the saying, *Hind Sight is Twenty-Twenty*, can take on a whole new meaning other than something that older people say. I was looking back and things were suddenly clear.

In a single moment my mind was back at Swan Lake with Taylor, opening the birthday present my father had bought me. *He knew. He always knew.* I thought to myself trying to process everything.

"That's why you gave me that vampire book for my birthday," I breathed.

Mom instantly slapped his arm. "You did what?"

Looking at her with a pained expression and then back at me he said, "I was hoping you could figure it out on your own. Your mom didn't want us to tell you any of this. She was more skeptical of the vampire thing than I was. Did you read it?" he asked looking hopeful.

"Nope, actually Taylor asked to borrow it." I regretted my words the minute I saw my mother's reaction.

This time both of their eyes got big and mom slapped dad's arm again, only this time harder.

"Brilliant Jake, *just* brilliant," she huffed.

"Should I have not let him borrow it?" I questioned, watching dad rub his arm.

My father assured me that I hadn't done anything wrong. He had just intended the book for my eyes only. It seems he knew my mother wouldn't have liked the idea of me having such a book, or Taylor apparently.

I watched my mom kiss her finger tips and then rub my father's arm where she had just hit him only seconds earlier.

Right as I was starting to feel my heart rate slow some, my father caught me off guard again. "Haden, there's one more letter I would like to read to you. This one came a few weeks ago and *this one* is why we're moving," he sighed grabbing my mother's hand and kissing it.

She handed him the new envelope. It was so beautiful. It reminded me of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century English movie where the families crest was stamped on all of their envelopes in thick blood-red ink. Dad read the new letter and I watched as a steady stream of silent tears fall down my mother's cheeks. By the end of the letter I was the only one not crying. I was mad.

"Who does this woman think she is, sending for me like that?" I huffed. "I don't know her and I'm *not* going."

"Haden, we need to move so they can't find you," mom said, trying to make me see their reasoning.

"Nope, I'm not going anywhere," I protested, feeling my anger rise. "*Montana* is my home. Some woman I don't even know isn't going to force us to leave."

"Haden, what if she comes for you like the letter says?" dad asked simply. "We just can't take that chance."

"If Nanny whoever does show up here, I'll just tell her that I'm sorry she wasted her time but I'm not interested. She should have kept me herself if she loved me so much. *This* is my home . . . with you, mom and Taylor." Saying his name brought immediate tears to my eyes. I still didn't know how to process the new information I had heard. It was all too much for me to take in.

### *13. Vampires, Wolves & Humans... Oh My*

*The truth will set you free*; or will it? Physically I was sitting at my parents' kitchen table but mentally I was in the land of the unknown. I wasn't human. Taylor wasn't my brother and my real parents were dead.

Truth is a tricky thing. It's something some people covet while others will go to any length to avoid it. As my mind tried to run from the shock those letters held, I stared off into space. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't process what they meant.

"Jake, she's having trouble breathing." I could hear my mom's voice but I saw nothing but a blur.

As my eyes held the back door in their sight, the rest of the room continued to blur. My body began to relax and suddenly nothing seemed to matter anymore. It didn't matter that I was a freak of nature or that I was somehow on the creatures of the dark most wanted list. I closed my eyes and let my mind take me anywhere it wanted to as long as it wasn't here. The truth had left a bitter taste in my mouth and a flood of thoughts that I couldn't comprehend.

"She's going into shock, Jake." my mother yelled.

Where I was going nothing mattered. I was in a haze, in an in-between world where no one could hurt me ever again. I gave in to the freeing feeling and felt my body go limp.

"Haden honey, can you hear me?"

Before I had a chance to fall further into the thoughtless abyss of shock my father's voice grabbed my soul and pulled me out.

"There you are," he smiled softly as I opened my eyes.

I could hear my mother's erratic breathing as she rested her cool hand on my forehead.

"I'm fine," I muttered trying to sit up.

My father helped me to my feet and I sat back down in the chair I had slipped out of when I blacked out. I moved my hair out of my face and took a sip of water. As the cool water slid down my throat, one thought after another began running through my head. A whirlwind of emotions flooded my body.

"Well it's obvious that I have some serious issues to work through, but all in all, they're not really that bad," I laughed feeling peace flow through my veins. I took the letters and the dumb airplane ticket and tore them into small pieces.

Mom watched me intently, her childlike glow reappearing.

"Well it's settled," dad said. "We're gonna stand strong like the wolves we are."

Not wanting to ruin the moment, I tried to keep my mouth shut but my curiosity won out. "Wolves?" I questioned with a chuckle.

My mother shook her head and gave my father a dirty look.

He winked at her before explaining. "Our last name Le Leux means *The Wolf*, in French, so we're the wolves," he said proud.

For a second it looked like he was about to say more but mom shot him another look, this one harsher than the last. Whatever he was about to say went right back where it came from in that instant.

"Now *that's* some funny stuff," I said with a laugh. "Vampires, wolves and humans . . . oh my. We could be a movie."

"Very true," dad said laughing with me.

Mom didn't share our sense of humor and didn't bother joining in. "Do you have any more questions?" she asked, not breaking a smile.

Not wanting to think about anything other than the fact that Taylor and I weren't related, I told her no. Relief spread across her face until I asked her when I could tell Taylor and Jenny.

Mom shot dad the same look I had seen on her face every time I mentioned Taylor's name today. Sirens sounded off in my head giving me an instant headache. *Now what?* I wondered helplessly. They were keeping something else from me. For now though, I wouldn't dare ask. We had all been through enough for one day.

Dad smiled at my mother and they both looked at me with such looks of exhaustion that I couldn't help but feel sorry for them. It was clear to me in that very moment what a toll all of this had taken on the two of them. They were honest people who were forced to be dishonest for years in order to keep me safe. Now the truth was out and they were tired. I didn't blame them and I sure didn't want to make it any worse.

My father put his hand on mine. "You can tell Jenny anything you feel she can handle and keep secret. When it comes to Taylor, your mother and I would like to tell him ourselves if that's alright."

My insides were on fire with the news about Taylor and I. My parents had no clue *just* how close he and I were. Seeing the pain in their eyes I knew what I had to do. I would just have to respect their decision and pray they would tell him soon. All I cared about right now was that he and I would be free to love each other openly . . . *one day*.

I stood up, kissed my parents cheeks and ran up to my room. My heart raced as if it were going to burst from all the excitement flowing through it. I wanted so badly to hear Taylor's voice so I grabbed my phone and held down 2 on my speed dial. I tapped my fingers over and over again on my bedside table and waited impatiently. My breath escaped me when I heard his deep voice.

"Hello gorgeous," Taylor answered on the first ring. "How are you?" I could hear his perfect smile through the phone.

"I'm great," I practically yelled as more tears fled freely from my eyes.

I could feel him freeze after he realized I was crying. "What's wrong?" he asked, panic in his voice.

I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't speak. I just kept crying.

"I'm coming home right now," he said immediately.

"No, no I'm okay. I have some bizarre issues but I have some great news, although I can't tell you just yet. Please say you're coming home soon?" I begged.

"I was actually going to try to surprise you. We're coming home tomorrow but now I'm thinking I'll ask Brad if he would be opposed to us leaving tonight." Taylor was no fool. He knew me better than I knew myself. He was sure to have realized that something major happened to cause me to call him crying.

"You don't have to come home tonight," I said suddenly feeling guilty for calling him before my tears were completely dried up. There was just so much I needed to say to him. "Tomorrow's fine. I just keep thinking about that night at the cabin and I haven't slept well since you've been gone," I admitted sheepishly.

"I haven't been able to sleep well either," he said softly. "I promise I will be home before you know it." His words made me ache to tell him the truth. *Soon*, I reminded myself silencing my growing impatience.

I hung up the phone and cried like a baby, letting my tears cleanse my soul. I had never experienced such intense love as I did for Taylor at that very moment. I could barely breathe with him gone. My heart was nothing without his.

I laid on my bed and stared up at the ceiling while my mind went over the letters once more. *Vampire? What was God thinking?* God forbid the drinking of blood. I knew the Bible verses well. Blood was the life-source of all living creatures and its consumption was strictly forbidden. Yet without it. *I would die*.

There was no question in my mind. God allowed this *vampire-thing* in me, I just didn't know why. I didn't know if I would ever understand why I was a monster. In my heart I was just a girl. I wasn't like the blood-suckers in movies that let their thirst for blood rule them. I wouldn't ever let myself be one of them. *God help me*, I prayed.

As I laid there thinking, I wondered what Taylor would say when he found out that I was a freak. I thought back to that day in the forest when he wiped the blood from my face and licked his finger, smiling. That moment would have to comfort me for now. He loved me. I

could feel it when he looked at me and I could feel it now with him so far away. I knew in my heart that he would help me through this.

I continued to let my mind wander until it brought me to a place I had not yet visited. I closed my eyes and saw an empty nursery full of everything except a baby. Would I ever be able to have the children I had dreamed of? Would Taylor still love me if I couldn't make him a father? The thought of never being able to get pregnant crushed my heart, and suddenly it was hard to breathe. If I was half vampire, did that mean that I was only half alive? If I was only half alive, that would mean that I was also half dead. Fear and repulsion began knocking at the door of my mind and I did my best not to answer it.

I laid back on my bed and closed my eyes, trying to concentrate on my breathing. The answers I had prayed for were now overwhelming me like wild fire. It was all coming together piece by piece. I finally knew why my parents had never taken me to the doctor all these years—they couldn't. I wiped another tear from my eye. All I could do now was pray.

My phone started ringing and I jumped, letting it pull me out of my head. I saw Jenny's pretty face on my phone and answered it happily, "Hey," I said shaking off the depressing thoughts that were trying to ruin my mood.

"Coast clear?" she asked.

"Yep, you're not going to believe this," I began.

"Spit it out, it's been killing me since I left!"

"Well, we were right! Taylor's not my brother after all," I said, my words still shocking me.

"I knew it," she screamed.

"And the kicker... I'm the adopted one."

"No way, I would have never put money on that one. So did they tell you who your real parents are?" Jenny asked.

"Kind of, they only know who my birth mother is.

"And?" she asked impatiently.

"My dad's sister was my real mom. They never met my real father *but . . .*" I said dragging it on. "Supposedly he was a vampire," I whispered trying to make it sound scary and then I laughed.

"Seriously?" For a second I thought Jenny was going to try to jump through the phone.

"No freakin way! I always knew you were cool Haden but *this* my friend is the tip of the iceberg. You are so awesome!"

"Wait, there's more," I paused, choosing my words carefully. I didn't want to scare her.

"They made me read two letters from the woman who dropped me off at their door step when I was a baby. She left one note with me and the other came in the mail a few weeks ago."

"You were dropped off?" she asked confused.

"Yep, wild eh? Anyway the most recent letter had a plane ticket in it for me." I sat there silently waiting for Jenny's response as she processed all of the information I had just thrown at her.

"An airplane ticket to where?" she asked serious.

"I don't know, somewhere in Europe."

"Rad! When do we leave?"

"We don't, I tore it up. I want nothing to do with that woman," I said annoyed.

"Why'd you go and do that dummy? Don't you want to meet your parents?"

"Can't, they both died not too long after I was born."

"Oh," Jenn said sounding as if I deflated her.

I ignored her and continued, "The letter she left with me as a baby said something about me being *special* and that my parents died protecting me from the bad vampires."

For the first time in her life Jenny was silently hanging on to my every word.



"Personally I think Nanny whoever is insane," I said disgusted. "I may not even be a vampire. As far as I'm concerned it's only speculation. Why should I believe her? I don't even know who she is. All I really care about right now is that Taylor and I aren't brother and sister," I said, trying to remove the gloom that was now hovering over our phone conversation.

As if a light bulb turned on in Jenny's head she came back to life in milliseconds. "Oh gosh, what did Taylor say when you told him? I bet he freaked!"

"He doesn't know and they don't want me telling him. Not yet anyway. They want to do it."

"Well that's just plain wrong," she huffed. "If anyone other than you deserves to know, it's Taylor."

"I totally agree and if my parents don't tell him soon, I will." I wasn't just trying to assure Jenny that he would know soon no matter what. I was also reassuring myself.

"So they let you tell me?" she asked confused.

"Yep, just no one else."

"Aw, I feel special," she giggled.

I was ready to get out of the house for awhile so I asked Jenny if she was up to getting some pizza and watching some vampire movies just for fun.

"Heck yeah, I'll pick you up in about in ten minutes," she said happily.

Hanging up the phone I put my hair up in a clip and sat in my favorite pink chair. I closed my eyes and pictured Taylor's face when a quick pain feeling like a brain freeze after one too many quick sips of a slushy shot through my head. I hung my head down closing my eyes in hopes it would go away.

At first everything was black until it began taking shape into something else. There in the darkness was Taylor chained to a chair, his eyes closed and his head hanging down. *Where is she?* the angry man demanded. *Do you think I'm kidding pretty boy,* he said hitting Taylor's face. Taylor slowly lifted his head to look at the man, his face all bruised and bloody, his color gone. *I would rather die than tell you,* he said. The man hit Taylor again, this time harder. He let out a deep breath, his head still hanging low.

I opened my eyes and couldn't breathe. I was dripping in sweat and my whole body was now shaking. I knew that Taylor was okay. I had just talked to him and he was fine. Even still, I couldn't get past how real that day dream had been. I wanted to throw up from the vision of Taylor's beaten face. I had never seen his perfect face with more than a scratch on it.

I stumbled to the bathroom forcing myself to take deep steady breaths. After splashing some water on my face I realized that my head was no longer hurting. *It must have been my overactive imagination,* I told myself. I went back into my room, turned on some happy music and finished getting ready. I would not be a prisoner to my fears— not anymore.

## 14. Nanny Lena

"Mmm I want *that* one," I said pointing to the cheesiest piece of pepperoni pizza I had ever seen. As we walked down the line ordering our food I looked over at Jenny's tray noticing it was covered with two huge pieces of pizza, a salad and a calzone. "Growth spurt," I teased.

"Puberty, I'm a late bloomer," she laughed, filling her glass to the brim with Dr. Pepper.

I wasn't very hungry but I knew I had better eat. There was no doubt that Jenny would be reporting to Taylor how I was once he was home.

As we walked to a table I glanced around the dimly lit pizza place and wondered if there were any others like me. They all looked normal for the most part but then again so did I.

Once we sat down Jenny leaned forward and whispered, "You know you could skip this human slop and get you some real food."

"Oh be quiet or I'll eat you." We both laughed and then bowed our heads for the blessing. This blessing however felt different. It was entangled with confusion. *Bless my food ... did that include my blood nourishment too?* I had never thought about it before. Lost in thought I jumped when Jenny spoke.

"Hey, check them out." Jenny motioned to a booth in the back corner where a guy and girl appeared to be arguing.

The small gruff looking guy kept trying to grab her hand while moving his face closer to hers as he spoke. The way she was pulling her hand away every time he reached for it, it was obvious that she wanted to be anywhere but there. Not wanting to stare, I turned around and took a bite out of my pizza which tasted amazing despite my lack of appetite.

"I'd slap him," Jenny said sitting up straight. She was still staring across the room. Jenn figured that if people didn't want her to stare then they shouldn't act crazy. I however, felt differently.

"Stop staring Jenn. It's none of our business. I'm sure it's nothing."

"It'll become our business if he doesn't leave her alone."

Quickly changing the subject I asked her what had happened with she and Brad at the cabin.

Hitting the nail on the head, she turned her attention away from the drama in the corner and focused on her food. "You've been kind of out of it so I never had a chance to tell you but he was great. He even apologized for that night," she said as she shoved a huge bite of salad in her little mouth.

"So did he tell you why he backed away?" I had been dying to know if she had got up the nerve to ask him, assuming that she would eventually.

"Nope, but we both know that he's a man of few words so I just let it go."

Putting another bite of cheesy heaven in my mouth, Jenn kicked me under the table and pointed to the register with her head. The fighting couple was leaving and the guy had such a tight grip on the skinny girls' arm that it made my stomach uneasy.

"Jerk," Jenny griped shaking her head. "You think we should follow them?"

Asking myself that very same question I told her no, as I continued to watch the couple wait in line to pay. After the girl paid, he grabbed her by her hair and pulled her out the door. Feeling steam building in my head, I handed Jenn some money and told her I would meet her outside. Taking one last sip of my Dr. Pepper I got up from the booth and walked towards the door.

When I got outside they were nowhere in sight. It didn't take me long to hear exactly where they were. I walked a little further until I spotted them in the back of the parking lot next to an old truck. I could hear her crying.

In seconds Jenny was by my side. "Can you hear them?" she whispered.

I nodded yes and kept listening.

"It's Brad, isn't it?" the guy screamed.

"Brad?" Jenn said repeating the guy.

I put my finger to my lips to silence her so I could hear them. She nodded and tilted her head towards them so she could hear better.

"No it isn't, we're just friends," she cried.

There was a loud noise followed by more crying.

"I think he just slapped her." Jenny's words were true. I had heard it loud and clear.

"You just think *that* hurt! Wait till I'm done with you! You don't wanna know what I have in store for Brad. When I'm done with him, I'm gonna blow up that pretty truck of his!"

Jenny gasped. "You think it could be *our* Brad?"

I raised my shoulders to answer Jenny. I had no idea what Brad they were talking about. What I did know, was that this guy was a total jerk and he was getting on my nerves fast. The more I listened, the more my blood boiled.

With the sound of the next slap I had had enough. I popped my neck and began walking over to them. The frail girl was hunched up next to the beat up rusty truck. She looked like a little beaten mouse with a bloody nose. The closer I got I could clearly see other bruises on her arms peaking out beneath her sleeves.

"Well *bello* sexy," the jerk said as I walked closer to him. "I'm kind of busy right now but if you give me just a few more minutes, I'll be right with you," he said licking his lips as if I were his dessert.

I clenched my jaw and pictured Taylor's face. Oh how I wished he was here to protect me. From myself. I looked up at the Restaurant sign and told him in my head that I needed him. I figured it probably wouldn't work but it was definitely worth a try.

Turning my attention back to the piece of junk before me, I stared intently at his face and smiled a devilish smile. He wasn't going to like how his night would be ending.

"Are you accustomed to mistreating ladies on the planet you come from?" I asked, speaking slowly through my teeth.

"SNAP... dork boy, she told you," Jenny laughed.

Dirty boy laughed. "This whore deserves this," he said slapping her again. "Now why don't you and your little friend go and mind your own business while I take care of mine."

Ignoring his invitation for us to leave, I shook my head no. "Look here genius, I suggest that you refrain from touching her again," I warned him, this time with a low growl. I could smell his blood from where I stood and at that moment I wanted nothing more than to shut him up for good. Instead, I stood there frozen... praying for a miracle.

"Dude, are you mentally disabled or something? Can't you see that this girl isn't playing? She'll eat you for lunch," Jenny said getting annoyed with him.

"I've got this," I told her, never removing my eyes from him. "*Any* guy who hits a girl is dumb piece of . . ." I said not finishing my sentence.

"Especially if he does it in front of *me*," Taylor added, standing next to Brad, both having appeared seemingly out of nowhere. His voice instantly took the edge off of my nerves.

"Brad!" The mousy voiced girl yelled his name as if she had just won the lottery.

Jenn looked at me, her eyes huge, confusion spreading across her face. I just shook my head. I had been living in a state of shock lately. This was *nothing*.

"Bradly boy, so it *is* you. So nice of you and your pretty friend to join us."

"Step away from the girl," Taylor warned, his voice icy. "That is if you don't want any trouble."

"Aw pretty boy, no need to get all huffy. This matter doesn't involve you. So why don't you just take a hike and let Bradly and I work this out," he said casually.

Brad nodded at Taylor who stepped aside and walked towards Jenny and I. Suddenly whistling rang out in the cool night air.

"Oh brother," Jenn complained rolling her eyes.

"What'd I miss? I had to use the facility," Kiernan said amused. "Ah, looky over there. What's the likes of a troll doin around these parts?" he asked pointing at the dirty guy, his laughter filling the air. "Watch out Brad they're stinky an from what I heard they bite."

"He would know," Jenny said under her breath.

Taylor put the palm of his hand on my lower back and I wanted to melt. "You called," he whispered, sending chills down my spine.

"And you answered," I said, wanting to be in his arms so bad that I momentarily forgot where I was.

"Erm erm, brother and sister remember," Jenn said in my ear.

Taylor heard her and moved his hand from my back to his side when Brad started questioning the girl.

"So *this* is Blake," Brad said more as a statement than a question.

"Yes," she answered, her voice shaking.

"Well Blake," Brad said calmly, popping his knuckles and walking towards them. "I think you should probably think pretty seriously about leaving right about now after you apologize to Gina."

"And if I don't redneck?"

Brad let out a hearty laugh and turned to look at Taylor, giving him a look like he couldn't believe how crazy this guy was. "If you don't leave now Blake, I will be forced to embarrass you in front of all these nice people. Honestly, you're lucky I don't let the two of them atcha," he threatened pointing to Taylor and I. "Trust me. You don't want none of that," Brad said, his southern accent thick.

What happened next happened so fast it was all a blur. Blake ran straight at Brad, punching him in his stomach. Brad stood there unaffected, laughing. Blake backed up, shock plastered on his face. He came back at Brad full force but Brad was too quick. He picked Blake up as if he were a ragdoll. I noticed a look of sheer craziness in Blake's eyes right before Brad's face went blank. Brad threw him to the ground, his right hand immediately holding his side. *Blood* I muttered under my breath and we all took off running towards Brad who had fallen to his knees.

Blake turned to run to his car but he was no match for Taylor who caught up to him in milliseconds, tackling him and pinning him down. "You're lucky I believe in God or you'd be dead," Taylor growled.

"Call 911," Jenny yelled at some people who had gathered to watch the show.

"Kiernan, see if Brad has any rope in his truck. I need to tie this trash up," Taylor demanded.

"I told you them nasty buggers bite," Kiernan told Brad whose face was as pale as a ghost from the loss of blood.

Trying to ignore the burning in my throat from the smell of fresh blood, I began breathing out of my mouth. Jenny and I ignored Kiernan as we hovered over Brad. Jenny held his hand while I put mine on top of his wound trying to stop the bleeding until help got there.

The police showed up at the same time as the ambulance. They loaded Brad into the ambulance and Blake got a first class ride in the back of a police car. Kiernan and Gina rode with Jenny and I rode in Brad's truck with Taylor.

I opened the glove box thanking God Brad had napkins so I could wipe some of the blood off of my hands. "I had no idea you were home but I'm so glad you were," I said practically in tears as I scrubbed my hands as hard as I could.

When I noticed Taylor watching me I stopped and grabbed some hand sanitizer out of my purse in hopes it would help cover the overwhelming smell of blood.

"It seems I never can surprise you though," he said grabbing my hand and kissing the top of it. I scooted closer to him and laid my head on his shoulder breathing him in.

"This big truck's not so bad. I like having you this close to me," Taylor sighed kissing my head.

I nuzzled next to him not speaking. I wanted nothing more than to feel him next to me.

We arrived at the hospital way too fast. Once he found a parking space he jumped out and was at my door in seconds, holding his hand out before I had even unbuckled my seatbelt. I placed my hand in his and within seconds I was in his stone cold arms. His chest was so cold and hard that it almost frightened me but I couldn't think clear enough to care. I could barely breathe. It felt as if all of my bodily sensors were a mess. He lightly touched his lips to mine and held them there before speaking.

"I could breathe you in forever," he said, causing me to lose all rational thought.

I looked up into his dark green eyes as he locked his arms around my waste. I didn't say anything. I just stared at him reveling in his utter perfection until he leaned down softly kissing me. As I melted into him I wished he and I could have more time alone.

"Soon," he promised smiling softly at me. "For now though we need to go check and see how Brad's doing. He lost a whole lot of blood back there." Taylor's words brought me back with a jolt. I had forgotten all about Brad when Taylor kissed me.

"You're right. We should get going," I said instantly feeling remorseful for being such a bad friend.

The smell of the emergency room made my stomach tighten immediately. Jenny and Kiernan were standing by the doors waiting for us. We all sat silently for what seemed like forever while we waited to hear how Brad was. Normally I would've run as far as I could from an emergency room but tonight I was happy being anywhere Taylor was.

While we were waiting for news on Brad I decided to play a little game. *Taylor, can you hear me?* I asked in my head, not looking at him. He turned his head to me, smiled and nodded yes. I then thought about mom and dad and how they had talked about moving to Houston.

"Why?" he asked, his tone serious.

"I can't tell you right now but I'm pretty sure I convinced them to change their mind."

"Well that's good because I like it here," Taylor added casually.

"I like it here too. That nurse over there is a hottie," Kiernan smiled.

It wasn't long before the doctor came out with an update on Brad. The doctor asked for Taylor and we all followed. Brad's stab wound had miraculously missed his lung. He had no major damage but he had lost a significant amount of blood and they were making him stay at the hospital for at least twenty-four hours for observation. I knew exactly what that meant. Taylor and I would have to wait just a little longer for our talk. Brad needed him.

I put my hand on Taylor's arm and kissed his cheek. "You stay. He needs you. Our talk can wait. Besides, I'm not going anywhere," I smiled, reassuring him that I was okay.

Before Taylor could say no I told him that Jenny and I had plans to rent some movies and just hang out anyway. That luckily seemed to calm any worries he had about leaving me alone. The nurse at the desk called Taylor's name and with a kiss on my cheek, he turned and was gone. I just stood there staring as he glided through the double doors. I missed him already.

Pulling up to my house I noticed a little pink Vespa parked in the front.

"Who's that?" Jenny asked.

"I have no idea but I'm in no mood for company," I said feeling my heart rate rise. "Let's sneak around back and maybe no one will hear us."

Opening the back door slowly, we crept in as quietly as possible and headed up the back stairs towards my room. As we walked down the hall I could hear three voices. Two were my parents and the other was the second mouse like voice I had heard today, only this one sounded older. I stopped short when I heard my name. I motioned to Jenny to go ahead of me into my room.

"I beg to disagree, Jacob. You see, Haden has no choice but to return home with me. These are *fabulous* cookies by the way. Thank you so very much," the mousy voice said while making chewing sounds.

"I do not mean to be rude dear lady but Haden has already made up her mind," my father answered back.

"Sure, sure but she doesn't know all the facts. When she does, she will change her mind. I have no doubt. By the way, what a lovely house you two have, so cozy. And you, dearest Jacob; you look so very much like your sister. To be honest, it makes me get a little teary eyed just looking at you."

"Pardon me," mom jumped in the conversation, resentment ringing in her voice. "Who exactly *are* you?"

"Dear me, please forgive my lack of manners. It was quite a long trip, deary. Yes, yes who am I? My name is Nanny Lena. I was Haden's family's Nanny. They were like family to me. I was very close to them all, close in deed. Such a shame it was. Couldn't have found a nicer couple... truly. Landon was one of a kind, a sight to see for sure, and the misses, oh what a little thing she was standing next to his side," she giggled. "She was a feisty one, that Serene. On the night of baby Haden's birth she made me promise to watch over her and protect her all of my life. *That*, dear ones, is why I am here. She *must* come with me. I cannot accept no for an answer. Would you like to see a picture of Haden and her parents?" she asked happily.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I almost ran down there and grabbed the picture from her but I couldn't let them know I was home so I stayed right where I was and continued to eavesdrop.

"Yes please," dad said sounding as if he were going to cry.

"He doesn't look like any vampire I've ever seen," mom whispered.

"Of course not dear, you've probably only seen ones in movies and those don't look real at all. Landon was a vampire through and through; one of the first of his kind and the best I ever had the pleasure of knowing, I might add."

"First of his kind?" dad questioned.

"Oh yes Jacob, he was very powerful and *very* special even though he was created out of pure evil. Vampires aren't always good kind sir. Most today still aren't but Landon was different. He too, had a kind heart like your dear Serene. His story is one to revel at. He had been unfulfilled feeding in the usual way. So far from God, and then one day he met your lovely sister. The rest was history. She showed him what true love was. He began seeing life through her eyes and soon he was feeding on animals to be more human like her. Despite their obvious differences they fell in love and Landon was changed forever. Sadly though, Landon's "blood" brother Arkos, didn't feel the same way about his new feeding practices or your sister. He was furious that Landon had chosen a human over him. You see, early on in their friendship, Arkos, Aramis and Landon had taken an oath, using blood; this, they believed, bonded them to each other, making them blood brothers. Arkos wouldn't let Landon forget this. Nor would he pretend that he wasn't against any mixing of vampires-- *especially* with humans. He thought humans were good for only two things. Servants and food."

I could hear the shiver in her voice when she mentioned Arkos' name. I sat frozen in awe as she went on.

"Landon, having found new meaning to his life, decided that he would no longer take human lives to survive and this angered Arkos very much... very much indeed. During this time, Aramis Kenton, their other blood brother, was falling in love with your mother's best friend, Alexandra. Together, Aramis and Landon told Arkos that they refused to abide by his rules from that moment on. No matter the consequence. Arkos told them that they had chosen death. He wouldn't allow them to make the blood of their kind dirty. He told Landon and Aramis that he would give them a head start before hunting them down and killing them. It was in *that* moment that Arkos swore he would hunt any and all other human lovers. Killing them all. Landon, Serene and the Kenton's as well as so many others, were just some of many who chose to go into hiding rather than fight."

"Who killed my sister?" my father asked. I could hear the deep pain in his voice as he spoke.

"Ah yes, such a shame, you see my people are special too. We also have gifts from God. We are called *Seers*. We are given prophesies... messages from God about the future, if you will. We too are hunted but for different reasons. Very, very long ago there was a prophecy given to us, the most important ever received by our people. Arkos got wind of it and had our people followed in order to steal it. Part of the prophecy was indeed stolen by the Stidoniums."

"The who?" mom asked.

"Followers of Arkos. The bad ones dear. As I was saying, only the Seer who received the prophecy and his assistant were the ones to read it in its entirety. In order to keep them safe, they separated the written words and hid them. To this day, no one knows how many portions they broke it down into. All we were told was that God would bring light to the darkness in His time."

The woman stopped talking for a second and I could hear more crunching before she began again. "Before the ancient one was killed, he took the locations of the parts he hid to the grave with him. His assistant however, chose life over protecting his part of the prophecy and handed it over to Arkos, giving him the very beginning of the prophecy. That little guy has been their slave ever since. Oh what a shame, he was such a pleasant fellow too."

"What does that have to do with who murdered my sister or Haden for that matter?" dad asked trying to bring her back to his original question.

"Oh. Yes, well you see dear, Haden's life was in danger," she continued right as I heard Jenny call my name. Putting my finger up to my lips I motioned her to go back in my room. With a look of confusion on her face she did as I said and I went back to listening.

"The prophecy, dear ones, told of a child to be born under an *Ice Moon*. This child would be *very* special, sent by God to save her people. She would bring peace to her kind and lead them out of darkness. This child was to be half vampire and half of another species-- a mixed breed. She would be impure to some and miraculous to others. This child Jacob... is Haden."

By now I had moved to the top of the stairs where I watched through the banister, still out of their view. The lady stopped talking only long enough to take a breath and grab another cookie.

"So tasty. Did you make these yourself, young Sidney?" she asked taking a bite slowly, obviously savoring it.

"Yes I did, thank you. What makes you think that this baby you speak of is Haden?" mom asked sadly.

"Oh, no thinking dear, only knowing; the prophetic child would be born with a birthmark of a crescent moon somewhere on its body. This is no normal birthmark. It is as special as Haden herself. A mark from God. It is *this* mark that would eventually disclose her location, no matter how secret. If it were to be exposed at night under a full moon they would have her location in minutes and she would be in grave danger. You see, Arkos wants her in his possession. He wants to learn about her and then kill her. In order for him to survive, she must die. The minute Arkos got his hands on the prophecy, he ordered all vampire babies born under any stage of the ice moon to be murdered. So many little angels were killed during this awful time. Many others were relocated by their nannies, who found new homes for them in other countries in order to save their precious lives. Many live with their adoptive families today and have no clue what their real identity is."

"Relocated where?" dad asked quickly.

"Why, I can't be certain dear Jacob. My main concern was Haden's safety, as we knew from her birthmark that she was indeed the chosen one. Serene didn't want to part from her baby even though she knew it was best. She kept Haden with her longer than she should have really, cutting it close. Too close. Landon and Serene lived underground with several other families for awhile before Haden was born. By this point they were both hopeful that the location of their home would go undetected by the Stidoniums. Sadly they were wrong and had to go deeper into hiding. They were found and murdered by Arkos' people. They both died protecting Haden."

My breath escaped me as the woman spoke her last words. *My birth parents died protecting me?* I listened closely as she continued her story.

"I removed her from the hiding place through a hidden tunnel and brought her here to you immediately. As for the rest of the wee ones who were relocated, I have heard only stories of

how their Nanny's would drop them off and hide, waiting for humans to find them and take them home before leaving. So very sad, but I dare say it saved many a wee ones lives."

Silence engulfed the room before my father spoke up. "Your story is interesting but I don't see the danger you say she would be in if she were to stay home. It sounds to me like she would have more of a chance of getting hurt if she went with you," dad objected.

"Oh, no Jacob. You mustn't think that. She is in *grave* danger here. Her powers are strong and it is only a matter of time before they find her. She needs to be around her people. She needs to be trained and protected. Arkos wants her dead and anyone that tries to stand in his way is *as good as dead*," she said warning him.

*Taylor*, I thought. He would be their first target. I had heard enough. I stood up and quietly went to my room.

"Hi ya stranger," Jenn said somewhat annoyed.

I hurriedly grabbed my overnight bag and began tossing clothes and underwear in it as fast as I could.

"Where are you going?"

"Shh," I demanded. "I have to leave tonight . . . *now*," I said quickly, lost in my thoughts. "That crazy woman who wrote the letters, she's here, talking to my parents! She says that people are coming for me."

"No freakin way," she whispered looking at my door. "Wanna camp at my house until she leaves?"

"No good, this woman would find me there. I've got no choice but to go far away until I figure things out," I said shaking. I walked over to my bedside table and pulled out an antique wooden box with a lock on it. I grabbed my keys out of my purse and fumbled until I found the little key. I unlocked the box and pulled out all of the money I had in there.

"Holy cow, how much money is that?" Jenny asked staring at me as I shoved the money in several of my jean pockets.

"A lot," I whispered.

She continued to stare at me with her eyebrows raised. She wasn't going to give up until I answered her.

"Fine . . . around ten thousand dollars."

"Did you just say ten thousand dollars?" she choked.

"Yes," I nodded. "Some is from my savings account and the rest was money I made from work. I don't trust banks."

"No kidding." Jenny's voice was in-between impressed and envious. "Where are you gonna go?"

"I wish I knew," I said grabbing a piece of paper out of my desk drawer so I could write Taylor a note.

*Taylor,*

*I'm leaving tonight. I can't tell you why I'm leaving or where I'm going. I just wanted to tell you that no matter what happens, you have my heart forever.*

*Haden*

I handed the note to Jenny as I opened my window.

"Give this to Taylor would you?" I asked scoping the distance from my window to the ground.

"Sure, but . . ." Jenny said looking helpless. "Do you have any idea where you're going?"

"Not one bit, I'll call you when I know. Jenn, my parents are going to call you looking for me. Tell them you don't know where I am."



"But I *don't* know where you'll be," she said.

"Well then that's perfect. In ten minutes, sneak out the way we came in and whatever you do, don't let them catch you leaving," I demanded.

She shook her head yes letting me know she understood. "Um are you going to jump out of your window?" she asked wide eyed, watching me closely.

"Yep, if I break my leg they'll have to take me to the hospital and I figure I'll be safer there than I am here," I joked.

I hugged her quickly and leapt from my second story window, landing gracefully on the ground.

"So freakin cool," Jenny said as she stared at me in shock.

I waved goodbye and ran towards my car, stopping short as I eyed Taylor's Maserati. In a split second I made one of the craziest decisions of my life. I would take his car instead of mine. I knew that there was a possibility that they'd hear my car start and come after me but if I took Taylor's, they would assume I was still out with Jenny and that he was leaving.

After all the times I argued with him about giving me a key to his car, I was now thanking God that he had been stubborn and put one on my key chain anyway.

Opening the driver's door I slid in, tossing my bag in the back. I knew immediately that I had made a smart decision. Taking one deep breath, I filled my lungs with Taylor's scent. I put the key in the ignition and brought Taylor's car to life. I took another deep breath, put it in gear and backed out of my driveway, saying goodbye to the pink Vespa still parked in front. My shaking hands grabbed my cell phone and dialed Taylor. Relief washed over me when I got his voicemail. I immediately started rambling at the sound of the beep. *I can't talk long. I borrowed your car. It'll be at the airport. I'll explain later. I love you.* Hanging up the phone I was extremely thankful that the hospital made him turn his cell phone off. I knew all too well that he would try to stop me or worse, go with me, putting him in even more danger. I knew I had no choice but to get as far away from him as possible. I had to keep him safe.

The sound of my phone ringing startled me since I was concentrating so hard on driving Taylor's speed machine. I saw it was Jenny and answered it while I tried to keep my eyes on the road.

"I'm barely home Haden and they've called me already," she said starting to take on her nervous chipmunk voice again.

"That was fast. What did they say?" I asked, still shaking.

"They asked when we'd be home. They said they had tried to call you but couldn't get through."

"Yeah, I pulled over in a parking lot and blocked my home number for that very reason," I said proud that my plan had worked. "Did they ask to talk to me?"

"Nope, but they thought you were with me. I don't think they believed me when I told them that I had dropped you off earlier at your house but for some reason your mom didn't push."

"I bet they think I'm with Taylor since I took his car."

"I saw that Haden, nice move," she laughed. "Are you sure you want to do this alone? You can come get me and I'll go with you," she offered.

"Thanks Jenn but if that Nanny woman was right, everyone I love is in danger and that includes you." Just then my phone beeped.

"I think I know where I'm gonna go," I told Jenny trying to ignore the persistent beeping in my ear.

"Where?"

"Boise, I think it's a good option," I said trying to convince myself.

"Boise? As in Boise, Idaho? Are you *serious*? You are going to drive Taylor's car all the way to Boise? Wow, you've totally lost your mind."

"Actually I'm gonna catch a flight," I sighed.

"But you don't like flying?"

"Yeah I know but I can't leave him without a car."

"You wouldn't, he has yours," she laughed, snorting.

Jenn knew exactly how Taylor felt about my Grandma car as he called it. The thought of driving Taylor's car did comfort me in some way, almost as if he was with me.

"You know what? I think I *will* drive his car. There's only one problem though. I already left him a message telling him he would need to pick it up at the airport."

"No problem, I'll just call him and tell him that you changed your mind and will be taking his car after all."

Before I had time to thank Jenny I noticed I was being followed.

"Jenn, I think someone's following me," I said feeling my nerves starting to go crazy again.

"Well, yeah, did you bother to look at the car your driving? You're not exactly going incognito, Haden."

"You've got a point there," I said watching the car behind me.

I decided not to take any chances so I punched the accelerator, using the vast amount of horsepower this car possessed. I needed to escape the car trailing me. Worrying about a ticket wasn't an option. Praying there were no cops around, I told Jenny to hold on. I put the phone down and gripped the steering wheel tight. It wasn't long before the car behind me wasn't even visible anymore.

"I'm starting to like this car," I said putting the phone back to my ear. "I'm glad I chose to drive this instead of mine," I laughed.

I almost couldn't get Jenny to agree to get off of the phone with me but I convinced her that I was tired and would be stopping at a motel to rest. What I didn't tell her was that it wouldn't be until I got to Idaho. I turned up the radio and drove.

## *15. Lies (Taylor)*

The staff at the hospital had been accommodating enough, offering multiple pillows to make my stay last night with Brad more pleasurable. Even still, I was unable to rest. Sleep seemed to escape me amidst my thoughts of Haden. I just couldn't release the nagging sensation that something was terribly wrong. Trying to calm my tired nerves I stretched, reminding myself that all had been quiet. I hadn't received any mental signals from her throughout the night. As I continued to try to assure myself that she would indeed call me if there was something wrong I heard Brad moan.

"Good morning sunshine. Can I get you anything?" I offered, feeling my thirst burn deep in my throat.

"Yeah, you can bring that twerp who stabbed me up to the hospital so I can have a word with him now that I've had some pain killers," he grunted painfully as he attempted to adjust his position in the hospital bed.

"Allow me," I said getting up from the chair. Brad was easy enough to move. Even though his build was bigger than mine, my strength had increased ten-fold in recent months, so lifting him was cake. I helped him adjust to a position that was more comfortable and handed him his water. "They said you should drink."

"You know, you should consider being a nurse dude," Brad smiled, every breath exuding pain.

"Thanks. I have no clue what my future holds," I said forcing a smile while I concentrated on ignoring my growing thirst.

The nurse knocked and walked in with Brad's breakfast tray in her hands. His face lit up with such excitement he suddenly reminded me of the Brad I knew before his parent's accident. I watched as he prayed and then began shoveling eggs into his mouth.

Watching his enjoyment only made my thirst worsen. I hadn't fed in days. Going away with Brad had made it extremely difficult to hunt. Just thinking about my last meal made my stomach turn. I watched the pleasure he was getting from his breakfast and found it hard to believe that this was the same guy I had spent the last few days with. He was glad to be away from his family even though he was now sporting a stab wound.

Watching Brad suppress his emotions at his aunt's house was almost as difficult as watching him close off right after his parents died. Not knowing what kind of a toll going through his parent's belongings would take on him, I made the decision to stay by his side the entire trip. This made it impossible for me to hunt which left me with nothing but rats to satisfy my thirst-- very unpalatable rats.

"T . . . can I be honest with you?" Brad asked as he shoved a huge piece of toast in his mouth.

"Sure."

"Man, you look horrible. You have dark circles and your eyes are so dark green it's insane. I would guess that pull out chair isn't too comfortable. Maybe you should go home," Brad said sternly.

"I'm fine. You just worry about getting better."

"Taylor buddy, we need to talk."

"You, my friend, don't need to do anything right now except rest," I insisted.

"I'll rest if you go home and get some sleep. It's not like I'm going anywhere for awhile. I'll still be here when you get back," he laughed followed by another moan. "I'll be fine. You can come back and check on me later."

The thought of smelling his blood any longer was not a pleasant one. Purposely torturing myself for one second longer seemed almost unbearable. I knew I needed to get out of there and soon. So without another thought, I gave in to his request. After breathing out of my mouth for days I was quite ready to end my misery.

I listened carefully until I heard no more footsteps in the hall and could safely assume that it was empty. I told my hard headed friend goodbye and left. The minute I was out of his room I took a deep breath. The antiseptic smell turned my already ill stomach. Nevertheless I welcomed it. Anything was better than torturing myself with smelling his blood while I was so famished.

I walked down the halls as fast as I could without attracting attention to myself. The smell of blood was everywhere, burning my nose with each breath I took. I knew I had to get out of there and fast. In mere seconds I was standing at Brad's truck. Unlocking the door I jumped in and froze. Haden's delicious scent filled Brad's truck, catching me off-guard. She was everywhere. I silenced my growing thirst for a brief moment and took in a deep breath, inhaling as much of her as I could.

I put the key in the ignition and threw the truck into reverse. Catching a glimpse of my reflection in the rear view mirror I could see that Brad was right. My eyes were almost black. This definitely wasn't a good sign. My throat was on fire and only one thing would stop its intense burning—blood.

Hunting was no longer an option. I licked my dry lips and tried to swallow with no such luck. My mouth was as dry as the dessert on a summer day. I needed to feed and fast. Clinging my teeth I could feel my muscles stiffen. I was quickly turning into someone I didn't like.

As I continued to drive, I saw a woman walking down the road. Suddenly visions of me sinking my teeth into her neck were flashing in my mind. I popped my neck, raised the stereo volume and floored Brad's truck. I had to get home *now*.

Only once before had I let myself get this thirsty. My recklessness almost cost Amber her life. I had sworn I would never let myself get to this point ever again and yet here I was . . . loosing it. My body was stiff as a board now. My hands were shaking as I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

Barely a year ago, I almost lost myself to the monster inside. For four straight days I fasted. I refused to touch any blood. I was almost seventeen years old and angry. I felt diseased. Having a condition that forced me to drink blood might as well have made me a leper in my mind. My stupid need for blood was forcing me to spend more and more time hidden away in my secret room; the room in the back of my closet where my parents stored my "stash," as they called it. No one knew about my rare condition except my parents and I had finally decided I had enough. I was done drinking blood.

By the end of the third day my thirst was practically unmanageable, forcing me to avoid anyone with a pulse. On day four I came to the conclusion that I couldn't live as a recluse so I accepted Amber's invitation to go to a movie. It was the biggest mistake of my life. It almost became the day she would take her last breath.

The entire way to the theatre my body was shaking ever so slightly. The smell of her blood had me almost entranced when we arrived at the theatre. That day will forever be burned into my mind. Sitting close to her in the theatre was pure torture, forcing me to refrain from breathing through my nose. When the movie was finished all I could think about was the sweet smell of her blood. I tried to focus on the nonstop babbling that came out of her mouth in order to keep my mind off of sinking my teeth into her as we walked to my car. By this point, I had begun taking small breaths through my nose, enjoying the pleasurable torture that came with each one. I opened her door and let her in as I imagined how sweet her blood would taste on my tongue.

When we got in my car she insisted that she had something extremely important she had to talk to me about. I instinctively took a deep breath, inhaling the warm fragrance of her blood when something clicked in my head. In that very moment my intense blood lust was all I could think about. I had to have her. I turned to face her and watched the vein on her neck pulsating as she spoke.

Amber was insistent on proving to me that she was a woman with needs. She needed a boyfriend who wanted to touch her; not one with a hands off approach like I had. She kept rambling on and I leaned my head back against the seat as I watched her closely. Her words filled the air but they were all quickly becoming a blur. She was no more than a friend in my eyes even though she thought different and I . . . well I was no more than a hunter quickly becoming intoxicated by the smell of her blood.

I forced myself to look away from her. It was no longer safe for us to be alone. I grabbed the door handle and she grabbed my arm. I turned to look at her when she put her hand on my face pulling it closer. The smell of her blood was so thick in the air that I forced myself to breath out of my mouth yet again. Right as I thought I had it all under control she pressed her lips onto mine. Shocked I reflexively moved her into a hug when she began to cry. I stiffened at the sight of her neck by my mouth. Her tears fell upon deaf ears. I heard nothing but the sound of her pulse. In a split second I became the hunter again and she my prey.

Turning my head slowly, I licked her neck, tasting the perfume on her skin. She moaned in such pleasure that I didn't stop. My tongue began searching for where my teeth longed to be. I pulled away just a little and licked my teeth; their razor-like sharpness was ready to puncture her beautiful neck. I tilted her head back as I licked her neck once again when there was a knock at the window.

"Who ya hidin from ya love birds?" Kiernan's voice rang out like a bell sent from God. I pulled away from Amber and threw open the door, jumping out. I could have kissed Kiernan for his much appreciated interruption. I asked him to take her home that night. That was the last time I had seen Amber until recently.

Stepping hard on the accelerator I made it home in record time. I flew out of the truck and sniffed the air instinctively. There was a new scent and my car was gone. Assuming my father had taken it out I flew into my room slamming the door behind me. Once at the armoire in my closet I ripped my coats out and hurriedly punched in my code H A D E N. Quickly I shut the door, ran to my refrigerator, grabbed an ice cold glass of blood and drank it down. I emptied the refrigerator of its contents in no time, heating none of the glasses.

Sipping my last glass slowly, I stood against the wall, savoring every drop as it refreshed my body. I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket to check the time and noticed I had missed calls; seven missed calls to be exact. I dialed my voice mail and waited. *Call us as soon as you get this son*, my father said emotionless. There were three from my mother, each more frantic than the previous. *Taylor honey we need to talk ... Taylor is your sister with you ... Taylor please call us when you get this*, and one from Haden telling me that she took my car. Horror struck my soul at the sound of her frantic voice. She was in danger and I had my phone off. I was instantly angry with myself as I listened to the last message from Jenny. *Hey Taylor, Haden asked me to tell you that she's keeping your car for a while. Don't ask me where she's going. She won't let me tell you. She's okay though. Talk to you later.*

My soul was on fire with what I had just heard. Haden had taken my car; the car that she had always refused to drive because she thought it would be a death trap with her behind the wheel. I lunged off the couch and moved swiftly towards the door, running out of my room and down the stairs as fast as my legs would carry me. I didn't see my parents at first until I practically knocked my father over as he was walking inside through the back.

"Where've you been?" he asked looking like he too had no sleep.

"At the hospital, Brad was stabbed. I tried to call you to tell you but I couldn't get through," I said wishing he would move so I could find Haden.

"Oh, is he okay?"

"He'll be fine," I said feeling my body tensing up from my nerves.

"Your mom and I need to talk to you."

"Can it wait? I really need to leave."

"No son, I'm afraid it can't."

Nodding, I turned and walked towards the couch where I stopped. They walked in hand in hand looking like the night of the living dead. My mother walked towards me, hugging me tightly as she began to cry.

"It's been a long night," my father said, rubbing his forehead.

"I'm so glad you're safe," my mom cried, cupping my face.

I assured her that I was fine and she went to sit by my father where they both stared at me silently for a moment. I stared back trying to figure out why they both looked so depleted.

"What happened? Where's Haden?" I asked my eyes probing theirs.

"We were actually hoping that you could tell *us* where your sister was," my father said rubbing my mother's delicate shoulders. "It was *your* car she took after all."

"That was brought to my attention only minutes ago actually. Honestly I don't know where she is. She left me a voicemail last night telling me that she was going to drop my car off at the airport. I had forgotten to turn my phone back on once Brad was out of ICU. I didn't check my messages until just now."

Mom gasped, "The airport?"

"She's not dropping it off anymore," I said quickly, trying to calm my mother. "Jenny left me a message after Haden saying that Haden asked her to let me know that she would be keeping my car."

"Why your car, she'll kill herself in that thing," she said, her voice up an octave.

"Don't worry mom. I'm sure that Jenny knows where she is which is precisely why I will be calling her as soon as we are finished talking." Wanting answers I continued, "What happened that would have forced her to take my car and leave? She would never leave and tell none of us where she was going."

I looked over at my mother whose tears had begun to fall harder.

Dad got up, grabbed the box of tissues and handed them to her as he took a deep breath, "Son, there is a lot we have to tell you; a lot you will probably be angry at us for keeping from you. Your mother and I only did what we did because we love you and Haden so much."

"What are you trying to say?" I could feel my father's intense remorse as he spoke.

"Son, we're not your birth parents. Nor are we Haden's. You were both given to us at different times.

"I don't understand," I said trying to follow what he was saying. "We were given to you at different times?"

"Yes, you are actually a few months older than your sister."

"So what you are telling me is that she is in no way blood related to me?" I asked feeling my heart expand.

"No son, she isn't."

Hearing those words flooded me with relief. I had known it all along, she and I both had. We were now free from the restraints that had stopped us from being together.

Reality stung my heart instantly. Haden wouldn't have run away because of this. She would have been sad but relieved just as I was. There had to be more and it couldn't be good. I looked at my father, trying to read his eyes.

"I'm so sorry son," dad apologized, silent tears falling from his face. I could see the deep pain on both of their faces. It was as if they were trapped in a dungeon with no light.

"I forgive you both," I said as I sat next to my mother, placing her tiny hand in mine. I hated seeing her in pain. "In all actuality I always knew in my heart that I was adopted, so it's not a real shock to me. What does shock me though is the fact that Haden isn't your biological child either. That's not why she left is it?"

"We don't think so. She handled the news like you, way better than we ever could have expected. She actually looked relieved," dad said, a hint of confusion in his voice.

"When did she leave?" I asked, looking at my watch. I could feel every precious minute flying by.

"There is so much more that you don't know, Taylor," my mother sighed. "Maybe you should go look for her. We can tell you everything when you find her."

"I need to know now if I have any chance of finding her. I need to get in her head. I can't help her if I don't know *everything*."

"Of course," my father nodded.

"Taylor, you were our first special blessing," mom said smiling warmly. "We never told either of you, but we lost our first baby. I was so sad and empty. I prayed for God to send me a baby and he sent me you. One evening around dusk your father and I decided to go on a walk. That walk changed our lives forever. When we got to the park, we heard the sound of a tiny baby whimpering. You never cried really. You have always been strong, even as a baby. There you were an angel all alone in a basket with a few bottles of formula and a few bottles of what appeared to be tomato juice. Lying next to you, there was also an envelope with a note and a whole lot of money. I of course immediately picked you up and cradled you in my arms while your father read the note. It didn't say anything really other than that you couldn't stay with your birth parents. The note asked whoever found you to give you a good home. It also spoke of your need for blood which is what was in those other bottles. I was so happy to hold you that I couldn't have cared less if you needed to chew on car tires to live. God had answered my prayers and even though the letter didn't tell us who your parents were it did include a very generous

sum of money which they said we would need in order to keep up with your constant requirement of blood."

"Where does Haden come into all of this?" I asked trying to place the pieces of the puzzle together in my head.

"Sweet baby Haden," mom continued. "You had been with us a few months already when one night our door bell rang. I was playing with you on the living room floor when your father came in carrying yet another baby basket, this time with a little baby girl inside and a much more disturbing note." My mom stopped short, looking at my father. "I can't," she choked back tears.

"It's alright, I'll finish," dad said wiping a tear that had escaped mom's eye off of her cheek. "Taylor, you see, Haden was special like you. She too needed blood to survive, but unlike the note left with you, hers gave a very unsettling explanation of her appearance on our doorstep.

"She was part vampire," I interjected.

Looks of shock washed over their faces.

"Yes," mom stuttered. "How did you know?"

Rubbing my hands together I told her that I had been putting the pieces together for months now. I had questioned my own "condition," the first time I ran off into the woods alone and fed while they were all asleep a little over a year ago. I went on to tell them how I had preferred hunting live animals as opposed to the cold dead blood I had grown up drinking; that for almost a year now I would hunt *and* drink the cattle nourishment they had provided me with.

Continuing my explanation I said, "I never had any idea that Haden was the same as me until very recently. Your birthday gift to her dad, just reinforced my theory; that and of course the time I caught her feasting on a bear," I laughed. "It must have been her first time. She was a vision, even covered in all of that blood." Smiling at the memory, my heart ached for her.

Mom's face was covered in shock but she said nothing.

"I'm sure you're questioning why we had you two keep your secrets from each other," dad said before going on with his story. "Haden's letter told us that she was special; a prophetic child who was in grave danger. It said that she was being hunted. We were forced to tell no one in order to keep her safe from the ones who killed her parents. Taylor, her mother was my sister."

"Does Haden know all of this?"

"Not everything, no. She knows nothing about you but she does know the rest. Like I said though, she didn't seem as upset as we would have imagined, even after we read her the other letter."

"What other letter are you speaking of?" I knew immediately that this, "other letter" held the key to her sudden disappearance.

"The one we received recently. It had a plane ticket in it, sent by her biological family's Nanny. The Nanny requested that Haden fly back to her homeland for her own safety. Haden was all smiles when she tore the ticket up. She said that she had no urge to leave even though your mother and I told her that we were worried that those people the Nanny spoke of might actually come looking for her. That was the last time we saw her. Haden text me yesterday letting me know that Jenny was picking her up for pizza but we never heard from her again," dad's facial expression was full of pain and confusion.

"So what do you think made her run?" I asked, still unable to make sense of her decision to leave.

"Something else did happen . . . something that we think might have scared her. Last night while Haden was out with Jenny, we had an unexpected guest who claimed to have been the Nanny who wrote both of Haden's letters. She came here to take Haden back with her. She claimed that Haden was in grave danger if she stayed with us any longer. She spoke of bad vampires that were on a man hunt, looking for Haden. She said that the stronger Haden's powers

grew, the more likely she was to lead them straight to her. Now, your mother and I never believed in any sort of mystical world but I would be lying if I were to tell you that I didn't question it now, because I do."

"Was there any way Haden could have been home when the woman arrived?" I asked sternly.

"She wasn't at first," my mom said through her tears. "You two are so quiet at times that it wouldn't surprise me one bit if she had come home while Nanny Lena was her. Haden could have listened and then ran. Oh I can't imagine how frightened she must be," mom continued to cry. "You've got to find her Taylor."

My mother was right, but she was forgetting one very important thing. Haden was the strongest person I knew. She was a fighter. "I will find her soon. I promise."

"Taylor," dad interjected clearing his voice. "You know son, we will love you as our son no matter what. If you too ... are a vampire, it won't change how we feel about you."

I told him I knew how much both he and my mother loved me and then excused myself, rising from the couch after kissing my mother's soft cheek. Within seconds I was in Haden's car. *Lord, please watch over Haden until I can get to her, I prayed. God protect us both.*

The comfort my body and soul had sitting in Haden's car were immeasurable. Her beautiful scent consumed every fiber of my being. The information my parents had divulged seemed so terribly fictitious but I could feel its undeniable truth in my soul. My hunches were right. She and I were vampires, part anyway. That alone could have easily been enough to frighten Haden, chilling her to the very center of her being.

Pulling into the hospital parking lot I saw Kiernan's van. Part of me wanted to turn around and just go but another part of me, the nagging friend part, knew I needed to check on Brad and make sure he was taken care of.

"Hiya pretty boy," Kiernan called from the chair next to Brad. "You need to go on back home. With the likes of you here, I'll get no lovin from Brad's oh so scrumptious nurse," Kiernan joked as I walked in Brad's room.

I couldn't force myself to smile so I just nodded acknowledging him.

"Well you look better physically T but that's about it. What's up buddy?" Brad said as he sat up straighter suppressing another moan.

Not answering him I turned towards Kiernan and asked him if he would mind staying with Brad while I took care of some business. I let him know I had already worked out everything about his job with my parents.

Before Kiernan had a chance to answer me Brad spoke up. "Looks like I'm healing faster than they thought so they're releasing me today. Where are we headed?"

"*We* are going nowhere," I told my friend.

"Um ya see, that's where yer wrong," Kiernan laughed. "Seems yer parents are worried about ya. They called and asked me to hang out with ya for a couple days. Brad over there just wants in on all the excitement."

"That's really unnecessary," I protested.

"T, you were there for me. Now it's my turn. That's how it works," Brad said giving me a look that told me he wouldn't relent.

"Brad, you have nothing to repay," I insisted. "I'm going alone and that's final."

"What if I told ya I knew where Haden was?" Kiernan asked smugly.

"How could *you* know, Kiernan?" I asked starting to get upset.

"Me little bunny, that's how. She's a nervous wreck that one. Couldn't keep it to herself yet she's been forbidden to tell you. So shouldn't you be askin *me* where *we're* going?"

I gave in to my defeat. "Fine," I said through my teeth.

"Taylor, we're on your side," Brad said reassuring me that I wasn't alone.



I nodded and walked out of the room to get some air. I walked until I found the hospital chapel where I prayed. When I regained my composure I went back into Brad's room to find him dressed with Kiernan holding his overnight bag.

"I am sorry for losing my temper," I apologized to them both. "I am just extremely worried about her."

"So what are we waiting for?" Brad asked limping to the door. "Time's a wasting."

Once we were all in Haden's car I grabbed my baseball cap from the dashboard, put it on and opened my phone, holding down 2. *Hey, this is Haden ... you know what to do.* Slamming my phone shut I tossed it on the console and raised the volume of the stereo.

"I'm sure she's fine. All women fly off the rocker at some point," Kiernan said attempting to comfort me in his own unusual way.

"Not Haden." I said coldly as I stared straight ahead. Considering I had no idea as to how long of a trip we were about to partake on I decided that it was best if Brad and Kiernan knew the truth . . . all of it.

"There are a few things I feel you both need to know before we're too far into this trip," I said stiffly. The car was quiet, not even Kiernan said a word. They both just waited for what was to come next. "What I am going to tell you is the truth, all of it. For starters, Haden and I are not related. My parents informed me of this news today."

Neither Brad nor Kiernan said anything.

"I'm not the least bit taken back by this news. In all actuality both Haden and I suspected it," I admitted. "That leads me to the next piece of information I want to share with you." I sat there contemplating my next words. They were words I had trained myself for months to keep inside and here I was about to scream them to the world. "I am in love with Haden and she is in love with me." I braced myself for Kiernan's response assuming it would be typical of him, which it was.

"Now there ya go Taylor me boy. Comin over to the kinky side," he laughed.

Brad turned around and punched Kiernan's arm.

"Ow . . . well what on earth was that for?" Kiernan bellowed.

"*That* was for your unfiltered mouth. You have problems Kiernan," Brad said as he slowly turned to face me. "Don't mind him; his parents must have dropped him on his head when he was a baby." Brad was still holding his side as he readjusted.

"Haden knows she was adopted but she doesn't know I was. I need to tell her . . . I need to tell her a lot."

Preparing myself to continue, I took a sip of coffee I had got from the hospital, feeling its warmth slide down my cool throat. "What I am about to tell you is very serious. I want you both to know we still have time for me to drop you off and call you a cab, if you're uncomfortable with what I'm about to tell you." I paused a moment choosing my next words carefully. "I'm a . . . vampire."

There it was . . . the silence I had been waiting for. Even Kiernan wouldn't know what to say to a statement like the one I had just made.

Brad was the first to speak. "Well that would explain it."

Curious, I asked what he meant.

"Taylor, the night of prom when I came to your side while you were pinning nimrod to the wall, I saw the color of your eyes. I saw your teeth. They weren't normal. I literally had to remind myself who you were and that I wasn't in a movie. I was worried you were going to kill Derrick."

"I almost *did* kill him." I couldn't bring myself to say his name. Visions of his body on top of Haden's still lay fresh on my mind, her eyes glossed over and her body weak from all of the alcohol he practically poured down her throat all night. I forced myself to visualize something else before I continued to get angry from reliving that horrid night.

"How is it that I always miss the cool stuff?" Kiernan griped.

We both ignored him.

I told Brad that I had questioned just how much he knew after seeing me in such a disturbed state. He never spoke of it and neither did I. I asked him why he had never bothered to confront me.

"I knew you would talk about it when you were ready."

Still upset at my lack of control that night I apologized for what he witnessed.

"No need. If I were in your shoes I would have hurt him worse than you did," Brad said coldly.

"Oh I'll say he was hurt, just a different kind of hurt. When he woke up to find himself all pretty in his new nighty, I'm sure his ego was hurting pretty darn bad," Kiernan laughed and Brad joined in.

Hearing their laughter, I didn't feel that they were grasping the severity of what I had just told them.

"I don't know if you heard me but I am a *vampire*. I require *blood* to live," I said, my tone serious.

"Human blood?" Kiernan asked.

"No, I don't need it. I don't touch the stuff but I would be lying to say I never crave it."

"Well then it's settled. We don't care if you don't," Brad said simply.

"I do have a question," Kiernan said poking his head in between Brad and I from the back seat. "Can ya change me into one? Ah, think of all the ladies I would get."

"I am not changing you or anyone for that matter Kiernan, end of discussion."

"What about Haden? Is she one too?" Brad questioned.

"Yes," I said feeling a stabbing pain in my heart at the sound of her name. "She just found this out too recently; along with some other really disturbing information. Apparently some woman that worked for Haden's birth parents has come here to find her and bring her back to Europe, where she was born. According to my parents, the woman said Haden is a prophetic child. She was supposedly chosen by God to save her people or something to that effect." I checked the rearview mirror for any sign of cops. When I saw it was clear I floored it. The more I talked, the more I was painfully aware of how long she had been gone. She needed me and I wasn't there for her. I clenched my teeth and began weaving in and out of traffic as fast as her car would let me go. "The woman said Haden is being hunted. My parents think that she came home and overheard their conversation. Being the crazy independent one she is, she chose to run. My guess would be to protect all of us," I growled under my breath.

"If I were you I would write a book," Kiernan interjected. "Ya got a lot to work with here. Vampires, incest, police cars . . ."

"Police cars?" I asked right as I saw the flashing lights behind us. "Just wonderful, where did they come from?" I huffed pulling over. I watched in my mirror as the police car sped past us and everyone in the car exhaled.

"Well, yer life's still book worthy even without the cops," Kiernan said patting my seat. "Good thing ol' Grammy had pulled in front of you," he laughed.

As I eased back on to the road I got a text. *I'm fine. Please don't worry. Tell the guys I said hello.*

Shutting my phone I squeezed it, clenching my jaw tighter. I could not for the life of me understand why she wouldn't answer her phone. I decided to text her back knowing the odds of her responding were greater than her answering her phone should I attempt to call her again. *Meet me somewhere please. We need to talk. I won't let anyone hurt you. You know I won't take no for an answer. I love you more than life.* Within seconds she text me back. *Okay, I'll let you know when I find a motel where you can meet me.*

"Where's she headed, Kiernan?" I demanded my tone serious.

This time not fighting me he answered, "She's on her way to Boise."

"Seriously? Then Boise it is," I said punching the accelerator.

## 16. *Escape*

Closing my phone, my tired spirit suddenly felt uplifted. Just the power resonating off of Taylor's words made me want to sing. I had driven non-stop, pausing only for gas, and I was exhausted. Thanks to Taylor, I now had the third wind I was praying for. I punched the accelerator and followed the roads that led to Boise. Maybe everything would work itself out after all.

I knew that my decision to meet him might have been a stupid one. Maybe it was my lack of sleep, but then again maybe it wasn't. He would definitely be able to maneuver his car better than I could. Although, I *was* really proud of myself for how well I had been driving it. I had done pretty well handling his speed machine. Spotting a motel about an hour outside of Boise, I decided it would be a great place to stop.

Thinking about the severity of my situation, I opted to park in the back; there was no need to scream to anyone where I was. I was sure that crazy Nanny woman knew what I was driving by now. I grabbed my overnight bag and headed to the office.

The nights' sky was unusually dark, its crisp air giving me chills. Starting to shiver I hurried to open the office door. The smell of stale coffee permeated through the room, comforting me with memories of all the family trips we took when I was a child. I was never allowed the forbidden adult drink. Noticing no one was behind the counter I made my way over to the refreshment table. I poured myself a cup filled to the brim and took a slow sip, relishing in the warmth it provided. Taking another drink of the stale tasting coffee I smiled. Memories of my youth began flooding back at me. As a young child, I had often promised myself that I would drink tons of the stuff when I was older. In that very minute something clicked in me. From that moment on I would think of my messed up situation as an adventure; an adventure I would come out of on top if it killed me.

After paying the lady behind the counter, I was so content that I hummed all the way to my home for the night. The moldy smell of the room brought back even more memories. One in particular stole my attention like a thief in the night. It was the one when my family and I were away visiting friends of my parents. I was maybe seven years old at the time. A bad storm blew through that night scaring me. As luck would have it I had accidentally left my Mr. Bear at home. I was overcome with fear as I heard the thunder roll across the sky. When it came time to go to bed I was beyond terrified, tears filling my young eyes. My parents had gotten a cot for Taylor to sleep on but I begged him to sleep with me so I wouldn't be alone. When he said yes I was elated. I held onto his arm for dear life all night long. He had to have been uncomfortable but he never whined. He just laid there quietly, letting me hold on to him until the morning.

Sighing, I grabbed my phone and text Taylor with the motel address, my room number and where I had parked his car. Then I dialed my most favorite motor mouth.

"Where are you?" she practically yelled making me pull the phone away from my ear.

I laughed. "I'm not too far from Boise. I found a motel and am going to rest until the guys get here."

"Oh thank God you're letting them meet you," she exclaimed.

"Yeah I changed my mind. I figured I could use some help. Plus I was thinking that maybe that Nanny Lena woman is just some crazy person who never had any of her own children," I added.

"That would definitely explain it, but if I were you, I would still watch out for her pink Vespa," Jenny chuckled. "So what are your plans for tonight? Want me to stay on the phone with you until they get there. We can pull an all-nighter."

"Aw thanks but I think I might just catch a bite to eat, take a bath and get a little sleep. I'll definitely need my rest if I'm going to be around all three of them tomorrow."

"Better you than me," she giggled.

After I hung up the phone I saw I had a new text message. It was from Taylor. *Thank you for agreeing to meet. Stay inside and lock the door. I will get there as soon as your slow car lets me lol Yours forever, Taylor*

I laughed out loud. He had taken my car instead of dad's BMW. I could only assume he had his reasons. I shut my phone and heard my stomach growl right as there was a knock at the door. I froze and then slowly moved towards the peep hole. Standing there as if angels sent by God; there were two men, both holding pizzas.

"Pizza delivery for Miss Haden," the tall one said. My thoughts immediately went to Taylor.

Obviously serious about me staying put he had ordered me pizza. I smiled wondering how he would take care of my *other* need. Unlocking the door I laid my eyes on two of the funniest looking guys I had ever seen. The tall skinny one bowed, never taking his eyes off of me.

"Miss Haden," he said.

The other one was short and fat with a nasally voice. "You must be hungry," he murmured as he kept looking at the floor.

"Thank you both, yes I am actually," I said, confusion setting in. I was shocked that Taylor gave them my real name. I turned around to get my purse so I could write them a check when suddenly I felt a sharp crack on the back of my head. Everything started to go black and I thought I heard someone scream my name.

Opening my eyes seemed impossible with how bad my head was pounding. Trying to force them open, I wondered how the tribe of African drummers got into my head. Finally I was able to open my heavy eyes but only a little. I couldn't see much of anything. It was dark and damp smelling, like mildew and dust.

"Good morning Princess," a nasal voice snorted at me. "Sleep well?"

Wishing my head would stop pounding, I tried to rub my temples but I couldn't. My wrists were bound together behind the chair I was sitting on.

"Oh yeah sorry about that princess, we had no choice with your powers and all. We sure couldn't have you trying to escape now could we," the strange voice said. "So, what shall we do with you?"

"Boones... enough," a deeper voice demanded. "Quit bothering our guest. She is after all... royalty."

I let my eyes close and felt a very cold finger rub my cheek, "and a mighty pretty princess at that."

I tried to move away but my attempts were useless. I had no energy.

"Don't bother princess; we had to give you a little something to calm you down a bit. You were a feisty thing on the ride here when you started to come to," the non nasal sounding man said amused. "Sorry about the pizza. I brought it with us for you. When you're feeling a little better you can eat some if you'd like. Although personally I can't understand how you can put that awful smelling human food in your mouth."

*Did he say human?* Trying once again to pry my eyes open, I spotted the short, fat man. He was sitting in a chair across the room petting what appeared to be a large cat . . . one of his eyes twitching. Looking to the right through the slits of my eyes I saw the tall one rolling two silver balls together in his hand.

"Where am I?" I slurred.

"Not so smart now, eh?" the nasal one said stiffly.

"Boones, that's enough. Haden I am sorry, but as of now we are unable to tell you that information. That is not our job."

"Are you helping Nanny Lena?" I asked my mouth as dry as the desert.

"No," he laughed, finding my question particularly amusing. "Quite the contrary, but she did however help us locate you."

The fat man snorted in the corner as he continued to pet the large furry thing on his lap. "Dell, let's call em already and turn her in. You know our reward will be great," he begged.

"Not just yet," the tall one said as he walked in a circle around me, running his long fingers across my hair. "Boones aren't you the least bit curious about this prize, this jewel? Haven't you ever wondered if it's even true?"

"Um nope not so much, she looks okay to me but not worth us getting killed for if we don't turn her in. If he knows we have her and haven't called him, we're in for it. Besides, what about her *supposed* powers?" he whispered as if I couldn't hear him. "When she gets strong she could use them against us."

The man called Dell laughed sinisterly. "Little friend, she has not fed in days and will be too weak to do anything," he said smelling my neck. "You do indeed smell sweet. I can hear your heart beating... *amazing!*"

Closing my eyes, I felt a wave of exhaustion wash over me. Letting myself drift off to sleep, I was suddenly on a white horse trotting through ancient woods I had never seen before. There were trees everywhere, one blending into the next. Feeling time running out, I begged my four legged friend to hurry. The fluffy cream wolf by our side looked up at me and ran faster towards the castle in the distance. We continued through the forest and over the bridge when I grabbed my bag. It took only a moment to find the silver scope. I placed it to my eye, spotting the castle immediately. *We're almost there! I have to speak to the head wolf. Their lives depend on it.*

I awoke in a cold sweat to find the once dark room now lit up from one light-bulb on the ceiling in the center of the room. Looking around while keeping my eyes partly closed, I saw only one of the men in the room with me. The short chubby one was sitting in the same chair as earlier, petting what was definitely an overgrown cat. Opening my eyes I stared at him.

"Well if princess didn't decide to wake up and grace us with her prophetic presence," he cackled.

I could feel anger rising like bile in my throat. Never in my wildest dreams did I for one second think that I would wake up one day to find all that I had known my entire life were a multitude of lies. Those I'd loved and trusted most were not who I'd thought they were. I sat lifeless, pondering these truths as the mad man's left eye twitched uncontrollably while he fumbled through his bag; his eyes on me . . . the prize.

Closing my tired eyes, I envisioned Taylor's perfect face. *Goodbye I love you* I thought. This was the end. There would be no happily ever after. Slowly I reopened my eyes. I could feel my thirst screaming to be quenched. I was beyond parched. Suddenly a new wave of emotion came over me. Just as the sun rises, replacing the darkness with its glorious light, anger began raging in my soul like an unsettled ocean. I became intensely aware of the thought of never seeing Taylor's face again, never smelling his skin. I wouldn't let that be an option. I didn't know who these people were and they obviously didn't know who I was. I wasn't going to just sit here and die. I would fight.

Anger continued to rise, spreading through my veins like a virus, causing me to give in to the new me. I broke free from the restraints and pounced, releasing the creature within. Lunging across the room, I grabbed the cat and sunk my teeth into it, draining it, all the while staring at the funny looking man.

Gasping, he scurried into the opposite corner like a dirty little rat, fumbling with his phone.

"No you don't," I hissed, leaping at him. I grabbed his phone and crumbled it in my hand.

"Thanks for dinner," I winked and ran out the door.

I ran through the dark dingy halls until I came to a door where I could hear cars on the other side of it. It was bright outside and the sun hurt my eyes from being held captive in a dark

room for who knows how long. I felt strong from my new found sense of inner strength. I looked around seeing nothing but the backs of buildings. I was in an alley way. On one end of it was a road where cars were passing by and on the opposite end of the ally I could see another road with trees in the distance. I ran as fast as I could towards the trees. The closer I got, I sighed a breath of relief when I realized that it was a forest. *Perfect*. I ran finding refuge amidst the trees. I was safe—for now.

Never losing my breath, I ran for what seemed like forever finally stopping to rest next to a large fir tree. I sat, shutting my weary eyes and prayed. *Where am I? What am I going to do now? Who were those men?* I knew that contacting my family, Jenny even, was out of the question now. I sat there surrounded by the peaceful sounds of the forest, wanting to cry but willing myself to suck it up. This was no time to be a baby. I needed to be strong. First things first, I needed money. Reaching slowly into the pocket of my jeans I laughed in spite of my situation. *My money!* They hadn't taken my money! My father had always told us that if we were going somewhere with large amounts of cash, it was much safer if we carried it on us instead of in a purse or wallet. *God Bless that man... I had money!*

I caught myself as I started to picture Taylor in my head, stopping myself quickly. I knew that it was a bad idea to communicate with him, for his own safety. I felt awful knowing how scared he would be when he got to the motel only to find me gone. All of my things were still there; my phone, my clothes... *everything*. I had no choice other than to leave him wondering. I loved him way too much to drag him into this any deeper. At least Brad and Kiernan there were with him. I had no one. They would all be better off thinking I was dead. Then maybe no one would come after them. I could hope at least.

I got up and dusted myself off. I closed my eyes and listened to see if I could hear any animals in the near distance. I figured now was a great time to feed. After all, I was in the perfect place. I needed my strength now more than ever. It wasn't long before I found my first meal successfully, feeding to my fill.

I slowly walked back towards the sounds of the city when the wind blew a smell in my direction that instantly caught me off guard... *human blood*. My instincts kicked in yet again and I began running towards the smell. Someone was hurt. What I found stopped me dead in my tracks. There before me, was a woman hunched over a body . . . feeding. She locked her crazed eyes with mine and then ran off leaving the body lying lifeless on the forest floor. *Oh dear God! Please let this person be alive.*

I ran over to the person and my breath caught in my throat. It was a teenage boy. As I bent down I could hear his pulse but just barely. I was going to pick him up when I noticed two small holes in his neck. They were closing as I watched in horror.

Knowing time was not on our side I threw the boy over my shoulder and ran towards the city. When I came to the edge of the forest I put him down and dragged him the rest of the way. I didn't want to attract any wrong attention to myself.

"Help! Somebody, please help!" I screamed looking around helpless. He was fading fast.

By the grace of God I spotted a dentist office. I dragged him to the door, hit the buzzer and then knocked while I continued to scream for help.

A small, way too skinny red head answered the door as if I had just stolen her Miss Peanut Festival crown, "May I *help* you?" It didn't take her long to look from my face to the boy's body. "Oh my God," she squealed when she saw the boy at my feet. "Who's he?"

"I have no idea," I said allowing her to help me drag him into the waiting area of the dentist office. "I was taking a walk during my lunch break in the forest and I found him on my way back. He needs an ambulance . . . *now*," I said crying.

She quickly changed her tone with me when she realized how bad off the boy was. His lips were blue and his complexion was more pale than anyone I had ever seen in all my life.

"Call 911," she ordered the woman behind the front desk. "There's an unconscious boy in our office," she yelled at the top of her lungs.

Within seconds we were surrounded by dental assistants. I was so thankful I had taught myself how to feed without covering myself in blood when I was back at the lake. The last thing I needed was to be accused of murder.

"Is he dead?" one of the girls asked, looking as if she might throw up.

"No, he still has a pulse but it's really weak," I said trying to calm both of our nerves.

Before I knew it, EMS was there and then the police showed up shortly after. I stuck around for questioning and tried to stay out of their way while they worked on the boy and talked amongst each other. Standing off to the side I overheard two EMT's talking. They were discussing how this boy was the fourth one they had found like this just this week. I stood there frozen.

When I was done answering my millionth question they let me go. All I could do now was pray for that kid and whoever or whatever it was that did that to him. I had a few of my own problems that needing tending to and one in particular required me to get the heck out of plain sight and fast. I walked to a near-by parking garage in case anyone was watching me and then snuck out the other side. At this point my head was still hurting and I was tired. It didn't take me long to realize that I had somehow ended up in Boise without knowing it. I needed a car and a huge chocolate chip cookie.

After walking for about an hour, I stopped at a used car dealership. Cringing at the thought of crooked used car salesmen I went in anyway. Eyeing a tall, surprisingly attractive salesman my heart skipped a beat. *Please let him be nice.*

"Hi how are you today?" the tall man asked politely. He didn't look like the stereotypical used car salesman; no this one looked genuinely nice. After I got over my initial shock, I told him what I was looking for-- something cheap and reliable. Not having misjudged him, he led me to a 1996 Honda Accord. *Perfect.* For a second I began to panic. I couldn't remember where I had put my driver's license but calm rushed over me as I reached into my back pocket and pulled it out. I love jeans, I thought. *Mental note: buy more jeans.*

I paid for my new car, tipped Mr. nice salesman one hundred dollars and was on my way. I was thankful not to have to walk even though it normally didn't bother me. Today though, I needed to hide.

I stopped at a gas station and bought a map and some cinnamon red hots. Once I was back in my car, I opened the map and put my finger on Boise. Then I closed my eyes, held my breath and moved my finger just a little away from the city. I opened my eyes to see my finger on McCall, Idaho. *Sounds good to me,* I thought.

Putting the car in drive, I was on my way. I drove fast and was there in a little over an hour. McCall was a cute little town up in the mountains, surrounded by huge trees with a beautiful lake. It reminded me of Swan Lake in a way and that comforted me instantly. Finding a motel however was proving to be a challenge. It seemed I would have to settle on a bed and breakfast. I booked a room for a few nights and thanked the kind lady and her husband.

Opening the door to my room, I was greeted by a gift basket of beef jerky, canned cola's and microwavable popcorn. Attached was a little card that said, *Enjoy your stay.* As weird as their gift basket was I couldn't have been happier. I knew right then I was going to like this place.

I took a sip of my complimentary can of soda when I happened to catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I put the can down on the dresser and took a closer look. It looked like something had died on my head. My hair was stringy and tossed all over with tangles everywhere. My face . . . now that was a different story altogether. It looked radiant. My skin complexion was smooth and creamy with just a hint of color. My eyes were brighter and full of life. Not wanting to stare at myself all night, I headed to the shower to wash the mop on my head and for the first time in my life, I was actually thankful for those tiny bottles of shampoo motels give you.

Feeling refreshed after my steamy shower I grabbed the remote and laid down on the hard bed. I turned the television on and began flipping through the channels, hoping I could get lost in a show and escape my own confusing life for an hour or so. Stopping on the news

channel I froze. The local body count was still rising and they had no leads but were working round the clock. *The local body count... seriously?* Most of the bodies had been found in or around local forests, all having lost significant amounts of blood with no apparent reason. Ten were dead and five were still in critical condition. The newest teen was fifteen year old Bobby Smith, found at lunchtime today. My stomach was instantly sick.

The supposed serial killer had made his mark in a few major cities. "Boise, Portland, Seattle and Billings to name a few," the newscaster said. *How could I have not known that this was going on in my own city? Had I been that out of it?* I knew the answer all too well. It was yes.

The news person was still talking. He was asking his viewers to be on high alert until the person responsible for the blood bath was caught. I shivered as I realized that what might be behind all of the deaths might not be human at all.

Remembering the conversation I overheard between my parents and Nanny Lena, I wondered if Nanny Lena could have possibly been telling the truth. Were those men who kidnapped me vampires? Could that woman in the forest have been one too? It all seemed unreal but it was starting to look like there might actually be some truth to it. I sat there thinking about how I needed blood to live, how I hunted animals and how I, with much repulsion at myself, enjoyed the smell of human blood. Thinking of me in that way made me ill. The picture of that woman in the forest, her mouth covered in blood as she hovered over the boys' body, was still fresh in my mind. If I *was* a vampire then why wasn't I like the others? How did I have a conscious and they didn't?

Feeling the salty water on my lips I gave in to the human side of me and cried until there were no more tears left. I knew that God would never leave my side and in that, I found comfort. Drying my eyes I forced myself to change the channel, stopping on some animal show about Polar Bears and their babies. I would gladly watch that over the news any day even though it did kind of make me hungry.

When the documentary finished I decided I wasn't going to hang out in my motel room all day. It was time for me to shop. I needed a new purse, some make up and some new clothes. I needed just about everything I could think of especially a coat. September had crept up on me without me ever noticing until now.

Shutting my motel door I turned to walk towards my car and saw a family getting out of their car. The dad had a small child in his arms and another one a little older was holding his hand. I watched him smile at his pregnant wife as they walked towards the office and I couldn't help but wonder if maybe one day I too would be blessed with a family or would I be alone forever. There was one thing I knew for sure, I had to figure out how to get myself out of this mess.

## 17. *Shadow Walkers*

Finding a mall was as rewarding as finding water on a scalding summer day. I had driven all the way to Boise with my windows down, enjoying the cool sunny weather. All the familiar shops in the mall seemed to mask my pain, even if only for a moment. Surrounded by hundreds of people out enjoying their day, I was just an ordinary girl who needed some clothes.

I walked in front of a cinnamon roll shop and the sweet smell of cinnamon sugar overwhelmed my senses. As if on cue, my stomach growled. I was famished. I ordered a cinnamon mini and ate it while I scoped out the other restaurants. Deciding on a bacon cheeseburger meal, I licked the last of my gooey treat off my fingers and got in line. Even with as



crazy as my emotions were, I still felt like I could eat a whole cow. Oh how I wished my mother was with me. She may have been as skinny as a pixy fairy but she loved to eat.

Just thinking about my mother had me wanting to cry. I tried to force back my tears as they handed me my order. Feeling insignificant in the large Food Court, I had a sense of calm wash over me. No one would think to look for me here. I walked around searching for a table next to one of the many trees when I saw someone who resembled my father. I continued to fight my tears. I missed my family more than words could say and after what I had just been through, I wasn't sure if I would ever see them again. That thought was more painful to me than dying.

I found a table by a tree just like I wanted. It was nestled in the middle of the food court surrounded by three large trees. I walked over to it, slowly pushing away the sadness that was trying to overwhelm my heart. With every ounce of strength I could muster, I forced the lump in my throat to go away so I could somewhat enjoy my food. Focusing on my messed up life wasn't going to fix anything.

"Mind if I sit with you?"

I looked up to see the most beautiful blonde girl I had ever seen other than Jenny. She was literally perfect, right down to her perfectly sculpted nose. Her straight bleached blond hair was long and hung softly, resting in middle of her back. It was the perfect contrast to her dark chocolate brown eyes.

"Sure," I said somewhat taken aback. I had no idea why Barbie wanted to sit with me but I didn't care. It was a free country.

"I'm Caina," the beauty queen announced as she set her tray down.

"I'm Haden," I told her trying to be polite. I watched as she removed her bottled water and salad from her tray. *Typical*, I said to myself, exhaling.

"I hope I'm not imposing. I saw that you looked kind of sad and I thought you could possibly use a friend," she said all smiles, catching me even more off guard. Was she for real?

Shocked, I looked at her and then back down at the table. *I must look worse than I thought*. I thanked her and told her that I was just having a rough day.

"New town, new people, a little home sick, you know," I said forcing a smile. Wishing she would disappear as fast she showed up I went back to drinking my shake and looking at what fries I had left. I didn't care if I looked like a weirdo. Maybe then she would leave.

"I *totally* understand," she sighed. "I remember when I was the new girl in town. Everyone stared at me but it got easier. So where do you live?"

Was she serious? As if a siren went off in my head I glanced quickly into her eyes hoping to read her. She smiled sheepishly at me before looking down. It's amazing what looking in a stranger's eyes can tell you about that person. She was definitely hiding something. I just didn't know if I cared to find out what it was. What bothered me was how uncomfortable she became when I looked directly at her. It was as if she froze for a minute.

I took a huge bite of my burger while I debated on how to answer her and then looked down at her tray. She hadn't eaten one bite of her salad. If Jenny would have been here with me she would have told me that this girl was just one of those typical girls who survived off of water and celery sticks. One of those... I'm prettier than you because I don't eat types. Then again maybe I was jumping to conclusions. Maybe she just wasn't as hungry as she thought she was when she first purchased her bird food.

My head was screaming run but my heart was telling me that I was overreacting. Maybe she was just a normal girl who saw someone in pain and was trying to be nice. After mentally reprimanding myself for not being very nice to her, I told her that I had no permanent address yet and that I was staying with friends. Technically I wasn't lying. I really liked the front desk girl and was seriously considering inviting her over for a friendly game of Scrabble. *Note to self: buy Scrabble*. I've never been a good liar.

Blondie seemed nice enough but I was in no position to trust anyone, even the future Miss America. While my head and heart were still arguing, Caina took a bite of her salad. I tried not to stare but I couldn't help but notice that it looked like she was eating dirt when she put it in her mouth.

"If it's not good, I'm sure they'll give you your money back," I told her thankful I had chosen a burger.

"No it's fine. I'm just trying to watch my weight and I'm not real into salads," she laughed nervously as she choked down another lettuce leaf.

"Well it was really nice to meet you Caina," I said after my last bite. "I had better get to shopping."

Standing up with me she looked at her diamond encased watch. "Can I come? I've got about thirty minutes to kill until my friend shows up. I could show you around the mall. I know it well," she said proud.

Wishing I had an invisibility cloak so I could disappear, I told her I was cool with that. Sadly enough I knew that the chances of me scoring one of those was impossible. I had always had a hard time telling anyone no even if it made me miserable to say yes. *Fun, fun*, I thought.

Thankfully Caina did most of the talking. I guess she could sense that I was in no mood. The normal Haden would have been much better company but she was gone. Right now she was dead as far as I was concerned.

"So did you have a boyfriend back home?" Caina questioned happily.

"Not really."

"Not really? Oh that sounds juicy, do tell."

*You have got to be kidding me. Am I in hell?* "It's complicated. I've moved on." I had to look away so she wouldn't see the tears in my eyes.

"Well there are tons of hot guys here. I'm dating three right now," she laughed casually.

"Wow, you must be busy." I knew I sounded like a jerk but I didn't care. I wanted her to get bored with me and go find her friend. Unfortunately, she had other plans. She acted as if she hadn't heard what I said. She just went on about how much she loved the way guys smelled when her phone rang. I was happy at the thought of finally being left alone to shop when she squished my plans like bug. Her friend Melly was here and wanted to shop with us. *Oh joy*.

"Melly is a bit odd, but really cool. I think you'll like her," she said sounding like she was trying to convince herself along with me. "She totally has the best taste in clothes; of course I taught her everything she knows about shopping." Caina laughed again reminding me of a cheerleader on game day.

I wanted to scream but instead I forced a smile and said nothing, succumbing to my fate. Standing by the restroom where we were supposed to meet her friend, Caina smiled flirtatiously at each cute guy who walked past us. Her beauty was undeniable. They were all at her mercy and she knew it, soaking it all in. I stood there counting the tiles on the floor until I heard Caina greet her friend. I looked up to see another gorgeous girl standing in front of us. She looked nothing like Caina. My eyes came to rest on her head where they stayed until I felt her smile happily at me. I smiled back and looked again at her head. Her unusual hair was like nothing I had ever seen before. It was beautiful. Not many people could pull off a hairstyle like that. She somehow had, and she was gorgeous. Her shoulder-length brown hair was layered. Chunked strips of hot pink jumped out in two places. She reminded me of a watermelon Jolly Rancher candy.

"So who's our new friend?" the crazy haired girl asked Caina smiling at me.

"Hey Melly, this is Haden. She just moved here and doesn't know anyone," Caina said like I was the new kid in school and she was my first new friend.

"Well you have two friends here now," Melly smiled again, her face lighting up the hall. Caina didn't seem too amused to have to share the attention from onlookers. Melly looked like she had no idea anyone was staring at her. I was in shock. She was unbelievably gorgeous. Her

creamy skin was flawless and the way her light green eyes shimmered had me feeling enamored. I couldn't help but stare.

Breaking my rude staring episode, Caina smiled and said, "You'll get used to her hair... eventually."

Feeling like an idiot I looked away. "I like it. It's cool," I said being honest.

"Thanks. I've never been one for normalcy. So what are we shopping for ladies?" Melly asked in a way that reminded me of a jolly elf.

"Haden needs some clothes but I think we should get our nails done... my treat," Caina insisted.

I had already decided that I was in for the long haul with her today so I smiled and followed her to the nail salon. After all, pretty nails never hurt anyone.

I decided on the plain and simple French manicure for my nails. It was heaven to be able to sit back and be normal for a little while. I was sad when the cute little nail lady was done.

While Caina was paying I sat down in the waiting area next to Melly, admiring her nails. They were done in hot pink to match her hair. Something caught her attention and she turned her head to the side away from me. As her hair swayed I noticed something black on her neck. As if she heard me she ruffled her hair some. There as plain as day was a tattoo of a black cross. It was about two inches and beautiful. She turned her head back towards me and noticed I was staring, yet again. This was becoming embarrassing.

"So how long have you been in Boise?" Melly asked, her eyes still twinkling.

"Not long," I said trying to figure out what it was about this Melly person that had me feeling all weird inside. I smiled at her and looked away. I knew it was better that I keep it simple. No one needed details on my life no matter how nice they appeared.

"Hey girls," Caina joined in right as her cell phone rang. She grabbed it out of her purse and shot a weird look at Melly. "I have to take this real quick," she said walking off.

She was back in seconds but her facial expression was harsh. "Looks like Melly and I are going to have to leave sooner than we expected. We have an unexpected . . ." she stopped short and looked at Melly again before continuing. "Seems we have an unexpected business meeting we have to go to in less than an hour." Caina immediately began digging in her Luis Vuitton purse pulling out a pen and some paper. "Here's my cell, Melly's too, give us a call and we can hang out again soon," she said smiling. She scribbled their numbers down and as quick as they came into my life they were gone.

Inhaling deeply, I thanked God being alone again and tried to gather my thoughts. I needed to get busy buying what I needed but first things first. I had to buy a cell phone. I needed to call Jenny.

"Hello," she answered cautiously. She had no clue who was calling her.

"Jenn, it's me, Haden."

"Holy freakin cow... you're alive!" I could hear her crying and suddenly I was too. I hurried to the nearest exit and left the Mall so I could have some privacy. I walked a little ways and stopped by some bushes where I sat down so I was out of plain sight.

"I'm okay Jenny . . . please don't cry," I pleaded through my own steady stream of tears.

"I thought. I mean . . . you weren't there . . . your purse, car... you never called. Oh God you're alive!"

Hearing Jenny's voice brought everything I was trying to ignore today right in front of my face. I was dying inside. I missed my family. I missed Jenny and I missed Taylor more than anything. Her voice had me thinking thoughts of going home when my brain kicked in and shut my heart up. That was impossible. I would get them all killed. I had to be strong.

"I'm so sorry you were scared," I whispered through my tears.

"What the heck happened to you Haden? Where are you?"

"I was kidnapped."

Before I could finish what I was saying Jenny interrupted me, "Kidnapped? What . . . by who?"

"I have no idea but I escaped and I'm fine. They didn't hurt me."

"How did you get out of there?" Jenn asked, her crying replaced by anxiety.

"I got mad and ate a cat," I answered sheepishly.

"Haden, did I just hear you right? Are you serious?"

"As serious as a heart attack," I said suppressing laughter behind my tears. I would have paid to see her face in that very moment.

"Now that's sad and funny all at the same time. So where in the heck are you?"

"I can't tell you where I am for your safety *and* mine. I probably shouldn't have called you but I. I." the Tears began pouring down my face once again and I was unable to speak.

"Oh Haden, please let me help you."

"You can't. No one can," I choked out.

"I probably don't have to tell you this Haden but Taylor is a mess. He's driving all over looking for you. Kiernan says he hasn't slept. He won't eat and he's barely said two words to anyone. He told Kiernan that he *knew* you were in trouble and that he was listening for you. None of us know what he's talking about."

At the thought of Taylor in pain I began sobbing as if rivers were flowing from my empty eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to make you cry more," Jenn said regretfully. "I just thought you would want to know and that maybe you would consider calling him."

Trying like heck to stop my endless tears I told her no way. "I can't Jenn. It's way too dangerous. Those men that kidnapped me . . . they were dangerous. I think they were who the Nanny woman was talking about. Everyone I love is better off not having any contact with me, especially Taylor. He would get himself killed for sure and I couldn't live with that; I just couldn't."

"Okay, but can I at least tell everyone that you're alright? I mean it's not like you've even told me where you are."

I stood up and leaned against the brick wall by the bushes thinking. "Tell Taylor I said." I couldn't finish what I was saying because I had no idea what I *could* say. Jenn waited patiently until I continued where I left off. "Tell him I wish I had a cd of him playing his piano. Ask him to please make one for me and then tell him I love him."

"K, got it . . . anything else?"

"Ask him to tell my parents that I'm fine and that I have plenty of money. Tell them that they need to act as if no one has heard from me . . . for my safety and theirs. Oh yeah and Jenn, please ask Brad to keep an eye on Taylor. I would die if anything ever happened to him."

"I can promise you that Brad's already doing that. I just wish there was something else I could do to help you. I feel so helpless," she said defeated.

"You are helping me. You're my best friend and you're telling my family what I can't. I have to go but I'll call you again soon," I said not wanting to hang up the phone.

"When, tonight?"

"That I don't know."

"If you need me Haden, call me okay," she said, her voice filled with sadness. I could tell she was fighting crying again.

As I hung up the phone I felt a sense of relief. They were all safe. Taylor was safe. He wouldn't be happy that I didn't call him but at least he would know that I was okay.

I put the phone in my back pocket and went back into the mall. I had wasted enough time. It would be dark in the next couple of hours and I wanted to be finished by then.

After one hour of what I considered speed shopping I was all set and quite proud of myself. I had bought at least one of everything I needed as well as some other essentials like

make- up. All I had left to buy was a book. I was in need of a vacation from my head and a good book was just the thing to do that.

I scored a great book only minutes after getting to the book store. Walking to my car, I put the book up to my nose and inhaled. I loved the smell of books. Something about them had always comforted me.

I slipped into the car and decided I would stop to hunt. After that I would go back to my new home and curl up under the covers with my new book. I had no plans of resurfacing for days. I pulled into the motel's parking lot and began looking around.

Before I parked my car I decided to drive around the parking lot a couple times looking for anything suspicious. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, I parked quickly and went into my room. I put the key in the lock and turned it slowly feeling it unlock. I poked my head in to listen and looked around so I could make sure no one was in there. Thankfully it was just how I left it, empty.

I knew that the chances of them finding me again were slim since I was pretty sure that they had followed me from my house the last time but either way I was definitely going to be cautious.

Lying back on the bed, I replayed the events of my day. I could remember how evil that girl looked hovering over the boys limp body. The memory of her eyes alone made me cringe. They were dark with fire. Meeting Caina and Melly hadn't been so bad. Honestly they had kept my mind off of Taylor. At least Melly had.

There was something so different about Melly. It wasn't just her wild hair that caught my attention. There was something else; something I couldn't quite put my finger on. I felt a sense of peace next to her. I didn't know why but I found myself thinking about calling her. Instead of convincing myself that I was insane, I grabbed my phone and opened it, running my fingers softly over the keys as I contemplated what I would do. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to call her. I was lonely and could really use a friend. Maybe she and I could hang out until I figured out what I was going to do about my mess. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the little piece of paper that had her number on it and dialed.

"Hello," an extremely vivacious voice answered.

"Hey Melly, it's Haden. We met at the mall earlier today."

"Hey! How are you," she said, happiness practically spilling out of her voice.

You would have thought that we were long lost friends reunited after years of separation with how happy she sounded hearing from me.

"I'm sorry we couldn't stay. Caina has a tendency to overreact when it comes to our job," she laughed. "Did you get what you needed at the Mall?"

"Yep," I said feeling myself start to relax. "I made out like a bandit. Now I'm just hanging out, fixing to read a little before I crash for the night."

"Cool, I love to read. What book?"

Grabbing the book out of the bag my eyes skimmed over the cover once more. "It's called, *Untouchable*. I read the back and it sounded so good I couldn't pass it up."

"It is good! I just finished reading that one last week. You'll love it," she said excited. "So do you have any plans for tomorrow? I thought maybe you and I could hang out."

I was only opposed to the idea if Caina would be there so I asked her if it would be just she and I. She let out a snort and a giggle, "Don't feel bad, she has a tendency to overwhelm everyone and I mean *everyone*. Tomorrow she and her boyfriend, Gavin, have plans so it would be just you and I."

Breathing a sigh of relief I asked her what she would like to do.

"How about we go paint some pottery," she suggested merrily.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Did you say paint pottery?"

"Yes, but if you want to do something else instead that's cool too."

"No, I'm fine with painting pottery. It's just that I didn't see you as the pottery type of girl," I admitted.

"It's the hair," she said laughing. "It tends to make people think things about me that aren't true. Bet ya would have never guessed that I'm an avid baker either."

"No I sure wouldn't have. But hey, I'm an avid eater," I teased.

Our conversation flowed so freely I almost didn't want to get off of the phone with her.

"That would make us the perfect pair then. I never have anyone to bake for. My roommates can't eat..." she said stopping mid sentence and starting over. "My roommates can't eat what I bake. They're all on a diet."

"You can bake for me anytime you want," I said enjoying our phone time.

"Great, I'll tell you what Haden. Since you like to eat and I have no one to bake for, I'll bring you a little something tomorrow."

I told her I would love that right as I felt a yawn approaching. We said our goodbyes and she told me that she would call me in the morning with directions. I shut the phone and held it to my heart. *Thank You, God.* Suddenly I didn't feel completely alone.

I picked up the television remote control and stumbled on the news. I couldn't have been happier when I realized that they were talking about the weather. From what the weather woman said, we were in for a pretty good cool front over the next few days. The cold night air had crept into my room, giving me chills. I got up to turn the heater on when thoughts of Thanksgiving and Christmas invaded my mind. I didn't like the empty feeling this gave me. I had a lot to fix before I could be back with my family and right now I had no clue where to begin.

A Breaking News announcement flashed across the screen and I froze in disbelief. *Four more bodies discovered early this evening, all were in need of blood transfusions. Three are still in critical condition and one died at the hospital. Police are asking parents to instill a curfew for their children. Should the numbers continue to rise the city will instill its own curfew until the perpetrator is caught.*

I stopped listening and stared blankly at the television. What kind of sick person would purposely harm teenagers and why? I wanted to close my eyes and make it all go away but I knew I couldn't. Something was out there and whatever it was wasn't good.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of rain steadily beating on the window. Stretching, I looked at the clock; 8:00am. I still had plenty of time before I met Melly at noon.

Staring at the ceiling I let my mind go where I had recently deemed forbidden; Taylor. Today I didn't care if he somehow heard my thoughts. I ached for him like the thirsty grass longed for the rain. I closed my eyes and there he was with me. I searched only a second before stopping on one of my favorite memories with him . . . the park. I would never forget that moment ever. The way his soft green eyes stared into mine, penetrating my soul or how his full lips parted ever so slightly while he contemplated his words. I could see it all and I wanted it back.

Startled by the phone I reached around the bed side table until I found it hidden under my new book.

"Hello," I said sounding like the living dead.

"Whoa, long night," the chipper voice laughed, immediately shaking me out of my trance.

"Hey Melly, sorry about my voice; it seems it hasn't woke up yet," I laughed along with her.

"I hear ya. Hey, I was wondering if you would be up to meeting a little earlier and doing some early Christmas shopping, say 10ish?"

I agreed to meet her at the food court while I wiped the remaining tears off of my face. I couldn't place what it was about her that lifted my spirits like a hot air balloon but it was just what I needed.

Between locating my liquid nourishment and grabbing some breakfast, my morning seemed to fly by. I wanted to check in with Jenny but it looked as if I would have to wait until tonight. I still wasn't in the best of moods. Honestly I didn't know if anything would change that.

I decided my outfit should match my mood so I grabbed a plain hooded sweatshirt and some jeans.

When I got to the mall, Melly was sitting on a bench reading a book looking like some exotic pink feathered bird. Oddly enough, she too was wearing a hooded sweatshirt and jeans, only her sweatshirt was black with hot pink letters. I read her shirt as I walked towards her. A slight laugh escaped my lips even though I had totally decided that laughter was off the menu today. Her shirt read, *Keep Staring, I might do a trick.*

"Awesome, eh?" she asked noticing my amusement. "People are just so drawn to my overwhelming beauty that they like to stare. Who can blame them," she laughed joking.

"You *are* quite beautiful actually, *and* even exotic looking," I added.

Weaving her arm through mine, in her thick English accent she said, "Ah, yes dahling that I am."

"So who are you shopping for?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, just my future husband," she grinned.

Feeling my heart shatter into a million pieces from jealousy I immediately wished I was back at the motel. "You're engaged?"

"Me? Nope, not yet anyway" she laughed. "I know my husband's out there somewhere. When we finally find each other he will be one really well dressed guy."

I shook my head at her and laughed. "Talk about positive thinking. I like it."

I did like it, but sadly I didn't think it was for me. There wasn't much about my life right now that was positive. All I could do was ride the waves that kept trying to crash over me.

I just so happened to look into the chocolate shop as we passed. I must have been drooling because Melly grabbed my arm, swinging me around and pulling me into the shop. It smelled like heaven in there. She didn't wait for me to look around. Before I could say anything she was handing me a bag full of chocolate covered blueberries. I popped a few of the sinful berries into my mouth and thanked my new friend. When I tried to share she refused. Practically skipping she dragged me out of the chocolate store and into the first men's store we came to. She walked in and began caressing a rack of leather jackets.

"Aren't they yummy?" she asked, staring at them like a kid in a candy store.

I had to admit that she was right. They were really nice coats.

"Yes but how do you know what size to buy him if you don't even know what he looks like?" I questioned laughing. I was totally confused.

"Well you see, I know he's tall, built and probably has brown hair," she chirped happily.

"Um how do you know this?" I asked as I stared at her in amazement.

"I just do. You'll see one day," she said, her contagious smile never leaving her pretty face.

"You know what? You should buy one for your future husband too, Haden."

*Husband? If she only knew.* "Nah, no husband for me," I said feeling a sense of dread wash over me.

Walking over to me she looked directly into my eyes. "You've already met him." It wasn't a question. Then a huge smile spread across her face. "You are definitely buying him one too. Trust me, you won't regret it and we can talk about the gunk you're trying to hide behind those pretty eyes later," she said walking back to the coats. "Now, tell me what size *your* husband wears."

Giving into the crazy girl with brown and hot pink hair's plot to dress my future husband to match hers, we walked out of the store with bags in tow. While we walked towards the exit of the mall my thoughts were with Taylor and the fact that I didn't know when or if I would ever see him again. I couldn't get past this looming sense of misery around me.

"Oh gosh, you're going to make me sad and that's tough. I think it's time we talk," she said, her expression soft. "I parked close. We can talk in my car if you'd like."

I said nothing. Both me and my pitiful mood followed her until she stopped in front of a black Hummer with pink flames on the side.

"You like?" she questioned laughing at my expression.

Totally in awe I said yes; my mouth open from shock as I walked up to it.

I looked at her Hummer and then back at her. The wind blew just right exposing her cross tattoo once again.

"I love your tattoo," I said getting a better look at it.

"Thanks, I love crosses," she said tossing our bags into the back. "Some friends of mine think my tattoo is too flashy. I think . . . who cares what they think," she laughed.

Once inside I leaned my head back and let out a huge sigh. She sat in the driver's seat and looked at me with an expression so kind that it reminded me of my mom. "Okay pretty lady, talk. Why are you so sad?"

I bit my lower lip as I turned to face her. Watching her light green eyes I noticed they were similar to mine. Was God showing me that as a sign that I could trust her? After what I had been through recently, I just wasn't sure.

Putting her hand on my arm she said, "Your secrets are safe with me – I promise."

As crazy as it sounded, I believed her and then the flood gates opened. With the flow of my words along came my tears to guide their path; every tear and word, cleansing my heart with its escape. As I spoke I could see the shock in Melly's eyes. Even though I wanted to tell her every little detail, I knew I couldn't. I told her how there was some strange woman looking for me and that I was forced to leave my family for their own safety. I told her how I had been kidnapped and was now on my own. The one thing I never mentioned was that I didn't survive on food alone. I wasn't sure how much I should really say. For now, I would just keep those details to myself.

When I got to the part about being kidnapped by the two men and hiding in the forest she spoke up. "I think there's something you should know before you continue, something that might comfort you a little."

I watched her closely as she looked out her window and then back at me. "Haden, I'm a vampire."

My mind immediately went into overdrive. I had to be hallucinating. I wanted so badly not to be alone that my mind had to be conjuring up a false reality in order to feel safe. I blinked my eyes trying to snap out of it and studied her face closely.

"I am a Shadow Walker," she continued. "So is Caina, Haden. You are not alone. Caina could sense that you were like us before she went to talk to you."

In utter disbelief I sat there silently for a minute trying to gather my thoughts. I stared down at the floor board while hundreds of questions flooded my mind. One question kept playing over and over again in my head.

"How do you feed," I barely managed to choke out.

She paused for a moment and then looked at her steering wheel. "We feed on animals in the forest, same as you."

"How many of you are there?"

"A lot, our kind is all over the world. We have learned how to blend in to survive. Humans don't have a clue," she grinned. "Watch, I'll show you."

She put the hummer in reverse and backed out of the parking space while I waited in anticipation of what she was going to show me. She drove around until she came back to the front entrance of the mall where she stopped, a little off to the side. We could see everyone who entered or exited the mall perfectly.

"Okay, here we go," she said sitting up higher in her seat, peering over the steering wheel. "I'm going to show you some others. You'll be shocked."

Instantly she pointed at one; an extremely pale, black haired girl wearing faded black skinny jeans that stood smoking by the entrance.



"Go figure," I said unmoved. "She looks dark."

"Not her silly... her," she said pointing a little left of where I was originally looking.

There on her phone was a tan, blonde beauty.

"Her?" I asked confused, "but she's tan."

Melly laughed. "Yep, ever heard of spray on tans?"

"How do you know she's one?"

"Easy, watch her movements. They're perfect. Every movement of her body flows into the next."

She was right. I could totally see it. I stared at the girl in awe when Melly pointed out two more, both guys.

"See, we're everywhere and no one notices."

As I watched how perfectly they all blended in, fear began to seep into my veins. Nanny Lena said the Sti . . . whoever they were had vampires out looking for me. Melly continued to show me how easily we could blend in and my stomach started feeling sick.

*Caina . . .* Something about her had bothered me from the moment I first saw her but I hadn't been able to put my finger on it. I looked at Melly, my eyes wide. *Father God, please give me the gift of discernment. I don't know who to trust.*

"Are you okay?" Melly asked softly.

I finished my prayer and looked into her eyes. I definitely didn't feel any weird vibes from her.

"Yes. It's just a lot to take in," I said biding time.

If Melly was one of them, she would have been stupid to tell me what she was. Instead, she *had* told me. She even showed me how to recognize others. Surely she would have already done something by now. I had two choices, either trust Melly or run. I chose to trust her.

I leaned over and hugged her, catching her off guard. "Thank you for telling me what you are and for showing me them," I said motioning to the others.

She smiled and apologized for interrupting my story. "Please finish your story."

Picking up where I left off I told her about the girl hovering over the kid in the forest.

She made a disgusted face and said, "Feeding on the young is against the rules. It looks as if someone has been making new vampires and focusing on teens. We think someone is carelessly creating new vampires. That's why Caina is gone. A meeting has been called and she and her boyfriend had to attend. We need to figure out who is causing this mess and get it cleaned up. Teen vampires are highly unstable. They have such high levels of hormones that it can make the transition and first few years unpredictable. We're concerned that the recent slayings is the beginning of an army. Only someone insane would want to make an army out of teenagers," she sighed. "Caina won't be back for another few days so why don't you come home with me. We can hang out at the house and meet some of the others I live with. Then tonight we can go hunting together if you want." Her face glowed with excitement.

All I could think was that I had stepped out of my life straight into a movie somewhere between Montana and Idaho.

"I'd love to meet your friends," I said trying to steady my heart rate.

My entire life I was taught to think that creatures of the night were only in my imagination. Never in a million years would I have dreamed that I would be one of them, and to think, today I would be meeting more. That both excited and frightened me some. I had no idea whether they would be like me or like the ones I had read about in books. I didn't do creepy well, ironically enough.

## 18. *Decadent Dreams*

As the voice in my head rambled on, Melly's phone rang. When she hung up she told me that Barnabus, her English mastiff, had escaped again. According to Melly, he had recently found a girl friend on one of their walks; a boxer named Daisy. Since then he had upped his number of escapes in order to go visit his sweetheart. Now she had to find him and bring him home . . . again.

"Any urge to go with me to find my love stricken dog?" she asked laughing. "We can go to the house after that and I'll bring you back to your car later if you want."

At this point I was totally flying on instinct so I said yes and prayed that my instincts were right.

"Awesome," she said happily. She put her hummer in drive and left the mall, all mall eyes on her as usual.

"Melly, I have a question."

"Sure, what is it?" she said flipping through the radio stations.

"Is it common for vampires to marry?"

Laughing as if I had just told her a really funny joke she said, "It varies, some believe in marriage and some don't but they pretend to for obvious reasons. The ones that live around humans on a daily basis marry more often than others. I think marriage is awesome but then again, I'm a romantic. Most vampires also don't have crosses tattooed on them. I'm different. I don't know much about Jesus but I do know that he was a good guy who wanted everyone to love each other. I think he was on to something."

"He was definitely on to something." I chuckled in disbelief. I couldn't believe that I was having a conversation with a vampire about Jesus and what He taught. Disbelief and I were quickly becoming friends. After all, we sure were spending a lot of time together lately.

Right as she began to speak again I spotted it; a black Maserati.

"Now *that* is a nice car," Melly said changing lanes to get a better look. "If I didn't have to find Barney, I'd flag them down and see if they'd take you and me for a spin."

I could feel my heart accelerating and almost immediately I broke into a cold sweat.

"Are you alright?" Melly asked looking at me all weird. "Your heart is going to pop out of your chest at the rate its going."

Not knowing what to say, I kept quiet. That's when Melly looked at Taylor's car and back at me. "You know them don't you."

"You could say that," I said barely above a whisper.

"Want me to get them to pull over?" she asked pulling up beside him.

"No," I yelled sliding down in my seat. Knowing Taylor was that close almost killed me. "I'm sorry," I cried. "I can't explain, not yet," and with that she didn't say another word about it.

As Melly decelerated I watched Taylor's car disappear into traffic. "Thanks," I barely managed to choke out.

"No problem. We can talk about it if and when you like. So how about we go find us a dog," Melly said trying to sound upbeat while changing the subject.

"Sounds great," I lied.

"Want a treat?" Melly asked me, working overtime to lighten the mood.

"Sure," I said wishing I could hide my broken heart.

"Cool, so I decided to bake you something a little different. You like chocolate, right?" she asked as she reached behind her seat and handed me a glass container. "I prefer glass to plastic. Plastic's bad for the environment and we will be here a *very* long time so we need to take care of it," she smiled adamantly.

I graciously took the container and opened it. Lying there patiently waiting for me were a few small iced chocolate brownies. I put the tip of a brownie in my mouth biting it slowly. Its

glorious flavors burst in my mouth like the sun giving light to a cloudy day. I tossed the rest of the brownie in my mouth, savoring its delicious taste while I tried to place its unrecognizable flavor.

"These are the best freakin brownies I have ever had," I told Melly while eating the others.

"Want to know why?" she asked proud of herself.

"I don't care really. I just want more," I laughed licking my fingers.

Looking at me and then back at the road she said nonchalantly, "There was Grizzly blood in the icing."

"As in bear?" I asked with a smile.

"The one and only," she chuckled. "I knew you'd love them."

"You should really think about making those to sell," I told her, wishing there were more.

"That's a funny thought. I don't really know how humans would feel about my secret ingredient," she laughed before spotting Barnabus. "There he is . . . that little monkey."

She parked the Hummer and told me she would be right back. Melly walked as graceful as a swan, approaching one of the biggest dogs I had ever seen. Little was definitely not one of the words I would have used to describe him. There he stood, in between and elderly white haired woman and his new girlfriend. Melly shook her head as she and the woman exchanged words before she walked back to the car. The back door opened and I was instantly greeted by dog of the hour. He was beautiful, sporting the biggest head I had ever seen on a dog and slobbering all over my face.

"Barney, sit. You don't need any more girlfriends. Besides this one is taken," she said winking at me.

I had no idea how or why but I was almost positive that he understood every word she said. He nuzzled his basketball sized head on her arm before lying down.

Melly had already shocked me multiple times in the short time I had known her; this huge dog of hers only added to it. I couldn't help myself. I was dying to know how she felt safe having a dog around other vampires. It was obvious that both she and I were different from others like us. I just couldn't wrap my mind around those that free-fed on whatever they wanted with no hesitation. If he were my dog, I would have been frightened for his life. She assured me that most didn't find dogs or cats palatable. That would be like humans eating them. Humans loved cow and chickens but most were repulsed at the thought of ever consuming a dog or cat.

"My close friends feel the same way I do. As for others, even if they had an urge to hurt him they know he's off limits, simple as that."

As Melly continued to drive I noticed we were going in the same direction as the bed and breakfast where I was staying.

"Where's your friend's house?" I asked confused.

"Oh it's not too far. It's just up a little ways in McCall."

I didn't say anything about the fact that I was staying there. Even though I wanted to trust her, I had to be careful. I would know soon enough if she were as trustworthy as I hoped.

Before my nerves had a chance to kick in, she let me know that we were close to the house. This was it. I was about to come face to face with more like me; hopefully they were all just like Melly.

"I hope Roger's home. You're going to absolutely love him! He does hair and is quite handy in the kitchen. As a matter of fact, he helped me make the brownies. He's been dying to meet you, no pun intended," she giggled.

Turning down a long driveway surrounded by forest I felt my body tense. Coming into a clearing we were there.

"Yay, there he is," Melly said excited.

I didn't even have my seatbelt unbuckled when my door opened.

"My lady Haden, what a pleasure it is to meet you. Roger Williams III at your service. Welcome," his gentle voice said greeting me.

Holding his hand out in order to help me down out of the tall Hummer, I noticed how put together he was. Roger looked to be in his early twenties, if that. His short dirty blond hair was neatly styled accenting his boyish features perfectly. He wore a long sleeve white shirt, sleeves rolled up, with a vest on top and jeans with boots. He was adorable.

"Shall we?" my new friend said placing my arm on his. "Welcome to our home, Mayfield Manor." He waved his hand in the air as if presenting the mansion in front of us as a gift to me. "My home is your home," he said enthusiastically.

"Isn't it pretty?" Melly called as she shut her door once her bag was out.

"Yes," I said breathless, staring up at it while we walked.

I had grown up in a relatively large four thousand square foot home. I knew it was by no means small but this house in front of me would have swallowed mine. It was at least two times the size of my house.

Different shades of brown bricks, ranging from dark to light, covered it generously, giving it a regal look. My eyes quickly scanned from left to right as we walked towards the front door. Its rich color, grand size and numerous windows were beautiful.

Opening the massive wooden front door Roger stepped aside allowing Melly and I to enter first. I couldn't help but gasp at the tiny white lights framing the entry way. I felt like a little girl in a fairy tale.

"I have a slight twinkle light obsession," he laughed noticing me looking around.

Grabbing my hand Roger led me down the hall in an almost skipping like manner while Melly following closely behind us. Once we were at the end of the hallway we walked through a small entry way into the biggest room I had ever seen.

"Marcus, come meet our guest," Roger called out into the huge room. Admiring the size of the room my eyes saw what appeared to be an iron statue. Sitting on the right side of the room on a dainty French provincial couch was a large black man. He slowly shut his book, setting it down on the table beside his chair and placed his glasses on top of the book.

"He doesn't need glasses," Roger whispered. "He tends to think they make him look more sophisticated."

"I heard that," the statue said, its baritone voice startling me.

The closer he came towards me, the better I could see just how large he really was. He was beyond intimidating in appearance, his height having to be close to seven feet tall. His handsome face and clean shaven head fit perfectly with his oversized muscles that bulged out of his short sleeve shirt.

"I can hear your heart racing young Haden. There's no need to be frightened. My name is Marcus." He bowed slightly, kissing my hand as he rose. Then the ginormous man turned and headed back to the chair he was just sitting in.

"Okay, Roger what's up with Caina? Is she back home yet?" Melly asked as she plopped down next to Marcus, studying the cover of the book he was reading.

I followed Roger to the couch opposite of theirs where I sat quietly, taking it all in.

"Nope, Miss Prissy pants and her Prized Prince have yet to return. She did call though sounding rather... u m m . . . unenthused to say the least. She told me that she was bringing some *friends* back, no choice of hers."

I couldn't help but notice the way Roger said, *friends*, his voice thick with sarcasm.

I had enough of my own problems to contend with. I had no need to go sticking my nose in their business. I was just shocked at the thought of her having *any* friends . . . real or fake.

"Seems to me that no one in their right mind would be friends with that girl," Marcus' deep voice rang out. I couldn't help but laugh and he smiled at me.

"Now Marcus, be nice," Melly laughed.

"He's got a point hun," Roger piped up. "That girl is a clueless, cranky, mood robber. It's hard to stay in a good mood around her. Who cares if she's pretty, her attitude isn't."

"S'been so peaceful around here since her and her friends have been gone," Marcus added changing the page of his book.

"Right, sadly she'll be returning soon with a whole new goon crew," Roger said rolling his eyes.

Obviously ready for a subject change, Roger turned to face me and put his hand on my leg. "So Haden, how do you feel about playing dress up," he said, his eyes glowing with excitement.

"It's okay, I guess" was all that would come out of my mouth.

"Roger, she has no clue what you're talking about," Melly chuckled.

"Oh silly me, of course she doesn't. I must sound crazy."

"What he was going to say is that he's throwing a huge Halloween party this year," Melly explained. "I'm going as Belle, patiently waiting for my Beast," she said jumping off the couch and twirling around. She was so graceful. I could totally see her in the arms of a prince, even with her wild hair and tattoo. Marcus got up, took her hand and began dancing with her. They danced all around the room weaving in and out of furniture as Roger hummed for them. When they were done Roger and I clapped.

It was hard to believe that these people were vampires. According to society they were something evil. According to me they were human. Seeing how normal they were gave me hope. Maybe I wasn't the monster I had once thought I was.

They sat back down and Melly asked Marcus to tell me what he was going to be for the party.

"I am going as Batman and Roger over there is going as Johnny Depp," he laughed.

Clearing his throat and rolling his eyes at Marcus, Roger said, "I am going as Don Juan DeMarco."

Looking at the giant dog at my feet I asked if he would be included in the festivities as well. "Does Barney get to dress up too?"

With a grin as big as the room Melly said, "Yep, he's going as Robin."

Putting his book back down on the table, Marcus tapped his big knee calling the dog over to him. "Yes Ma'am, Barney is my sidekick," he said petting his huge head.

"From one gentle giant to another," Roger laughed.

All I could think was that these were the strangest vampires *ever* and for just a moment I was able to ignore the enormous ache in my heart.

After what felt like forever of my new friends debating on who I should dress up as, Roger and Melly gave up just long enough to go into the kitchen and fix me dinner. Marcus excused himself to go hunt so I thought now would be the perfect time to call Jenny.

"Haden, you have the timing of Champions," Jenny exclaimed out of breath.

"What's wrong?" I asked worried by her frustrated tone.

"Just Kiernan's stupid mouth as usual. I was on the phone with him just now when you called. He is *such* a moron. It seems his big fat Irish mouth got him in trouble *again*," she said without having taken one single breath. I sat there relishing her familiar voice bubbling over even if the news wasn't going to be good.

"The moron made Brad mad. Brad said he saw you. Kiernan said it was the pain killers ... blah- blah- blah. Anyway, Brad was so annoyed with Kiernan's mouth, that he told Taylor to pull over and let him out; he would just find you on his own. Taylor of course said no. Kiernan said go ahead and from what big mouth told me, Brad convinced Taylor that they had a better chance of finding you if they split up."

I don't think any of what she said registered with me after I heard Taylor's name.

"Haden, did you hear me? Brad's all alone sporting a stab wound looking for *you*. You have to find him."

"I heard you but you know that I can't let him know where I am. Jenn that's not safe. Taylor would be in danger if Brad told him where I was. You know how tight they are. Like Brad wouldn't tell Taylor the minute he saw me."

"Just tell Brad that he can't tell Taylor and explain to him why. Seriously, Brad would be in no danger right? So technically you could meet up with him with no threat to him."

"I'll think about it Jenn, but I'm not promising anything. I'm in a house full of vampires right now. I can't think this environment would be safe for him."

"Haden if they're anything like you, I'm sure it would be fine. Wait a minute . . . did you just say you were in a house full of vampires?"

"Yes," I laughed amused at her tone and how long it took her to click in to what I said.

"That's so awesome. Just tell Brad to try to tone down the hotness while he's with you. It's sure to get him eaten," she giggled.

Roger called out that dinner was served and I had to cut my phone call with Jenny short. After promising to think hard about calling Brad, I hung up the phone with my pushy friend and looked up to see Roger in front of me, all smiles.

He took my arm and escorted me to a beautiful candle lit dining room where he sat me at a very large ornate wooden table. Melly sat next to me and before I could blink Roger was back placing a beautiful plate covered in mouth watering steak and vegetables in front of me. I bowed my head momentarily to pray. When I opened my eyes both Melly and Roger were watching me. Melly was smiling and Roger looked confused.

"Were you praying?" Roger asked, his voice soft but serious.

"Yep," I said as I cut into the beautiful cut of meat in front of me.

"Who do you pray to?" Roger reminded me of little kid that had just seen Ronald McDonald for the first time after growing up eating his cheeseburgers but never seeing the man himself.

"Jesus," I smiled enjoying the rare piece of steak I had just put in my mouth. Luckily Roger asked nothing else about my prayers habits. I was in no position to talk about any of that. I was in a really funky place at the moment. Even though I knew God loved me, I couldn't wrap my head around why he had allowed my life to become such a mess.

After dinner, Melly and I went hunting together. It was so nice to not hunt alone. I enjoyed watching her run through the forest, weaving in and out of the trees like a gazelle. Once we had our fill I said goodbye to Marcus and Roger and she drove me back to my car. She followed me back to the bed and breakfast where we talked for hours before she left.

I felt so free with her. We talked about anything and everything. I even told her about my earlier phone call to Jenny and what happened between Brad and Kiernan. She caught me off guard when she sided with Jenny about me calling Brad. According to her, if he was out there hurt and looking for me, I needed to help him. She wouldn't leave me alone until I promised her that I would call him in the morning. I was sure that she was just curious about my other life; the one I had before my world fell apart. When I finally convinced Melly that I would get Brad's number and call him in the morning she left happily.

I went straight to the bathroom to take a nice, hot bath. Playing with the bubbles I let my mind wander back to my childhood. Thoughts of when I was little rushed back at me. My mom would always fill the tub full of bubbles and rubber duckies. I would play with them while she'd clean me and tell me stories about each little duck. My favorite was Hector. He was Taylor's duck, dark blue with a black bill. I loved him more than all the others but I couldn't ever say his name around Taylor because he didn't like it. He had named him Bud, but to me he would always be Hector the happy duck.

Closing my eyes, I decided that I would send Taylor a little mental message. It was time to let him know for sure that I was okay. Concentrating, I thought of Taylor's picture perfect face and then of Hectors. *His name is still Hector to me. I'm okay but I miss you something terrible,* I said

in my head, praying he got the message. I knew he wouldn't be happy that I didn't tell him where I was but at least he might not worry about me as much.

When I was done drying off I put my new fleece pajamas on enjoying their softness. I crawled into bed, slipping under the covers and closed my eyes, letting them rest after my long day. Night held me tight in its arms as I laid in bed with only the sound of rain and thoughts of Taylor on my mind. I woke up the next morning feeling his strong arms around me only to realize that it had been a dream. His scent was still fresh in my mind.

Taking a deep breath, I inhaled what was left of my dream. I had slept better last night than I had since I left home. I spent the entire night with Taylor, even if only in my mind.

I was alone inside of a small log cabin. The fire in the fireplace crackled peacefully as I looked around the unrecognizable room. My breath caught in my throat when hands came from behind me, moving my hair away from my neck. Where my hair had just been, Taylor's lips now rested.

Walking around to face me, he stared softly yet intently into my eyes, holding my face gently in his hands. I closed my eyes, feeling weak. *Open your eyes my love. I am here even if only for a moment. I do not know how long I can stay so let's not waste time.* Opening my eyes I blinked. *Are you really here,* I asked staring into his dark green eyes, my arms limp by my side. Taking my hand he placed it on top of his forest green pull over sweater, right above his heart. *Yes, tonight I am in your dream, as real as when you are awake,* he said, his eyes intense. *I have a gift for you. I had it made. I'll give it to you tonight and then I will tell you where I will put it so you can get it when you wake up. I know you are purposely keeping your distance from me and for now I will allow it. Knowing you have my gift will comfort my heart until we are together again fully,* he said kissing my hand as he led me to the enormously large brown leather couch the center of the room. *Will you do that for me, open it tonight and then go get it when you wake up.* I was so overwhelmed with emotions that I could feel my eyes about to erupt with tears. I would have done anything for him. He was my everything. Yes, I said, my lower lip quivering. *No tears Haden. You are strong. We will get through this together. Do what you must without me right now but know that we will be together again very soon.* He kissed my cheek and said he would be right back. Caressing my hair with one hand he got up and walked to the other side of the room where a table sat. Watching him walk made me melt. He looked just as gorgeous as ever in his sweater and stone washed jeans. Returning to sit with me he placed a small iridescent pink box in my hand. *Open it,* he pleaded softly. The box was so tiny, so delicate that I hated to disturb it, but I opened it anyway. Inside it was a smaller black velvet box. I opened the box very slowly. Losing my breath I ran my index finger lightly over the tiny key made of diamonds. It was very small, no bigger than a nickel, outlined in teeny tiny rubies. He gently took the box from me and removed the key which I could now see was attached to a delicate white gold chain. *May I?* he asked before putting it on me. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out his car keys. *Here is my half,* he said handing them to me. There with his keys was a solid white gold heart, completely plain except for the small rubies outlining the cutout where my key fit perfectly. *It symbolizes our future as well as my unending love for you. The diamonds are for how pure our love is and the rubies are in honor of the month my heart melted into yours. I will have my key chain with me always and one day the key will be back where it belongs. Until then my heart will never be whole.* Speechless, all I could do was cry.

Leaning into my face Taylor kissed my tears. That immediately sent the ever familiar Taylor chills down my spine and I touched his face. Turning his head he kissed the palm of my hand and I could feel my breathing becoming erratic. He leaned closer, placing his soft lips on mine but only for a moment when I moved closer to him, pushing my lips harder on his. My heart and soul were on fire. I wanted him. I needed him... now. To my surprise he gently pushed me away wearing a slightly cocky smile. *Not yet, it's not time but it will come, I promise. I want nothing more than to feel you close to me but you are my world and we must do things right. We have to fix this mess first. One day you will be my wife and we will be together. Until then we can't lose control.*

Taylor's self restraint was both admirable and aggravating. In that moment I didn't want smart. I wanted his lips on mine. I wanted all of him. He chuckled and said, *I heard that. Believe me,*

*I want you too but it's not the right time.* Rolling my eyes he laughed at me again, this time scooping me up into his arms and carrying me into a back room. Setting me down softly on the bed, he laid down next to me. I moved as close to him as I could, my head on his chest, our fingers intertwined. *I will stay awake all night holding you while you sleep.* I lifted my head a little to look into his eyes. *I don't want you to go. I need you.* I began to cry again as I set my head back down on his chest. He kissed the top of my head and the promised that he would come to me again in my dreams. I begged him to visit me every night. *I'll do what I can,* he said before he began humming me to sleep.

Thinking back to my night with him I absentmindedly touched my neck hoping there would be a key there. The more I woke up, the more I was sure that it had only been a dream. I just couldn't get the address he had given me in my dream out of my head. Before I could plan what I was going to do, there was a knock at my door. I quietly crept to the peep hole and peered out.

"It's me... Melly," she said even more boisterous than yesterday. Tucking my messed up hair behind my ears I unlocked the door and let her in. "Good morning! I brought you some breakfast," she said all smiles as she whizzed past me. "We have a big day ahead of us. Oh and I bought you a new outfit since it's gotten pretty cold out there."

Still somewhat disoriented I grabbed the hot coffee she held out to me and sipped it, enjoying the intense heat on my throat.

"Thanks Melly," I said as I opened the bag that held a ham and cheese croissant.

"No problem, I figured I'd get you all fed and dressed and then we could meet Brad for an early lunch. It was pretty funky out there earlier. It looked as if the sky might just fall. It looks better now thankfully. We only have some overcast and a little rain to deal with now."

Last night one of the many questions I asked my new friends was how sunlight affected them. I was dying to know if the fables were true. Would they really burn up in the sunlight? Was their skin all sparkly? Marcus was the first one to answer me. He, being an intensely dark, black man, loved my questions and jumped at the chance to answer them. He assured me that he didn't sparkle in the sunlight, nor did any other vampires. He also let me know that they didn't burn in the sunlight either. Their skin is more sensitive to sunlight than humans. If they're out for long periods of time it might feel like they have sunburn under their skin. With some, this burning sensation can be rather intense. Because of this, many chose to stay indoors on extremely sunny days.

I walked over to the window and moved the curtains slightly to look up at the sky. She wasn't kidding. It was definitely a dreary day.

"Okay okay, open your boxes," she demanded playfully.

Taking one more sip of coffee I opened the first box.

"White snow boots," I yelled. "Thank you, I love them!" I hugged her and she immediately handed me the other one. In it was a dark green hooded sweatshirt lined with fleece and the word hottie on the front in white letters. It was plain. It was . . . perfect.

"You like?"

"No I love," I boasted.

"So one more question," Melly said smiling devilishly. "Okay?"

"Can I do your hair? I was thinking pig tails."

Normally my response would have been no, but for some reason today pig tails sounded fun. Looking at the weather, we were going to need to make our own sunshine today.

After my beauty session was complete, I had to hand it to Melly. She had succeeded in making me look cute. With breakfast and my beauty treatment behind me it was time to leave. Melly insisted we leave my car behind. She thought it looked like it didn't feel too well and could use a little tune up. I laughed at her honesty. She and Taylor would get along well together if they ever had the chance to meet. I hopped in her Hummer and started telling her about my dream right after she pulled onto the road. Without any warning she floored it.



"What's the address?" she asked looking determined.

Without any hesitation, I told it to her and then held on for dear life as she weaved in and out of traffic all the while smiling and waving at the people she would pass. It took us no time to get to the park.

"This place is pretty," she said as she parked.

Oddly enough it resembled the park by my house back home. She and I both jumped out, looking around to see if we were alone. Thankfully the park was empty.

"Where did Romeo put your present?"

"Um, he buried it actually. He said there would be a small shovel taped to the underneath of a bench," I said remembering my dream. "Over there," I pointed straight ahead."

Melly beat me to the bench, got on her knees and came up holding a small shovel with a tiny red bow attached to it

"This guy is too cool," she said enjoying our game.

Thinking back to where he said my box would be buried, I made my way to the back of the park where there was the entrance to a trail.

"Back there," I said getting more excited. I knew he wouldn't have buried it too far down the trail since he would have known how the anticipation would have driven me batty. About fifteen steps in, there sat another bench and to the right of it, back by the trees, was freshly moved soil. Melly handed me my shovel and I started digging. I hit the box after only a couple of seconds and to my surprise it was no small box like I had assumed. It was about the size of the box that my boots came in.

Sitting on the bench I took a deep breath and opened it. On top was my little pink box. I picked it up and my tears began to fall. He *had* come to me! I opened the small box and kissed the tiny key.

"Wow, that is insanely beautiful," Melly said taking it from my shaking hands and putting it on me. "Is there more?"

"I don't know. It feels like it but he only told me about the necklace."

"Well come on woman. The suspense is killing me," she chuckled.

I removed the layer of cardboard to find that there was indeed more. "Hector!" I yelled. "He heard me!" I was so excited; I almost jumped out of my skin.

"He heard you?" Melly asked confused.

"It's kind of confusing; he hears my thoughts when I think about him and apparently more than I realized. Picking up Hector I saw a tiny collar around his neck with a tiny metal tag that said, *Haden's Hector*. By this point I was crying almost hysterically. I rubbed the tears from my eyes and looked back in the box. There were four letters-- two from my parents and one from Taylor and Kiernan. There was also a cd with Taylor's handwriting on it and what appeared to be a jar of his famous instant hot cocoa. I picked up the cd that said, Favorite piano concertos, and held it close to my heart.

There were no words to describe the bittersweet feelings radiating through my heart. My presents had given me something I had recently lost . . . hope. I put everything back in the box and stood up smiling down at Melly.

"Let's go find Brad," I said feeling happier than I had in days.

## 19. *Darkness*

Sporting a full stomach and the biggest smile my face had in a long time, it was time to call Brad. I dug through my purse looking for my phone. Jenn had so kindly text me with his number when she insisted I find him. *Don't forget*, the message demanded.

I dialed his number and waited. "Brad," I said, the feeling of home engulfing me as soon as I heard his deep voice.

"Hey there pretty lady. Jenn told me to be expecting your call but I wasn't too sure. You've been a tough cookie to find," he laughed, his southern drawl thick.

"Yeah, there's been a whole lot of mess going on," I said not wanting to go into detail about anything yet. "How's your side Brad, any better?"

I looked up feeling Melly's eyes on me. It almost looked like she was searching my face for the winning lottery numbers.

"I'm doin good, feelin better every day." The more he talked, the better I felt. There was a sense of home in that voice and I welcomed it with open arms.

"I'm so glad," I said relieved that he was a fast healer. "Look, here's the deal Brad. If you promise me right now that you won't tell Taylor where I am I'll meet you for lunch."

"When did you become so secretive?" he teased.

*Since people began hunting me*, I thought, not answering his question out loud. After he promised to keep mum about my location I said I would meet him at a burger place by his hotel. I told him I'd be with the girl who had pink and brown hair.

"Did you say *pink* and brown hair?" he asked serious, obviously thinking he had heard me wrong.

"Yep I did. She pulls it off, trust me." I laughed as a huge smile spread across Melly's face.

After we hung up the phone it wasn't even seconds before Melly asked me what he had said. Finding her comical I replayed our entire conversation, including how he sounded confused that I would be hanging out with someone who had her unusual hair.

I looked at Melly's face and suddenly got a tingly feeling in the pit of my stomach. Was she feeling something weird about Brad? I debated on whether or not to ask her and I decided that I would. Blushing, she told me that just the sound of his name made her feel all giddy inside.

"So, let's go get your beast, Belle," I teased.

The restaurant was empty except for a small elderly couple sitting in a back booth. We waited for five minutes before an extremely skinny, cranky woman greeted us. I watched as she smacked her gum while she stared at Melly's hair. When I told her we were expecting someone she rudely said, "Ain't we all," before walking off.

"Well, she was pleasant," Melly snorted laughing.

"Yeah and so are boils on your butt," I said, allowing the flow of unintended sarcasm to roll way too smoothly off of my tongue.

Right after we sat Melly's face went blank. I turned around in my seat to see Brad standing by the, oh so pleasant hostess. I waved at him letting him know where we were. He looked quite pleased to be able to escape the night of the living dead woman. When he got to our booth I stood up and got the biggest bear hug I'd received in a long time. I was shocked considering his recent wound.

"Let me look at you," Brad said taking a step back and giving me a once, over. "You're in one piece but you're way too skinny. I'm gonna order your scrawny butt a steak," he said showing the silver rays of his glowing chivalry.

After he was done with his role as surrogate brother, Brad quickly introduced himself to Melly while he smiled his warm southern smile.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Brad." He shook her hand and then sat down. For a second I thought I saw Melly melt into her seat.

"This is an interesting place you picked Haden, especially with that lovely hostess. I shouldn't say this but she reminded me of an angry rat."

Melly and I both busted out laughing and by the look in Brad's eyes he found himself comical too. I hadn't seen Brad smile that big since he lost his parents and sister. It was so nice to see it again. The longer we all sat together, the more I noticed that there was a definite spark

thing going on between Melly and Brad. They were so engrossed in each other's conversation more than once, they barely noticed I was there.

Finally when there was a lull between them I jumped in. Of course it was more like someone took a breath, but I figured whatever, I would take what I could get.

"Brad, we need to talk. Not here," I said serious.

"My pad it is," he said all smiles.

Brad generously paid for our food and then we followed him to his hotel room. It was hard not to think about what beautiful words awaited me in Taylor's letter but I had to talk to Brad first. I debated on asking Melly to give us some time alone. I needed to tell him things I had never told her. I wanted her to stay but I was still questioning just how much I could trust her. My gut still said yes so I decided I would let her stay. I could only pray that I was right. Time would tell and that's all I really had at this point.

Melly was absolutely glowing all the way to Brad's hotel.

"It's him Haden, he's my husband. I know it," she said, excitement dripping off of her voice.

"Melly you *do* realize that Brad is human, 100% flesh and blood human?"

"So," she said smiling.

"What do you mean *so*? You are a vampire and he is a human. That's kind of a big deal."

"I won't eat him if that's what you're worried about," she laughed.

"Just be gentle with him. He lost his whole family awhile back and today was the first time I've seen him really smile since then," I said hoping she would take me seriously.

"It will be the first of many smiles on his gorgeous face, I promise," she said trying to assure me that her intentions were pure.

The rest of our ride was filled with Melly asking me to tell her everything I knew about Brad. Luckily his hotel was pretty close. I still wasn't in the most talkative mood.

Brad's hotel was gorgeous, just as I had expected. He was eighteen when his parents left him their life savings. He used some to play the stock market and the rest he used as he wished. Tonight it was pretty obvious he wished not to have to sleep in a cheap motel. He beat us there but by only a few minutes.

Wanting to get back to my letters I didn't waste any time with small talk. They both sat there, eyes on me, listening intently to all I had to say. I told Melly that I hadn't planned on revealing any of this information to her but that in the short period of our friendship I had come to love and trust her like a sister.

I took a breath and began, taking it all the way back to the graduation dance and how that was the first time I had craved human blood. I told them what I overheard Nanny Lena telling my parents. I even told them how I started having feelings for my so-called brother. I told them everything I could think of including how Dell and Boones had kidnapped me; how they talked about handing me over to someone higher than them, someone by the name of Arkos.

By the time I was done they were both still and quiet. Melly looked like she was in deep thought while Brad looked like he was choosing what he was about to say very carefully. When Brad finally spoke I was still watching Melly who was frozen in somewhere in time.

"Haden, this whole situation sounds pretty dangerous. I really think we should call Taylor," Brad said, his eyes soft and full of concern.

"No way... we can't," I protested.

Melly jumped up suddenly, looking like a deer in headlights. "Um I just remembered that I promised to meet Roger for a fitting for the ball. I've gotta run," she said looking at Brad and then at me. She turned to Brad and asked him if he could take me home so I wouldn't have to call a cab.

"Sure I can take her home, if she lets me," he teased smiling at me.

I nodded my head at him and asked Melly if she was okay. In as few words as possible she said yes and apologized for having to leave so fast. She told Brad it was nice to meet him and she left like a bolt of lightning-- just that fast.

"Wow, she's fast," Brad laughed.

Not feeling like having any new secrets, I told him that she was a vampire.

"Ah, well that would explain it," he grinned. I take it I don't have to worrying about her eating me for dinner.

"Well not literally at least," I teased. His face turned a cute shade of red before he turned the conversation back over to me.

For the next few hours Brad and I talked and then watched a movie together. It was so nice to be around him. I could almost feel Taylor. When the movie was over it was Brad's turn to talk and my turn to be shocked.

"I don't think it's my place to tell you this Haden but since this whole situation is so serious and with you being so adamant about not involving Taylor, I think there is one *huge* thing you should know."

I watched him gather his thoughts while I waited patiently.

"Taylor shared some pretty interesting information with me and Kiernan on our way to Boise, something he never told you. He was hoping he would be able to speak to you face to face. He assumed it would change your outlook on everything, especially your relationship with him."

"What is it he wanted to tell me?" I asked growing impatient.

"Haden he's just like you. He's half vampire."

"What are you talking about Brad?" My thoughts began to spin around in circles. "But... how? I mean... why? Why wouldn't my parents have told me when they admitted that I was adopted?" Tears found their way back to my eyes. "How does he . . . ?"

"You mean how does he feed? Just like you. He has a little room in the back of his closet just like you do."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Your parents told him about you being one after you vanished but he already figured as much. He's a clever guy. My point is that you need him and he's way stronger than you knew so I don't see why you won't let me call him and tell him where we are right now. He can help you through this," Brad pleaded.

"The answer is still no Brad. Half vampire or not he's vulnerable just because I love him," I cried. "Don't you see . . . being close to me . . . just knowing where I am could get him killed?"

Brad's facial expression was one of pure love. "I totally understand Haden. You are safe with me. I want you to understand that I am going nowhere, vampires or no vampires. I'm like glue where you're concerned. You can consider me your overprotective big brother, your shadow."

A chuckle escaped my lips. "Seriously Brad, I can handle this myself. You're human, aka lunch to some."

"Your point would be what?" he asked serious. "I could always ask your friend to change me." His voice was strong.

I knew just by looking at him that he wasn't bluffing. He had vowed to Taylor to protect me at all costs and protect me he would-- to his death if necessary. Brad wasn't anything if he wasn't a man of his word.

"Fine," I gave in. "But you have got to realize what kind of danger you'll be putting yourself in."

Brad agreed to keep quiet and not call Taylor which put my mind at ease some. I let him take me back to the bed and breakfast. I told him goodnight and went up to my room, waving at the owners as I passed.

Closing the door I went to the window and watched him drive away. I almost wished he would have stayed for awhile so I didn't have to be alone. Then as if a veil was removed allowing the darkness to subside I remembered my letters. Spotting the tiny coffee pot, I jumped up to heat myself some water for hot cocoa. Soon I was back in bed ready to read Taylor's words. More than anything I longed for sleep filled with Taylor but that would have to wait.

I began with my parents' letter. Surprisingly they weren't too long and thankfully they didn't make me cry. Dad was just reiterating how to be safe on my own, how not to talk to strangers and of course he reminded me to keep my money on me when I was gone. He ended his letter by telling me that he understood why I left and that when I was ready to come home he would protect me. The letter from my mom was typical for her. All she did was beg me to come home and tell me how she was praying for me. Moving on to Kiernan's, it didn't take me long to read it. It was the shortest but also the funniest. My heart ached with how much I missed them all.

Placing the letters on the bedside table I finished my cocoa and then put Taylor's envelope to my nose inhaling as deeply as possible. I lay back in my bed, snuggling in my sheets as I opened the letter. It began with a poem.

*When day ends and night draws near  
Know that you have nothing to fear  
In my thoughts you will be  
In your dreams you will see*

*My heart,*

*I am assuming by now that Brad has told you about our physical similarities. I can only imagine how it pained you to find this out from someone other than me. Please know it was my full intention to tell you myself. Sadly, life had other plans. I know your heart is lonely, angry, and at moments full of indescribable darkness. You are not alone. I am always with you. You are strong Haden. Remember my words. Hunt, drink your fill and feel no guilt. You have to feed to survive. God put the animals here for us. You will need your strength through these trials. Let Brad be there for you and quiet your stubborn, independent side until we can figure this out together.*

*Counting the minutes,  
Taylor*

Slowly I placed the note to my heart. Would he and I ever be together again? I had to believe that we would. I had no other choice. Holding the letter tight I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The sound of a knock startled me out of my very empty slumber. Rubbing my eyes I grabbed my sweatshirt, slid it over my ratty head and peaked through the peep hole. There stood Melly looking as perky as usual. She was holding a coffee cup and smiling.

"You don't ever sleep do you?" I questioned as I opened the door.

"Girl, it's 2:30pm. You must have had a long night," she teased.

"2:30?" I asked going back to rubbing my eyes. "I kinda did have a long night. I did some late night reading and lost track of the time."

"Well drink this," she said handing me the cup of coffee. "It should wake you right up. Roger's waiting for us."

"To do what?" I moaned feeling awful.

"To have you fitted silly. He's paying to have a costume made for you," she grinned.

"Oh... Oh!" I said realizing what she was saying. "Look Melly I didn't want to be a party pooper the other day but I can't go."

"Can't or won't?" she pouted.

"A little of both I guess. You heard what I told you and Brad last night. A vampire party probably wouldn't be the safest place for me right now," I shrugged, sad at my own truth.

"Technically maybe not, but with Roger, Marcus and I there to protect you there shouldn't be a problem and besides there won't just be vampires at the party. There will be tons of humans there too. Roger has a lot of human friends.

I wasn't expecting her to throw that at me but for some reason it didn't really surprise me. Roger loved people. Now I had something new to consider. Who would come after me in a party full of humans? She did have a point.

"Alright, I'll go Melly, but just so you know, Brad won't let me go alone."

"I was counting on that," she smiled. "As a matter of fact he's meeting us at Roger's house in a couple of hours."

"Huh?"

"I stopped by his place this morning with breakfast so I could apologize for my rude exit last night. When I told him about the ball and that he *had* to come he said he would as long as he got to pick his own costume. He is so yummy!"

I eyed her sharply.

"Figuratively speaking Haden... just figuratively," she laughed.

Not feeling like beating around the bush I asked her why she ran out so fast last night. Her facial expression went blank and she told me that there was something she had to take care of but she couldn't talk to me about it. She promised that she would tell me why as soon as she could. I decided I would let it go. I had been safe around her so far and I still felt like she would do me no harm.

We got to Rogers house quickly. Today however, the driveway was filled with even more cars than last time.

Sighing, Melly said, "Time to meet the gang."

Before I could react, my door opened with Roger standing there smiling a tense smile. "Hello again beautiful," he said as he helped me out of Melly's Hummer.

Faster than light Melly was by my side. "When did *they* get here?" she asked Roger, her face clearly unhappy.

"About fifteen minutes ago," he huffed. "Caina is her usual lovely self and the goon crew that accompanied her is well . . . interesting to say the least."

"Roger how serious? Is Haden good going in?" Melly looked worried.

"Yep she's fine," he smiled at me. "Even your human friend should be fine. Most of Caina's crew are in the game room and I've invited quite a few of my human friends over," he winked. "No worries, only annoyances. They'll be on their best behavior." He grabbed my hand and led me into the house.

Right as I opened the door I was attacked by long blonde hair. "Haden, it's so good to see you! I hope Melly's been taking good care of you while I was gone. I'm sorry I had to leave but my boyfriend and I had some business to tend to." Grabbing my hand from Rogers, Caina told him that she was going to borrow me for a minute. "Come meet my boyfriend," she said way too happy. She pulled me over to the bar where a guy with straight, shoulder length dark brown hair had his back to us.

"Hello Haden," Marcus smiled at me from behind the bar. "Want a drink, Grizzly perhaps?"

"No thank you Marcus," I politely declined.

Very slowly the boyfriend turned around while removing Caina's small hand from the chunk of his leather jacket she had been pulling.

"Gavin honey, this is Haden, my new best friend."

I'm glad I wasn't holding anything breakable because I most likely would have dropped it. Was there any end to the beauty in the vampire world? This one was beyond breathtaking. He was spellbinding. All the silly vampire movies where girls couldn't resist the vampires charm

flashed in my mind. This creature was two words, unbelievably breathtaking. He was . . . bad boy can't bring home to mom . . . sexy. His dark brown eyes slowly moved to mine where they stayed. He grabbed my hand, pulling it close to his mouth and smiled a very slow smile, revealing what appeared to be fangs as he kissed my hand; his cold lips giving me goose bumps. Inhaling slowly as he held my hand to his lips he said so soft it almost wasn't audible, "Yes, beautiful indeed."

Feeling like I was in some crazy vampire lust trance I was quickly pulled to the opposite side of the room and into a bathroom.

"Snap out of it honey." Roger was in front of me snapping up a storm.

Looking at him wide eyed I sat on the toilet lid.

"Okay sweetie, here's the deal. Some of the Shadow Walkers you meet aren't the best. What I mean is they don't always enjoy eating light like some of us do. Plus my dear, you are half human. You are beautiful and you smell incredibly delicious. Gavin is definitely appealing to women but he is not to be trusted. Not even mentioning his cranky partner in crime Caina," he said lowering his voice. "Haden meet who you must but do not, I repeat do not look them in the eye. They can seduce you like a good bottle of wine. At least they might be able to. Melly told me who you were last night. I hope you don't mind. She needed my advice. She needed my help protecting you. Either way, we don't know how you will be affected by certain Shadow Walkers but from what I saw, Gavin definitely had some effect on you," he said cringing. "So, in order to keep you safe, you need to stay with one of us at all times. Whatever you do, don't go anywhere alone, okay?"

I agreed and Roger hugged me tightly.

"I think I could use that drink I refused earlier," I smiled.

"Me too," he grinned back at me.

Luckily Caina and Gavin were nowhere in sight when we got to the bar. Marcus was still sitting behind it with a book in hand. "Ready for that drink now," he smiled getting up.

"Yep, that would be great," I said.

"Count me in," Roger piped up.

"Me too," Melly's voice rang out.

"Anything for the human?" Brad asked playfully.

"Brad!" I turned and hugged him.

"I told you . . . like glue," he whispered in my ear.

Melly politely introduced him to Marcus and Roger who kindly shook his hand.

"Welcome my human brother. How about a coke on the rocks," Marcus baritone voice offered.

Brad accepted his offer in his typical gentleman like fashion. We all took a seat except for Roger who went to welcome more guests. Brad and Melly quickly merged into a conversation together and I felt someone staring at me. Across the room standing by the piano was a vampire all by himself. He saw me catch him watching me but he didn't look away. Instead he held my stare for a minute. He couldn't have been any older than Roger. He was so cute, dressed in a baby blue tee shirt and stone washed jeans; his dirty blonde hair hanging just above his shoulders casually. He too, looked like someone had drawn him from their imagination.

Breaking our stare I turned to Melly who was giggling like a school girl. I asked her who the cute guy standing in the back of the room was.

"Oh that's Talon. He's really quiet but a great guy. You're safe with him but don't go talk to him unless you feel like striking up the conversation." She then turned her attention back to Brad.

That day was just the first of many days that I spent in Roger's house. Days quickly turned into weeks. During that time I had met my fair share of vampires as well as humans, all very different. Some vampires were creepy enough to look like they had just stepped out of the most evil vampire movie imaginable and others I would never have known they weren't human if

Melly hadn't told me. There was only one I rarely caught glimpses of, Gavin. He would stroll by me with Caina at his side and every time he would stare at me with such intensity, it made me feel weak.

It had been six weeks since my first day there; six very happy weeks minus the fact that my dreams were all empty. Even still, my thoughts never left Taylor. I wondered where he was and if someone had convinced him that I wasn't worth his time or trouble. I exhaled releasing some of my negativity as I laid my head on Marcus' huge bicep. I was too short to reach his shoulder.

I opened the new book I was reading, *Werewolf 101*. I had seen Talon reading it and asked him if I could borrow it. He smiled kindly and loaned it to me without hesitation. Even though it had been weeks since I first met Talon, he was still really quiet and reserved around me. Melly said not to take it personally. He was like that with everyone. Something in me was dying to know more about the ever secretive Talon. Every time we were in the same room I found myself wishing he was closer, yet for the most part I kept my distance.

"You still reading that silly werewolf book?" Marcus questioned, adjusting his wire rimmed glasses on his nose.

"It's not silly," I pouted.

"They don't exist, young Haden." I could feel the base in Marcus' voice resonate through my head.

"Actually they are stories and fables, just like us," Talon said. Showing up out of nowhere, he was standing by the windows to the right of us, now looking directly at Marcus as he spoke. Unlike the usual lack of expression he wore on his face, now he was sporting a small smirk.

"Are you saying werewolves exist?" Marcus questioned him.

"Yes," he said and then walked off. "That boy is odd," Marcus sighed.

Melly laughed as Brad lovingly ran his fingers through her hair while she rested her head on his lap. I had learned a couple of things over the last month and a half. For one, I wasn't alone, and secondly Melly had found her Beast and Brad, his Beauty.

Feeling like I needed some air I excused myself to go take a walk outside. It was cold and overcast, a perfect day for vampires to be out and about so I knew that the grounds would be relatively empty. The house had seemed vacant all day. The back grounds area was a maze of bushes behind the pool, just like in the movies. It was beautiful.

I decided to take my chances and began my journey, hoping to find my way out before dark. After a couple of minutes I leaned my head up against a wall of bushes, closed my eyes and called Taylor's name in my head for the third time today. I begged him to come to me in my dreams. They had been silent for weeks and I was beginning to give up on ever sleeping well again. Sighing, I opened my eyes and continued on. I had finally reached the middle of the maze where a beautiful waterfall was placed. It was a statue of an angel watering flowers.

I don't know how long I had been sitting there alone in my thoughts, when I noticed it was getting dark. Standing up, I began walking back the way I had come. I stopped for a moment thinking I heard footsteps behind me. I looked up and there he was smiling devilishly at me.

"Fancy finding you here Princess," Gavin said walking slowly towards me.

I froze as he walked in a circle around me, inhaling me as if I were a drug.

"Caina is smart to fear you," he said quietly as his ice cold finger touched my cheek.

"I am no princess," I said backing away from him, "And I'm no one to fear."

"On the contrary, you are for her." His words were slow, sexy, and icy, cutting through any rational thought I had recently entertained. "You are exquisite."

He moved closer to me. This time I stood still, not moving. Part of me wanted him close to me. It was the same part of me that told me that Taylor was better off without me. Maybe I had found my new home where I really belonged. Maybe my old life was just a thing of the past. Slowly he bent down, his cold breath on my lips, his hands on my chin as he tilted my head up.



He moved his lips to my neck where they rested. My heart rate immediately sped up and I instinctively moved in closer to his body.

He whispered to me as he licked my neck. "You belong with me Haden." His kisses were indescribable; his teeth on my neck were an invitation for me to leave it all behind; an invitation I was very much considering. "I will give it all to you," he said placing his hand on my lower back, pushing his body even closer to mine. "Just say the word and I will make all of your dreams come true."

I could feel my eyes rolling back slightly from the overwhelmingly pleasure I was feeling as his teeth traced a vein on my neck. He nibbled once more and then his eyes pierced mine as he cut the palm of his hand with his nail. With his index finger he placed a drop of blood on his lips. The smell of his blood was driving me crazy, inviting me to drink. He moved in towards my face and I lost all control. I licked his lower lip feeling his blood tingle on my tongue. I had never tasted anything so delicious. He moaned pulling me closer, kissing me with such force that I almost couldn't breathe and yet I wanted more. I bit his lower lip, doing what I could to taste more of him. That excited him feverishly and he pushed himself closer to me again.

"Haden, honey, where are you?" Gavin stopped instantly with the sound of Roger's voice.

"I will find you again," he whispered and then disappeared.

Feeling beyond confused and really woozy I sat down on the ground right where I was. Almost tripping on me Roger gasped. He looked like he had seen a ghost. He immediately moved my hair and looked at my neck.

"Thank God," he exhaled. "Good heavens what happened to you?" he asked sitting next to me, taking my hand in his.

"I... uh ... I'm not sure. I was walking and then Gavin showed up," I said through chattering teeth.

"You're cold. Let's get you inside and warm you up. We can talk about this later when you're feeling better."

I must have looked awful because Brad jumped off of the couch the minute he saw me. He put his hand on my head. "You're freezing Haden. Where have you been?"

"The maze," I chattered.

Suddenly someone came up behind me and put a blanket over my shoulders. I turned around to see Talon walking off.

After being fussed over for awhile, Roger pulled me aside wanting details. I saw no need in replaying my embarrassing loss of control so I gave none. Instead I asked Melly and Brad to take me to the bed and breakfast. All I wanted to do was crawl in a hole. I pictured Taylor's face. *Where are you? I need you.*

That night I had the first nightmare I had had since the one I had weeks before; the one where Taylor had been kidnapped. This nightmare began simple enough, beautiful even. Taylor and I were dancing cheek to cheek in a candle lit room with mirrors everywhere. Our spinning was steadily getting faster and faster. As we slowed down I looked into his face but it was no longer Taylor; instead it was Gavin smiling his alluring smile. Being thrown out of my sleep, I bolted up fast. I was covered in sweat. I took a sip of water and put some clean pajama's on before I went back to bed.

Once I was asleep again the nightmares continued. This new one was the most real. There Taylor was, tied to a chair just like the one in the dream I had months ago. Only in this one I could have sworn that Taylor saw me see him. I started to walk towards him, to remove the gag from his mouth but he lightly shook his head no. His beautiful face was swollen and bruised. I looked around the room trying to see if I could recognize where he was. I was crying profusely at the sight of Taylor's beaten body. He was weak and the sight of blood splattered on his shirt made my stomach tighten. His eyes reached out to me, undeniably sensing how severe my pain was.

I woke up yet again shaking and out of breath. I decided I had no choice but to call Jenny even though it was only four in the morning.

"Hello," she answered, her voice groggy with sleep.

"Sorry to wake you up but it's important. I need to know when the last time you saw Taylor was."

She paused for a moment and then told me that it had been awhile.

When I replayed my dream for her she promised she would call him in the morning as soon as she woke up. I hung up the phone and dialed Brad. He said he wasn't sure when the last time he talked to Taylor was. I told Brad that I was scared. I started to cry and he said that he was on his way over to where I was. He hung up the phone and I hugged my pillow and sobbed as beaten visions of Taylor filled my head.

That night Brad slept on the couch in my room so I didn't have to be alone. Most of the night I lied awake watching him sleep wishing my prince would find me once again.

The next morning I woke up to a note. Brad had gone out to get us breakfast. Melly was picking up costumes from the seamstress. The costumes! I jolted awake realizing that tonight was the Halloween Ball. How could I have forgotten? I never really wanted to go. I wanted to hide in my motel room and eat junk food all night.

Brad was back and soon breakfast was done. The day was already flying by. All I could do was try to figure out how to get out of going tonight. Every fiber of my being screamed run.

## *20. Blood Lust*

Running away had never been an option in my life until recently. Just the idea of hiding from my problems had become comforting. Fortunately, where tonight was concerned it didn't look like I would have to run anywhere. There was a really good chance that I could leave early which made me very happy.

With every passing minute I grew more anxious about Taylor. Picking up my phone I called Jenny who was in the middle of a manicure. My first question to her was whether she had been able to talk to Taylor. Much to my dismay, her answer was no. She said that she called him over and over again but he never answered. My stomach was instantly sick. She and I both knew all too well that something wasn't right. Sirens were blaring in my head like the sound of a cat in heat and it wasn't pretty. I knew Brad and Melly would be back soon so I would wait and ask Brad if he had heard from him before I jumped to conclusions. I was going to do my best to stay calm.

After five straight minutes of biting my nails I couldn't have been more frazzled. My plan to stay calm had totally bombed. Then I had a thought. Maybe I was thinking all wrong. Maybe I had actually put him in more danger by *not* being close to him. If he was in trouble I could pray that they would realize he didn't know where I was and they'd let him go.

When Brad and Melly walked in I asked Brad what Taylor said when he talked to him. I was hoping that positive thinking would work here but instead Brad told me that he too hadn't been able to get Taylor on the phone. Brad of course told me not to worry; he was sure Taylor had probably just taken a little time for him to regroup. I liked Brad's reasoning even though my heart was screaming that he was wrong. I chose to follow my mind instead of my heart and pretended that Brad's theory was correct. The alternative was just too painful for me to fathom.

All too soon we were at Roger's mansion getting ready for the Halloween Ball. Roger had outdone himself. The decorations were to die for. Melly was talking up a storm as she tightened my corset. I had decided to dress up like a maiden from the late 1700's that was attending a Masquerade Ball. I always enjoyed watching movies with Masquerade Balls in them. Tonight it would be my turn to wear a mask.

Roger had spared no expense; calling in favors with his favorite hair stylists who transformed Melly and I into our new selves. Melly totally resembled Belle minus the small fact that Melly's dress was yellow with a couple of hot pink splashes on it.

Roger knocked at the door right as I had finished putting my scarlet red gown on. "Ladies, it's about that time. You two can't possibly get any prettier."

I opened the door and his face was covered in a huge smile.

"Oh Haden, you are a vision," he approved, looking me over. "And you Belle, are a real beauty," he said bowing before us. "Let us go, shall we."

As we walked down the long hallway towards the ballroom we passed multiple bedrooms on each side. It resembled an expensive hotel hallway. They were filled with house guests; both human and vampire. When we first entered the hall it was filled with chatter. With the first step I took out of the room, silence surrounded me. As we walked you could hear gasps and low whispers coming from every direction.

Melly walked next to me and whispered in my ear, "Those are all for you," she said.

I tried to keep my eyes focused forward but I couldn't help but be pulled towards one particularly disturbing stare on my left. There stood Caina, glowering at me. Imaginary lasers were shooting me with her eyes. The minute our eyes met she instantly changed her previous expression into a smile, a very forced smile. Next to her, looking like a sinful dessert, stood Gavin who bowed as I walked past. Almost as if he were demanding others to follow his lead, several vampires bowed after him as I approached them. I felt like a princess; a princess in a very messed up dream.

Once in the ballroom I stood silently against the wall taking it all in. The room was extravagant. The soft twinkle lights gave it a magical feel. On one side of the room Roger had an orchestra set up and on the complete opposite side there was a DJ booth with an adjoining bar. The waiters Roger had hired were all lined up against the massive back window that overlooked the pool directly in front of the maze. The waiters all resembled penguins in their pristine tuxedos. I walked over to the far side of the window and stared out at the beautifully lit pool with its floating candles, all the while wishing I were dead.

"It will be okay," the male voice whispered softly, handing me a cup of hot chocolate with a peppermint stick in it.

I looked up to see Talon standing next to me wearing a warm smile on his face. He wasn't dressed up. I didn't ask him why because I was wishing I wasn't either at that moment.

"Your favorite I presume—peppermint hot chocolate made with real chocolate," he said.

"Um, yes it is," I said shocked. "Thank you."

"No problem." He bowed his head slightly and then left.

I stood there sipping my utterly childish drink while I watched the guests pour in. The enormous room filled quickly as the orchestra played. Melly found me after getting herself a drink and stood next to me watching for Brad silently. Looking around the room I spotted her *Beast* and tapped Melly on her shoulder.

"Will you be okay if I go get him?" she asked me, never taking her eyes off of him.

"Sure, I'm fine," I lied, immediately shoving the guilt down my throat so it could party with the lump I had been suppressing for hours. "Go dance with him," I added seeing how excited she was.

Melly looked like a lit candle walking through the crowd she was glowing so brightly. I handed a waiter my empty mug and placed my mask back over my eyes wishing that it were only that simple to hide my identity. I saw something moving through the crowd causing it to spread

like the red sea. I smiled when I saw what the cause was. Melly and Brad were ballroom dancing together. They were incredible. As I watched them I almost forgot how dreadful life really was. The longer they danced, the more people joined them and the more I wanted to leave.

Wishing the clock would speed up I made my way to the bar and ordered a Grizzly Spritzer. Feeling the bubbles tickle my throat I walked back towards the window and stared out into the night.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

I didn't have to look to see who was standing behind me. I could smell him; almost taste him.

"Yes... very," I agreed.

"Not as delicious to the eyes as you."

Turning slowly I looked up into the face of an angel, a very dark angel; one whose eyes were burning mine with the intensity of his stare. He was dressed in the same era I was. His tux was black with scarlet accents that matched the color of my gown perfectly. His hair was in a precise pony tail and I could see the reflection of the room's lights in his dark brown, almost black eyes.

He put on his mask and stretched out his hand. "May I?" he asked, his voice smooth as silk.

"What about Caina?"

"She is nothing to worry about," he said very slowly as he led me to the dance floor.

In that very instant I was extremely thankful my mom had forced Taylor and I to take dance lessons when we were children. Closing my eyes shut I pushed his name down, far away from my mind. I could not think of him. Just being alive, I hurt him. Tonight I would change that.

Gavin's presence on the dance floor seemed to cause a stir. It was quite possibly the beautiful way his fluid like movements demanded the attention of anyone who had eyes. Every woman in the room was watching every movement he made yet his eyes were focused solely on me.

"You are a beautiful dancer," he said, his words entrancing me.

At the end of the first song he dipped me only slightly, gently biting my neck, teasing me as the clapping erupted. I looked over to see Melly and Brad still lost in each other's eyes.

"Another?" Gavin asked as the first song blended into the next. He stood still, politely waiting for my response.

At my nod we began again. We danced for what seemed like hours. I felt consumed; drunk off of his mere presence. His delicious smell was making me dizzy.

"I wish I had you all to myself," he said leaning his head ever so slightly next to mine. "For now this will have to do but later we will come together again. I have prepared a room for us to meet."

I closed my eyes as I got lost in his voice.

"I want to taste you," he whispered, his cold breath tickling my ear. "I want *you* as my Queen, your blood mixed with mine... tonight." His eyes were hot with fire as he moved his face back a little and watched me.

I tried to speak but nothing would come out of my mouth. I felt like I was making a deal with the devil, a really gorgeous devil. He slowly pressed his cold lips on mine as he picked me up off of the floor. We began spinning around the dance floor; his kisses more intense with each turn. He slowed down, carefully releasing me from his tight hold.

"I will be back for you soon." It was a promise.

Standing there light headed I watched as he walked over to a very irate Caina.

An hour or so had passed and there had been no sign of Gavin or Caina anywhere. Honestly I was relieved. I wasn't really ready to die even though that was my original plan when I saw Gavin tonight. If my death could save Taylor I would die a thousand times.

Suddenly the orchestra stopped playing and the twinkle lights went off. They were quickly replaced with strobe lights and music coming from the DJ. People all over started yelling with excitement.

Melly and Brad had been babysitting me for what seemed like forever. Roger, Marcus and even Barnabus had also come to check on me every now and then. I was so ready to go home. All of the outlandish costumes were a little over the top for me and now the dance music and strobe lights were giving me a headache. Not wanting to ruin their fun by begging to go home I told them that I was going to go for a walk.

"A close one," Brad demanded.

Agreeing, I smiled and walked off. I walked around the dance floor to the opposite side of the room where one of the many snack bars stood. I set my hand down on the table as I looked longingly at the spinach and artichoke dip when a cold hand was placed on mine.

Running his ice cold fingers over the top of my hand he said, "Come with me."

As he led me out of the room I watched people move out of his way as if he were royalty. At the end of the long hall he turned around making sure we hadn't been followed. We turned right into another hall. We walked until he stopped at the end of the hall and opened the door letting me in first. Once inside I saw that we were in a stairway. He motioned for me to walk up the stairs. I did as he said. It led us to a large open game room of sorts. To the left was a pool table with a bar wrapping around the back corner of the room against the wall. Directly in front of me was a maroon leather couch and to the right stood two black leather high back chairs.

Gavin picked up a remote off of the table and turned some music on. It was soft and dark. He walked over to the door and locked it as he smiled at me.

"Would you care for a drink?" he asked not waiting for an answer before pouring something red into wine glasses. "Take your mask off," he said, the sound of his voice making me feel like I had just stepped into a hot fire.

He stood watching me as he sipped his drink. After my mask was off I took a small taste of my drink. Its flavor exploded in my mouth. I had never tasted anything quite like it. There were no words for how delicious it was. I drank it all in one gulp and Gavin smiled as he watched me. He set his glass down and led me to the couch.

"I mustn't waste our time together so I will get right to the point. I want you to bare my child." Gavin said speaking slowly, startling me with his words, "Tonight."

Feeling woozy again I sat there confused by what I had just heard. "I'm flattered Gavin but I can't accept. Besides, I can't have children." Just saying his name gave me such intense chills that I had to fight to maintain my composure.

A slow smile spread across his face in amusement. "You can have children. I will show you."

Placing his body close to mine he kissed my lips slowly as if we had all the time in the world. "Did you find your drink satisfactory?"

"Yes I did." Before I could blink he refilled my glass and was back handing it to me. The aroma of the drink was so exotic that it made my throat burn with desire. I *had* to have more. I held the delicate glass with both of my hands and drank it all in one sip.

"Not quite what you're used to but in time it will be. It is the drink of sacrifice," he said grinning sly at me.

The word sacrifice had me frozen. "What did I just drink?"

"Caina's blood... vampire blood. She sacrificed herself for us."

He could see just how confused I was by what he said. *She sacrificed herself? What does that mean exactly?*

"We do not let others drink from us—ewer," he said simply. "Thus it is a sacrifice when we give of our blood to others."

I was instantly frozen in shock as well as sickened by what I had just done.

"No need to be frightened Haden. Tonight's drinks were her gift to us. She offered it as a way to show you that she has no hard feelings about you and I. Tonight was her treat for us. Do not worry, she was not harmed," he said smiling.

Still repulsed at the thought of drinking her blood I cringed. Gavin stood up and pulled me into his arms. "Would you like to taste mine again?" His face was serious and sexy.

Not feeling the least bit of control I whispered yes. In one movement he sliced his arm with his nail. I didn't hesitate, immediately putting my mouth to his arm. I slowly licked every tasty drop of his blood. His was about a million times richer than Caina's had been. It was like comparing white chocolate to dark chocolate. Anyone in need of a serious chocolate fix never went for white.

"More," he urged me on as I licked my razor sharp teeth. I went to bite him and stopped myself. He grabbed my head softly with his other hand. "Drink my love, drink. Let my blood quench your thirst."

I was so consumed with dark passion that I followed my instinct and felt my teeth pierce his skin, his deep moan giving me intense chills as I drank, savoring every drop. Suddenly I saw Taylor's face in my head and I forced myself to stop drinking. Gavin grabbed me, pulling me into him, and kissed me again; this time with such severe intensity that I felt the world spinning around me.

"Now it's my turn to taste you," he said; his eyes on fire.

There was no question that I wanted him to but for a very different reason. I wanted him to drain me of my blood. I wanted him to end my life. Approaching my death wasn't at all how I imagined. Only months ago I had assumed that my so called, "condition," would end it all. My need for blood would be what stole me away from my family. In a way, it still was. Here I stood, in the arms of the most beautiful vampire in the world who wanted me as his Queen and all I could do was picture Taylor's perfect face in my head. As Gavin's hands began to roam, his teeth moved lightly across my neck, searching. *Goodbye, I love you*, I told Taylor in my head.

Gavin grabbed my right arm and kissed it before piercing my skin with his teeth. I moaned in pleasure, thankful that dying wouldn't hurt. With another moan I begged Gavin to drain me of my blood; I begged him to kill me.

He froze, pulling away slowly. At first he appeared shocked when I asked him to take my life but then his shock turned into confusion. "And why would I want to do that? You are no good to me dead. This is just foreplay to our future together," he smirked.

He picked me up and tossed me onto the couch. I lay there with my heart racing as I watched him take his jacket off and then his shirt as he came towards me.

"No." I barely made out a sound.

"Yes," he said, his voice dark and seductive.

*Don't... let... him... hurt...you!*

I froze instantly. *Taylor?* I replayed the words in my aching head. Had I just heard Taylor? Just the possibility gave me hope. Quickly I jumped up becoming angry at Gavin's advances.

Smiling he said, "You're even prettier when you're all mad."

I, however, was not amused. We began doing a dance of sorts around the room. He bent down into somewhat of a crouch trying to get his hands on me. I wasn't going to let that happen. I was infuriated.

"You're quite fast Haden, very impressive. Our children will not only be beautiful but also strong."

That thought seemed to please him immensely. He was clearly enjoying himself.

"There will be no children," I hissed. "There will be no us."

"I beg to disagree. I will covet you the rest of my life, Haden. I am a part of you now and you me," he sneered.

"No you're not, and I'm *not* a part of you" I growled, barely escaping his grasp. Jumping from the couch to the top of the bar I saw his eyes narrow as he watched me, his smile turning dark.

"That's where you're wrong. When you drank my blood directly from me and of my own free will, you became a part of me. When you, my beautiful one, offered me to drink your blood from you, I became a part of you. We are now one in blood. I am yours and you are mine . . . forever."

It couldn't be. He had to be bluffing. Looking at him told me something very different. All I could think about at that very moment was running into his arms. He was the forbidden fruit and my soul was so hungry, it hurt. The way his eyes burned into mine had my brain turning to mush. My thoughts were anything but clear. I was lost in a fog of doubt and confusion. Something so strong in my body called me to him. *Safety*. I would be safe with him; there would be no more running.

He laughed quietly as he watched me battle myself. "Don't fight it. It's meant to be Haden. Come to me," he whispered reaching his hand out to me.

Right then someone tried to open the door.

"Haden, are you in there?" Brad's voice was harsher than I had ever heard.

"If you know what's good for your friend, you will tell him to go away," Gavin hissed towards the door.

Fighting the urge to send Brad away I hissed at Gavin. "No."

"If you must be difficult, then so be it. Just remember . . . you can run but you can't hide from me. You won't be able to fight this forever. I live in you now," he said leaping at me.

Barely escaping his grasp yet again I accidentally knocked over a crystal vase which shattered into a million pieces.

"Haden," Brad yelled.

Fearful for Brad's life I yelled at him. "Go away Brad! I can handle this," I shouted back never taking my eyes off of Gavin.

"Good girl," Gavin said right before he came at me once more.

Brad didn't listen to me. He continued to kick the door until it finally gave way. I had never seen Brad so angry. Gavin turned away from me slowly to face Brad and I yelled, "Brad run!"

It was too late. Gavin was hovering over Brad's body on the floor, his teeth in his neck.

"No," I screamed lunging at Gavin. I grabbed him and threw him off of Brad who tried to get up. "Stay down Brad," I demanded.

Once again his southern boy stubbornness took over and he ignored me. He slowly got up touching his hand to his neck. "You bit me," he said both shocked and mad.

Gavin cocked his head. "I'm not done either," and off he flew towards Brad again throwing him to the floor. This time I jumped on Gavin's back, digging my teeth into his neck, trying to drain him of *his* blood. "Not now love." Gavin said amused and tossed me off of him directly onto the couch.

It wasn't long before Brad was Gavin's chew toy again. Brad was no match for Gavin; his body was beginning to go limp. All my thoughts and fears became jarbled into one. That could have been Taylor. What had I done?

Gavin slowly got up from Brad's limp body turning to face me. "He'll be dead soon just like your Taylor," he grinned. His words cutting through my heart like a knife.

"What did you just say?"

"I knew you were keeping yourself from me for him but now he is of no concern. You and I can be together with no complications," he smirked. "Now my love where were we? Ah yes, you were in feisty mode. I liked it!"

Feeling anger like never before, I ran towards him, knocking him to the ground. He grabbed me, pulling me towards him and kissing me hard. I spun around breaking his arm and

threw him clear across the room. He came back at me full force. As I jumped to get away he grabbed my ankle. I fell hard to the ground breaking my leg. Gavin stood still calculating his next move. I chose to ignore my pain and leapt towards him throwing him to the floor.

"Brad," Melly's voice rang out.

"Haden," Roger screamed.

Talon pulled me off of Gavin and began running with me in his arms. Everything began to blur around me as I clung to Talon. Surrounded by screams I blacked out.

## *21. New Life*

Feeling extremely groggy I tried to pry my tired eyes open. I quickly noticed that I wasn't at home or in my motel. I had no idea where I was. I strained to pull my heavy head up and look around the room. I was lying in a bed that was too small for me with my feet resting on a bench seat at the end of it. I blinked a few times, assuming I was dreaming. No matter how many times I opened and closed my eyes, the room didn't change.

It had a cute, yet old womanish feel to it. The walls were sage green, framed with white crown molding. White lacey drapes hung around the one window to the right of me. Next to the bed was a white wicker night stand. Lying on top of it was a white doily with a lamp made out of shells and a Bible.

Starting to sit up I stopped as I heard voices whispering in the hall.

"When will she be up? They're asking for her," a man with a mousy voice asked.

"She'll be up when she's up. You yourself should know how potent Grammy Lenora's tea is. She will sleep as long as her body needs her to sleep. Besides, she's been through so much, the poor dear. She needs her rest. I'm not about to wake her," the mousy sounding woman protested.

"Three weeks Lena, she's been asleep three weeks," the man huffed. "The Kenton's are anxious to see her."

"Well they've waited this long... they can wait a little longer. Go tell them that she needs more rest before her introductions. She and her friends will be spending Thanksgiving with us. That's final," she huffed. "As for you Lenny, quit worrying so much. I made her tea stronger so that her leg would heal by the time she woke up. You and I both know that she has a tough road ahead of her. I promised her dear parents that I would watch out for her and that I will do. As God is my witness, I will make her transition from her old life to her new one as pain free as possible. Thank heavens for dear Talon risking his life to save her. He is an angel indeed, that one."

"You'd better go check on her then, and I will call the Kenton's to give them your message," the mousy sounding man said in defeat.

Slowly the door to my room opened, revealing a small round face peeking in.

"Well hello dear," the gerbil looking woman said cheerily when she noticed I was awake. "It's so good to see those beautiful eyes of yours." She walked in the tiny room, closing the door behind her. "I'm your Nanny Lena, Haden. My brother and I were just speaking about you. We've both waited a very long time to see your pretty face again."

So *this* was Nanny Lena. She was much smaller than I imagined. She couldn't have been any larger than 4ft. tall; sporting a weeble-wobble appearance, as round as she was. She was dressed in a sage green velour jump suit of all things. Her brown, wavy hair was cut neatly by her ears. If she would have stood by the wall she would have blended in rather well minus her hair.



Pulling up a chair she sat next to me. She took my hand and smiled softly. "How are you feeling dear?"

Still immersed in grogginess I wasn't really sure how to answer her. "I don't really know," my raspy voice replied.

"Tis to be expected, you've had a rough time and your body is in the middle of its change. At first it will weaken you but once the change is complete, you will be stronger than ever," she assured me while tapping my hand lightly.

"The change," I choked out.

"Oh yes, you're changing sweet one. There will be plenty time for questions later but for now we need to see about getting some real food into you. Hold still while I remove your IV."

"My IV," I choked straining to sit up.

"Yes dear, you needed to be fed while your body rested. But now that you're awake I would assume you're pretty hungry."

"Brad... Melly... Roger," I said as names just started rolling off of my tongue.

"They're all doing well dear one. As a matter of fact, Brad and Melly stayed with us for awhile when Brad was healing. Now they're staying down the road a ways. Brad was a little too big for our beds," she chuckled. "But they have eaten dinner with us every night since you all arrived. Such good friends they are."

"Taylor?" I almost couldn't bring myself to ask. I could see a pained look on her face now and my insides cringed.

Standing up quickly a smile was back on her face. "No more questions for now, only food. Let me go and fetch you some clothes.

With that being said she was gone and I was alone; alone with a very broken heart. *Oh Taylor, where are you?* I put my face in my hands and cried.

I don't know if they heard me crying but luckily I was able to cry until I drained my eyes of all the tears they held before Nanny Lena returned, her face still glowing.

"I hope you like these," she said placing some light pink velour pants with a matching hoodie on my bed. "And this is from Melly," she laughed pointing at the white tee shirt with pink letters she placed on my bed. It said, *Future Queen*.

"Sounds like her," I said doing my best to force a smile.

"Melly also bought some make-up for you, although I can't see why on earth you would bother. You are so good looking without it, just like your parents; may God rest their souls. Anywho, Melly and Brad are on their way here right now. Oh so excited to see you they are!" she said, quite excited herself. "When you're done getting dressed you can come meet us in the dining room. Take a right out of your room and then follow the hall all the way down. We'll be the last door on the right. My brother and I will be preparing dinner. If we're not in there when you arrive have a seat and we'll be there shortly."

When she left the room I threw my legs over the side of the bed and tried to stand up. My legs were wobbly from all the resting they had done. I sat back down and tried again, slowly. Giving my legs time to work, I walked slowly to the little bathroom and bent down to look into the mirror. My hair looked horrible. If the small woman was right and I had been in bed for three weeks it was no wonder my hair looked like Medusa's.

I saw the shower and decided that I would take a quick one. After I dried off, I got dressed, applied some chapstick and was done. My eyes were glossy from the tears they had shed but I didn't care. There was nothing that could hide my pain so I didn't even try.

When I was finished getting ready I opened the door into a very tiny yellow hall; it's ceiling not much taller than me. As I walked I couldn't help but notice all of the framed pictures everywhere filled with more little round faced people. I could only assume that I was in Nanny Lena's house.

Opening the last door on the right like she said, I saw a little man the spitting image of Nanny Lena putting plates on the table. He too was small, only a couple of inches taller than she was.

"So good to see you up and about," he said while he finished setting the table. "I can only stay for dinner and then I must be off but I was so hoping to see your bright eyes open before I went home. By the way dearest, my name is Lenny. I am Lena's big brother.

"Big . . . psh. He's no big brother. He was born only minutes before I was," Nanny Lena said as she was bringing in a wine bottle that appeared to have a picture of a large white rabbit on it.

Lenny rolled his eyes and laughed. "She has an authority complex . . . clearly," he teased.

I walked into the dining room noticing immediately that the ceiling was much higher probably to accommodate guests.

Lenny pulled out a chair for me while Nanny poured me a glass of whatever was in the mystery bottle when there was a knock at the door. Nanny practically skipped to go answer it.

"Our guests have arrived," she sang happily.

When I saw pink hair I wanted to sing too!

"Haden," Melly shouted as she hugged me, pulling back quickly to look at me. "You look perfect, better than perfect!" She turned and told Nanny Lena what a great job she did fixing me up.

"Where's Brad?" I asked impatient. "The last time I saw him he looked . . ." I couldn't finish my sentence. The memories choked me making it difficult to speak.

"Wait till you see him now," Melly said absolutely glowing. "He looks better than ever if I do say so myself."

Right after she said that the door opened and someone resembling Brad walked in. Melly chuckled as she watched the shock wash over my face.

"I told you he looks terrific," she gloated.

I ran over to him and hugged him with every ounce of strength I had. I pulled away shocked. He was hard as stone. He bent down returning my hug and his face felt as cold as ice when it touched mine.

"You look great," he said, his voice steadier and more smooth than normal.

"You too," I said staring back at him. "What did I miss?" I was starting to question my sanity. Brad had always been attractive but now he was flawless. There wasn't even one tiny blemish on his handsome face.

"Why don't you all have a seat and do some catching up while my brother and I finish dinner. I poured each of you a tasty treat sent over by the Kenton's in honor of Haden's return," Nanny Lena said smiling.

I couldn't take my eyes off of Brad's face. "But you were. I mean you looked--"

"Awful," Melly said finishing my sentence. "He did look awful. When I found him he had almost no blood left." I could see anger in her eyes as she thought back. "If you would have had more time left I would have killed Gavin," she growled under her breath while she looked at Brad.

"But instead you gave me life." Brad's words brought Melly's beautiful smile back instantly.

Looking at me she said, "I got him out of there as fast as I could. Talon told me to follow him and I did. Lenny was waiting with a car outside. He took us to a private jet and well . . . here we all are." She stopped talking but was still smiling.

"A jet?" I asked lost.

"Yes, a jet that Talon, Nanny Lena and Lenny had waiting for *you*."

"Oh," I said as if I had a clue to what she was talking about.

"When they saw me with Brad they had us get on the plane too. Brad was almost gone when Talon came up behind. He told me that there was only *one* way to save him but I would

have to act fast. I didn't want to choose this life for him but it was either that or lose him forever." Both Brad and Melly were smiling so intensely at each other that I felt like I was intruding by watching them. "Then with barely any strength left he said, "I . . . love you . . . Melly. I want . . . to be . . . with . . . you." I knew right then what I had to do."

"The transition was painful, I won't lie but I've never felt more alive. I've never been happier," he said looking into her eyes as he spoke. I just stood there in shock.

Nanny finished bringing the food and we all took our seats. Lenny blessed our dinner and the three of us dug in. I was famished. Brad and Melly sat there enjoying their drinks.

"I *love* the smell of food," Melly said taking in a deep breath. "Gosh I wish I could eat some. It smells *so* good."

"See, to me it doesn't smell good or bad. It must be because I'm still new to this life," Brad said kissing Melly's hand.

Dinner was wonderful. It tasted just as good as it smelled. The roast Nanny had cooked was just what I needed; a side of mashed potatoes and baby carrots made it perfect. Right after dinner Lenny excused himself and left.

"Where's he off to?" I asked as Nanny placed a beautiful piece of pecan pie in front of me.

"He has a guest of his own right now that he has to tend to. He was just so worried about you that he wanted to see that you were alright with his own eyes," she said licking her pudgy fingers.

The rest of the night I spent in the little living room with Melly and Nanny. Brad gave me a quick cold kiss on the cheek and left not too long after Lenny. They both looked like they were in a hurry. I had so many questions but I was still so overwhelmed that I didn't know where to begin. Melly ran outside briefly, returning with tons of bags filled with tissue paper sprouting out of them.

"For you," she said putting them all around me on the floor. Both she and Nanny sat very still watching me open each bag as if it were my birthday party. My friend had bought me a whole new wardrobe. I was beyond grateful. Just when I thought I was done with my gifts, Melly handed me another bag.

"You have just one more. Brad was waiting for the right moment to give it to you. We thought that there would be no better time than now. He was told back in the states to give it to you." Melly's face looked awfully sad all of the sudden making me not want to open the last bag.

As soon as the tissue paper was out, so were my tears. There in the bag lay one of Taylor's shirts. I recognized it immediately. It was one of his favorites. On the front it read... *Real men love Jesus* written in black. Taylor had volunteered to help a youth program a couple years back at our church when a kid gave the shirt to him as a gift. I picked it up, put it to my face and inhaled Taylor's sweet smell. It smelled as if he had just taken it off.

"He told Brad that it would help you sleep. He sounds like a pretty fabulous guy," Melly said putting her hand on my arm.

I smiled at her while trying to stop anymore tears from falling out of my eyes.

"Hey, I totally would have dated him even if he were my brother," she laughed trying to lighten the mood.

"Her brother," Nanny Lena let out a mousy chuckle, "Oh heavens no, anything but really."

Melly and I both snapped our heads in Nanny's direction. She looked as if she were under a spot light.

"Oh dear, I said too much," she said looking around the room.

"Nanny, what do you know about Taylor?" I asked wondering if maybe she knew his parents too.

"Can't say really; we *Seers* are bound by the law of our people to maintain the highest level of secrecy. Can't say anymore, nope, can't." Her face was all smiles. "I think I'll just go into the kitchen and put on a nice pot of tea."

"Well she's a little odd but I really dig her," Melly snickered.

"Yeah, she's definitely different." My mind wasn't there with Melly. It was with Taylor, wherever that was.

"Melly," I said staring at her.

"Yes." She appeared taken aback by the urgency in my voice.

"Will you do something for me?"

"Anything," she said; her face as serious as mine now.

"Promise me," I demanded softly.

Cocking her head to the side she said no.

"Please," I begged.

"I will not promise until I know what you are going to ask."

"I want... I mean I need you to kill me." I looked down at the floor so I couldn't see the look in her eyes.

"What?" her dainty voice practically yelled.

"I'm serious," I said looking into her eyes.

"Have you lost your mind?" For a moment she looked lost in thought and in a split second it was as if a light bulb went off in her head. "Oh, I totally get it now! *That's* why you were hanging around Gavin. You wanted him to kill you. Holy cow, how did I not see that?" She was quite amused with her realization.

"Is it really *that* funny?" I asked annoyed that she wasn't taking my request seriously.

"No of course not Haden, but it is sweet. I bet you think that for Taylor to live and be happy, you need to vanish, and what better way to do that than to die right?"

Starting to get even more annoyed with her bounciness in my time of despair, I huffed. "What is so amusing about that? It's true, me being alive put him in danger and no matter how hard I tried to stay away from him, danger found him anyway. He's out there hurting right now, maybe even dead all because I'm alive," I spouted as silent tears fell down my cheeks.

"Haden I doubt he's dead. Hurt maybe, but dead no. This God you spoke of to me, you told me that He knows all and loves every one of His children, right?"

"Yes but what does that have to do with Taylor?"

"According to you and what *you* told me, it has absolutely everything to do with Taylor. You yourself said that not one hair falls from God's children's heads without Him knowing. Don't you see? The God you speak of is watching Taylor right now, wherever he is. He is with him when you can't be."

I was quite shocked that God was using Melly to preach to me but then again I knew just how sneaky God could be sometimes.

"Okay so you're right but what about me always putting him in danger just by being alive?"

"Oh poppycock," Nanny Lena's bright voice rang out, "Don't be silly Haden. You would hurt him way more by not being in his life. Silly you, you two are more connected than any two I've ever seen. I bet his heart would stop beating if yours did. It's a good thing for him that your heart is still beating, a good thing indeed."

I didn't bother to ask her how she knew this information. I just assumed she had been spying on me my entire life and left it at that.

"Nanny, my heart feels so hurt, empty and just plain miserable. I need to know where he is. I *need* to go to him," I said pleading with her. If she knew where he was, I wanted her to tell me.

"What you need right now is to get yourself strong. Your Taylor will find you when he's ready." Both Nanny and Melly looked at each other like Nanny had once again said too much.

"When it's time, you two will be together again. The other half of your heart will find you when the time is right."

Oddly enough her words comforted me some. I don't know if it was simply because I was so desperate for someone to give me even the tiniest reason to hope or that I really believed her. Taking a slow sip of hot tea I wondered what was next for me. I didn't even know where I was. All I knew was that my heart ached more than words.

"You haven't said anything yet but don't you wonder where we are?" Melly asked.

"Nope," I said not wanting to be in this weird life anymore.

"Come on, you know you're at least a little bit curious."

"Not really, I don't see what kind of a difference it makes anyway." My words came out sounding like those of a first grader but I didn't care.

They had taken me somewhere without my permission and I could feel them all keeping information about Taylor from me. I was angry at them and angry at God for not fixing this whole mess.

"Her change is almost complete Melly. She will feel better soon." Nanny looked over at me and smiled lovingly. "Soon dear Haden, you will have all the answers you seek. Be patient young one. You have much work ahead of you. You are very special. God sent you for a very important reason. You are here to do His will."

"If that's the case Nanny, then why won't God heal my heart," I said stiffly.

"Oh young one, He will. He will very soon. You must have faith. I know that you know how much God loves you."

Putting my hand on the tiny key lying on my neck I sighed. I wasn't about to tell her just how much I was questioning that supposed fact.

"God chose you Haden because you are so different," Nanny said trying to make me feel better.

"So he chose a freak; a broken hearted, trouble magnet weirdo? That makes no sense."

Melly was laughing again which totally caught me off guard. I looked at her like she was nuts. "Sorry but you're cute when you're upset and seriously did you ever stop to think that you're a trouble magnet *because* God chose you?"

"Well said Melly dear."

I couldn't believe my ears. They were ganging up on me. I stood up and excused myself so I could go to bed. I thanked Melly, forced myself to smile, grabbed my clothes, and walked to my room. I just wanted to be alone. I could hear them talking as I shut my door. They could finish their, *God chose Princess Haden*, conversation without me.

The next morning when I awoke there was a note under my door. Nanny was letting me know that she had stepped out but had left some freshly squeezed orange juice and homemade waffles for me as well as some blood in the fridge. Melly would be by later to see me.

That day Melly and I spent driving around the English countryside so I could see where they had taken me. I had always wanted to see England, just not like this. Melly thought it would do me some good to get outside for awhile. I thought it would do me good to go back to bed. When I asked her where Brad was she said he had to tend to some things. I didn't push to find out what he could have to tend to in a country other than where he lived. I honestly didn't care. I just followed Melly wherever she led me.

That day blended into the next and then the next after that. I had become nothing but an empty shell, only going through the motions of life. They all tried to make me happy but as each day passed I only detached more. Even though no one would kill my body, there was nothing they could do to save my heart.

Time meant nothing to me anymore. I was startled out of my sleep by the sound of a loud knock at my bedroom door. Right as I sat up Melly glided into my room. "Rise and shine sleepy head, it's Thanksgiving. We have lots to do in the kitchen!"

"Melly, they don't celebrate America's Thanksgiving in Europe," I said wishing she would leave and let me go back to sleep.

"They do in this house. Come on lazy bones, get up! We have guests coming over in a little while. Brad's going to pick them up from the airport."

"Guests," I moaned.

"Yes, guests and no being the party pooper today. Oh and tomorrow we leave for Kenton Manner."

This got my attention immediately. Nanny had told me a little about the Kenton's; that they were good vampires and more than that they were my parent's closest friends. None of that information mattered to me. I just didn't care. I felt dead inside.

"I'm not going," I told her adamantly.

"Yes you are. Don't be cranky or I'll slip you more of Nanny's special tea and knock your difficult butt out." Laughing she tossed me a pair of jeans and a sweater.

"You can joke all you want but you can't make me go. I'm prophetic remember. I'll hurt you." My attempt to sound threatening was beyond pathetic, making Melly laugh even harder.

"Yeah, you go ahead and try almighty depressed one." The twinkle in her eyes and smile on her beautiful face made me smile too but not because I wanted to. "I knew there was life in there," she said as she hugged me.

That morning I was surrounded by the familiar smells of turkey, dressing and all the trimmings. Even though I was in no mood to celebrate anything, I would have been lying if I said that it didn't smell amazing. Everything reminded me of Taylor even though he had never been here. I was quickly coming to realize that Nanny Lena's story was just that... a story. There would be no happy ending and no matter what they all kept telling me, I knew that they were mistaken about me. I was no one special. I wanted to find whoever started the whole prophetic child thing and make them take it back so I could go home to my friends and family; to my old life.

"Brad's back!" Melly squealed and went out the back door to find him. She came back only minutes later on Brad's back. I instantly remembered all of the piggy back rides Taylor had given me and I had to fight tears as they started to spill out of my eyes.

"Happy Thanksgiving Haden," Brad said. His face had a glow on it to match Melly's. He bent down and hugged me while still wearing his Melly monkey on his back.

Right then I heard a man's soft voice followed by a much deeper one. "I may be shorter than you but I can manage. I could toss your big ol black butt across the room if I wanted."

"Roger! Marcus!" I hollered using more energy than I had in weeks as they walked through the door.

"Gorgeous!" Roger dropped his bags in front of Marcus and ran over to me. "Let me look at you! Not too bad! Your beautiful hair could use a little moisture therapy but other than that you look terrific!"

Melly introduced Roger to Nanny Lena and I walked over to Marcus. He wrapped his big arms around me and kissed the very top of my head. He had become my giant teddy bear in a very short time while I stayed at Roger's house. I always felt so safe with him.

"We missed you Haden," he said; his baritone voice rattling my chest. Trying to stop myself from crying I told him how much I had missed them too.

Thanksgiving dinner was really good. It was strange to be celebrating with Nanny Lena and a bunch of vampires that didn't eat but it was fun nevertheless. Roger's bright disposition was as contagious as Melly's smile and for just a little while I didn't focus on my problems.

"So Mels, what time is our flight tomorrow?" Roger asked.

"Our flight... as in you're coming with us?" I almost jumped out of my seat with excitement.

Roger turned to Melly. "You didn't tell her that we were going with you guys?"

"No she didn't!" I almost couldn't contain my excitement.

"I didn't because she wouldn't have listened anyway." Melly stuck her tongue out at me. "Haden's been a little under the weather emotionally," she said with her eyes opened wide as she winked at me.

"Well we will just have to see about fixing that," Roger said as his small cold hand squeezed mine lightly.

"Yes we will," Marcus agreed sipping his drink.

Solitude was something I longed for, dreamt of these days even, but if I was being forced to go bond with some strange vampire family against my will then I couldn't think of any better people or better yet vampires to go with me than Marcus and Roger.

"Where's Barnabus going to stay?" I asked as I pet his basketball head.

"He's going to go with us of course," Melly said looking at me like I had just asked a really stupid question. "Can you imagine how hurt Barney would be if we didn't take him? Besides Marcus and Brad wouldn't let me leave him behind even if I wanted to."

Marcus shook his head no as he kept reading Nanny Lena's *Seers Sights*, magazine.

Everyone gathered in Nanny's tiny living room after Thanksgiving dinner, filling it quickly. I started getting tired so I told them all goodnight and headed to my room. I put on Taylor's tee shirt and crawled in my bed where I prayed for faith and cried until I fell asleep.

## 22. *Family*

That night sleep escaped me. If I could have hunted it, forcing it to come to me, I would have but I had no such luck. Even though I was exhausted physically my brain didn't seem to care. I lay there in the dark wondering just who these Kenton people were and what made them so darn important. Who did they think they were requesting to see me and saying it was for *my* benefit?

When I was growing up, I always looked forward to being an adult. I had stupidly assumed that when you became an adult you had more say so about what went on in your life but that totally hadn't been the case with me so far.

Having only gotten a couple of hours of sleep, I was beyond exhausted when my alarm clock went off. I could hear the muffled sound of voices down the hall as I approached the bedroom door. I tip toed across the hall quietly into the bathroom. I was going to take a long, hot shower; shaving my legs as slow as possible. I didn't care if we missed the flight. I wasn't the one who wanted to go. When I came out of the bathroom they were all laughing. I wished I could laugh too.

I finished packing my things neatly in the luggage Nanny Lena let me borrow and dragged them down the hall to the living room begrudgingly. Brad stood up as soon as he saw me and took my bags. Before I knew it there was a plate with scrambled eggs and bacon shoved in my hand.

"Most important meal of the day," Nanny Lena chirped.

I ate my breakfast like a good girl, had a couple glasses of liquid nourishment and we were off to the airport where the Kenton's private jet awaited us. It was huge but I was unimpressed. I couldn't be bought. There was way more to life than how much money you had. It was a hard lesson I was learning right now. Without my parents and Taylor in my life, money meant nothing. Once we were inside the jet I sat next to Roger, laying my head on his bony shoulder.

"Wake up sweetie. Haden honey, wake up."

I opened my eyes to see Roger smiling at me. Looking around I saw we weren't on the plane anymore but instead we were in some sort of large SUV with really dark tinted windows.

"We're almost there. You fell asleep on the jet and none of us had the heart to wake you so Marcus carried you to the car. You must not have slept at all last night, you poor thing," Roger said holding my hand. "Oh my goodness," he blurted out. "Would you take a look at *that*... and I thought I had money."

Everyone grew silent as we all stared out of our windows. We were in the country somewhere, on a long cobblestone road lined with trees whose leaves were painted the color of light gold. Approximately a mile or so down the road there was a large body of water with a water fall in the center. We drove around the water and at this point Kenton Manor was in plain view. About a mile back on a small hill the mansion sat, resembling a castle. There it stood with all its grand beauty.

The driver continued to follow the road as it curved, taking us along the side of the house. Once we passed the house, two more structures came into view. There to the far right back corner of the Manor was small brown cottage. It was the cutest little home I had ever seen.

"It must be a guest house," Roger exclaimed. "It's adorable."

The road veered left towards the other building which sat closer to the house than the semi-distant cottage. This one was a three, story square shaped building made of black glass. We all watched as our reflection drove along the front. It was breathtaking.

Behind the house, building, and cottage was grass and then forest . . . plush forest. I couldn't speak. It was prettier than anything I had ever seen.

The driver pulled around to the back of the dark building and hit a button. The glass on the lower level opened up and two almost unnoticeable huge glass doors gave way to let the driver through. Brad broke the silence as he almost choked at the sight of all the cars. This was no ordinary garage. It was filled with limousines, sports cars, trucks and motorcycles. Driving around the first level, we went down a ramp which took us down even further until the driver came to a stop.

"We're here," the gentleman said as he got out of the car.

Everyone started getting out except for me. I stayed put until Brad came and pulled me out. Hand in hand he and Melly followed the driver after his instructions to leave our bags. I walked next to Roger while Barnabus and Marcus tailed behind.

The driver led us through a door and down a long cement hall until we came to metal elevator doors. Once open we saw that it was no elevator. It was another hallway leading to gorgeous wooden double doors; on it the letter K was carved. So this was it, I thought. The people who turned my happy life upside down were somewhere behind those doors. I was ready to get this over with; to ask them to leave me alone so I could go home. Barnabus licked my hand and I pet his oversized head quickly before I followed everyone through the doors.

The first person I saw shocked me instantly. There stood Talon just on the other side of the open doors in another hall with a beautiful smile on his face.

"I can take this from here Bart," he instructed the driver.

Melly and Brad greeted him with a handshake and a hug. When he caught my stare his smile seemed to grow even larger, exposing his perfect white teeth as I walked towards him. I hugged him, not hesitating. He felt like granite and yet I didn't want to let go. I wanted to hold on to him and cry but I pushed my tears down for the millionth time and smiled at him. He kissed my head startling me and then quickly moved on to greet the others.

"Right this way," he said leading us down the hall. "Everyone's very excited to meet you all."

I followed him while replaying what just happened. He kissed my head and he was speaking. I didn't think I had ever heard more than a few words out of him before. This whole situation was definitely getting more interesting; if that was even possible.

The hall led us to a single white door. On the other side was a beautiful room. It was huge just like I would have assumed judging from the outside of the house. It must have been a family room of sorts. Elegantly decorated with hues of purple and splashes of silver throughout,



it took my breath away. Three dark purple velvet couches sat neatly arranged on one side of the room with two glass end tables holding gorgeous crystal lamps on either end of the center couch. Behind the couches on the other side of the massive room was a white grand piano. I closed my eyes as I imagined the many times I would sit with Taylor while he played. I quickly wiped the tear from my cheek praying no one had noticed.

The room smelled of sandalwood which made me inhale deeply over and over again while Yiruma played softly in the background through the speaker system. What shocked me more than anything was the beautiful platinum cross that hung elegantly above the white marble fireplace on the back wall. I would have never imagined in my wildest dreams that a cross would be hanging in a vampire's home. I shook my head and looked at it again. It was still there. Maybe these vampire people weren't so bad after all.

"Can I get you all anything to drink?" Talon offered from behind me.

Everyone politely refused his offer as they all got acquainted with the room just like I was. Talon announced that he was leaving to inform the Kenton's that their much anticipated guests had arrived and my stomach immediately got queasy.

In no time I heard the door open. Everyone turned to face them as they walked in. When I first saw her my breath caught in my throat. The woman who walked into the room following Talon was beyond exquisite. She was something out of a dream; too beautiful to be compared to the most beautiful of movie stars. She looked like the female version of Taylor. Her thick, dark brown hair hung past her delicate shoulders to the middle of her back. Her eyes struck my heart immediately. They were clover green, just like Taylor's. I knew in that moment that I had lost what little was left of my mind, yet I couldn't take my eyes off of her. She wore a form fitting cream sweater with white jeans and cream snow boots. She looked like a model and *I* needed to check myself into the nut house. I was seeing Taylor's face everywhere.

When I finally peeled my eyes away from her I looked at the unbelievably handsome man holding her hand. He too was breathtaking. Neither of them looked a day older than twenty-five. His hair was brown with blond highlights, cut short, somewhat reminding me of my father. The color of his outfit matched hers perfectly. It looked like someone had opened the page of a magazine and out they walked, hand in hand. The smiles on their perfect faces lit up the already bright room even more. It was hard to believe that there were no windows.

"Arabella will be home soon. Gabriel went to pick her up," Talon told the couple.

"Thank you son," Mrs. Kenton said smiling warmly at him.

She was quick to approach me, her eyes kind. "You must be Haden. I would know those eyes anywhere. You look so much like your mother. Oh Aramis, isn't she the spitting image of Serene?"

"Yes dear, it's quite amazing," he said putting his arm around her. "Welcome to our home everyone. I am Aramis and this is my wife Alexandra. Please have a seat and make yourself comfortable." He smiled at everyone like we were all old friends reunited after years of separation.

Melly quickly introduced everyone including Barnabus. She thanked him for inviting us all and told him that she had heard many wonderful things about he and his wife from Nanny Lena and Lenny. Melly looked as comfortable around these people as I was beginning to feel which put me even more at ease.

Mr. Kenton squeezed his wife's hand. "Thank you for the introductions Melly but it is we who want to thank you all for being open hearted to the truth about us... and to a new way of life."

"In all honesty, it was Haden who opened all of our eyes to the truth," Melly continued.

The more I listened the more confused I felt. I was clueless as to what they were talking about. Me show them the truth? I gave up. A new way of life? I knew at that very second I had crossed over and was now a certifiable loon.

Nudging her husband Mrs. Kenton whispered, "Haden's confused, dear."

"Of course, I'm so sorry Haden. You are somewhat out of the loop but we will tell you everything very soon. What has Nanny Lena told you?" Mr. Kenton asked me kindly.

"Um... honestly not much. All I know is that I was a normal girl with a normal life and then one day everything went crazy. I was suddenly some prophetic girl who was being hunted by insane people... vampires or whatever. One day I had a family and then the next day it was stolen from me." Everyone's eyes were glued to me as I continued; barely stopping to take a breath for fear that I might cry. "The minute Nanny Lena showed up I lost everything I loved."

My face was obviously pretty pitiful judging by the look on Mrs. Kenton's but I didn't care. I wasn't going to pretend that I was fine with all of this even if these vampires were nice. I was nothing but an empty shell.

"Oh Haden," Alexandra began. "Darling you were never normal . . . ever."

"Neither were your parents," her husband followed. "They were both very special people that God blessed with very special children; you having the most important job of all of them."

Something he said caught my attention and I froze. "Children as in plural? Are you saying I have brothers and sisters?" I asked questioning my sanity again. I had to be hearing things.

Mrs. Kenton looked at her husband and smiled. "That is exactly what we're saying. You can't imagine how long we've waited for this; for you to be here with us, safe and ready."

"I'm not ready for anything other than the truth . . . all of it," I announced.

"Spoken just like Landon," Mr. Kenton said proud.

"I don't mean to be rude but who is Landon?" The name rang a bell but I couldn't place it.

A look of sadness came over his perfectly shaped face. "As awful as it is that you don't know who he is, I'm glad to hear that your aunt and uncle did as we asked. In doing so, they kept you safe all these years. To answer your question Haden, Landon was the greatest vampire to ever walk the earth. He was my best friend, but most importantly, he was your father."

"So it's true then, you two knew my biological parents?"

"Oh yes, very, very well," Mrs. Kenton said proudly. "Your mother and I had grown up together back in the states."

Just as the pieces of store bought puzzles come together one by one, so were the pieces of my life. As she spoke, I remembered stories told to me by my father. Was this the friend my real mother left with after High School?

"We had been best friends since grade school. She and I were closer than most sisters. We traveled here together right out of High School. She met and fell in love with your father not too long after we arrived. She was so in love with him that she insisted I meet his best friend. Your mother said that there was only one tiny problem," Mrs. Kenton said smiling at her memory.

"What was that?" Melly asked, clearly enjoying the story.

Smiling a mothering smile at Melly she continued. "Well the, 'tiny,' problem was that they were both vampires. Everyone but me laughed. Looking lovingly at her husband she caressed his cheek. "Your mother had a way about her Haden. She saw only the good in others, a quality I presume you possess as well. Once she had me believing that vampires really did exist, she convinced me to go on a double date with her and your father. I will always be indebted to her for that. Her big heart changed my life forever."

"And mine," Mr. Kenton said watching his wife.

"That is such a beautiful story," Melly sighed looking up at Brad.

Before I could go back to the subject of me having siblings, the door swung open and in waltzed a beautiful little girl with Talon. Behind them was another much larger vampire.

"Arabella, come meet our guests," Mr. Kenton said as the golden haired beauty in white sat on his lap. He introduced her and her rosy cheeks lit up with excitement as each person said hello. She whispered something in her father's ear after seeing Barnabus lying next to Marcus. "May she pet Barnabus?"

"Of course, he loves children," Melly said.

Arabella had the most beautiful color to her face. It was a soft light pink, not at all one of a vampire. I was even more intrigued by these people now that I saw they had with them a human child; a very happy one at that.

"Arabella, it's time to go to your room sweet heart. I'll call you down later," her mother said kissing her before sending her off. Arabella told us all goodbye and skipped out the door.

"Your daughter's lovely," I said as I watched the door close behind her.

"Thank you. She has been quite a blessing," Alexandra said beaming. "We found her orphaned when she was just a baby. We tried to locate her parents but weren't successful. So I begged my loving husband to let us adopt her. I always dreamed of having a daughter but because of the Stidoniums we felt it necessary for Aramis to change me for my own safety. Unfortunately I never got my princess, but then one glorious day God sent us Arabella. Aramis said yes to my request and the rest is history," Mrs. Kenton said as she rubbed her husband's arm.

"Fascinating," Roger interjected leaning towards them. "So you have no problems with self restraint being around humans all the time?"

"None at all," both Mr. and Mrs. Kenton said in sync.

"Simply remarkable," Roger said sitting back. "I have many human friends and I would have never fed on them but I would be lying if I said that I hadn't been tempted before."

"It is quite admirable of you two Mr. and Mrs. Kenton," Marcus followed.

Melly and Brad said nothing. They just smiled.

"Not to be rude and change the subject but you mentioned something about me having siblings," I said about to jump out of my skin.

"Yes Haden dear, you sure do; four to be exact."

"Four," I gulped. "How is that possible?"

"You were the last of five," Alexandra said pleased. Sadly we don't know the whereabouts of one of them but happily we received new information that another one was recently found. Mrs. Kenton brushed her hair back from her perfectly defined cheekbones and continued. "You have two brothers and two sisters. Your two sisters were taken the night of your parent's death; the night you were brought to your aunt and uncles house in the states. Your sister that was just located has no idea who she really is. She suffered from a severe, drug induced amnesia. They changed her name years ago. She has no recollection of her childhood whatsoever. The good news is that we know her exact location and she is perfect in every way; completely undamaged by the evil she was raised around until very recently."

"And the others?" I asked quietly.

Mr. Kenton smiled again at his wife and told me that they knew where both of my brothers were. "They both know you're here and are ready to introduce themselves to you whenever you're ready."

Silence followed Mr. Kenton's last words. No one spoke as I tried to digest what he had just told me. All I had to do was say I was ready and I would be able to meet my brothers; brothers I knew nothing about until ten minutes ago. It was all so unbelievably overwhelming.

"Father," Talon cleared his throat. "Maybe it is too soon. She has been through so much."

"Yes she has Talon but she is strong. It should be her decision."

Talon nodded and walked towards the wall standing as still as a statue.

"Are they nearby?" I asked, feeling my eyes fill with more tears.

"Very," Mrs. Kenton smiled.

Not knowing what to do or say I bowed my head in prayer. I told God that I hadn't asked for any of this, yet here I was, the center of what felt like a messed up screen play. Did I really want to know my brothers? At this moment I had no clue. Yes, I was curious. It would be

a lie to say otherwise. Would it be fair to them to say no? I couldn't think so. After all, they had waited eighteen years to see their baby sister again. The answer was yes, I did.

"I want to meet them as soon as they want to meet me," I said feeling the first of many tears start to fall.

Right after I said that, Talon's head snapped around. His eyes were instantly on me. Sitting up straighter I watched as he turned and began walking towards me, seemingly cautious. My mind began racing faster than I could keep up with. Why was he walking towards me like that? Could he be? Was that why I was so drawn to him? Impossible, but then again was it really. I studied his face harder than ever before as he slowly walked my way, stopping only a few feet from me.

There was no sound in the room other than my racing heart. Talon got down on his knees in front of me and took my hands, never removing his eyes from mine. His next words shook my soul.

"I've waited a very long time for this moment. For years I have watched you. Years I have waited for my baby sister to return home."

I sat there numb and speechless as I continued to analyze his perfect features. I hadn't realized I was crying until Mrs. Kenton handed me a tissue.

"May I hug you?" Talon asked, reserved as usual.

I nodded and leaned forward, resting my head on his stone shoulder where I cried until I could cry no more.

When I was finally able to compose myself, I pulled back to see a soft grin on Talon's beautiful face. "You look just like our mother, Haden." Talon got off of his knees and sat down on the floor next to me, my hand still in his when he asked if I was ready to meet our big brother. Quietly I said yes and then waited but nothing happened. No one moved. Talon finally cleared his throat right before Mrs. Kenton said Gabriel's name, somewhat annoyed.

I moved my eyes to look at the tall muscular vampire with short, spiky brown hair standing in the back corner of the room by the door. His smile was so large it was as if someone was shining a bright light on his chiseled face.

"What? I was just giving the poor girl some time. The way Talon ran over to her, he about gave her a heart attack," he said laughing.

This time I stood up and started walking in his direction, stopping right before I reached him. I let my eyes rest on his face as I soaked in the moment. He had a boyish charm about him, almost making him resemble a little boy in a grown man's body. Like Brad, he too looked like he was in the Army. His broad shoulders and short hair cut had me wanting to call him GI-Joe.

"You're quite the pipsqueak. I would have thought you'd be taller," Gabriel said smiling brightly.

Talon let out a low growl behind me.

"Oh Talon, quit being so sensitive," Gabriel smirked at him.

"It's okay, I do look pretty short when standing next to Sasquatch's," I teased back causing the room to fill with laughter.

"Well, get your scrawny butt over here so this "Sasquatch," can get a hug from his little sister."

I did just that. He picked me up off the floor and engulfed me in a huge bear hug causing me to lose my breath. "I... can't... breathe," I attempted to say.

"Put her down Gabe. She can't breathe," Talon demanded him from behind me.

Gently setting me down on the floor Gabriel apologized for the tight hug, promising he would be gentler next time.

Talon and I walked to the empty couch where we sat while we all talked for hours. For the first time since all this mess started I felt somewhat normal. If only Taylor could have been with me.

The conversation was kept light and happy at first until I asked them to explain the gibberish they were speaking when we first arrived. I wanted to know what they meant when Roger and Melly said I helped show them the light. Melly of course was the first one to speak.

"I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me Haden," she began. "We weren't from Boise like we told you," she said sheepishly, "and it was no accident that Caina found you that day in the mall."

Feeling numb, I asked her what she was trying to tell me. "Please, just spit it out. I can't take much more." I could feel my eyes wet with moisture once again as I assumed what she was about to say.

"Haden, Shadow Walkers are under the authority of Arkos. We were Stidoniums sent to find you and bring you to him."

I wanted to scream at her! I wanted to ask her how she could keep that from me for so long. I wanted to know how she could hurt me like that. My face must have hardened because Talon took my hand in his and told Melly that she needed to continue her story.

"Haden, it's not what you think," she continued. "Arkos lied to us. He used us to get to you. He never told us of his true motives. He chose the three of us because we were more like you. He knew you wouldn't give Caina the time of day if I wasn't there. She has a hard time pretending to be something she's not. She wasn't open to eat only animals for any period of time." Melly looked over at Roger and Marcus and then back at me. "There's more, you see... the three of us didn't eat only animals before that time. We were asked to do so in order to gain your trust. None of us had any issues with it." She was looking at me with such pain on her face that I almost didn't recognize her. "Before, we fed mostly on animals and when we did feed on humans they were bad people. We now see how wrong that life style is. Please forgive us for deceiving you."

In an attempt to comfort her, Brad put his arm around her waist, pulling her close to him. *Was I the only one who had been in the dark this whole time?*

"We had more morals than most of our kind," she continued, "and he knew that. He also knew that Roger had a house there and that he had human friends. Roger had wanted to stop feeding on humans' altogether before we met you. It just didn't sit right with him anymore."

I glanced over at Roger who lifted his shoulders and mouthed, *I'm sorry*.

"See Haden, it all fit into place for Arkos. We had no idea you would have been in danger if you would have come back with us. It wasn't until that night when you told Brad and I everything that happened to you that I saw the truth for the first time. When I left that night, I went to tell Marcus and Roger what was going on. Arkos told us that you were special; that you were our future Queen who had been stolen as an infant. He told us that you had no idea who you really were so we needed to be gentle with you; we needed to gain your trust and bring you back with us. None of us knew what his real motives were . . . are, even." She stopped talking but continued to search my face for some sign of forgiveness.

"Who is this Arkos person?" I asked angry.

"He is the one who killed our parents," Gabriel said, fury resonating in his voice.

Mr. Kenton quickly interjected. "Haden, Melly is speaking the truth."

"Yes," Marcus said.

"We really had no clue," Roger added.

"This is just so much to take in," I said putting my head in my hands.

Mrs. Kenton spoke next warming my cold soul with her soft words. "Haden love, no one will lie to you here. You are safe. We are all family and will protect you. You have been through so much. You needed truth and now you need to rest your tired head. It may be confusing now but after you have a full stomach and some sleep I'm sure it will all begin to make sense." Her beautiful eyes caught me off guard every time I looked into them. It was just like looking into Taylor's.

That evening I dined on the best Seafood Alfredo I had ever had. When dinner was done and Arabella had gone to bed I started yawning. Mrs. Kenton said she would have their Nanny Mena show me to my room. I told everyone goodnight but I didn't say much. I was ready to stop crying. Talon pulled my chair out for me and smiled, saying nothing. As I followed the short, round woman out of the room through the halls I couldn't help but notice that she resembled Nanny Lena, she too slightly wobbling as she walked. After she led me to my room she showed me a little red call button next to an intercom by the bed; when pressed it would call her so she could take me to the breakfast room.

My room was beautifully feminine, done in pastel pink and white. As pretty as it was, it didn't keep my attention long. I was interested in nothing but sleep. I got ready for bed, said my prayers and fell asleep with my hand touching the key around my neck.

I awoke to the sun shining through the pink window treatments making it appear like spring. At first I was dazed and not quite sure where I was, but all too quickly that familiar lump returned to my throat-- yet another night and no Taylor. Strictly going through the motions I showered and got ready. There was no telling what this new day held in store for me. If it was anything like yesterday I was glad I had got some much needed rest.

When my shower was done, I realized I was famished in both ways. I hadn't seen anyone hunt since I had been there. During the previous nights conversation the Kenton's educated us all on their no hunting way of life. They preferred to drink their "meals," out of a glass, sparing no expense to do so. Mrs. Kenton did say that every now and then she missed human food but that after awhile living without it the less she craved it. She also informed us that she had never hunted. Because of her immense love of animals, Mr. Kenton had promised her that she wouldn't ever have to take an animal's life herself; a promise he never went back on.

I rang the buzzer and the lady known as Nanny Mena showed me to the breakfast room where everyone else was waiting for me. I sat down and Talon put a plate of scrambled eggs in front of me with a hot cup of coffee. He smiled and walked off. Before I had the chance to ask, Mr. Kenton began telling us how and when his eating habits were so drastically altered. It was all because of one very special human being . . . his wife. He spoke very little of his life before her. He only said that those times were much too dark to mention. It was a time when he didn't know the meaning of light; a time when he didn't know God. I watched his jaw bone clench as he spoke of his past. I knew right away why Mrs. Kenton had fallen in love with him-- with a vampire. He was special, a ray of light once captured by the dark but too bright to remain amidst it.

He went on to speak of Arkos, his brother bound by a blood bond made early on in his vampire life. He spoke of how he and Arkos didn't share the same thoughts about humans. When Arkos demanded that he and my father cut their relationship off with their new humans, my father and Mr. Kenton refused, causing what quickly turned into the first vampire massacre. Arkos threatened to kill Alexandra and my mom should my father and Aramis continue to be foolish and risk their kind of being exposed. He was angry that they would even consider lowering themselves to the level of a human. They refused yet again and the anger consumed their brother. He told them that he would spare their lives but he would kill my mother and Mrs. Kenton as well as any other vampire who felt the same as my father and Aramis did. "God," Arkos said, "is a joke." Those were the last words my father and Mr. Kenton heard their brother say. They left and never looked back. They all went into hiding together while so many others were killed just because Arkos thought they might have had a relationship with a dreaded human.

Mr. Kenton stared down at his hands as his beautiful wife gently put her hand to his face. "It was definitely a sad time," she said, her eyes on her husband.

Marcus thanked Mr. Kenton for his explanation. "It definitely explains why Arkos is the way he is. He was jealous that you had found love."

Roger nodded, agreeing with Marcus's assessment. "He told all of us that we were unable to love, to have any emotions. After the day I changed, I kept waiting for the day I didn't care anymore but it never came. Instead I found Marcus and Melly," Roger said remembering.

Mr. and Mrs. Kenton smiled and looked at me. "Would you like to know about your sister?"

This time I said yes without hesitating.

"Like we said last night, we didn't know what had happened to her until recently. Up until then we had only assumed and prayed for her safety and protection. It was Talon who found her," she said approvingly. "Then God blessed us immensely and we found out that not only was she a remarkable person but she was coming to visit us of her own will. Now you must keep in mind Haden, that she has no clue of any of this. So we must all give her time to adjust."

I, of course, understood better than anyone that having the world change at the speed of light around you could be a little traumatizing. "May I meet her?" I asked.

Mrs. Kenton turned her soft green eyes to Melly who already had both Talon and Gabriel watching her. "Melly dear, you are not whoever you were told you were. You were once a part of the most loving and powerful families of our kind. You are a Kenward. You, my beautiful child are Haden, Talon, and Gabriel's sister."

I couldn't help but gasp and Melly quickly followed. She looked at Brad who had a grin spread across his face larger than the table. Then she looked at the rest of us and did something I had never seen before . . . she cried. In mere seconds Talon was beside her handing tissues. Gabriel walked slowly towards her stopping behind her back. I got up from my chair and walked over to my sister where I stood frozen next to Gabriel. She turned around and looked at us all. Spreading her arms wide, she hugged Talon and I and then Gabriel. She pulled away and smiled at me. I had found my sister.

As I walked back to my seat I became lost in my head once again, wondering what it would have been like for all of us to grow up in Kenton Manor. I just couldn't understand why they didn't ever come to get me.

Almost as if Mrs. Kenton had read my mind she spoke up. "We wanted you Haden but your safety was our first priority; that and the safety of our son."

"You had a son," I said fumbling my words.

"Oh yes, a very perfect little boy born during the first stages of the Ice Moon, a few months before you. Not long after his birth Aramis was forced to change me," Mrs. Kenton now looked like she was the one lost in thought.

"Where is he?" I asked, wondering why he wasn't in the room with us.

Solemnly she said softly, "We don't know. We had his Nanny take him to the states when he was a baby. She saw a young couple find him and then left. Because he was born under the Ice Moon, he was in danger. We had no choice but to let him go . . . for his own safety. In order to keep him free from harm, we couldn't have any communication with him. We couldn't even watch him. If they were to see us watching him it would have put him in danger. She dropped him off and that was the last we heard of our son. We have prayed for him ever since and I believe that when the time is right, God will bring him home."

Catching my breath I had to fight the urge to cry. I had totally misjudged the Kenton's and now sitting in front of them it was very obvious to me why they had been my parent's best friends.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I said quietly. I really didn't know what to tell her. I just wished I could comfort her in some way. The tenderness in her voice made me miss my own mother even more. She quickly pointed out that when you truly love someone, you do whatever you can to protect them, even if that means letting them go. I couldn't have understood that fact any better than I did at this very moment.

## 23. *Winter Wonderland*

The next couple of weeks were some of the most magical weeks of my life. Once we were settled at Kenton Manor we watched as it transformed into a Christmas Wonderland. Lights, decorations and beautiful Christmas trees filled the grand house.

Although I was still empty inside I had slowly begun to heal emotionally in a way I never expected. During that time, I began to understand a little more about me; about who I was and oddly enough the conclusion I came up with eased my pain. Monster and freak were no longer words I used to describe myself. The Kenton's had a very special way of showing you the good in yourself.

As Christmas drew nearer, the more I felt as if I had lost one family and gained another. Melly and I spent every day in the kitchen baking up a storm with Roger humming as he continued to help with decorations. All the while, Arabella floated around like a dainty fairy, sprinkling happy dust in every room. Our days were filled with so much love. Every evening we would gather around the fireplace while Mr. Kenton would read to us out of the Bible, "The Living Word," as he called it. Life was changing. I would never be the same.

December had always been my favorite month growing up. Every year my parents managed to make it magical even after I was let in on the secret of Santa. This December was different in ways I couldn't describe. Sadness lived in my heart, but I had learned how to keep it locked in a very private place where only I visited. Happiness had quietly snuck into my veins the night I met my brothers and sister for the first time.

I took in a deep breath feeling the oxygen fill my lungs. I had a growing feeling that something was about to happen. I just didn't know what. Anticipation filled the air like the aroma of Roger's cookies.

It all began to unfold the day the snow fell. That day would eventually be known by everyone as the first day of the dreaded December blizzard. In my memory it would be etched as the beginning of the rest of my life. For me it began like every other morning that the Kenton's were out running errands.

After I was showered I made my way to the breakfast room expecting to see everyone like normal, but today I was greeted only by Nanny Mena instead.

"Where is everyone?" I questioned Nanny Lena's plump sister.

"Oh Miss Haden, you were off to bed last night and missed the weather report. It appears we're due to have ourselves quite the blizzard; the worst in twenty years they say. Everyone's out gathering supplies. It seems we could be snowed in for days." As Nanny Mena spoke she set down a huge plate of scrambled eggs and crisp bacon in front of me.

"Is it really going to be that severe?" I asked feeling uneasy.

"I believe so, yes dear, but you just never know. It just may turn the grounds into a winter wonderland full of magic," she chuckled before she went back to singing.

That morning I ate my breakfast rather fast and made my way back up to my bedroom where I continued to read the new book on werewolves that Talon lent me. I was completely engrossed in Chapter 5, *Werewolves you know and love*, when there was a knock at my door.

"Come in," I called, quickly being pulled out of my book. Looking up the first thing I saw was hot pink. "Hey, Melly! I'm glad you made it back before you had to dig your way through the snow to get in," I said laughing.

All smiles as usual she sat on my bed. "Hey, good lookin. Whatcha doin?"

"Nothing, just reading some old werewolf book Talon just lent me."

"Great, so you're not busy then." She grabbed my hand and yanked me out of the chair. "We have a big day sis," she continued enthusiastically as she pulled me down the hall.



"If you say so," I said confused. Melly had always been full of surprises and I knew that it was better for me just to go with the flow. "So what's the story?" I asked knowing my chances of finding out were slim.

"Hmm, should I tell you now and ruin all the work the Kenton's did for you or should I just let you see for yourself?"

Rolling my eyes at my loving and sneaky sister I grunted, "Fine you win. Lead the way."

"Oh no need, we're already here," she said pointing towards the closed door that led into a living room. "It's in there. The tiny thing almost froze in the snow but we got to it just in time." I could see the laughter behind her eyes as she saw the pure confusion in mine.

Not knowing what was behind the door I opened it slowly, barely peeking my head through, when Melly gently pushed me through the door as she whispered laughing, "It's a surprise Haden, not a snake."

I quickly assessed the room when I saw the familiar pink luggage next to the couch. "Jenny?"

"Haden!" Jenny yelled jumping off the couch and running towards me.

Completely taken back I began babbling. "When did you get here? I had no idea you were coming!"

She hugged me with such force she practically threw us to the ground, "I missed you *so* much. When I got the call from Brad to come spend Christmas with you, I couldn't pass it up!"

Seeing her was amazing. She was just as cute and perky as ever.

"Haden, you look different. I can't place it. Have you been feasting on a bunch of cute English guys," she teased.

Melly said she was going to go and check on the others and left us alone to catch up. I stared intently at Melly, wondering just what she had told Jenny about the new Brad. From the big smile on Melly's face I could tell that she had so nicely saved that task for me. If I was being honest with myself, I was more worried about how Jenny would handle the news about Melly and Brad than about Brad's change. Jenny and I talked for at least an hour before there was a soft knock at the door.

"It's just me," Melly called. I came baring more gifts she said, her voice ringing through the air like a delicate wind chime. "If your next gift is as good as your first I can't wait," I said jumping up off the couch in anticipation of what was behind door number one, the door Melly was poking her head through.

"It's not for you sis... it's for Jenny." Watching Melly's giddy face I immediately saw her grin get even bigger as she said, "okay, okay. . . I know," to someone behind her.

"Umm are you alright?" I asked wondering if the cold weather had messed with her sanity. Was she talking to herself?

"Yes, I'm great. I was just politely reminded by the surprise that it isn't an "it," she said laughing as she moved into the room to make way for the "not it" surprise to make its way through the door. Directly behind Melly stood Brad, who looked better and better with every passing day. His new look definitely worked for him. He was breathtaking, truly a tall drink of water. Hearing the loud gasp that came from Jenny, I could only assume she was thinking something similar.

"Brad?" Jenny choked out as she stood there expressionless.

"Well, look at you. You are as pretty as ever," his deep voice echoed in the large room as he walked over to her and gave her a hug. "I'm so glad you had a safe trip. We all missed you."

Jenny just stood there staring up at him as if she saw a ghost and I quickly shot a look of annoyance over to Melly for not warning me that she was bringing him now. Melly just shrugged her shoulders and smiled. I was not amused and quickly moved to Jenny's side where I grabbed one of her shaking hands and pulled her back to the couch where I forced her to sit.

It was a couple of moments before Jenn spoke and when she did it was typical Jenny who emerged. "Brad," she whispered. "Did you have a face lift? You look like a dang model!"

Melly laughed and Jenny smiled at her, clearly having figured out that they were together. Jenny's moments of silence had never proven to be wasteful, as they were few and far between, and today was no exception. "Seriously... who is your surgeon or could it possibly be . . . Ahh that's it . . . you're in love!" Brad smiled his genuine smile as he grabbed Melly's hand and nodded yes. "Wow. I don't know what to say!" she marveled.

Jenny was a trooper. With tear filled eyes she got up and went and hugged Melly and Brad. "I am so happy for you both!"

Jenny was her usual self and didn't skip a beat. She sat next to Melly and demanded she get the whole story. No one was allowed to leave anything out. I winked at Melly as I excused myself to grab a snack. It was *her* turn to deal with things. She and Brad could tell Jenny all about his transformation. I needed a break. As I approached the door I almost got knocked over when Gabriel came pummeling through.

"Sorry bout that pipsqueak," he teased. As I tried to make my way around him I heard an all too familiar voice coming from his waste. Laughing at my facial expression he pulled a small walkie-talkie device from his belt, telling it to be quiet before it ruined the surprise. Before Gabriel could lower the volume I heard something that made me laugh.

"Whatch ya mean shhh? I know the likes of you. Yer big and ya think yer better than us small lads . . . that you can boss us around but I'll tell ya what . . . you better get yer big butt in here and show me to me Haden and Jenny before I decide to come lookin for ya. You don't want cha none of this. I'll tell ya that much."

Rolling his eyes Gabriel spoke very slowly into the hand held device where my favorite leprechaun had just spoken.

"Look little man. I tried to explain to you that you being here was a surprise for Haden. She's standing right here with me. You and your big mouth have ruined the surprise for her. I'll have Nanny Mena bring you to where we are in just a minute. Sit tight little dude." Gabriel laughed as he attached the walkie-talkie back to his belt. "Your little friend sure has a mouth on him. I like his spunk. He's pretty funny," Gabe said clearly amused with Kiernan. "Sorry he ruined the surprise."

"Don't be sorry. That's just how Kiernan is. I can't believe that he's here. It will be like the whole." I couldn't choke out the rest of what I had started to say. There was no way that the whole gang could be here. One very important part of us was missing. I started to get a huge lump in my throat when Talon walked in.

"What did you do now?" he said looking directly at Gabriel. "He didn't do anything, Talon. I was just missing someone." That was only a portion of the truth. I was thrilled that Jenny and Kiernan were here. I was overjoyed that they would be spending Christmas with me but my heart was empty in a way that could only be filled by Taylor and he had left me for a better life. At least that's what I was hoping.

Before I could dry my eyes, Kiernan burst through the door and grabbed me. "Ah let me look atcha. You're just as pretty as the last time I saw ya Haden me girl! So nice to see yer beautiful face again." When Kiernan was done hugging me he made his way over to Brad, Melly, and Jenny where he bowed in front of Jenny. "Me bunny." I quickly realized that Kiernan probably didn't know about Brad's change either. Oh boy was this going to be fun. I would have to wait a little longer for that snack I was on my way go get. Before I could say anything Kiernan introduced himself to Melly and then said something that shocked everyone in the room.

"Well I'll be a drunk monkey Brad . . . you've gone and been bit haven't ya? You jumped ship and crossed the sea," Kiernan laughed. "I sure hope this here pretty lassie did the biting."

Melly was laughing at this point, obviously finding Kiernan quite comical. Looking at Jenny's face I could see that she found nothing amusing about this. She obviously had no clue why Brad looked so good.

"Kiernan . . . seriously. Must you always stick your foot in your mouth?" Jenny said giving him a dirty look. "You know that wouldn't happen. Haden would never bite anyone!"

Brad spoke up when he saw how upset Jenny was. "You're right Jenn. Haden would never bite anyone but there is truth to what Kiernan said. I have changed. I *was* bit, just not by Haden."

Jenny stared at Brad confused. "What, but why," Jenny choked out. "If it wasn't Haden that bit you, then who was it?"

"I did it," Melly said gently caressing Brad's face. He was going to die. I had no choice."

"I knew it! You sneaky, sneaky lad! Way to go. You found you a hot chick and jumped on it. I would have begged her to bite me too. Shoot . . . she still can if she wants," he winked at Melly who giggled. "I don't go around biting people but if I did . . . you'd definitely be next," she teased.

All the while Brad kept his eyes focused on Jenny who was about to cry. Now was my time to escape. I was going to let Brad handle this. Looking at Talon I asked him if he wanted to go with me to grab a hot chocolate. Before I could finish asking, he was at my side standing quietly with his hand out for mine. "Want to go with us Gabriel?" I asked.

"And miss this drama? No way, your friends are quite amusing, I think I'll stay right here and see what they can teach me about humans," he laughed.

"Suit yourself," I said getting out of that room as fast as possible. I was starting to feel like all the air had left my lungs when Talon asked me if I was alright.

"Umm yeah... I'm okay. I'm just a little overwhelmed. If you don't mind, I think I'm gonna hold off on that hot chocolate. I really think I'd just like some time alone to regroup before dinner if that's okay."

"Sure, if you need anything, you know where to find me," he said trying to read my face. Talon was extremely intuitive and connected to me even though we hadn't grown up together. By the look on his face it was obvious he could feel my pain.

Trying not to look in his eyes, I walked towards my room but as soon as I was out of his view I turned and headed towards the grounds. He would have freaked knowing I was planning on going outside at the onset of a blizzard.

I hurriedly grabbed one of the many coats in the coat closet and quietly closed the back door behind me, turning around to make sure no one had followed me. Seeing that I was in the clear, I zipped the big white coat shut and covered my head with the fur-lined hood. The wind had picked up and although I wasn't as sensitive to temperatures as I was when I was young, I somehow felt safer all bundled up.

Ever since the first time I walked the grounds at Kenton Manor, I had immediately fallen in love with one particular area located far in the back behind the cottage and through the forest a ways. It was a peaceful spot Talon had told me about one day when I was really sad. It was his favorite place to go to be alone and think. He figured I would love it too and he was right. I frequented it whenever I needed some time alone which was definitely right now.

For some crazy reason that lump was back in my throat and I found myself wanting to cry again as thoughts of Taylor lay heavy on my mind. Having the whole gang back together without him was almost more than I could bear. I looked up into the cloudy sky and inhaled deeply. I could almost feel him close to me as I held the key around my neck and kissed it.

I walked faster through the forest area until I came to a statue of an angel looking up to heaven. It was Mrs. Kenton who had decided to place the beautiful 6ft statue of the female angel with its hands in prayer and eyes looking up to God, in the entry way for anyone who didn't have the best sense of direction. The angel served as a beautiful land marker. Talon told me that Mr. Kenton designed the area himself. This solemn spot was for anyone in the family who needed serenity and solitude. It just so happened that I needed both today.

Passing the angel, I inhaled the cold air as I took in the greatness of it all. There in front of me lay the small lake, frozen, silent, and peaceful. The white glazed lake was surrounded by large trees which looked almost as if they were there to guard a precious secret. Off to the right sat a stone bench under a wooden covering slightly back amidst the trees where you would easily

miss it if you weren't looking for it-- yet another one of Mr. Kenton's ideas. If someone needed to be alone, he didn't think they needed to be sitting where everyone could see them.

As I approached the familiar bench my eyes rested on the old wooden cross above it. Giving into the tears, I sat on the bench and pulled my legs up under me as I continued to seek the peace I so longed for; the peace I knew I would never find until I knew where Taylor was. I closed my eyes and laid down still holding onto my knees. Maybe if I closed myself into a tiny ball I would just disappear along with my heart.

I don't know how long I had been lying there when I smelled him. My brain told me that my insanity had to stop and yet my heart ignored it. Keeping my eyes shut I tried to force myself to sleep. If he was coming to me, I would be there waiting. I inhaled deeply; with every breath his sweet scent got stronger. If only it was really Taylor that I was smelling . . . if only. Before I knew it I was in a deep sleep. The further I drifted, the deeper into the dream I went.

The very dream I had longed to have for weeks was right in front of me, consuming me instantly. The more I cried, the more I could feel my tears washing away my pain. I couldn't see him, but he was there with me. He was close. I could almost feel him and then I did. A hand... *his* hand... softly touched my cheek and I shivered at how it set my skin on fire. Oh how I had missed his touch. Darkness continued to surround me. The Taylor of my dreams lightly pressed his lips on mine and I no longer cared whether it was light or dark. He was there with me, once again. His lips were just as soft as I had remembered; only they were colder. Just as I was getting into the dream, he spoke to me.

"Open your eyes my love."

"No," I mumbled unwilling to let go of the Taylor in my head.

"Love . . . please."

This time I felt my body being moved and unwilling to let go of my dream I fought the voice that kept begging me to wake up. After all, I could still smell him. I could practically feel him next to me. The dream consumed me like light consumes day. There . . . in my dream, it was Taylor who was carrying me. I wasn't ready for it to end. I didn't want real life anymore if he wasn't in it. I would sleep forever just to hear his voice again. I refused to wake up and see Talon holding me.

The Taylor in my dream became quiet other than humming my favorite song he had written for me when we were little. I nuzzled my head in his neck and inhaled the leather of his coat mixed with his delicious smell. I never wanted this dream to end.

The next thing I knew, the temperature changed. It was much warmer. I assumed we were no longer outside. Continuing to hum, Taylor laid me down on what felt like a bed. I wanted so badly to see his face. Even though I couldn't comprehend why my dream was still black, I didn't attempt to open my eyes and end the dream as I had so many other times. I wouldn't let go of him this time even if that meant I stay asleep forever. I would rather die than let him go.

Again he put his hand on my face. This time he traced his finger across my lips, up my cheek bones and back to my lips where his mouth met mine once again. Softly he spoke again, pleading with me to open my eyes.

"No," I moaned.

"Haden, please look at me. I am here. You are not dreaming."

This time my eyes took over and slowly opened. What they saw took my breath away. There next to me was the most perfect sight my eyes had ever seen. Taylor in all his perfection was right there staring at my face, tears glistening in his beautiful green eyes.

"I have waited for this moment for a very long time," he said running his hand through my hair.

I just lay there in awe staring at him, wondering if I had lost my mind. I blinked back my tears as I slowly reached up to touch his face. There on his right cheek lay a scar, one I had never seen.

Grabbing hold of my hand he gently pulled it away from his face. He closed his eyes and kissed it, letting his lips linger a little longer on my skin.

Slowly I sat up and once again my tears ran down my cheeks like summer rain. He grabbed my face with both hands and stared deep into my eyes. Leaning closer, his tender lips met mine again, this time more intense than the last. Still in shock, I couldn't think. I could only react. When his lips met mine, my entire body felt as if there were hundreds of tiny sparks all over me. I moved closer to him and met his body with mine. His kiss was soft and tender and I melted into his arms. Laying my head on his chest we just laid there, neither one of us talking. Realistically I knew it couldn't be a dream and yet I was too scared to speak and have it all end.

Finally he broke the silence. "I am so sorry, Haden."

I said nothing while he held me tight against his chest. Rolling onto his side, he pulled himself onto his elbow and rubbed my cheek as he continued. "I know I said I would come to you but it was best I didn't; it was best for you."

"But why?" I asked, crying again as he looked sorrowfully into my eyes.

"I had no choice love. I had been careless in my efforts to find you and instead, they found me. They wouldn't let me go unless I told them where you were, which I didn't."

"But Taylor, you *didn't* know where I was."

"Yes love actually I did. Brad called me the night he first met with you. I made him promise to let me know the minute he found you. We both knew you would be against it but I also knew you would forgive him. I was on my way to you when I stopped to get you flowers and a teenage girl approached me, bruises all over her face. She was crying and begging me to help her. Then she said she had to go. She mumbled that whoever beat her would find her and she ran off towards the woods. I followed her to try to let her know I would help her when I was jumped from behind." He looked down as if he didn't want me to see into his eyes.

"You *did* come to me," I mumbled to myself. "You were bound to a chair."

"Yes, I did come to you . . . once, and it was a mistake. You shouldn't have seen me like that."

"What did they do to you?"

"None of that matters now, love. All that matters is that we are together and that you are safe. I am just so sorry it took me this long to get to you."

"When did you get away from them?"

"I would have gotten away sooner but they wouldn't let me eat. They were starving me to make me weak. They were unsure of my strength and were given strict instructions by their leader to see to it that I wasn't fed anymore than what would barely sustain me. Approximately six vampires kept watch over me. It was their job to get information out of me about you. Their leader, Gavin, would come in every few days to take his turn with me, his eyes piercing into mine. He told me awful things to try to get me to break but I wouldn't relent which only made his anger more intense. The weaker I got, time seemed to pass with no meaning; that is until I heard you call me. That's what fueled me. I knew I had to figure out how to get away from them so I could protect you. That night after you called me, I managed to lure a rat over to me and ate it when they thought I was sleeping."

I grimaced at the thought of beautiful Taylor, weak and eating a rat. Noticing he had stopped his story and was watching my face, I apologized and he continued.

"No, it wasn't palatable but it was the beginning of me regaining my strength. Sadly even the rats were few and far between but I ate what I could. Those rats helped save my life; them and a few very brave vampires. Brad was one of them."

At first it didn't sink in that Brad had known where Taylor had been and didn't tell me. All I could do was sit there speechless. Gavin, that's a name I never wanted to hear again and yet there it was placed before me dark as could be.

"Oh dear God," I cried.

"It's okay now, no tears. We're together and I'm not going anywhere. No one will hurt you. I won't let them."

"But," I began to say when he put his finger to my lips.

"Shhh... we have plenty of time for that. For now let's just be together. I won't ever leave you again, I promise."

"I'm so sorry I put you in danger," I told him wiping my tears as more fell.

"Don't you dare apologize, Haden. You did nothing wrong. You are special. I always knew it. God put you and I together for a reason and we won't let Him down. I will make those people go away and leave you alone, even if I have to hide you to keep you safe. I will do whatever it takes to make those monsters stay away from you. You *will* be happy again.

For now though, we have people waiting for us and although Brad knows where I am, I can assume that the others might get worried and come looking for you."

Looking around, I realized we were in the guest cottage.

As we got up, I was again taken back at how perfect Taylor was. It was as if I was seeing him for the first time. I couldn't stop looking at him. He had a white button up shirt on; the top buttons lay open exposing his perfectly chiseled chest underneath his black leather jacket. He immediately caught me looking at him and smiled, melting my heart.

"Come on silly," he teased. "They're probably looking for you. I would bet you didn't tell anyone where you were going either."

"So," I squawked. He knew me too well. "You found me, so why couldn't they?"

"That's easy, because they're not me. Besides, don't you want to introduce me to your friends?"

"Actually no, I would much rather stay here and keep you all to myself," I grinned sheepishly.

Grabbing my hand, he spoke softly to me. "There will be plenty of time for us to catch up. I, myself want nothing more than to consume you in every way shape and form *but* I would also like to meet the people who took such good care of you and thank them.

Okay, so I saw his point but that didn't mean that I liked it. I agreed to go with him but made it perfectly clear that I would rather stay hidden away with him in the warm cottage with its cozy fire.

Walking outside, hand in hand, I realized how numb I still was. Nothing seemed real. I couldn't help but feel like my mind was playing tricks on me. If it was, it could play them for the rest of my life.

Right as we walked outside, setting our feet on the newly fallen snow, he turned around smiling and asked me if I wanted a piggy back ride.

"Absolutely," I said feeling myself smile bigger than I had since this whole mess had begun.

With that answer, he picked me up and placed me on his back where I laid my head on his shoulder and kissed his neck. Softly he sighed and we left the cottage. We were barely outside when he stopped and tilted his head towards mine.

"Is something wrong?" I asked him.

"Not at all, actually I was wondering if you were up for a little race. I mean you always thought you were faster than me. I was just wondering if you actually were, now that we know you're some sort of prophetic child," he snickered.

"Hmmm, okay but only if you promise me something."

"Anything," he said setting me down and turning to face me.

"If I win, you have to hold me tonight until I fall asleep," I said knowing good and well what his answer would be.

"Deal, and if I win," he smirked, "I'll hold you till you fall asleep."

"K, lets race to the house. I'm assuming you know where that is. Or if not you can just follow my dust since that's where you'll be anyway," I laughed.

"Your dust? Quit the talking Haden and show me what you're made of. On the count of three we go."

As soon as he said three I was gone running, feeling the cold wind against my face. Taylor was right beside me, keeping my pace. I could feel him smiling and I picked up speed. I actually think he was holding back. He had always been a faster runner but he was also a gentleman and I knew who would win. It wouldn't be the faster of the two of us, that's for sure. I decided to spice it up a little bit and veered away from the house towards the forest. He shot me a look of confusion but followed close. Once I was by the forest I ran in deciding to show him my new talents. I had become very strong and agile over the past few months and many a time I would retreat to the forest where I would seek some solitude amidst the trees, even up in their branches. I ran faster, dodging tree after tree, barely missing their grand trunks. My heart rate accelerated and I began to smile. I could feel him getting excited right along with me. Without giving him any warning I jumped over a huge log and continued to run until I found one of my favorite trees where I proceeded to climb up it. I knew Taylor well enough to know that he would follow me and follow me he did, all the way to the top where I sat all smiles, proud of myself.

"Wow, I always knew you were part cheetah but never knew you were also part monkey. Seems the monkey in you ate your fear of heights thinking it was a banana," he joked as he kissed my nose.

"Why thank you kind sir. Now we can head back to the house? I just thought we could use a little exercise and I wanted to show you my favorite tree."

"Nice tree," he said looking all around us. "Just so you know gorgeous, I'm ready to follow you anywhere you want to go," he smiled showing all of his perfect teeth and dimples.

I could feel my heart swell with every word he spoke.

"Can I have that piggy back ride again?" I asked once we were back on solid ground.

I hopped on his back again and this time I didn't let go. I shut my eyes and sent up a silent prayer to the God I had begun to think was ignoring me. When we got close to the house he set me down by a tree. Not saying anything he grabbed my right hand and placed it over his heart as his eyes met mine, his face serious.

"All yours," he said taking my other hand and kissing it gently. Then he pulled me right next to him, so close that our faces were almost touching.

"I will never leave you again Haden. I make that promise to you on my life."

My breath became very shallow as I felt his breath caressing my face. I got up on my tip toes and lightly pressed my lips to his, feeling his chest hard against mine.

"I won't ever push you away again," I whispered. "I promise... on my life."

"I know," he said as he kissed my head and wrapped me in his arms.

In that moment I couldn't have asked for more. If I died right then, I would die a very blessed woman. In Taylor's arms I was right where I belonged. I felt my heart burn with a fire of love that I had never felt before. We were finally free to love each other. After months of feeling as if I had no air in my lungs, I was whole again. I could breathe in a way I never knew. It was as if my soul was alive for the first time in my life. I was in heaven in his arms and I never wanted to let him go.

"You don't have to," he said breaking the silence.

"I don't have to what?" I asked confused.

"You don't have to let go."

"You heard me? I hadn't realized my thoughts were quite that loud," I said having forgotten just how connected we really were.

"They're not. God just designed our souls to fit together perfectly. We're two halves who become whole when we're together. I couldn't breathe without you either. That chapter in our life is over, only happiness from here on out, I swear."

## 24. *Cloud Nine*

After another tantalizing kiss we somehow found the strength to pull away right before entering the house. Taylor and I stopped short when we heard the familiar sound of one of Kiernan's favorite Irish songs playing through the home speaker system. We couldn't help but smile because we knew exactly what that meant. There was a party going on and our favorite little Irish man was heading it. Taylor laughed softly as I led him to where I had left everyone a couple hours earlier.

Before we opened the door we could hear the joyous laughter. It all seemed so unreal. Once we were inside, it was as if the heavens had opened up and God Himself was smiling down on everyone. The couches and tables had all been moved against the walls. The center of the room was now a makeshift dance floor. Kiernan and Arabella were dancing around laughing. Kiernan caught sight of Taylor and nodded his head with a wink as he continued to dance with the little princess. Not too far from them were Brad and Melly dancing up a storm. Jenny was sitting next to Talon on one of the couches while Gabriel and Nanny Mena spun around on the dance floor with the rest of them. I stood there in awe.

"Shall we?" Taylor's eyes twinkled like the midnight stars.

"Oh yeah," I said removing his arm from around my waist and grabbing his hand.

We danced around and around all laughing. Kiernan was sweating as if he had just plowed a field.

"It's better than cologne," he said winking at Jenny who was staring at his sweaty shirt.

She shook her head and looked away.

Kiernan spun around and tried to grab Jenny's hand and pull her up. She of course nodded her head no but that didn't stop him. Instead of going back to the middle of the dance floor he broke into his own Irish Jig solo standing directly in front of Jenn while Arabella clapped egging him on. Taylor, Melly, Brad, Gabriel, Nanny Mena and I all joined in on the clapping, thoroughly enjoying his show. Talon joined in and well, Jenny just laughed as she watched her admirer dance a jig for her.

I watched as she blushed, not saying a word to Kiernan which was highly unusual. If I wouldn't have known better, I would have thought she was trying not to gripe in front of Talon. From the looks of it, she was going to handle Brad and Melly's relationship just fine. Then again, who could blame her? Talon was beyond gorgeous. Jenny smiled at Kiernan and then at looked down in embarrassment. Talon was clueless to Jenny's admiration. He got up and walked towards Gabriel who was leaning against the back wall.

Eventually the song ended and was replaced with some sort of flute instrumental. Kiernan bowed in front of his new fans and then turned to face Taylor and I all smiles. He turned around one last time and winked at Jenny before he walked over to us.

"Well I'll be a wooden horse on a warm summer day. I'm all warm and toasty inside seeing you two standing there together," he said with a smile. He slowly moved towards Taylor, hugging him. I saw tears in his eyes when he pulled away. Like me, I could only assume that for awhile Kiernan thought he'd never see his best friend again."

"You're one tough guy T, back from the dead and all. The last I heard you didn't look so good."

Taylor shot Kiernan a quick look I recognized immediately. He was clearly not happy with something Kiernan just said. Good for him I wasn't fully paying attention. I was fixing to ask him what was up with the *too much information*, look when the door opened and in came Roger, Marcus and Barnabus.



"Hey guys," I said so excited that they were going to get to meet Taylor. Barnabus ran up to him the minute he saw him. Taylor bent down and hugged Barney as if he knew him even though this was their first time to meet. Now this confused me. Taylor had always been great with animals but from how Barney nuzzled up against him you would think that they had known each other for quite some time. I just chalked my insanity up to lack of sleep until Taylor said, "Hey there Barney! Good to see you buddy."

"You know each other?" I asked totally confused.

"Actually, yes we have met before," Taylor grinned, continuing to pat Barney's huge head.

I stood there wondering what I was missing as I looked at both Roger and Marcus, my eyes huge prodding them silently for information when Taylor answered my silent questions again.

"I'll explain soon."

"So do you know Marcus and Roger too?" I asked, quickly realizing that it wasn't just Brad who knew where Taylor had been all this time. If this were the case, not one of them had ever thought that maybe . . . just maybe, they should have told me. I tried to steady my breathing and quiet my brain. Taylor stood back up and shook Marcus's hand and then Rogers. I just stood there in shock feeling like a complete idiot. *Was I the only one that didn't know?*

"Yes, we have met. Marcus and Roger actually helped save my life."

"You all knew where he was," I gasped in disbelief, "And yet no one bothered to tell me?" The pain of their secretiveness pierced my heart like a dagger. "You all knew I was dying inside," I cried, feeling stupid.

As I listened to Taylor start to explain, I began to get light headed. The room started to go dark and I hurriedly grabbed Taylor's sleeve to try to steady myself but that didn't work. Everything went black anyway.

The next thing I remembered was waking up in my bed. I quickly looked around the room for Taylor. I was terrified that it was all a dream but sitting there silently in the corner, reading my book on werewolves, was Taylor. When he noticed I was awake he put the book down and came and sat with me on my bed.

"So it wasn't a dream?" I asked, staring at his perfect face.

"Not at all, I'm here," he said kissing my forehead. "Here drink this." He handed me a warm glass of blood. The smell of my drink had me salivating instantly. I had spent the last few days doing what the Kenton's referred to as, "fasting." I had taken in very little nourishment of any kind during that time. The Kenton's did this as an offering to God. I did it because I was lashing out at myself and in some ways, God too. I must have been doing it wrong because I didn't come out of it feeling refreshed as both Mr. and Mrs. Kenton described. I came out of it sleepy and in my bed, dazed and confused.

I finished the glass in one steady drink when Taylor smiled and handed me another.

"Thank you," I said sheepishly.

I knew him too well not to expect some type of a lecture on taking care of myself but he surprised me and said nothing about my childish decision to almost starve myself. He just sat there silently and patiently waiting for me to finish drinking so he could have my full attention. I guess he knew what he was fixing to tell me would hurt me. It was clear that even though I was a *supposed* prophetic princess and had some vampire thing going on; I was still part human and with that came my weaknesses.

I put the empty glass on the bedside table and took a deep breath in anticipation of what he was about to tell me. Taylor kissed my hand before he got up and walked across the room where he stood quiet for a moment. I watched as he chose his words carefully.

"First off Haden, I want you to know that none of what happened to me was your fault, absolutely none of it," he said turning back to look at me. "I got impatient and because of that, I made some really stupid and rash decisions. That's why I was captured, not because of you. They

never could have taken me if I would have been taking better care of myself which I clearly wasn't. You are not the only hard headed one in this room," he laughed. "Just like you, I thought I could overpower my need for blood. We were both wrong. You were just lucky that you were surrounded by loved ones when you got weak."

He walked over to the window and looked out, staring off into the distance. "One good thing is that they have no idea what my real strength is. Next time they decide they want to have a little talk with me, I will have the upper hand."

"There won't be a next time," I said agitated. "This is all because of me. Don't you get it? My life started this so I will be the one to end it." I wasn't about to let him fight my battle for me.

"There will be a next time, but you *won't* be alone," he said, his eyes piercing into mine. "Haden, this is not a game. They are extremely dangerous creatures and as much as I don't want to hurt you, you need to know just what they are capable of."

I wanted to jump up and explain to him that I knew exactly what those things were capable of. I wanted to tell him that I knew what Gavin was thinking and *what* he was after, but I just couldn't find the strength, so I remained silent as he continued. He proceeded to tell me that they were sick and malicious, purely evil. None of that shocked me. It's what he said next that rattled me.

"Two of Gavin's goons were transporting me when they decided to stop and have themselves a little midnight snack. They had almost drained me of what blood I had left before they tossed me in the back seat of some car they had stolen. I don't know exactly where we were. I was weak and could barely breathe. I could hear cars passing by but only barely. When I knew they were gone I used what little bit of energy I had left and opened the back door and put my feet on the ground. There was no way I could walk so I grabbed your phone out of my pocket. I hit the first number I could on your speed dial. I didn't care who it called. Michelle answered on the first ring. I told her I needed help. As hard as it was just to hold my head up, I squinted through my dry eyes and told her the street signs before I blacked out. I awoke to Michelle hovering over me.

"Michelle who?" I asked confused.

"Your friend Michelle. I know it's hard to believe but somehow she was in the right place at the right time or in her case, the wrong time."

I sat up a little straighter, holding on to every word he spoke.

"I had to concentrate really hard not to bite her," he said shaking his head as he remembered. "I knew that I would have killed her. I saw her face right as she said my name. Most of what I remember is a blur. The rest after that is even hazier."

Taylor stopped talking and then came and sat down beside me again.

"All I remember after that was them returning before Michelle had a chance to get me into her vehicle."

Before continuing he looked at me in my eyes and apologized. "She's dead Haden. They killed her. I'm so sorry."

Normally my eyes would have started to fill with tears but honestly I think I had none left. Nothing seemed real. All I could muster to say was, "oh." I don't think his words had really sunk in.

When he saw that I was handling the news without having a nervous breakdown, he continued where he left off. "Those guys were by no means smart but they had an impressive amount of strength. Would it have been under different circumstances, I would have graciously accepted the challenge of putting them in their place. Unfortunately this wasn't the case, not yet anyway. They kept me barely fed; everyday finding new and inventive ways to try to get information out of me. That only made me angrier. As you know, physical pain means nothing to me." He stopped again for just a moment and put his hand on my hand.

"When Gavin first came to visit me I knew immediately that he was their leader." The look of pain on his face was almost more than I could bear. "I could smell you on him."

My heart froze. *How could Gavin be so cruel*, I thought wishing I could tear him apart.

"He knew this would drive me crazy and he was right. He thought he could use it to his advantage. That's where he was wrong. Your scent gave me strength. With each breath I took, I inhaled you, taking in as much as I could. You see, I knew that if Gavin was close to you, you were in danger. There was no question in my mind. I had to get you away from him. I knew you were probably feeling abandoned by me, maybe even angry. I knew that made you vulnerable to him."

I looked down at our hands, ashamed of just how right he was. I *had* felt abandoned and at times I was angry at him for leaving me.

He lifted my chin and kissed my lips slowly. "Don't be mad at yourself. I could never be mad at you. You did what you felt you had to. I blame myself for everything. None of it was your fault... none of it," he said adamant that I understood him.

"How did you ever find a way out of there?" I asked, choking down the tears that threatened to spill out of my eyes.

"It's not pretty, Haden. That day when I smelled you on him, something snapped inside me. I became crazed inside. There was no question anymore; I was going to escape. I just didn't know how. That night was the first night I fed on the delicacy of whole rats. They're nasty but they sure can come in handy," he insisted.

Picturing Taylor eating rats was almost inconceivable. Guilt began filling up my heart like a dam about to break. While I was wasting my time with Gavin, Taylor was fighting for his life. How could I have been so stupid?

"I'm so sorry," I choked out as a tear escaped one of my eyes, sliding slowly down my cheek.

"Don't apologize to me," he said, gently rubbing the back of his hand along my cheek. "I know his powers, Haden. You were weak and he knew that. He used you. Gavin wasn't like the others under him. I knew that the first time I met him. He was good looking and extremely calculated in everything he did and said. He wanted me to break and I wanted to break him. I still do."

Taylor clenched his jaw as he said this. I was just hoping that Taylor would let go of whatever plans he had. I had seen firsthand that Gavin didn't like losing. That frightened me. I couldn't lose Taylor again. I would die first.

Clearing his throat, he went on to tell me how he slowly got his strength up enough to go to Brad in a few of his dreams.

"I had no idea that he had turned. In my mind, he was still human. I was just desperate and knew I could count on him. I sent Brad as much information as I could. Every day I got stronger, but I was very careful not to let them see that I was regaining my strength. I kept my eyes closed for the most part but my ears were wide open. I paid attention to what the guards said. They were sloppy in how they spoke, steadily giving away more information than Gavin or Arkos would have liked. I used my hearing to locate the entrance doors. It took only a few days of tapping into Brad's dreams before two friends of Roger's showed up dressed in all black. Somehow they convinced the old guards that they were there to relieve them of their duties. They told them that Gavin had an important matter arise so he assigned them to take that shift. Then they told them that Gavin needed them back at their base. The guards were idiots," he sighed shaking his head. "You would think that someone as intelligent as Gavin would have been smarter than having those two morons watch anything larger than a bird."

"But you were in the states and Brad was here with Melly?

How . . .?" I started to ask, stopping short. I knew exactly how they got to him so fast. They let Brad and Roger use their private jet. Of course . . . it was all starting to make sense.

"The vampires looked confused but followed the directions and left," Taylor continued. "There wasn't any time to waste. They called Brad and told him it was safe. They handed me a gallon of blood and told me to drink, fast. I did as they said and felt better instantly. It didn't take

long for the others to realize they'd been had. I was so weak I could barely hold the container to drink. About halfway through the gallon I heard voices outside of the door, down the hall. They weren't familiar. Roger's friends demanded that I stay put. I didn't bother trying to move. My body was beaten down in more ways than one. My bones were broken and I was still weak, even with the extra blood. I stayed there waiting patiently, drinking the rest of my nourishment with shaking hands. I didn't have to wait for long before I heard the front door break and the fighting start. As I swallowed the last drop, I could feel my strength coming back. The door flew open and a guard came in ready to attack me. I heard you cry my name in my mind and suddenly I could no longer feel my pain. I was still weak, but I fought him until he could no longer fight me."

Taylor studied my face as he spoke. Hearing what he was telling me was hard but I was so happy to finally have the truth that I stayed silent and kept listening.

"I limped out into the dark hallway and there stood Brad smiling, covered in blood. It was the best smile I could have seen other than yours," he said squeezing my hand lightly. "That was the last thing I remembered until a week later when I woke up in a little room with a little man sitting in the corner reading a magazine called, *Seer's Sights*."

*Lenny.*

"Yes, his name was Lenny," he smiled. Taylor shifted his position, leaning in closer to me when he began again. "When I first tried to speak, I had a hard time. My throat was so dry. They say that's common when you go without enough water and blood for as long as I had. I didn't let it bother me. All I could think about was you. The small man sat by me day and night, rarely leaving my side. He had a friendly look about him reassuring me that I was safe with him."

I drank the glass of water he gave me and noticed I was attached to an IV... *again*. I didn't say anything. I just kept on listening.

"The little fellow introduced himself as Lenny and began to tell me where I was and why I was there when Brad came in with the largest dog I had ever seen."

"Barney," I nodded. I was beginning to see the pieces of the puzzle fit together one by one. "You were hurt bad." I choked out, feeling my eyes burn from all the tears I had cried.

"Yes I was. They didn't think I would make it at first but they had no idea how determined of a person I was. They didn't know how much I loved you." Taylor smiled and handed me a half of a sandwich.

"Eat this. You need your strength. We have a big night ahead of us."

I had no clue what he was talking about but I ate the sandwich like he asked. It was ham and buttercase, my favorite.

"That Nanny Lena sure does love you," he said as I took a huge bite.

"Nanny Lena," I said with a full mouth looking towards the door. Is she here?"

Taylor laughed, clearly amused with me speaking with a mouth full of food.

"Yes she is. I was told that Nanny Mena called her. They thought it would be a good idea if she stayed here during the storm. Nanny Lena arrived shortly after you passed out and has been here ever since. I was going to make you a sandwich myself but she insisted. She said you loved her ham and buttercase sandwiches so I let her make it for you instead."

All of this seemed like a very odd dream to me. I was still weak but I could feel my strength coming back to me with every bite I took. I looked at the empty glass of blood and began salivating. What I really wanted was to hunt. It had been weeks since my last good hunt. I had stopped caring. But now, here with Taylor by my side, I felt refreshed. Even with all that had happened, it was over now and he was here with me. I missed living. I missed the taste of a fresh grizzly. When I noticed I was running amuck in my own thoughts again I immediately stopped, looking at Taylor who was grinning at me quietly.

"Bear huh?" he laughed. "You know, I can finish my story later if you'd like. No hunting for you right now though, not yet. You're still a little too weak," he casually added.

"No, no. Please go on," I begged, feeling like a complete idiot. I was so sick of that stupid liquid consuming my thoughts.

"That was the beginning of a very rough time for me. From what I was told, most don't survive what I went through. Even pure vampires don't have the ability to be drained of blood for that long and survive. According to Lenny, I should have died after the first few weeks of being taken, but for some reason I didn't. After I was rescued I went into a comatose state, barely hanging on to my life. When I first came to, the little man told me how they had to give me something to keep me in a deep sleep in order to save my life. After a few weeks, my body took over and I no longer needed the special mixture to sleep. I slept so sound and so hard that they all thought I was going to die. They told me that Brad visited me every day but I don't remember that. From what Brad said, I blacked out during the escape. He took me to a private jet and then brought me to Lenny's cottage where I stayed until I came to you. Lenny is a really good guy. He saved my life.

I knew all too well what he saying. As much as I hated to admit it at first, Nanny Lena saved my life too. Nanny Mena, their sister had done her share in taking care of me since I first arrived at the Kenton's. They were all like angels in short, round bodies.

In some weird way, Taylor's story was similar to mine. They were both overwhelming. Taylor was about to finish his story when there was a knock at the door right before Melly stuck her head in.

"All clear?" she asked blissfully. Before we could answer she was gliding into my room with a wine glass that I knew was just for me.

"Thank you," I practically yelled. I was definitely getting my energy back.

Plopping down on the other side of my bed Melly handed me two of her famous brownies.

"I figured you were in need of a little special treatment and what better than my brownies?" she giggled.

I didn't even think twice. I grabbed them out of her hand, devouring them both before anyone could say anything else.

With big eyes Melly laughed filling the room with her melodical voice. Taylor couldn't help but laugh with her. I guessed my brownie eating was funny. Either that or I had chocolate on my nose. No matter what it was, I didn't care. I was feeling better by the minute. Plus hearing Taylor and Melly laugh was like medicine for my heart. I just sat there and soaked it all in.

"So, did this gorgeous specimen tell you what an amazingly strong creature he is?" Melly asked joyfully, winking at Taylor.

"I wouldn't go there, but thank you," he said, modest as usual.

"Oh please! Haden, no wonder you're in love with this guy! He's freakin hot and amazing! Of course he's not as hot as Brad though," she laughed.

Not even two seconds later the door opened again and in came Brad and Barney.

"Speak of the most perfect vampire alive," Melly said jumping off of the bed and running to Brad who picked her up and threw her into a hug.

"Hey Haden, you look like you're feeling better," Brad grinned.

"I feel great actually. I was just listening to Taylor tell me all about your adventure and how you saved his life. I'm not going to lie, I was pretty upset that you all had kept his whereabouts from me, but the more Taylor explained, the more I could see why. Thank you for taking care of him."

Before anyone else could speak Roger came in carrying a huge bouquet of flowers and a carafe. He set the flowers down on the chest of drawers before taking my empty glass and refilling it. It felt like we were having a party. I just wished I wasn't in bed for it.

Taylor must have sensed how overwhelmed I was because he whispered that we could finish the catch up session later if I wanted. He insisted that I had heard the most important

details. The rest according to him was irrelevant. I, of course, couldn't think of anything involving him being irrelevant, nothing.

Everyone stayed in my room for about a half an hour talking about the coming snow storm when Roger finally said that it was time they all get ready for my last surprise of the day. I didn't really know if I could handle any more surprises. All I wanted was to be alone with Taylor. He looked directly into my eyes and closed his. Reopening them slowly, his eyes burned into mine. It was his way of saying he loved me in a crowded room. It was meant just for me.

I couldn't help but start to choke up again. I was so emotional when it came to him. To think that there were people out there that actually thought *I* was the prophetic one. Anyone who thought that I was the answer to their problems had it all wrong. I, Haden Leleux Kenward was a mush. I was the most sensitive person I knew, especially when it came to matters of the heart. My mom once told me that tears were God's way of cleansing our soul. If that were the case, then I should have one really cleansed soul.

"Alrighty then, let's jet," Melly said before Brad turned to Taylor.

"Hey T, can we borrow you?" Brad's sincere face searched Taylor's to see if it was an okay time. Taylor looked deep into my eyes.

"Are you ok enough for me to go with them and meet you later for your surprise?"

I nodded my head taking another sip of my tasty drink. This time it was a Virgin Pina Colada. Roger enjoyed making me fruity drinks that he loved before his vampire days. I loved that I was loved so much.

"Yes of course," I told Taylor.

"We'll wait for you in the hall buddy," Brad said wanting to give us a few moments alone.

Taylor leaned towards me, his breath again causing goose bumps to surface all over my body.

"Come with me," he said, his voice soft as a Spring rain.

I followed him into my bathroom where I saw candles all over.

"I'm going to start a nice bubble bath for you so you can relax and gather your thoughts before tonight. I know how frazzled your brain is. A candle lit bath will do you good," he said as he lit each candle one by one; the light from each individual candle in the dark room caressing his chiseled features. I was yet again in awe of his beauty. I stood in a daze while I watched the light from the candles dance magically on his face. When he had all of the candles lit and my bath water started, he pointed to the white chair next to where I was standing. There sat a pale yellow bag with white tissue paper reaching out of its top set on a rectangular white box.

"I bought you a little something for tonight and you have an outfit on the chair that Melly picked for you. She thought you'd like a new outfit to wear." He smiled at me with that picture perfect smile of his, his eyes twinkling like stars, lighting up my heart.

I was totally confused as to what was going on. After all, he hadn't even met the Kenton's or had he? I wondered loud enough in my head for him to hear me.

"No, I have not had the pleasure of making their acquaintance but I look forward to it this evening," he winked. "Now, I'm going to leave you to your bubble bath before you ask too many questions and ruin your surprise. Melly will be back for you later. Until then my love," he said letting his gaze rest on my face.

He kissed my lips softly and then left me alone in the beautiful bathroom with nothing but my thoughts of him and of what was to come.

I grabbed the pale yellow bag adorned with fluffy tissue paper and opened it to see what Taylor had bought me. When I opened the bag I saw a little black box. Inside the little jewelry box was a pair of earrings, delicate little flowers. They were breathtaking. The petals were made of small, pale yellow diamonds hugging a circle of tiny, white diamonds. They were beautiful. I rubbed my finger across them and asked God not to wake me up if I were dreaming.

Right as I realized that I had nothing to wear to match them I remembered the white box that had been sitting under the bag. Smiling, I set the earring box down, shut off my bath water

and opened the box. Inside was a pale yellow tee shirt with writing on it. I laughed aloud the minute I read what it said. In white letters it said, *Kiss Me I'm Stylish*. Go figure, it matched my earrings perfectly.

When I pulled the shirt out, a little piece of white paper fell to the floor. I picked it up and chuckled again. It said, *You should wear this with your white jeans and white snow boots I bought you. You'll look so hot. ;o) See you soon. Love, Melly*. She was crazy but I loved every crazy ounce of her immensely. I stopped right then and thanked God for my sister. The saying better late than never totally made sense to me at that very moment. I was so blessed.

I undressed, slipping into the glorious bubble bath that Taylor had drawn for me. He was right. The heat from the water immediately relaxed my tense muscles. The bubbles were the icing on my bubble bath cake. It was perfect. I watched the candles flicker and remembered how the light had danced off of Taylor's beautiful face earlier. It all still felt like a dream. I had been so miserable for what seemed like forever. Not knowing where he was had been torture. God in all His mercy had spared us both and I was so thankful. I said an Our Father and then sent another silent prayer up to my Father in Heaven. *Lord, I know that I am nothing without you. I also know that half of me was created out of evil but I love you Lord, with all of my heart I love you. If I am the prophetic one, then please bless me. Give me the grace I need to do Your will. Please help me to bring others to you, especially those who think there is no hope; those like me. All I want is to please you. I am sorry for my weaknesses. On one last note, I really miss my parents. Will you please send your angels to keep watch over them until I can be reunited with them? Amen.*

I had avoided calling my parents for tons of reasons. Right then surrounded by bubbles, knowing Taylor wasn't far from me, everything seemed to be coming together. I made the decision that first thing tomorrow morning I would call them and let them know that I was safe and sound.

When my bubble bath was done I got dressed, put some make-up on. I placed my beautiful new earrings on my ears, admiring them in the mirror. I was dressed and ready for Melly. I sat down at the little white desk and opened the drawer, pulling out a piece of paper and a pen. I had never been much of a writer but with the pen in my hand, I began writing Taylor a note.

*When we were little all seemed right. We lived a life of laughter and truth. You have always been my best friend. You have held my heart all of my life. I will never forget the day that the truth about you and I came out. We had figured it out before, yet we kept our love a secret. Finally we were free to love each other. My love for you was like a thirst I couldn't ever quench with you playing the role of my brother. Taylor, finding out you weren't my brother was one of the best days of my life. I could love you the way I not only wanted to, but needed to. So much has happened since that day. So many lies have been unveiled. Distance was shoved in between us, trying to keep us apart, but as I sit here on my new bed in a new home, I thank God for bringing you back to me. I thank our God for protecting you from the evil that surrounded you. I can only pray that we will never be separated again. Through good and bad, I am yours. You have my heart and my soul. Forever, Haden.*

I folded my letter and put it in my jeans pocket. I was ready for tonight no matter what craziness they all had planned. On cue as usual Melly knocked and then came in smiling even brighter than earlier.

"Are you ready princess?" she asked bowing in front of me.

"Oh Lord please Melly. I'm not a princess, especially yours," I said rolling my eyes smiling. "By the way, thanks for the cute shirt." I hugged my sister and then sat down on the bed, pulling a compact out of my purse so I could powder my nose one more time before we left.

Melly looked like she just walked out of a fashion magazine as usual.

"The earrings Prince Charming bought you go perfectly with your shirt if I do say so myself," she said proud.

"I love it all." I caught myself smiling as I looked at her. She was so full of energy that she was exuding excitement. Just being in the same room had my anticipation growing. Whatever my surprise was, it was going to be fun.

"So, let's get the show on the road. Get your butt up so we can get moving," she demanded playfully. I did as my older sister said and followed her out of my room where she practically skipped down the hall towards the elevator.

"We're going down the elevator?" I asked shocked. I had only been down there once, right after we first arrived. I had no idea what was down there. Whatever it was, it was private.

"Yep, it's where the party is. It's going to be a blast. I hope you're hungry. We're having live antelope for dinner," she said laughing again.

"You're joking right?"

"Of course silly, you're so gullible it's cute."

We got in the elevator and Melly hit the button for the lower level where the highly anticipated party was scheduled to be. When the door opened my breath caught in my throat. The room was exquisite! Twinkle lights were everywhere. They gave the room a magical Roger sort of feel. I inhaled deeply, taking in the moment when Roger showed up to escort me out of the elevator.

"Princess Haden, You're a little early but welcome to your party," he said gleefully. Jenny was directly behind him glowing just like the rest of them. In a little pale yellow dress she looked cute as always.

She saw me checking her out and smiled largely. "Cute huh," she said turning around so I could get a better look. "We thought pale yellow was a bright happy color. You know, to celebrate a new beginning."

Then she leaned into my ear and whispered, "Do you think Talon will like it?"

I *knew it*. I thought to myself. I *had* seen her checking him out. After I reassured her that everyone, including Talon, would notice her, she moved enough out of the way for me to see my new family in the back by the bar. Marcus stood elegantly where he was most comfortable, serving everyone drinks. Gabriel was leaning on the bar, his back to us, dressed in blue jeans and a pale yellow long sleeve button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Talon stood to his right, smiling casually as Gabriel talked. He looked like a model in his pale yellow tee shirt and white jeans. We matched perfectly. His shirt had words on it too like mine. I laughed as I read them to myself. It said, *Werewolves bite and you're gonna like it*. I didn't know what his obsession was with wolves but his shirt was pretty funny.

They all turned simultaneously when they saw me enter. Marcus and Talon nodded at me while Gabe gave me a thumbs up as he read my shirt. I looked around but didn't see anyone else.

The empty room was beautifully decorated. Clusters of pale yellow and white balloons hung throughout making it look like a page out of a fairy tale book. I let out a sigh while I let my eyes dance around the large room. It looked like this party wasn't going to be nearly as big of a deal as I had anticipated; that is until Roger ruined that thought with his next words.

"I know it looks empty in here but just you wait. We have quite the night ahead of us and low and behold it seems there are *two* big surprises tonight. We were only expecting one so we have had to make some slight adjustments which has affected our timing a little. Why don't you take your cute little self over to Marcus and let him fix you a drink. If you're hungry the waiters will be in here soon with some hor'dourves."

"No need, Talon is taking our pretty little flower out to grab a bite to eat first." Melly said motioning to Talon to come to where we were.

I could feel Jenny's posture straighten as he got closer.

"Okie dokie, but don't be late," Roger demanded as he grabbed Jenny's hand pulling her away with him.



As I walked with Talon back towards the elevator, I asked him how we were going anywhere with this crazy blizzard coming. I had heard that vampires were hard to kill but being half human I had no urge to be stuck out in the blizzard of the century.

He nodded at me, smirking as he put his arm around my shoulders and said, "No need to worry. The blizzard won't be here until the morning or mid afternoon. We're cool. Besides, I was given strict instructions to get you out of the house until it's time for the party." Talon's expression gave no clue as to what was going on. I could only assume this was why he was the one chosen to babysit me before the party.

Talon led me to the parking garage where he pulled out keys and disarmed the most beautiful car I had ever seen.

"Is that what I think it is?" I asked freezing in place.

"Whatever you think it is, it won't bite you," he laughed pulling me on.

"Is it a Bugatti?" My breath got lost in my throat, choking me as I approached the passenger side of the snow white car.

"Yep," he laughed opening the door.

My first thought was of Taylor. I could only imagine his facial expression if he saw Talon's car. The only reason I even knew what kind of car this was, was because of Taylor. He was researching them before he bought his Maserati. Taylor loved them but their price was insanely high.

"Is it yours?" I asked rubbing my hand along the inside of the door.

"Not exactly, it belongs to the family; all of these do," he said looking around. "We can drive whatever we want. This one happens to be my favorite," he shrugged, smiling as he put the car in reverse and drove out of the garage.

The snow had just started to fall again giving the ground a glazed icing look. In no time we were at the restaurant. He was out of the car and at my door in seconds. As he helped me out I noticed that we were in the back of a building.

"Where are we?"

"Chez Nicolette's," Talon said shutting the car door behind me.

A man greeted us at the back door. He nodded and smiled at Talon as he put his hand out in front of him allowing us to enter. We followed the man down a hall, past the kitchen and to our booth in the back corner. It was as if he knew exactly where Talon wanted to sit. Sitting in the very back corner of a dimly lit room we had plenty of privacy which was fine with me.

The restaurant was a cozy little Italian Bistro where Talon and I were treated like royalty. I told him what I wanted and he gave the waitress our order as I sipped my lemon water. All I had to do was sit back and enjoy my date with my brother. We talked and laughed, getting to know each other better until the waitress set a huge bowl of Shrimp Fettuccini Alfredo in front of me. I tried to pace myself but I was starving and it was good.

We were having a great time when Nicolette came and said hello. I took my last bite as she introduced herself. She smiled politely at me when he told her who I was and then turned her eyes to him. Talon politely smiled and thanked her for dinner before looking away.

Something was off about her. The way she looked at Talon had my sirens going off. If looks could kill, she would've been lethal.

"It's been too long," she said staring at him with such intensity that I felt out of place.

Talon smiled kindly at her. "Yes it has been. You look great Nicole."

He was right, she did. She was radiant; her porcelain skin glowed in the candlelight of her restaurant. She had long straight blonde hair that hung like corn silk down to the middle of her back and she walked with such grace and determination that she looked like she was stalking prey. Her ocean blue eyes were framed with thick black eye liner, making her eyes pop out at you.

Talon didn't seem nearly as taken back by her beauty as I was. She only looked at me once

"Thank you for dinner Nicolette," he said handing her money.

"Your money is no good here," she said lifting her nose at it.

My brother thanked her again as he rose from the table. I stood with him and took his hand following him out of the restaurant.

"Bitter ex-girlfriend?" I asked as we drove away from the restaurant.

"Not exactly," he said staring at the road.

"If she didn't like you, why did she comp. our meal?"

"She likes me," he said smiling slightly. "She just likes me more than I like her."

"Oh," I said laughing softly. "I see."

We made it home even faster than it took us to get from the house to the restaurant. Back at the house I took a deep breath as Talon opened the door for me. The garage was filled to the brim with even more cars than were there when we had left. *Now* I was nervous.

## 25. Frozen Tears

"Just breathe," Jenny said quietly, "Trust me, it'll all be okay. You'll have a great time." Knowing Jenny was in on it did make me feel a little better. I knew that she wouldn't go along with anything that would make me uncomfortable, at least not without letting me in on the secret.

Waiting to greet us in the entry way with Jenny was Nanny Mena.

"Hello dears, you are just in time. Roger let me know about five minutes ago that I could send you up."

Nanny Mena looked like a chubby little doll, dressed in a yellow floral skirt and white button up shirt.

"You look nice Nanny," I said enjoying her bright smile.

"Why thank you Haden dear. It is quite a special night, a special night indeed."

The elevator doors opened and I stepped in feeling my stomach turn. With each floor my heart rate accelerated. I had no idea why I was so nervous about tonight. The people waiting for me were my family and friends, at least some of them anyway.

From the looks of the garage and how full it was, it appeared that I wasn't going to know everyone tonight. That thought made my stomach do even more flips. Over the past few months I had quickly become quite the recluse. Meeting new people had a totally new meaning now. I didn't trust anyone.

Thoughts of the impending blizzard confused me even more. I knew how strong vampires were. A little blizzard wouldn't bother them. It was the humans that would be more affected. This was no time for a party. *Maybe they are having an important vampire meeting, Haden*, I said to myself as the elevator stopped. Feeling the severity of what might lay ahead, I took another deep breath right as the elevator door opened.

Much to my delight, standing only few steps away was my Prince Charming, looking more handsome than I had ever seen him look in my whole life. My heart began racing at the sight of his perfect face and all thoughts of what lay ahead tonight were gone. All I could think about was Taylor. I didn't care what happened as long as he was by my side.

There were no words for how incredible he looked. He stood still, smiling at me and I froze, my breath leaving my body. I had looked at this person my entire life but suddenly he looked so different. Standing before me was Taylor, the man. He was no longer the boy I grew up with and this made me need a fan. Suddenly the air around me felt very hot.

Taylor was wearing a white button up shirt with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a pale yellow tee shirt that clung slightly to his well defined chest. His faded blue jeans had a hole over his left knee and the start of another small one on the lower part of his right thigh. My eyes scanned him all the way from his short brown hair down to his brown boots and I felt my brain go to mush.

I was so busy staring at him that I tripped as I walked out of the elevator. Talon grabbed my arm immediately helping me up. He held my elbow as I made my way out of the elevator.

Taylor stood still, watching me closely with his dimple framed smile. He was holding a stuffed Grizzly bear and a bouquet of yellow and white flowers.

"For you," he said, his clover green eyes shining from all of the tiny white lights. I took the bear and hugged him tightly before smelling the flowers.

Talon took the flowers from me and Melly and Jenny followed him down the hall towards the party room, leaving us alone.

"You look beautiful to say the least," Taylor said serious as he stared at me, his eyes glistening from tears.

"You look pretty darn hot yourself," I breathed.

He leaned in towards me and lightly caressed my lips with his. My heart sped up and we both laughed. I gently laid my head on his chest and inhaled deeply inviting his sweet scent into my lungs.

"Can't we just stay here in the hall and skip the party?" I begged.

"I'm afraid not, love. Your friends have worked really hard to show you how much they love and appreciate you. I can't think you would want to disappoint them by not going."

Taylor knew just what to say to pull at my heart strings. I rolled my eyes and said fine. I conceded to go with him even though I would have preferred to just snuggle with him in the hall.

What I saw when he opened the door almost made me choke. The once empty room was filled with people, tons of people. It was now a vast sea of faces and I didn't recognize hardly any of them. I stood still trying to take it all in when a familiar nasal voice called my name. I turned around to see a relative of my father's coming towards me.

We played catch up with family for almost an hour. There were so many members of our adoptive family that we hadn't seen since we were children. The more the evening progressed, the more at ease I was. Maybe I had been overreacting. So far it looked like it was just intended to be a happy reunion. I just wished my parents would have been there.

Trying not to let my negative thoughts ruin our night, I squeezed Taylor's hand and inched a little closer to him as we continued to walk around the room. There were both familiar and unfamiliar faces everywhere. We saw friends from High School, from work and tons of strangers that smiled at us like they had known us since we were infants. Many of them had the same flawless complexion that the Kenton's had. From the looks of it, the room was filled with both vampires and humans just as I had expected. It was a room radiating with beauty, most of it coming from the strange faces I had yet to meet. I couldn't figure out why all of these people were there. Honestly I didn't care so I stopped trying.

The two main faces I had expected to see weren't there yet. Looking around the room again, I didn't see the Kenton's anywhere. Taylor still hadn't met them and I was growing impatient. When I turned around Brad was walking towards us smiling.

"Hey guys, do you mind if I steal you both for a second. It's about time for surprise one," he said looking as if he was up to something. "If you'll be so kind as to follow me, I'd appreciate it." He winked at me, knowing it was in my nature to hesitate and run from surprises.

Like a good girl I smiled back. Taylor squeezed my hand and grinned at me as we followed Brad towards a stage and up the stairs until we were standing on it. On the left side of the stage, there was a pale yellow love seat with 2 white pillows and a microphone on a podium. Brad led us to the love seat and then went to the podium where he grabbed the microphone.

As I gazed out into the crowd, I began to get nervous. I looked over at Taylor and quickly realized that he had no idea what was going on either.

After Brad introduced himself to the large crowd, he pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket and began to read from it.

"On behalf of the Kenton's I would like to welcome you all to Kenton Manor. We all appreciate you braving the weather to share today with us. It is a *very* special day for all of us here. It's a day that those of us in this room, friends and family of Taylor, Haden, and Mr. and Mrs. Kenton, will always be honored to have been a part of. Today is a day for the books. I am honored to have been friends with both Taylor and Haden for years as well as their family. They are by far some of the kindest people I have ever met. They were my family when I had none. I will never forget the love they showed me at a time in my life when I wasn't very appreciative or receptive. They never gave up on me and for that I will be forever grateful to them." Brad paused for a moment and smiled at us before looking back into the crowd. "I also had the pleasure recently of meeting the Kenton's. They are a breed of their own... indeed and a gift to us all. It is an honor today that I get to be a part of such a special time in their lives. I know you are all growing curious and wishing I would get on with it, so without further adieu, I would like to welcome to the stage Aramis and Alexandra Kenton as well as Jacob and Sidney Leleux, Taylor and Haden's adoptive parents."

The crowd began applauding and I jumped up off the couch to look in the direction that Brad was pointing. I wanted to jump up and down with excitement when I saw my mom and dad walking through the crowded room towards us. I was so ecstatic, I almost couldn't contain myself. I missed them so much.

My mom was like me, she hated large crowds, but when saw me she practically ran towards us. My father was right behind her, holding her hand. The Kenton's entered after my parents and walked slowly, following them but keeping their distance as if to give them a head start. They shook hands and said their hellos as they walked.

My mom was as cute and pixie like as ever, sporting white jeans and a pale yellow sweater with a white turtle neck underneath, her dark brown hair was spiky, almost resembling Melly's since hers too, stuck out slightly in various directions. She ran up the steps, kissed our faces and hugged both Taylor and I at the same time, shaking almost uncontrollably. Behind her came dad, wrapping his arms around all of us at once. Clapping erupted yet again and I could hear crying coming from each and every direction.

Brad hugged my parents and asked us to be seated. I sat in between my mom and Taylor. My mom's hand grasped mine as if it would never let it go. Tears quietly streamed down my face as I watched Brad walk slowly back towards the podium again. What came out of Brad's mouth next shocked us all to the core.

"Most of you know that Haden and Taylor had both been separated from their adoptive parents recently. This reuniting is one of pure joy. I personally am honored to be here to witness it and as if God hadn't blessed us enough with the reuniting of Taylor, Haden and their family, He orchestrated something even bigger. There are no words for what we are going to witness next."

Not knowing what was going on I looked at Taylor wondering if he had answers. He shrugged his shoulders slightly and looked back at Brad. Brad paused again. His eyes rested on Aramis. His hand was on the small of Alexandra's back as they continued to walk slowly towards the stage. Aramis nodded and Brad continued. I was clueless.

"Those of you who are here on behalf of the Kenton's already knew the story of their baby boy. You already know that he was separated from when he was only a few months old. Because of unforeseen circumstances, they were forced to send him away. When Arkos, the head of the Stidoniums, sent his soldiers out to kill all half breed babies born in a six month window of the Ice Moon, their son was on that list. His young life was in danger."

Brad stopped and waited for a second before continuing. It looked as if he were contemplating his next words. "For those of you that don't know, there was a very important prophecy given to God's people many years ago. It stated that a special child would be born under the Ice Moon. This child was chosen by God. He or she would bring the vampires out of hiding and into the light. This child would be given such a power that he or she could shine the light . . . the truth, into the darkest of places. Their gift from God would allow them to expose all lies. This prophetic being would overthrow any that stood in their way. He or she would be extremely powerful. This child was a threat to Arkos."

Feeling the many stares that were now all aiming at me I looked down at my feet hoping to avoid them as much as I could. *So much for no attention tonight*, I thought to myself, wishing I had an invisibility cloak yet again.

"Growing up where I did, my people knew nothing of this. We didn't feel the consequences of Arkos' extreme anger. The Kenton's along with many of you did. You lived it. Some of you still do. Arkos knew it would only be one baby but he wanted them all out of the picture. He ordered that all babies that were born within the year of the Ice Moon were to be killed. Many babies were slaughtered during this dark time. Those that weren't killed were sent away and most were never seen again. This was the case with the Kenton's baby boy until just recently."

Gasps filled the room as I looked over at Mrs. Kenton who was waiting off the stage by the steps. She looked at her husband with such a look of shock that I began to cry again. I couldn't believe it. Someone had found their son. I scanned the sea of faces wondering which face was his.

Brad smiled at her and continued. "I don't have to tell most of you how the Kenton's are able to touch lives. When Arkos took the lives of their best friends years ago they selflessly took in their friends children and raised them as their own. One of those children decided recently that it was time they be reunited with the baby they lost so long ago. Talon Kenward took this upon himself to start a worldwide search for their son without telling them. As God would have it, he was able to find success sooner than he expected. Tonight I am so pleased to be able to reunite Aramis and Alexandra with their son who is here with us tonight in this very room."

Silence filled the air when Brad stepped away from the podium and walked off of the stage. Everyone's eyes were on him as he made his way to Mrs. Kenton. He took her hand and led her up the stairs as Aramis followed.

Brad stopped and gave her hand back to her husband. Brad whispered quietly to them both as we all waited impatiently.

My mom squeezed my hand as they talked and my breath caught in my throat. Right as I began adding two plus two in my head, Brad turned towards Taylor and smiled, motioning for him to get up. Taylor turned to me quickly and then stood up. As he released my hand I saw his clover green eyes shining from tears. *Oh my God*, I gasped quietly.

Brad said nothing more. He didn't need to. Silence filled the room as Taylor walked slowly towards the Kenton's. Tears fell down my cheeks like a silent rain storm. My Taylor was Aramis and Alexandra Kenton's long lost son. *He* was the baby they had sent away so long ago to protect and now he was home.

Taylor stood motionless, his parents in front of him. His mother stepped in closer, slowly touching her hand to his face. I could hear Taylor's breathing accelerate and I assumed he was trying not to cry when she pulled him close and kissed the side of his head. Aramis put his arm around them both. I could see his lips moving as he held them.

My mother sat still next to me crying quietly. I was sure that even though she was happy for Taylor, she had to have been grieving at what she must have thought was the loss of her only son. I, of course knew that was wrong. Taylor loved her more than life itself. He had been her baby boy his whole life and finding his biological parents wasn't ever going to change that. I laid

my head on her shoulder and let my tears continue to fall, thankful to have my mom with me. Right then I noticed someone was playing piano as if on cue. Its melody was soft.

Brad walked back to the podium taking the microphone again. "Today God has blessed us all. I want to thank you again for being here with us on this very special night, in coming blizzard and all," he laughed. "While everyone gets reunited up here, I would like to invite you all to mingle amongst yourselves. The night is young and we have yet another surprise in store before tonight is over. Take this time to get to know each other. Enjoy the music and grab a bite to eat; although not literally for some of you," Brad chuckled at his last words, "There are waiters ready to serve you. If you need anything, just locate the girl with hot pink in her hair. She would be glad to help you." Brad pointed at Melly who waved her hand in the air when he volunteered her.

I stayed seated next to my mom as we both watched Taylor and Mrs. Kenton speak softly to each other. I couldn't help but notice how they looked almost as if they could be brother and sister. Their features were so similar that it was obvious she was his mom. Mr. Kenton stood beside Taylor and Alexandra silently watching them speak.

After a few minutes, Taylor turned and walked towards us, grabbing our moms hand and pulling her into his arms. He whispered something to her and she smiled through her tears. I smiled too, as I was sure of what he had told her. He took her petite face in his hands and kissed her forehead before letting her go and walking over to our father. They looked at each other for a few minutes when smiled and pulled Taylor into a full blown hug, patting his back. It was amazing to watch. I sat on the couch giving them some time but it didn't take long before Taylor came and grabbed me. He was glowing, even more than usual. I could only imagine how it felt to meet you're biological parents, something I would never be able to do.

For the next half of an hour The Kenton's and our parents stood with us talking about life. They were all getting along so well that Taylor and I excused ourselves to get something to drink when we saw Kiernan walking towards us.

"Well, I'll be! Taylor, you've got two hottie moms, you lucky guy. So, I was thinking... you clearly don't need Haden. You're already surrounded by too much beauty. I think I'll go ahead and take that cute little thing off yer hands." Kiernan said grabbing my hand and kissing it as he winked at me.

"Dream on Linky, like she would choose you over him," Jenny said walking up behind him laughing.

"Ah, me little bunny is a wee bit jealous I see."

"Kiernan, keep dreaming," Jenny bit back playfully.

"Why do you keep fighting it m'love?" Kiernan was now turned facing Jenny, totally engrossed in her.

"Fight what... my love for you? Pshhhh," she laughed.

"Maybe we should leave you two alone?" Taylor teased.

Both Kiernan and Jenn spoke at the same time. Jenny said her usual, "no thanks," whereas Kiernan asked where they could go for some privacy.

Jenny slapped his arm. "You wish Kiernan."

Listening to them bicker gave me the sense that all was well with the world. In that very moment I felt like I was back at home in the states. I was so comforted by their silly fighting I couldn't help but laugh.

I continued to relish my in friends undeniable chemistry when in the corner of my eye I saw Gabriel on the other side of the room motion to Talon in a way that had my insides uneasy. I watched as Gabriel talked. The more he said, the stiffer Talon's body became. Gabe walked off and Talon's facial expression hardened. Gabriel went back to mingling with the guests and Talon slipped out of the room unnoticed by everyone but me. I debated on asking Taylor if he had seen what I had when I decided not to ruin the moment. I would just make a mental note to ask

Talon about it later. Whatever it was that Gabriel told him, it wasn't good. I was sure of that much.

Once I forced the picture of Talon's cold expression out of my head, I began enjoying myself. It was turning out to be by far the best night of my life. All of the suffering we had encountered over the past few months seemed to be erased. Tonight was a dream come true. We all mingled, danced, and laughed for a good couple of hours when suddenly the music stopped. Taylor excused himself right before I heard Melly call my name.

"Well hello beautiful! Are you about ready for *your* surprise?" she asked not waiting for an answer before talking again. "Any idea what it might be?"

"Not a clue," I said completely serious. I couldn't imagine what kind of surprise could top the others.

Right then a spot light shined directly on Melly and I. I could hear the beginning of one of my favorite songs Taylor had written for me, playing through the speaker system. He had written it after our night at Swan Lake. I listened to the violin intro, looking around wondering what was going on. Melly stepped back away from me and smiled a softer smile. Taylor's voice began to fill the room as the recording of his song played. The sound of his voice was so warm compared to his cold skin. It could melt ice.

I was now the center of what. I didn't know. I could see my mom, The Kenton's and all of our friends forming a circle surrounding me when Taylor stepped through all of them looking like an angel. He was holding one single daisy. It was such a delicate flower for such a cold time of the year, I thought. He kissed the cheeks of both of his moms and walked towards me. He handed the beautiful flower to me and began to speak, his voice warmer than a summer night.

He took my hand, kissed it and held it tightly in his own as he spoke.

"Once upon a time, I was just a boy, a boy with everything I could have asked for. I had parents who loved me and I had a sister who was my best friend. Today I am a man. The journey to get here was one of happiness as well as heartache. Each heartache was wrapped around a valuable lesson; each containing its own miracle. With every one of them, they taught me how to be the best me I could be. One lesson I learned was that I cannot function at my full potential with only half of my heart. I know this because I have tried and the result was devastating. I couldn't breathe without you in my life, Haden. When you left and went out on your own, I knew you thought you were protecting me. What I didn't know, was how my soul would scream in agony while you were gone."

As he looked deep into my eyes, I momentarily forgot we weren't alone, even with the bright light shining on us and the microphone attached to his shirt. He stopped talking and took a deep breath, his eyes staring deep into mine. Getting down on his right knee he pulled a little black box out of his pocket and opened it. Seeing this, my heart froze, my breathing stopped.

"Haden, there are moments in a man's life where he can define himself by them. The decisions he makes in those moments will alter his life forever. The choices he makes can make or break his soul for all eternity. I have spent my life loving you and I will until I die. In front of all of our family and friends I would like to ask you to do me the honor of spending the rest of your life with me... as my wife."

I sat very still while he slowly opened the box and held it up to me.

"Haden, I will catch every tear you cry and turn them into diamonds. There will be only happy tears from now on. I ask you to take my hand and walk with me for all eternity as my best friend, my wife and God willing, the mother of my children. Haden, will you marry me?"

As I looked at the most beautiful pear shaped diamond I had ever seen, I began to cry.

"Yes," I choked out softly in shock.

He took the delicate ring out of its box and placed it on my ring finger, kissing where it lay. I stood there taking in the moment, looking at the perfectly white diamond in awe of its simple beauty when Taylor stood up. Gently placing my face in his hands he kissed me; his lips

tender and full of emotion. When he pulled away, I felt his lips caress my cheek where one of my tears had just fallen.

"I will make you happy. You will never cry anything but happy tears again," he promised.

Applause erupted and the room came back to life. Family and friends surrounded us so that they could offer their congratulations.

The party ended with Taylor's arms around me and us dancing slowly. All of our friends and family continued to celebrate with us until the early morning.

That night was everything I never knew I always wanted. It was perfect. At the end of the night after we said all of our goodbyes, Taylor walked me to my room and true to his promise, he stayed with me, holding me until I fell asleep. That night, unlike so many others from the past year, my dreams were filled with beautiful images. Times were changing. In Taylor's arms I was safe.

## 26. *Trouble*

The next morning I awoke unusually early with the feeling of Spring in my heart even though Christmas was only a little ways away. We were fixing to be in the middle of a huge snow storm and I was singing like a bird after the last snow fall. I put my fluffy white robe over my penguin flannel pajama's, slipped on my polar bear slippers and went downstairs to see if anyone else was awake.

Roger was putting lights on the Christmas tree in the Kenton's huge foyer while singing Christmas carols, all alone. Everyone else was still asleep or busy apparently so I offered to help. It had never been my favorite job at home and it wasn't here but it was a huge tree and I couldn't imagine him doing it all alone.

When we were all finished, he and I took a step back and my heart fluttered as a familiar feeling, one I hadn't felt in a very long time rushed over me, *excitement*. The tree was so beautiful. We took a step back, proud of our work and sighed.

"That's one tall tree," Roger said with a smile.

"No kidding, I thought I was a goner a couple of times." Roger and I laughed and we went our separate ways, him towards the kitchen to get a drink and me back to bed. Tree lighting was exhausting.

Roger's decorations were everywhere and I enjoyed them as I walked. The smell of cinnamon filled the house and suddenly I began to feel the Christmas spirit for the first time this year. A Christmas without Taylor wouldn't have been a Christmas at all. I couldn't believe how fast things had changed. Picturing his beautiful face I smiled.

Back in my bed I snuggled under my covers and stared up at the ceiling. My mind was too awake to sleep. I rolled to my side and looked in the direction of my closet where my parents and Taylor's Christmas presents were stored. Even though only a week ago I had no clue where Taylor was or if I would be seeing my parents this Christmas, I couldn't resist buying them gifts. I had wrapped them and put them in the back of my closet just in case. The realization that we would all be spending Christmas together under the same roof had me on cloud nine.

As thoughts of a happy holiday filled my head, my body gave into sleep and I was able to rest for a couple of hours before my alarm clock went off.

Stretching long in my bed I reached over to turn my alarm off and noticed a dozen white chocolate covered strawberries in a crystal dish on my bed side table with a tiny note attached to them.



*Good morning beautiful. The Blizzard missed us so Brad, Marcus, Roger and I have all decided to do a little hunting this morning. I will see you when we return.*

*All my love,  
Taylor*

I smiled and took a bite of the most luscious strawberry I had ever eaten. I laid back down and looked towards the window where the sun was peeking out behind the drapes. I was in shock at how perfect everything was. Everything still seemed like a dream and here I was, about to start planning my wedding. I closed my eyes and imagined the preacher saying the words I had so longed to hear. That thought almost made me giddy inside.

*Thank you for my strawberries. I love you so much,* I said in my head sending my fiancé a mental note. *Fiancé, I love that word,* I thought to myself grinning like a little kid on Christmas morning. It had been so long since I had tried to communicate with Taylor in that way. I didn't know if I still could but it was definitely worth trying. I loved him so much it hurt.

My cell phone rang bringing me out of my little world.

My mom's cheery voice greeted me on the other end. "Good morning honey! How did you sleep?"

"Better than I have in a long time. How about you and dad? Did you like your room?"

"We slept like babies after talking like teenagers until early in the morning. He and I were both so excited to be with you and your brother." she said stopping herself right before she said the word brother.

"It's okay mom. I know how weird this must be for you."

"It will just take some getting used to," she said apologetically. "It's not like we pick the weird issues in our lives, Haden. What we do choose . . . is how we deal with them."

I found myself very proud of my mom at that moment. I knew it had to be harder on her than she was letting on.

"Taylor and I know that this will be weird for some people for awhile, especially you and dad. We'll just have to work through all of the kinks. We expect a little weirdness," I told her trying to assure her that I wasn't the least bit upset with her.

"Haden, for only being eighteen years old, you sure do talk as if you've been alive for fifty years sometimes. God definitely knew what he was doing when he picked you as those things. . . "She caught herself again and started over surely wishing she would have chosen her words more carefully the first time.

"God was smart when he chose you to help those people... I mean vampires. You have always had the biggest heart. I know you will do whatever your job is and do it well. Your." her speaking slowed as she tried to stop herself from crying. "Your uncle and I both know you'll do great and we'll be right here cheering you on."

At that moment I wished I could have jumped through the phone and hugged her.

"You mean my father," I said quickly. "He's my dad and you're my mom. You will *always* be my mom, forever."

I could hear my mother's crying pick up and my heart ached to be with her. Before I could say anything else she told me that she loved me and changed the subject.

"So, we have ourselves a pretty special wedding to plan. I say that we should probably get busy," she said letting her usual spunkiness return to her voice.

"Yep, I am still in shock. I was just laying here thinking about everything before you called."

"Well honey, there's no time for shock. We have a lot to do which is why I was calling you. Melly, Jenny, Alexandra, Arabella, Roger and I were hoping you were up to some hot tea and some Bridal books after breakfast. The girls went out earlier and got a ton of fun magazines.

All the boys went hunting except Aramis who took dad and Kiernan out to show them around. So it's just us girls for awhile."

I told my mom I had a couple things to do and then I could meet them. I got off the phone, did a little Pilates and jumped in the shower. I stood still letting the hot water heal my sore muscles when I heard a noise coming from my room. I could hear someone moving around in there. Assuming Melly or Jenny had let themselves in, I rinsed the conditioner out of my hair, turned the water off and got out. I wrapped myself in a towel and opened the bathroom door. My entire body froze at the sight of him.

"Now *that's* a good look for you, very sexy." Gavin said with a sly grin. He was standing by my window, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and a devilish smirk on his charming face. He was dressed in all black, his sweater clinging to his perfectly defined chest.

My voice caught in my throat as I started to speak. "What are you doing here?" I asked tightening my towel around my dripping body.

"Aw, you don't look happy to see me. Don't be mad. I just came to offer my Congratulations."

In one fluid movement he was off of the wall, walking towards me, his eyes staring into mine. When he reached my side he grinned and my heart started to accelerate. He laughed, enjoying my response and I clenched my jaw as I tried to refrain from hitting him.

"Oh so you *did* miss me," he said hearing my heart rate change. He walked behind me where he stopped. He stood so close to me that I could feel his ice cold breath on my neck. I was still frozen, not with fear, but with whatever hold he had on me. I couldn't move. I just stood there, naked and wet, with only a towel between him and me. I shut my eyes and focused on clearing my thoughts so Taylor wouldn't hear me.

"I have heard from some that you have been a very busy girl since you and your, wanna-be vampire boyfriend reunited. I was even told that you were planning a wedding. Is that true?" he asked, his tone emotionless.

Before I could answer him his cold lips were on my neck causing me to shiver. I could feel his teeth lightly graze my neck as he moaned quietly. I tried to move away and he pulled me back, turning me so that I was facing him. He was so close, his lips were almost touching mine; his grip on my waist was tight. He pressed his lips hard on mine, kissing me with such force my lips almost hurt and then released me.

Knowing I couldn't let him see the effect he had on me, I took a deep breath and asked him again why he was in my room uninvited. He walked slowly, circling around me while rubbing his index finger lightly down my arm. I felt like a jelly fish as my legs began to get all wobbly.

Growing up I didn't know much about vampires other than the obvious fact that they were evil and survived on the blood of humans. I also didn't know they were real. Thankfully Talon had shed some light on the whole vampire subject for me not too long after I arrived at Kenton Manor. He told me that the older the vampire was and the more pure their diet was . . . the more seductive they would become to humans. "Gavin," Talon said, "was a perfect example." Gavin's diet consisted of hunting men only, the stronger the better. Talon said that Gavin got a thrill out of it. It was almost as if Gavin thought that with each victim he consumed, he would also gain their strength, in return, making him more powerful. *That* was Gavin's high. He had no interest in feeding on women. Talon said that most women were at Gavin's mercy without even knowing it. They would follow him to the ends of the earth if he asked. Female vampires weren't immune to *NightMares* either. NightMares were what Gavin's kind were called. The word night stood for creatures of the night and the word mare symbolized the beauty, strength and speed of a horse. They were mesmerizing, dark creatures who were as fast as lightening and they were to be feared. In the vampire world, they were the top of the food chain. This was why Caina was so willing to do whatever Gavin asked.

Standing there with Gavin's perfect face only inches away from mine again I reminded myself that I was stronger than others. I closed my eyes and pictured Taylor's face, his perfectly angular features warming my now cold heart. Taylor's face gave me the strength I didn't have only moments before. I turned my back to Gavin and walked back towards the bathroom while he watched my every move. Now that I wasn't right next to him I felt my anger resurfacing. He smiled at me, clearly enjoying what he was seeing. My anger didn't bother him. Instead he found it attractive somehow.

"I am not going to ask you again because honestly I don't care why you're here. I know what you did to Taylor and as much as I would like to teach you a lesson, for now I will let it go. God will have His revenge on you, not me," I said through my teeth.

At the sound of God's name Gavin laughed so deep that I could feel it resonate in my chest.

"God... What God? You have been so deceived in your fragile little human world. If there is a God who so wants revenge, I invite it," he said his face smug.

Before I could say anything else there was a soft knock at my door.

"Haden," Jenny called. "It's me."

Gavin's face flashed towards the door and for a brief moment I thought he was going to go open it but instead he came closer to me.

"I will let you have your girl time for now but I will be back. We aren't finished," he whispered in my ear.

I stood there in disbelief as he turned towards me and winked right before jumping from my third story window. I was not going to let him ruin my wedding and there was no way I was telling anyone that he had been in my room. Surely they would all freak out. I would just have to handle him myself even though I didn't know how just yet. I did know for sure that Taylor couldn't find out about Gavin knowing where I was. I wasn't going to lose him ever again.

"Haden, are you in there?" Jenny asked knocking again.

For a minute I had forgotten that she was at my door. I looked up at the cross above the door, sighed and opened the door letting her in.

"Hey there hot stuff," she teased, "I love the wet look. I bet Taylor would too. You need some clothes though," her soft laughter instantly comforted me. I could only pray that it would be enough to keep my thoughts quiet and out of Taylor's head.

"So, Roger has cooked up a storm downstairs and we're all waiting for you. The boys are all out doing vampy stuff. You know, there is something *really* sexy about envisioning Talon hunting. He's so fine. I bet he doesn't even have to hunt. He probably just calls the poor mesmerized animals over to him and they go without a second thought."

"You are so silly," I laughed finding her amusing.

"I'm not silly, I'm truthful. He is one piece of meat I wouldn't mind sinking my teeth into."

I almost choked on my own spit. "Oh good god, you are spending way too much time with Melly," I said in shock trying to smother the ever growing smile I had on my face. I had never seen this Jenny before. She was totally new to me, amusing but definitely new.

"Talon had better watch out," I teased while she continued to dig through my armoire trying to find me an outfit so we could meet everyone downstairs.

When we got to the breakfast room, surprisingly the boys were back from hunting. I caught Taylor's eyes immediately. Without consciously thinking about it my body began walking towards him and he did the same. He wrapped his arms around me, keeping his eyes locked into mine. I noticed immediately that something wasn't right. His eyes were uneasy. Right then dad, Taylor's father and Kiernan walked through the door, all looking highly distraught. Jenny looked at me probing me for answers. I just shrugged my shoulders. I had no idea what was going on but I knew it couldn't be good.

"Everyone, please be seated," Mr. Kenton said, his voice stiff.

Taylor slipped his fingers through mine and led me to the large breakfast table where we sat with the others. I looked over at Melly who was talking quietly to Brad with a look of disgust on her face. Marcus just kept petting Barnabus while Roger was listening intently to Jenny. Mom and Mrs. Kenton were sitting next to each other, sad expressions on their beautiful faces. For a minute I thought that someone had seen Gavin leaving my room. I could only pray that wasn't the case.

When everyone was seated and quiet Mr. Kenton asked Talon to proceed.

Talon stood up, his expression unreadable, his posture perfect. "Gabriel and I have been keeping an eye on things in the US since we have been gone and it seems things have only gotten worse. The death toll has doubled." Talon looked down at the table and then back up again, "It seems that all but five have since gone missing from the morgues. I have spoken with a few of my connections and was informed that there have been a multitude of new slayings all over the NW side of the states." Talon looked at Aramis and then sat down.

"We have come to the conclusion that we need to go back to the United States and put an end to it," Aramis said.

"Are you saying that someone is creating new vampires?" Jenny asked Aramis wide eyed.

"Yes that's exactly what we believe."

"Why in the US and not here?" Melly asked.

"It's not just happening in the United States, Melly. It's on our soil too." Aramis looked at his wife and then back at Melly. "We believe there is a much bigger picture than we are seeing right now."

"Is it Arkos?" I asked.

That's when Gabriel spoke up, "We have a pretty good idea who it is and it ain't him, little sister. It seems that your admirer is having some issues with not being the head honcho over here. We're gonna head on over to the US, clean up his mess, and put him where he belongs."

Aramis cleared his throat and looked at me with a solemn face. "What Gabriel was trying to say is that we believe Gavin is the one behind it all. It looks to us like he might be building an army. Yet only one person has actually seen him in the US so Arkos isn't doing anything about it," he said looking right at Taylor.

"Why would the Gavin guy be building an army?" Jenny asked sitting up straighter in her chair. "Is he after Haden?"

"He wants Arkos gone," Melly said shaking her head, still wearing the same look of disgust. "I would be willing to bet that this has nothing to do with Haden. He's so smug, he thinks he can have whatever he wants. Gavin is all about power and attention. I've been waiting for him to do something stupid," Melly continued. "This doesn't surprise me at all."

"Me neither," Roger joined in. "He has always had a bad attitude and it's no news that he has his sight on Haden. I bet he thinks he'll win her over if he takes Arkos' place. What a child," Roger said rolling his eyes.

"I personally wish that Arkos would have done away with him years ago," Melly added.

"Arkos would never do that," Aramis interjected. "He was the one who created both Gavin and his brother. I remember it like it was yesterday. Arkos was building his own army at the time. He had been on a prowl of sorts, looking for people that possessed the qualities he was looking for. Gavin was his favorite. He was the lead singer in a rock band just on the brink of stardom when Arkos found him. Landon and I had been following Arkos for weeks trying to get an insight into what he was planning. One night after a performance, Arkos approached Gavin who looked at him as if he were beneath him. Arkos loved it. After that he sent a couple of guys to mess with Gavin and he went crazy on them. Gavin was sure of himself and enjoyed a good fight. The only thing he lacked was self control and Arkos knew he could force that lesson. Gavin was strong. He was a born leader. It wasn't long before Arkos approached him again, this time making Gavin an offer he knew he couldn't refuse... eternal life and power. What Arkos

didn't bargain for was that Gavin's brother would show up the night of the change to visit Gavin. Without a word, Arkos changed Sebastian too. What Arkos didn't know was that Sebastian was visiting from the seminary. He was on his way to becoming a priest," Mr. Kenton said, his words quieting the entire room, shocking us all.

"Gavin's brother is a priest?" I asked, the words slipping out of my mouth.

"No, he never made it back to the seminary. No one has heard from him in years," Aramis said shaking his head. "Arkos left him to die that night when he found out that he was a Christian. He took Gavin with him after presuming that Sebastian was dead. Landon and I waited for them to leave before taking him to your birth parents house. Your mother and father took him into their home where your mother nursed him until he was strong. That didn't take long once we got some blood into him. He stayed only for a few short weeks. He was repulsed at what he had become. He was having a really hard time making sense of it all. We tried to explain to him that we were Christians too but the more his thirst grew the more he wasn't so sure that it was even possible. A young vampire's thirst is almost unquenchable. It takes a very strong spirit to fight the constant longing for blood. It takes an even stronger one to not feed on humans. In the beginning, the scent of blood is extremely strong to the newly changed." He said this smiling at Brad who was nodding in agreement. "Brad over there is the perfect example of self restraint. I can tell you that even right now he is fighting back thoughts of feeding."

Brad nodded once again and Melly kissed his cheek with a look of pure pride on her face.

"So what's the plan?" Marcus asked. "When do we leave and how do we find Gavin?"

"The plan is to rip the stupid vamp apart and find the nearest fire," Gabe said laughing.

Ignoring Gabriel Mr. Kenton continued, "That's the problem. No one has seen or heard from Gavin since you all fled from the United States except Taylor. Gavin is flying under the radar at the moment, keeping his distance from us. He doesn't want to anger Arkos until he is ready."

I hadn't realized that I was biting my nails nervously until Taylor leaned over and whispered in my ear, asking me if I was alright. I told him I was fine, I was just sad about the whole situation. In actuality I was anything but fine. None of them had a clue just how cocky Gavin was obviously. I sat there wondering what I was supposed to do. Was I supposed to tell them that I had seen him less than two hours before this family meeting? I couldn't do that. Taylor would put himself in danger and I wasn't about to lose him again.

Talon answered Marcus breaking my train of thought. "We leave tomorrow morning."

Leave it to my mom to be the human in the room worrying about her daughter. "What about Taylor and Haden's wedding?" she asked softly not wanting to step on anyone's toes.

They all looked at us waiting for an answer.

"Nothing will stop me from marrying this girl," Taylor grinned. "It's all up to her as to when she wants to marry me," he winked.

I looked over at him and told him that I loved him intensely in my head before I spoke. "Actually this works out great," I said excited.

Everyone turned and looked at me as if I was insane before I explained. "I would actually like to get married back home so it's perfect. We can all go back together. Gavin isn't ruining anything."

"I think Haden's suggestion is awesome. She and I will be packed and ready to leave for the states tomorrow morning early," Taylor said looking pleased.

"Well then it's settled, everyone take care of whatever last minute things you need to and I'll have the jet ready to leave tomorrow morning at six am," Taylor's father said with my dad nodding in agreement next to him.

My mom's smile was huge. I was sure she was already planning where everyone would sleep. I was just happy to be going home.

The day flew by in the blink of an eye and all the while I fought hard to keep Gavin out of my head. His beautiful devilish face kept intruding in my thoughts off and on all day long. I

was hoping that once back in the US he would back off but I knew better. "I'll covet you," kept playing in my head like a broken record. Talon hadn't explained if what Gavin said about he and I being bonded was possible and I hadn't asked. Now I was wishing I had. It obviously wasn't going to make a difference right now anyway. I knew two things, that I had no choice but to get rid of Gavin and that I was marrying Taylor. It was the how part that would just have to come to me later.

As I put the last piece of clothing into my new luggage, a gift from Melly, there was a knock at the door. I opened it to see my father and Talon standing there.

"Hi," I said confused as I backed up so they could come in my room. Talon walked in while dad looked behind them in the hall as if he were making sure they hadn't been followed.

"Hi honey. I'm sorry we're barging in on you like this but Talon and I need to speak to you alone. There's something you need to know before we go home and we don't have much time."

I looked from my dad to Talon and both were wearing expressions that I couldn't read.

Dad sat down on my bed, patting it with his hand for me to sit next to him as Talon shut the door. Talon stood frozen in front of the door like a guard.

"Honey, do you remember what our last name means," he stopped and then cleared his throat, "I mean mine and your mother's last name."

"Sure I do. It means *The Wolf*," I said not understanding where he was going with that question.

"Yes, you're correct. That's exactly what it means. Haden, what I'm fixing to tell you will sound like I'm making it up but I assure you I'm not. I need you to listen closely since our time is so limited. It was believed that our ancestors were werewolves."

Wondering if I was hearing things I looked deep into my father's eyes. "Huh?"

"They weren't the wolves of fables that feasted on humans Haden. They were civilized wolves. They were wolves created by God to be protectors of the hidden world," he said watching my face closely. "That included vampires, until Arkos took control and the others went into hiding. Once that happened and the other vampires decided not to fight, our kind dispersed, going in many different directions. It was said that the head wolf, Lee, my great Grandfather, took some of our kind and moved to an undisclosed location where they are believed to be today. We are decedents of Lee, the leader of the wolves, hence our last name." He looked at Talon who gave him a nod before he continued. "It has been said that when there is no threat on the hidden world, there is no need for the wolves so they will stop phasing. When the war was over and my great grandfather moved, he sent his wife and children to the states where they could live a human life, undetected by anyone. He decided to stay behind with the others to watch Arkos."

I sat there looking at him like he had lost his mind. What was he saying? He was a werewolf? That would mean I was half vampire and werewolf and that was insane. He saw the look on my face and began talking again.

"I know this has to be hard for you to understand. It's definitely a lot to take in. I know you've been through a lot and I wouldn't be sitting here telling you this if I didn't think it was necessary." He stopped and rubbed his forehead. "Haden, Talon came to me with the news of the newest death counts and we talked. Honey, we know that we are on the brink of another war. With that means the return of our kind," he said looking deep into my eyes to see if I was grasping what he was saying which I wasn't.

"I don't understand what you're getting at, dad," I said looking at Talon who tilted his head in my dad's direction telling me to let him explain.

"Honey, we are werewolves... you, me, Melly, Gabriel and Talon. We don't know when or how but we do know that it is only a matter of time before we phase. I have been reading about this for years. When Talon approached me, I knew he was right. We have to be prepared when the time comes. When it comes to you four, we are unsure as to how you all will change

beings you have vampire in your blood as well. You four are special. There are none of your kind reported in books so we have no idea what we'll be dealing with."

I sat there emotionless contemplating what he had just said. "So you're saying that I'm not human at all?"

"No honey, you're not, none of you are. You were just able to live as a human since there was no need for our kind."

"Does mom know?" I asked.

"No she doesn't."

"Are you planning on telling her?" I asked thinking of how freaked out she would be.

"Not right now no. I think it's better we keep this our little secret for now. She's been through enough recently with finding out about you and Taylor."

"So what is Taylor?"

"Half vampire, half human," Talon answered.

"Does he know about me?" I questioned.

"No he doesn't but he will need to, all of your friends will," dad said. "Until we know how the phase will affect you all I will be sending you to Swan Lake for each full moon until we know exactly what we are dealing with."

"What about my wedding?" I asked starting to wonder if it would ever happen.

"It won't affect anything unless you let it, Haden. You have a long road ahead of you but we believe that we have some time before the war begins. Aramis spent the majority of our flight here informing me about the prophecy. He said that he was waiting to talk with you about it when the time was right. Sweetheart, it's almost time."

Talon spoke up after standing guarding the door in silence. "You will have to be honest with us from now on Haden. No more withholding information. You may be the prophetic one but we are family." He said those words staring at me intently. "I know Gavin was here in your room. I can still smell him," he said, his face looking ill.

My dad looked at me shocked.

"You forget little sister that we too have a good sense of smell," he smirked.

"Haden, he was in your room? How come you said nothing?" my dad asked upset.

"I didn't see a point in freaking everyone out. Besides," I was unable to finish before Talon interrupted me, answering in my place.

"Our little Haden thinks she can conquer the world by herself. What she doesn't know is that I won't let her. I have watched you your entire life. I will continue to keep an eye on you. So no sneaky stuff," Talon said his face serious again.

Dad grabbed my hand putting it in his. "I have loved you Haden since you were a baby. I loved my sister and I would have walked to the ends of the world for her. I only wish you would have gotten to know her. I do know that she would be so proud of you and your brothers and sister too. You have a lot of work ahead of you but God doesn't make mistakes and He didn't make one in creating you. No, you're not what you thought you were. No, your life won't be easy but it will be worth something. You have a huge purpose, all of you do. When you're feeling overwhelmed, pray. God hears you. Always remember that."

Talon tilted his head to the door and said we had company, stopping dad in his tracks.

## *27. Home*

Dad left my room as soon as Talon heard someone coming. Talon stayed behind almost giving Jenny a heart attack when she got to my door. She actually started to fall over. Talon caught her, steadying her back on her feet and smiling at her before he let her go.

"Sorry about that. You scared me when you opened the door," Jenny said trying to catch her breath as she stared at him.

"I was just leaving," Talon said turning to look at me.

"No, you should stay. I was just going to ask Haden if she was up for a late night snack."

"Actually, I was just on my way out to hunt," Talon said apologetically.

"Please stay with us," I asked him before he could leave.

"Sure. I could always wait for you and we could hunt together if you'd like."

"I'd love that since Taylor is out with Brad getting his stuff from Lenny's."

"Well I'd go too but I think blood tastes nasty," Jenny said laughing.

Talon smiled at her comment and she immediately started glowing.

"When are we hunting?" Gabriel asked shocking us all as he entered my room.

"Now," Melly interjected right after him.

I laughed out loud momentarily forgetting the conversation just minutes before.

"I feel so left out," Jenny said huffing.

"I could change that for you," Gabriel offered.

"Gabriel, that's not funny," I said rolling my eyes at him.

"I wasn't joking," he replied winking at Jenny who just stood there with a huge flattered smile on her pretty face.

Trying to change the subject I asked where Kiernan, Marcus and Roger were.

"They're downstairs playing Yahtzee. Last I heard, Kiernan was beating Roger and Marcus had decided to head off to his room to read. I think that the bet was, if Kiernan won, then Roger owed him dinner," Melly said pulling me off my bed.

"And if Roger wins, he gets to eat Kiernan?" Jenny questioned laughing. "Hey, I can wish right?"

"So are we outta here or not slow pokes?" Gabriel asked ignoring Jenny's joke.

"Right after we have a late night snack with Jenn," I told him smiling at her.

So we all played follow the leader and headed to the kitchen where we found Kiernan and Roger. The smell of grilled cheese in the air made my stomach growl.

"I want one," Jenn said looking into the pan that Roger was hovering over.

"Me too," I joined in.

"I figured as much which is why I'm still cooking. Kiernan here has already had three sandwiches," Roger said clearly proud of his cooking abilities.

"And they were mighty tasty my friend," Kiernan said with a mouth full.

Once my sandwich was done cooking I walked over to the round table in the far side of the huge kitchen that everyone else other than Roger and I were sitting at. I stood there eating and listening to Gabriel go on about wanting to find Sebastian.

"Impossible," Talon said.

"Nothing's impossible baby brother," Gabriel said leaning back in his chair and popping his knuckles.

"Say what you will Gabriel, but it is virtually impossible when you don't have anyone willing to give up his location."

"What's with the secrecy?" Melly piped up, "I bet Brad and I could find him."

Roger shook his head as he washed his hands. "I say leave the poor guy alone. We can all handle this on our own."

I hated to always be the party pooper but I was still half human or werewolf or whatever I was. Either way, I was some part of a creature that needed sleep. So I told them that Talon and I had better get to hunting before I was too tired, making it pointless. Talon stood up and followed me out of the room smiling at Jenny who was waving nervously at him.

Talon and I walked side by side until right before we got to the forest when I smiled at him and began running. I was so comfortable being next to him. It felt like he had always been in my life. I felt safe with him.



When we were finished hunting we walked back to the house slowly. I knew that Taylor and Brad were going hunting too before they came home so I figured I had some time to spare before he'd be back. I looked up at Talon and smiled. He looked down at me and smiled back. We both laughed.

"You know, you're pretty good at that for being a beginner," he said approvingly.

"Good at hunting?" I questioned.

"Yep, you've come a long way since that day at Swan Lake."

I froze dead in my tracks. "How did you know about that?" I asked looking up at him. "You knew where I was?"

"Yes, I know a lot," he smirked.

"Really, like what?" I asked in shock.

He smiled a sly smile and started walking again.

"Like what?" I begged.

"Like the fact that you fidget when you're nervous."

"Anyone can see that," I said unimpressed.

"Alright, how about the fact that you organize your clothes by style and color, or the fact that you used to melt seven slices of American cheese in a cup in the microwave and eat it with a spoon when you were little," he said watching me out of the corner of his eye as he walked.

My jaw must have hit the ground. I stopped walking again. "How on earth do you know that?"

"You didn't think I was going to let them take my baby sister away and not make sure you were well taken care of did you?"

I was silent while I thought about it.

"I never really put much thought into it I guess. How long had you been watching me," I asked curious.

"As long as I can remember," he said simply.

"Thank you... for keeping an eye on me." I leaned my head on his arm for a brief moment and exhaled.

"I promised mom," he said solemnly.

His words cut me to the core. "What was she like?" I questioned as I tried to choke back my tears.

"She was like you," he answered staring forward.

We walked the rest of the way back to the house in silence. I was trying to process how he had been watching me for my entire life, almost like a guardian angel and yet I had never seen him or had I?

I told him goodnight and I headed to my room where I was supposed to meet Taylor. When I got there Melly was sitting outside my door playing her gameboy.

"These little things are addicting," she laughed closing it.

She followed me in my room and it wasn't long before Brad and Taylor showed up. It didn't matter how long I looked at Taylor, it never failed, with each new time I had issues breathing around him. I wondered if that would ever go away. Even my body temperature went crazy when he was around.

The guys were both in great moods. Taylor told us that Lenny was definitely game with going to the states for our wedding. We just had to pick a date and tell him when. I hadn't even thought about a date. Ever since he proposed, things had been crazy. I hadn't had time to catch my breath and tonight's crazy news literally had my head spinning. I felt like I was in the middle of a soap opera and no one had told me. Part of me wondered if I would ever have a normal life again. I knew that answer in my heart. It was no.

The next morning we all boarded the jet except Arabella, Nanny Mena and Marcus who stayed behind. Taylor's parents didn't want Arabella anywhere near any possible danger. Marcus had offered to stay behind and watch over her and Nanny. They accepted, thankful for his offer.

They would all fly to the states in time for the wedding. Marcus had asked to keep Barnabus behind and at first Melly had said no but towards the end she caved and let him stay. You would have thought she was leaving her child behind with the way she fussed over that sweet dog.

The flight was great. Now that I was mentally aware of what was going on as opposed to the last time I was on the Kenton's jet I got to see just how beautiful it really was. I looked at Taylor who was across the cabin from me in deep conversation with our parents, The Kenton's, and Brad. I wondered what was going on in his head about all of this. He didn't look the least bit phased sitting there with his new parents *and* his adopted ones. I admired him for that.

My insides were a mess. I wondered when I would have even five minutes alone with him to tell him about my parents and what I was. I was about to explode from holding it in. According to the books, I was a monster but I knew better. I knew that no matter what my physical make up was, my soul was anything but evil. Yet I couldn't help but wonder what me being half vampire and half wolf really meant for my future. What did it mean for mine and Taylor's? Right now I would just focus on going home.

Arriving in Montana was like a dream come true. The snow covered the ground like a blanket and Christmas was so close I could almost touch it. Once off the plane, the Kenton's had arranged limo's to pick us up. Brad and Melly, Kiernan and Jenn, and Taylor and I all rode in one while everyone else took the other.

When we stopped in front of our house I couldn't help but want to cry. I got out of the limo as fast as I could. I stood still, inhaling deeply, over and over again taking it all in. I was finally home. I never thought this day would come.

Taylor came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist as he whispered in my ear. "Everything is going to be perfect. You'll see. You're home, you're safe, and we're going to have a wedding here soon. Who knows maybe even a baby too," he teased, his soft voice warming my heart.

I had no idea if that was even possible. What if he didn't want to marry me when he found out what I really was? I turned to face him and nuzzled my head in his chest so he wouldn't see the tears flooding my eyes.

When I looked up it was plain to see that I wasn't the only one happy to be home. Kiernan's van was parked in my parent's driveway, music blaring out of its speakers. Like the fool he was, he began dancing around the front yard care-free and happy to be home. Soon everyone joined him while they played in the snow. Even mom, dad, and the Kenton's had gotten in on the action before going inside.

I watched as Talon threw a snow ball right at Gabriel hitting him in the head. Gabriel stood still, slowly turning his head in Talon's direction where Talon stood laughing. Gabriel stared at him with a huge grin on his face as he bent down gathering snow and rolled it into a huge ball. Talon motioned for him to bring it on and then Talon took off running. Jenny had just thrown one at Kiernan who chased her, catching her and throwing her on his back while he ran around the yard.

The mood in the air was as light as a feather. Everyone was happy and even if it were only for a moment, it seemed as if all was normal. I laughed as Taylor danced with me, spinning me around the yard. He pulled me close to him and kissed my lips sending chills down my spine.

"Welcome home, love," he said his eyes twinkling.

I knew our playtime couldn't last forever but I enjoyed it while I could. Eventually we were all ready to go inside and get warm. I followed the others while Jenny and Kiernan led everyone in our house as if it were their own. Mom had made some homemade peppermint hot chocolate by the time we got inside and Talon smiled at me when he smelled it. Before I could go upstairs to unpack mom insisted that we all go into the living room for some hot chocolate and a snack. She had Kiernan helping her bring in blood for everyone. I was totally impressed with how well she was handling everything. She didn't say one word about her beautiful white carpet and the possibility of stains. I guess she figured vampires weren't likely to spill.

We all enjoyed our tasty snacks before everyone began to go their separate ways. Mom had invited everyone to stay at our house but they all declined. Mr. Kenton had already made plans before leaving England. Our house wasn't huge and surely Mr. Kenton had known that when he made reservations at the hotel in Billings. They definitely weren't the type to intrude, even if it was where their son lived.

They said they would see us the next day, accepting my dad's offer to supply their nourishment while staying in Montana. They said their goodbyes and left with a supply that would last them until the next evening when they would be back. Roger tagged along with the Kenton's since he was staying in the same hotel. He told us that he was ready for some peace and quiet which we all knew meant that he was ready for a bubble bath. Whoever thought vampires didn't like baths had never met Roger.

Kiernan and Jenny left not too long after; both wanting to see their families but promising they would see us the next day. Jenny had debated on meeting us for coffee later. I was sure she was more interested in if Talon would be there or not. I had convinced her that Haylee needed her. Besides the fact I was pretty positive that her parents would be happy to have her home at least one night.

I mentioned to Taylor that all I could think about was reading a good book and a cafe mocha. Melly overheard us and asked if she and Brad could come with us. Before all was said and done, Gabriel and Talon were coming too. Our first stop was the book store where Taylor and I had worked.

When we walked in it was almost as if we had never left, the familiar smell of books comforting my senses. Melly walked in as if she owned the store, turning heads immediately. I had been around her so much that I had forgotten what kind of affect she had on guys. It didn't take long to remind me. Brad looked like a Southern stone carved out of the most expensive granite

It didn't take me long to find a book. I knew exactly what I wanted to read about . . . werewolves. Melly's eyes caught mine as I grabbed the book I wanted but she didn't say anything about it. From the look of her face though, it was pretty obvious that our uncle and brother had the same conversation with her that they had with me. I was sure she knew that I hadn't told Taylor about my recent findings. I was pretty positive that she hadn't told Brad either; for now it would be our little secret. I paid for my book and we walked out into the cold night air. Stifling a yawn I told Taylor I wanted to pass on the cafe mocha for now. I was really tired mentally and just wanted to go home. We said our goodbyes and Taylor and I walked to his car so we could head back home.

Mental exhaustion had been a constant theme in my brain lately. I was beyond tired when we pulled up to our house. The soft glow in the windows from the lights on let me know our parents had waited up for us. As tired as I was, I was happy.

Taylor opened the front door for me and we walked hand in hand into the kitchen where our mom and dad were sitting at our round dinette table.

"Hey you two, there's some hot chocolate on the stove if you're thirsty," mom said, her tiny hands cradling her cup while her bear-slipped feet rested on dad's legs. Dad was sitting right next to her reading the local paper. He shut the paper and put it down when he saw us come in.

"Pull up a couple of chairs," he said smiling.

Taylor pulled out my chair before he went to pour us some hot chocolate. When he came back he moved his chair closer to mine and I laid my head on his shoulder inhaling the warm scent of the hot chocolate mixed with the scent of Taylor's skin. I couldn't remember having been so at ease in months. If it was a dream, I definitely did not want to wake up.

We sat at the kitchen table for almost an hour talking with our parents about life and our dreams for the future. My parents even brought up grandkids. It was the best conversation I had been a part of in my life. I had three people whom I loved immensely and who loved me the

same, all sitting at our cozy table with me sipping the world's best hot chocolate. I sat there in awe of what a perfect moment it was. Even if outside of our house the world was crazy, right then, right there, I was safe. I was happy. I was home.

## 28. *Christmas*

The following days were filled with so much laughter that I almost didn't recognize my life. It had all seemed so dreary for awhile and now to have hope in my heart, well I was simply overwhelmed.

Here it was, Christmas Eve already. The past few days flew by in a blur as we all worked together to get our house ready for Christmas. Each room downstairs was quickly becoming transformed into a holiday heaven. The Kenton's even hired someone to come and decorate the outside for my parents. My favorite decoration by far was the ten foot Christmas tree that the guys chopped down behind the house. It now stood grandly in our family room. It was beautiful; the smell of pine instantly put me in the mood to sing Christmas carols.

Everything was perfect in every way until I received a very peculiar Christmas card. It wasn't unusual for me to receive numerous Christmas cards every year. What *was* unusual was that this one had no return address. I took the card from my father and went into my room to read it in private. Taylor was out doing some last minute Christmas shopping with Talon, Gabriel and Roger. Brad and Melly were out hunting which left only my parents and I at home. It was the quietest it had been since the night we got back making it almost seem like old times.

I walked through the door into my room, shutting it behind me and sat down on my bed, setting all the mail down all except for the curious card. Something inside me said that maybe I should just throw it away if it was going to cause me so much anxiety. Another part of me, the louder part, said that I had no choice but to open it, so I did. The card looked like a typical generic Christmas card with a picture of a Santa Claus grabbing a cookie off of a plate. The written words inside however, were anything *but* generic. I held the card in my hand and stared at the words as my heart rate began to accelerate. *You can run but you can't hide.*

I read the words over and over, contemplating what to do. Gavin was watching me. I knew it was him just as he knew I would. What I didn't know was whether to tell Talon about the card or not. After all, the card could have been sent from anywhere. I grabbed the envelope and read the post office's stamp. *Billings*. He was here, close to me. For all I knew he could be outside my house right now.

My stomach turned as I held the disturbing card in my hand. Talon and Gabriel's speculations now made perfect sense. I knew immediately that they were right. It was Gavin who was building an army. I could feel it in my soul.

I took the evil card and put it in my underwear drawer where I was sure no one would find it. With today being Christmas Eve, I had no time to think about Gavin and his scare tactics. My mom had planned a huge buffet for tonight and was totally in party mode. She and I had just finished setting up the tables in the dining room and laying the food out. My father was in the living room whistling while he moved furniture around to make more sitting room for us and our guests. It was only a matter of time until everyone started arriving.

I went to my closet and picked out some black jeans and a form fitting dark red sweater with my black snow boots. As I stood in front of the full length mirror on the inside of my closet door I caught sight of my engagement ring. I lifted my hand, admiring the tear shaped stones perfection. I wouldn't let Gavin ruin the one thing in my life that had never been flawed. I was going to have to figure out a way to meet him and force him to see that it was in his best

interest to leave me alone. I still had no idea how though. All I knew was that I had no choice. I had to put an end to him contacting me or sooner or later someone would find out. I also knew Talon was watching me like a hawk. It was only a matter of time until he knew Gavin was here in Billings.

I went into my bathroom and put on my make up when there was a knock at my window startling me. I quickly set down my lip gloss and walked to the door of the bathroom where I stopped. I didn't know if I wanted to know who was outside of my window. Whoever it was, wasn't human, that was for sure. They would have had to climb the tree up to my second story window which thankfully I had locked. I decided that I had no choice. If it was Gavin I just wouldn't open the window. If he wanted to act like a child, two could play that game.

When I got to the window my heart skipped a beat. Taylor was outside of it, perched on the snow covered limb holding a present, grinning at me. I hurriedly opened the window. He leapt off of the tree and was in my room in seconds.

"You are so beautiful," he said, his sparkling green eyes pulling me in.

"I was hoping you wouldn't mind if I gave you one of your Christmas presents now instead of tomorrow. I figured that you and I wouldn't have much alone time for awhile," he said, his eyes twinkling as he handed me the shoe box sized present.

I didn't bother to sit before I began unwrapping his gift. I was immediately confused when I saw that it was indeed a shoe box. I looked at him and then back at the box.

"Aren't you going to open it?" he asked, smiling as he watched me.

I didn't say anything. I just slowly opened the box to find a brand new pair of Nikes.

"Shoes," I grinned, thinking what an odd Christmas gift this was.

Laughing he said, "Yes, I was thinking that if you and I were going to be racing each other then we should both have some new shoes."

I immediately felt like a goofball for being so slow and not getting the meaning behind the present at first. "Thank you! I love them," I said hugging him tightly.

"I'm glad you like them. You're real present comes tomorrow."

"I'm sure I'll love it, whatever it is," I said admiring the white and pink shoes after I took them out of their box.

After I tried them on to make sure they fit, Taylor said that we had better get going. We could both hear people arriving and we knew that although mom was handling the whole vampire thing well, it was all still really new to her. She needed us.

That night went off without a hitch. Mom had done a bang up job with all of the food she had made. Roger was so impressed he wouldn't leave her alone about giving him some of her recipes. We ate and talked until around eleven pm when everyone started going home. The whole night had been a blast. Not one time did anyone mention Gavin or a possible war thankfully. There was no talk of anything that would have made it seem like the room was filled with vampires and half vampire, half werewolf creatures. For awhile I had forgotten that I was *different*. I spent the entire night next to Taylor until dad asked if he could steal me away for a minute. Taylor smiled and said of course as dad grabbed my hand, helping me off the couch.

He handed me my coat and asked me to follow him outside. Opening the back door, I stepped out and heard whispers in the distance.

"Let's take a walk," he said smiling, his breath filling the cold night air.

We walked out back, the night dark and quiet, until we reached our gazebo where Melly, Talon and Gabriel sat waiting for us. I sat down next to Melly who looked excited.

"I have called you all here because as you know, there will be a full moon shortly after the New Year. We are getting feverishly close," he said standing at the entrance. "I am happy to say that I was able to contact an old friend of my grandfathers, thanks to Talon. He has agreed to come to Swan Lake and share with us his knowledge of our ancestors. We will need to be there plenty of time before the full moon. That means that we have to leave shortly after Christmas. I know that for some of you, finding out that you are part wolf answered some lingering questions

you might have had in regards to your attraction to the moon. I know too that for our Haden, this has seemed to only add to her already complicated life." He looked at me and smiled before continuing. "You guys are from good stock. You are all born warriors and should be proud. Haden..." he said looking at me with sorrow in his eyes. I know that you aren't my little girl anymore. You are now a woman on a path of righteousness. Even though you may feel alone at times, you are not. We are your family and were chosen to walk that path with you, protecting you. That includes Taylor. You need to tell him . . . now. Then he can help you tell the others." Turning to look at Melly he continued. "Melly that means you too. Share this with Brad tonight. You two need to give your loved ones time to soak this information in before we leave."

"What about mom?" I asked wondering when he was planning on telling her.

"I will tell her tomorrow night," he said, his face solemn. "I was hoping to wait a few days but I was told the sooner the better. I too have no choice."

Melly's phone went off with a text message shining a blue light in the gazebo. "Sorry about that. It was Brad," she said as she shut her phone.

"You guys don't need to stay out here any longer. I just wanted to have this meeting to let you all know where we're at in terms of leaving. Remember what I told you, the sooner the better," dad said looking at Melly and I.

After dad left and our meeting was done, Gabriel and Talon went hunting while Melly and I stayed in the gazebo little longer.

"Are you going to tell Taylor tonight?" Melly asked after hearing me exhale.

"It looks like I have no other choice. He deserves to know I guess."

"You guess," she laughed. "Haden, you two are getting married."

"Maybe," I said feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders.

"Maybe? Oh please, you can't seriously be worried about what he'll say when he finds out?"

"No, I'm not worried about how he'll handle it. I have no doubt that he'll act as if it's nothing and still want to marry me. It's me, I'm worried about. I don't know if I can marry him."

Melly's eyes got big. "Are you kidding me?"

"I have already put him in enough danger Melly. Because of me he was almost killed."

"You don't know that," Melly said sitting Indian style.

"Melly, he's half vampire and half human. The half human part makes him weak compared to full bloods. Being married to me would put him in even more danger and what if I can't control myself if I do phase?"

"Honestly I think you're jumping way ahead of yourself. Shut your eyes and take a deep breath," she said as she watched me. When I didn't do as she demanded, she huffed at me, "Come on now, just do it. It's not like it's hard and it will help."

Not wanting to upset her I shut my eyes begrudgingly and took a deep cleansing breath. She was right. I did feel a little better,

"You feel better huh?"

"Yeah, some."

"Good, now get off the crack pipe. Don't make me remind you how much danger you put Taylor in by *not* being with him," she said rolling her eyes at me.

She and I both knew she was right. The only thing I could do was pray that God protect us all.

We got up and walked back towards the house saying nothing until we got to the there.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning," she said hugging me. "I don't want to keep Brad waiting."

We said our goodbyes and the back door opened right as I put my hand on the door knob.

"There you are. I was going looking for you. I can't have my future wife out in the woods all night alone. What kind of husband would I be," Taylor smiled pulling me into his arms.

"I wasn't alone, Melly was with me," I told him as I inhaled him as deeply as my lungs would allow.

"Dad came in a long time ago without you and I was starting to get worried. I know you must have the weight of the world on your heart right now. I also know just how hard headed you are, always wanting to figure everything out for yourself with no help. What I really know is that you need me," he teased kissing the top of my head. He had no idea just how right he was. I needed him like the moon needed the sky.

"There's something I have to tell you," I said looking up at him.

Not ready to go inside, I asked him if we could talk somewhere else. We walked hand in hand to the gazebo in silence, enjoying the stillness of the night.

I knew it was late and I wanted to get this conversation out of the way but I was having a really hard time finding the words I needed. I had no doubt that it was simply because there was no perfect way to say what I had to tell him so I just began with the first thing that came to my mind.

"Well if I wasn't already weird enough I found out even more about who I am," I said looking at the stars in the sky.

"What do you mean, you found out more about who you are?"

"I mean that I'm not exactly like you. I'm . . . different . . . I'm worse," I choked out forcing myself to continue. "I'm not half human Taylor. I'm full monster." I pulled my hand out of his, feeling like I was diseased and didn't deserve his love.

He grabbed my hand putting it back in his. "Haden, I have no idea what you're referring to but I do know this, you couldn't be a monster if you tried."

"Even if I were part werewolf and part vampire?" I asked fighting tears.

"Yes, even if you were part vampire and werewolf," he said looking lovingly at me. "Haden, your soul is as pure as the heavens. It's untainted."

"I *am* those things Taylor. I don't even know what that means. All I know is that one day I was normal and the next, I was a monster. Now I find out that I'm a double monster on top of being some *supposed* prophetic child born to save her people. I don't want to be anything special. I just want to be normal. Why can't things go back to the way they were," I cried as I got up and walked to the entrance of the gazebo. Leaning my head against the side of the door frame I looked out towards the back of our house.

Taylor was behind me instantly, his arms around my waist and his head on my shoulder. "Just think of this as the new normal," he breathed. "Don't push me away Haden. I will love you forever no matter what your physical make up may be. So what if you are part blood sucker like me and part crazed dog. You will always be you," he said nuzzling his head next to mine.

I turned to face him so I could see him as I spoke. "Dad says that our werewolf ancestors were not like the ones we read about in books. Our kind were created to protect, not to do harm. He said that we were created to be protectors *but* we only phase when a war is close, otherwise we go into remission—at least most do. Dad is concerned that there is an impending war which means we could possibly begin to phase as soon as the next full moon," I said searching his eyes.

"Okay, so you could phase... no big deal."

"No big deal? What do you mean no big deal? I don't know how to be anything but human," I cried.

Wiping my tears with his icy hand he told me that we could get through anything together. He wasn't about to lose me no matter how I insisted I could do things on my own. He knew me all too well.

I sat back down and began telling him everything dad and Talon had shared with me. He listened without as much as the tiniest movement. When I was done talking, he kissed me softly and reassured me that together we would be okay. I laid my head in his lap and shut my tired eyes while he ran his fingers through my hair. I could have stayed there forever and have been perfectly content.

I awoke hours later in Taylor's arms not knowing where I was. I pulled myself up just a little so I could see where we were. We were in his bed and on top of the covers. It was five am on Christmas morning. Thanking God that I had more time alone with Taylor before having to share him, I rolled over and snuggled closer to him, laying my head on the pillow next to his. I closed my eyes and then felt his lips on mine.

"Merry Christmas," he said softly.

"Merry Christmas," I said back before drifting off to sleep.

Hours later I woke up in my own bed to the sound of my alarm clock. When I rolled over to turn it off I saw a note. *Good morning beautiful. I set your alarm for you so you could shower before breakfast. By the way, I think Melly told Roger and Kiernan about our trip to Swan Lake soon and why. I just didn't want you to be surprised if they say something about it. See you downstairs. I love you.*

Today was a new day, a beautiful day. It was my Lord's birthday and I had decided that I wasn't going to let anything put a damper on this day, especially my congested head. I got out of bed with a huge smile on my face. Last night couldn't have been more perfect and today I was ecstatic about seeing Taylor's gorgeous face again. I was also crazy excited about this Christmas as our family had grown ten-fold.

I had an hour before breakfast was scheduled to be on the table. Taylor and mom were doing it up as usual with only one difference this year. When mom invited everyone over Roger was the first to accept, offering to help which mom graciously accepted. Christmas breakfast was a tradition in our family. It was just as big as our Christmas Eve buffet and Christmas Dinner.

I was showered and ready in no time, my excitement bubbling over. I walked down the stairs and I could hear my mother's laughter filling the kitchen with cheer while Christmas carols played on. I made my way into the kitchen and was instantly greeted by happy faces. Roger was singing Jingle Bells with my mom as they worked happily. Taylor was nowhere in sight. Roger smiled and handed me a glass of orange juice.

"Merry Christmas!" both mom and Roger chirped simultaneously.

"Taylor had an errand to run honey. He told me to tell you that he'd see you at breakfast," mom said as she put more bacon in the frying pan.

I drank my orange juice and stole a piece of bacon off the platter before I was out the door, leaving them to their cooking channel moment. There wasn't much time before breakfast, so I headed to the living room and grabbed a magazine. Not long after I sat down The Kenton's arrived with Talon and Gabriel. Soon the house was filled with people.

Breakfast was great. Taylor got home with Kiernan and his mom in tow right as they were putting the food on the table. Kiernan and his mother had celebrated every Christmas with us since we had known them.

When we were done eating and the dishes were all put away, there was an unexpected knock at the door. I was the closest to the door so I told everyone to stay seated and I would get it. I was beyond surprised when I opened it to find Nanny Lena and Lenny standing there, round faces glowing, surrounded by tons of gift bags by their feet.

"Come in! I didn't know you guys were coming," I said excited as I grabbed what bags I could bringing them inside and setting them down in the entry way.

I was so happy to see Nanny Lena and Lenny. Although if anyone would have told me this month's ago I would have thought they were insane. Today however, they were a part of my family. I could only hope that one day Nanny Lena would have a job as my babies Nanny, *if* I would be able to have children.

Back in the living room I sat on the plush white carpet leaning up against one of our three oversized cream couches with Taylor sitting behind me on the couch next to Brad and Melly. Everyone was laughing and joking as the presents were being passed around and unwrapped. Melly motioned to Roger asking him to grab two presents wrapped in shiny candy cane wrapping paper and hand them to her. She gave one to Taylor and the other to Brad smiling at me.



Brad and Taylor looked at each other as if nervous about what lay inside the perfectly wrapped packages. Brad had his box opened only seconds before Taylor. Both of them pulled out their gifts at the same time. It was their matching leather coats.

"Try them on," Melly insisted, her voice barely able to contain her excitement.

Brad and Taylor stood up doing as she asked. She had been right. They looked great. She had them both turn around so everyone in the room could admire our gifts to them but before Brad sat down he walked over to the tree and picked up a black bag with hot pink tissue paper. Taylor grabbed my hand and kissed it thanking me for his gift as Brad handed Melly their bright bag.

"For you Mels," he said sitting next to her.

She tossed the tissue paper on the floor like a kid, before pulling out a black leather jacket that said *Angel* in hot pink with a hot pink flame underneath. It looked like a very cool, very Melly, motorcycle jacket.

"I love it," she said jumping up to try it on. "It's perfect!"

"Well now that the love birds have all shared their gifts it's my turn," Kiernan said handing Talon, Gabriel, Melly and I small boxes wrapped in brown paper with red bows. "I thought you might need these soon," he said laughing.

I was the first to unwrap mine since Melly was still basking in her newfound happiness. What I saw made me take a double take. It was a black dog collar with my name in pink letters on it. I pulled it out slowly lifting it up in confusion right as Gabriel opened his.

"You got us all a mutt?" Gabriel asked, looking at the spiked leather dog collar he held in his large hands.

"Nope, my overly large friend. The collars are you for you. That way we can keep ya on a leash," Kiernan chuckled amused with himself.

The room was silence for a moment. I don't think anyone knew what to say. I could feel Taylor's hands on my shoulders massaging me in order to keep me calm.

"I love mine! It even has my name on it," Melly said running over to hug him.

"Well we couldn't have ya gettin lost now could we? We've got to stick together and we surely don't need to be confusin the likes of you guys with ol run of the mill sleddin dogs," he laughed loudly.

Everyone found his last comment funny except for Talon who still wasn't used to Kiernan and his humor.

The unwrapping of the presents lasted a few hours blending into Christmas dinner which looked like a professional chef had made it. Taylor missed helping prepare breakfast but he was running the show for dinner. He had helped prepare a meal fit for a king. Dinner and dessert lasted another couple of hours and by the time it was done I was exhausted and ready for a nice hot bubble bath. All I could think about was tomorrow since Talon had pulled me aside telling me we needed to leave first thing in the morning.

My first thoughts were focused on when I would be able to tell Jenny more than anything else. I guessed I would just have to break the news over the phone tomorrow. I would call her and tell her that she needed to pack her things for a hairy vacation at the lake. All I would have to do was mention that Talon would be there and she wouldn't hear another word I would say.

Taylor and I excused ourselves after the dishes so we could hunt before we packed our bags and went to bed. He and I knew that this would be our last night alone for awhile. After I put my new shoes on I was ready. I was beyond thrilled to be outside after having spent the entire day in the house. I let the wind fill my lungs as I ran, Taylor next to me.

When we were done, we walked back to the house slowly, talking about our day. We were both extremely happy that we were able to be together on our favorite holiday. It was missing only one thing, our two last gifts for each other. Taylor stopped right as we outside of the forest.

"I think it's time for your other present. I wanted to give it to you earlier but it was hard to catch you alone," he said, pulling a flat box out of his back pocket, the red wrapping paper shimmering as the moon light reflected off of it. I had no idea what it could be. I didn't need or want anything. I had everything I could have ever dreamed of standing right in front of me. I opened the box and laughed.

"You bought me the female version of your watch! I love it," I said putting it on. "Now I can count the minutes too."

"I'm glad you like it," he smiled, his dimples melting my heart.

"My turn," I said. The anticipation of his reaction to his present from me had been eating away at me all day. "Follow me," I said leading him to the garage. I tried not to laugh as I watched the confusion set on his face. "K, wait here," I said opening the small garage door looking in to make sure everything was perfect. "Okay, it's all yours," I was so excited I was about to jump up and down.

He walked in the garage and turned the light on before he froze. "Haden, you didn't," he said completely shocked. He walked over to where his new motorcycle stood, perfectly wrapped in black paper with a huge red bow and just stood there staring at it.

"It's not going to unwrap itself," I teased. In that moment I wished I would have had a camera. I never wanted to forget what Taylor's face looked like when he turned around to look at me after finding his new pearl white Ducati Multistrada 1100S under all of that wrapping paper. It was priceless.

"You bought me a Ducati? Where did you get the money?" he asked flabbergasted.

"It's not just from me actually. I used some of my savings and when I told The Kenton's what I wanted to get you, they said they would love to help. Then when mom and dad found out they pitched in too. Oh and don't worry, The Kenton's also said that they would pay to ship it and your car to Europe for you when we go back," I said overjoyed at seeing him so happy. Seeing his smile that big was the best gift I could have ever had.

Taylor was beside himself. He had wanted a Ducati ever since he got his first bike when he was sixteen. I was beyond thrilled that I could help make that dream a reality.

"So how about it?" I asked.

"How about what?"

"How about you take me on a ride?"

I didn't have to say another word. He was on his new bike in a flash with me sitting behind him. I closed my eyes and held on tight. We drove around until the early morning enjoying the freedom his new bike offered.

Taylor lovingly put his brand new baby back in the garage and thanked me again for his gift. Looking at my new watch I saw that it was almost two in the morning. Both he and I had packing to do if we were going to follow everybody to the cabin tomorrow.

He walked me to my bedroom door and stopped, never taking his green eyes off of me. I didn't want him to leave so I just stood there saying nothing and stared back at him.

"Why don't we both get our packing done and when I'm finished I'll come back and sing you to sleep," he offered. I couldn't have thought of a better plan myself.

## *29. Full Moon*

The few hours we spent together that night flew by in a flash. The next thing I knew I was getting into Taylor's car with Brad and Melly, my eyes heavy from the lack of sleep. The

Kenton's had rented a Lincoln Navigator and were taking both Gabriel and Talon with them. Jenny would ride with Kiernan. I could only imagine what their trip would be like. Kiernan was given strict instructions not to tell her why we were all going, just that I said she had to. I could only pray he kept his mouth shut until I had a chance to talk to her.

Roger had offered to stay behind and ride with my parents. As of this morning my father still hadn't told my mom why we were making this bizarre winter trip to the lake; so much for his, "the sooner, the better," advice. Dad hadn't invited Roger to ride with them to be nice. If I knew my father, he had ulterior motives. He was hoping that mom's new friend would help soften the blow once he told her. My father was right, if anyone could help my mom see the good in a bad situation, Roger was definitely the one for the job.

The ride to the cabin was smooth. Brad sat in the front with Taylor while Melly and I sat in the back. Brad and Taylor were discussing the recent slayings in the Northwest and how they would both like to get their hands on whoever was responsible. I said nothing until Melly leaned over and whispered in my ear."

"I see Taylor handled the news well."

"Yep," I said remembering how soft his features were when I told him. "How about Brad?"

Melly laughed shaking her head. "Brad said he had wanted to be a veterinarian when he was growing up."

I laughed with her and then stopped short when I looked up. We were practically sitting in traffic. The closer we were getting to the lake, the more cars were on the road.

"What's all this?" I asked leaning forward.

"I have no idea," Taylor said. He told me that a friend of the family had rented out every cabin surrounding the lake."

"Maybe it's a wolf party," Melly laughed. Brad turned around and smiled at her and I huffed. I didn't find this whole wolf thing nearly as funny as Melly did.

"I'm sure they just want to make sure that we have privacy," Taylor said as he watched the road.

In minutes we were driving by a few lake houses not too far from ours. Every one of them had cars covered in snow parked in front of them. It was obvious that we were the only people just now arriving.

Once we got to the cabin I called Talon.

"Hello."

"Talon, Swan Lake is packed," I said panicked. "There are cars everywhere."

Talon laughed slightly. "No need to worry, Haden. Everything's under control. Jacob must have forgotten to tell you all. We found out that there were more wolves around the area than we originally thought. Because of the recent death toll, the Alpha of the area had already called a meeting when Timber contacted us. Jacob suggested they change the location of the meeting to Swan Lake and Timber accepted."

"Timber?"

"Timber is the second in command. He answers to the Alpha of all wolves, Lee. They'll be explaining all of this at the meeting. This is anticipated to be the biggest gathering of wolves in America in over one-hundred years. Timber will be speaking to us all tomorrow night."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Swan Lake was filled with descendents of the wolves and their friends. This was going to be interesting for sure. After I hung up with Talon I dialed Jenny, not wanting to put off our much needed conversation any longer. She answered after the third ring, her voice clearly annoyed.

I took a deep breath and began telling her why she was taking a really bizarre road trip with Kiernan to a frozen lake in the dead of winter.

"That would explain why Kiernan kept saying he wanted to stop and pick up some dog food. He thinks he's so funny," she said annoyed.

"Jenny did you hear me? I said that I'm part vampire and part werewolf. Aren't you the least bit freaked out by all of this?"

"No, now there's just a better chance that you'll eat Kiernan like I suggested months ago," she laughed.

I pulled the phone away from my ear and looked at it like it had an issue before putting it back to my ear. My best friend was insane. If only I were able to accept all the creepy stuff in my life as well as she did. I guess God knew what He was doing when He brought her into my life years ago.

That night we all sat around the cabin talking. Talon had spoken with Timber earlier in the day about what was going to happen during our stay at Swan Lake. Anxious to know what to expect, we sat quietly waiting for him to share what he knew with us.

Listening to Talon speak about the head wolf made my nerves jump in anticipation. My hands began to shake and I stood up to get some water when I noticed Jenny biting her nails. At least I wasn't the only one who was nervous.

"Timber and a few other Alphas will be arriving tomorrow afternoon," Talon said smiling at me as I returned to the room with my water. "We'll meet them deep in the forest where we can't be disturbed."

These, "deep in the forest," meetings were to go on every night until the full moon Talon said. The Alpha's would be schooling us on the way of the wolves and what we were to expect from our individual wolves. They wanted us prepared for anything. When the moon reached its peak we were to be ready.

Everyone's mood was solemn for the most part except for Melly and Gabriel who both looked like they were anticipating a huge birthday party. I was a nervous wreck. If I were a smoker I would have had lung cancer by now. Instead, I just chewed fiercely on the gum Taylor bought me. His anticipation of my overactive nerves had been correct. I was a basket case.

When my mom showed up with Roger and dad it didn't help the feeling in the house. She was the only person that looked more traumatized than me. Apparently she hadn't taken the news that her husband was a wolf all that well. I sat by her the whole night, holding her hand while she listened silently to everyone else talk. She wasn't at all her jovial self by any stretch of the imagination.

The next night came all too fast. It was almost time to meet Timber. Talon made sure that we all understood that he was to be respected. He was not only strong both physically and mentally; he was also the next in line for Alpha of all werewolves. He was extremely wise and Lee's right hand man.

Talon pulled me aside when no one was paying attention. "Haden, I need to tell you something before we leave." He paused for a second and then looked deep into my eyes. "Lee is our mother's great grandfather."

"What are you saying?" I asked in a serious tone.

"Honey, you will be a magnet for attention. We're all decedents of the Alpha; that includes you. You're not only the prophetic one. You're also considered royalty amongst the wolves. They will all know who you are even though you don't know them. I just wanted to warn you."

I shook my head and took a deep breath. "Great."

Talon put his arm on my shoulder. I forced a little smile and walked off to find Taylor.

Arm in arm Taylor and I walked towards the forest with our friends and family beside us. You could hear the buzzing sounds of whispering coming from all directions. There were people everywhere. The others were no doubt just as curious about what to expect as we were.

When we entered the forest there were people on all sides of us. The deeper we got, the more there were. It was starting to make me nervous. Taylor squeezed my hand while we walked. He knew that all I wanted to do was run away. I wanted no part in any of this. I wanted to go home.

After walking for about twenty minutes we saw lights and a make shift stage. When we were almost to the stage area someone was handing out books. I took mine and read the title, *Werewolves: Warriors of the Hidden World*. They were handing them out to everyone. Not one person was empty handed and that included my mom who gulped as she took hers.

"This is so cool," I heard Kiernan say behind me.

"I know *right*" Jenny agreed.

For the life of me, I couldn't understand what anyone would find cool about a huge group of people gathering to learn about how and when they're possibly going to turn into some fang having animal that roams the forest.

I looked up and saw a woman standing on the stage, microphone in hand. "Hello, I'm Elisha," the raspy voice said. "Welcome."

The woman's voice silenced everyone immediately. Her long, dark black hair, dark skin and high set cheek bones gave away her Native American decent. She was older and had such a wise look about her I was anxious to hear what she said next.

"I am mother to Savannah and friend to all."

"Each area has a mother wolf," Talon whispered in my ear. "Elisha is your mother wolf. Her father was the Alpha of the Northwest. He recently passed away. She and her daughter are all who are left in their line."

Everyone looked in the direction of her daughter where she was pointing. I strained to see Savannah's face but couldn't. She nodded and kept looking up at the stage towards her mother.

"I have been chosen to introduce our very special guest to you all," Elisha continued. "He came to be with us all the way from Nostovia, the home of our people. I am honored to introduce to you, Timber."

The crowd went wild. Clapping erupted from all around me and before I could think, there was excruciating pain in my ears from the noise. Talon hurriedly handed me ear plugs before I could cover them. I smiled and put them in as fast as I could.

On to the stage walked an extremely attractive, slightly rugged looking man. His ocean blue eyes were such a contrast to his dark brown hair that I could see them clearly from where I stood. Smiling largely he walked towards the microphone. He couldn't have been any older than forty, if he was even that old.

He was dressed in dark jeans with a long sleeve white shirt under a faded green tee-shirt. His skin was lighter than Elisha's but darker than mine. It was olive in color and accented with a few freckles on his cheeks. His wavy brown hair hung just below his ears and his fingers were covered in big silver rings that shined when he grabbed the microphone.

He looked out into the crowd and I froze. That familiar feeling was back again. It was the same one I had had when I first met Melly and Talon. There was something different about him but I couldn't place it.

"On behalf of Lee I would like to thank you all for coming today," he said his voice authoritative. "We have much to do and a short time to do it in, so I won't waste your time. I have been sent to you today to educate you, your families and friends on our kind. I will also be in charge of your training."

He took the microphone off of the stand and walked downstage. "It has been years since our kind has been called into service. I'm sad to say that many of you, who have grown up in the states, have spent your life in the dark about who you really are. When this week is over, your eyes will be opened to a world you never dreamed existed... the hidden world of your people. What you are holding in your hand is a very special book written by our Alpha-wolf, Lee. Read the entire book before our meeting tomorrow night. It will explain what I won't have time to. Do not take this reading lightly. It is full of valuable information about our ancestors and what they were. You will need its information to control your wolf."

*My wolf?*

"Your inner wolf Haden," Taylor chuckled, whispering in my ear as he smiled.

*Oh*, I thought feeling stupid. I still had no clue what God was thinking in making *me* the, "chosen one." How was someone who needed even the most basic of information decoded every now and then supposed to save herself much less her people?

Taylor smiled and shook his head at me while he squeezed my hand again. "God knows what He's doing," he whispered in my ear.

*If you say so*, I thought as I turned my attention to all the people who had started raising their hands to ask questions. Timber held his hand up towards the crowd and said that all questions were to be saved until tomorrow night's meeting. He wanted everyone to read their books first.

He said one last thing before ending his speech and walking off the stage. "You might have noticed that I am not advanced in age as some of you might have expected. I would like to put your minds at ease," he smiled genuinely. "I may look young but I have been controlling my wolf for years. Nostovia is a place where our people phase at will even in times of peace. We are a special group that Lee put together anticipating a time such as this. Our group, along with the Alpha's here will be coaching you through your first change. The circumstance that has brought us here tonight may be born of darkness but I assure you, it is a momentous occasion nonetheless." He smiled again, his blue eyes sparkling. "Here with us tonight, there is a new breed of our kind, a very special one at that. We will all be in for a very special treat as we watch them phase. I will not give out their identities but it would be impossible for you to miss who they are as the week progresses. I ask you here and now to respect their space. We are family. We are here for a greater purpose than ourselves. We are here to learn how to protect *them*" he said looking directly at me.

Clapping erupted again and he walked off the stage, vanishing in the forest. Jenny immediately came up to me, her face as giddy as a five year old. "He was so awesome. He made me want to be a werewolf," Jenny said shivering.

At this point it seemed like Jenny was ready to be anything but Jenny. I felt Taylor staring at me and turned to look at him. My eyes were so full of sorrow and confusion that tears were ready to spill out of them at any moment. I was in the same funk as I was before the big meeting. I couldn't seem to grasp any of this.

Everyone was talking about Timber while I stood staring at the dirt beneath my feet. I just didn't see what all the fuss was about. This Timber guy was just a person or wolf or whatever. Right about the time my mind started going one hundred miles a minute, Taylor grabbed my hand.

"May I?"

"Please," I begged.

He tossed me up on his back and began zigzagging through the massive amount of people as he walked fast towards our cabin.

"Thanks, I needed that," I said when he put me down inside.

"You're welcome. I knew you needed to get out of there. I could hear your brain," he laughed.

"Can you stay with me tonight? I really don't want to be alone."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he said pulling me into his arms.

That night I took refuge in his arms, praying that I dream about anything as long as it wasn't about vampires or werewolves.

The next few days went by faster than I had expected. We had all read our books like good little students, learning quite a bit about the history and make-up of werewolves.

Our kind had been nicknamed Warrior Wolves. According to the book, the werewolves in fables, lycanthropes, were indeed real. They fed on human flesh just like the movies portrayed; that is until one day when a new breed emerged. Certain spiritual wolves began to become sickened by such acts and many began refusing to feed. This caused them to become

malnourished which made it harder and harder for them to phase. Eventually this threw them into a remission of sorts until my mother's great grandfather discovered a way to call on his wolf once again without ever having to consume human flesh. Spending many hours alone in prayer he found a way to phase at will. At first he could only call on his wolf during each full moon. The more he phased, the more control he gained, and eventually he could phase whenever he felt the need. The book said that to this day only some were capable of such a thing.

According to the book, everyday Lee would pray and connect to the wolf within himself. As time went on he began testing his theories on others who also wanted to reconnect with their wolf. To his surprise, there was a one hundred percent success rate. These descendants were found to be born warriors. They were fighters that felt called to defend the people of the hidden world. They would become the protectors of all mystical creatures in danger. Lee's theory worked so well that he made a life of teaching others how to call upon their inner wolf. Chosen by Lee himself, they were taught how to call upon their wolves in times of war. That was the start of the warrior wolves, a breed of civilized werewolves.

Lee's story was interesting but I wasn't sure how much to believe. It all seemed like some crazy movie to me. I knew I would have my answers soon enough and that would have to suffice for now.

Tonight was New Years Eve and this year there would be no party. Instead it would be filled with more talk about the book. The full moon was in only a few days and time was steadily slipping away.

Before I knew it, the night I was dreading was only hours away. We were all ordered to meet in the forest. Tonight our friends and family would have to be left behind. Taylor didn't like this part but dad convinced him it was best and that he would be with me soon enough. He also reminded him of how much mom needed him.

Taylor put my face in his hands and kissed me softly before I followed my father out the door. Melly, Gabe, Talon and I all walked side by side into the forest. Melly grabbed my hand and smiled. I smiled back, feeling my stomach clench from my nerves.

Those that were full wolves already knew what to expect tonight. The book had been clear on that. It was us half breeds that had no clue what the night held. Each wolf had been assigned a mentor to walk through their first few phasing's with them. None of us other than my father had received ours yet. The one thing we had been told was that, because of our differences we had to be taken deeper in the woods for everyone's safety. Since we were the first of our kind, no one knew what to expect.

Melly and I walked in between Gabriel and Talon as Elisha led us even further into the forest where four tiny cabins stood. It was my guess that they were built recently for this very reason. I had never seen them before.

As we approached the small cabins we saw four others waiting for us. Timber stood casually with three other extremely tall and muscular men behind him, each standing in front of a cabin. Timber was the only one smiling. The men in front of the cabins began calling names one by one, Melly's first. She hugged me and practically skipped to her assigned cabin. Next was Gabriel who strutted over to his counselor, taking his sweet time. Then it was Talon's turn. He grabbed my hand and whispered in my ear, "You'll be great. You were meant to do this."

The others all followed their counselors into their designated cabin. Timber and I were now facing each other, alone.

He smiled brightly at me. "Good evening, Haden. Did you bring your extra set of clothes like we asked? You will need them when tonight is over."

I almost laughed when I saw that he was my counselor. Of course he would be paired with me. After all I was the most unpredictable out of all of us, being the one with all the unknown powers everyone was convinced I had.

"Just so you know, I will be able to hear your thoughts when we phase, so you might want to clear your head," he said, his expression kind.

"When *we* phase?" I asked. "You're going to phase too?" I wanted to make sure that I had every detail in line before I became some fierce animal.

"Yes," he said leading me into our cabin. "You will phase first and I will phase after you so that we can talk. You read your book, correct?"

"Yes I did. I just didn't know how much of it was true."

Timber laughed enjoying my innocence. "All of it is true, Haden. With you though, we don't know what to expect. All we know is that it will be something great," he said looking at his watch. "We don't have much time. Do you have any questions?"

"Actually, yes I do. Will it hurt? How long will I be phased? How will you be able to hear my thoughts and how do I phase back?" I asked not wanting to be a wolf the rest of my life.

He laughed again when I was done. "No it won't hurt. It will feel empowering. Your body will produce a hormone, giving you a high sensation as you phase. This is what gets you ready for battle. It's similar to adrenaline, only multiplied by about one thousand. While we are in wolf form, we will be able to hear each other's thoughts. When you have control of your wolf I will let you go around the others and you will be able to hear their thoughts as well. It is how we communicate with each other when we are unable to use our mouths."

"So why do wolves howl?" I asked not seeing the point if they could communicate in their minds.

"Why do humans yell or cry? It's the same principal. Howling can alert others too far to be connected by mind of impending danger. It is a very important tool we use when at war or when feeling great emotion. Howling is a very important part of our communication."

"So how do I phase back?" This was the question I was most concerned about. I had no idea how any of this worked, especially with me being a vampire too.

"It's simple. You will think it when you are ready and you will phase back."

"I will think it?"

"Yes, you will think of you in your human body. It's that easy. There is only one thing we are all concerned about with you and your brothers and sister. With your desire and need to drink blood, we are concerned that it could be overwhelming for you all until you learn how to control your thirst."

"We all control it just fine now," I said thinking this whole back of the woods separation thing was unnecessary.

"Yes of course you do but when you are at one with your wolf you might not be able to. Do you remember what you read in the book about the first of our kind? They too craved blood, taking it a step further than vampires. They had an incessant hunger for human flesh. We are unsure of how possible it is that those feelings could resurface in your wolf when mixed with your own intense thirst. That is why we must be extremely cautious until we are sure you are fully in control." Looking at his watch again he smiled at me. "It's just about time. Don't be afraid."

I stood there feeling my heart beat so fast that I thought it would pop out of my chest. I was terrified. I had read the book and seen the pictures. I had listened to Timber's talks every night but nothing prepared me for what came next. Timber walked over to the large back window and with one swift movement he pulled up the shade letting the moon light shine in on us. It was just as bright as if we were outside.

At first everything seemed normal and for a split second I was starting to think that they had all been wrong about me and then it happened. My body started shaking uncontrollably, stopping as quickly as it started. A feeling of intense heat rushed through my veins and I closed my eyes.

"Open your eyes, Haden," Timber commanded softly.

I did as he said and looked around the room. Nothing looked the same. The contrast in the green lawn chairs and the brown walls was so vivid that I found myself blinking in confusion.



I stood still, sniffing the air. I could smell Talon, Melly, Gabriel and so many other scents that I didn't recognize.

*How do you feel?*

I heard a voice in my head and instinctively turned towards it. There behind me, eye to eye, was a dark reddish-brown wolf with crystal blue eyes. It was beautiful.

*Can you hear me Haden?*

Right then I remembered what Timber had told me about communicating with our minds.

Yes, I said still looking around.

*How do you feel?* The wolf asked, watching me with his light blue eyes.

*Fine*, I said back.

I was more than fine. I felt larger than life. I wanted out of the cabin. I wanted to run.

*Not yet. Tomorrow night will be your night to run. Tonight we just concentrate on how you feel.*

I didn't want to concentrate on how I felt, I wanted to run. I walked over to the door and pawed at it. Turning my head back towards Timber, I growled. He made a sound that almost sounded like laughter.

*They were right, Haden. You are a feisty one. There will be no running tonight, but I promise that you will have your run of the forest soon.*

I walked over to the window and jumped up, resting my paws on the glass as I whined.

*I can tell that you and I are going to be good friends. It's time to phase back for tonight*, Timber said after making that laughing sound in his throat again.

I let out another small growl in defeat and phased back to my human/vampire body in seconds. I put on my dress and turned around to see Timber in human form, his back to me. I cleared my throat to let him know I was dressed and he turned to face me with his arms crossed.

"And you were worried?" he said, his hearty laugh filling the cabin. "You are definitely the one they speak of. I have no doubt."

"What makes you say that?" I asked wishing I could go a day without someone reminding me how different I was.

"I just know. Besides, you knew exactly what you were doing the entire time. You didn't need my help with anything. Your wolf is strong, Haden, stronger than any I have ever come in contact with. Your strength energized me.

I knew he was right. I felt stronger than ever.

"You have been given the power to lead. It's radiating from you even now. It's breathtaking," he said staring at me. "I am honored to have witnessed you phase tonight."

"Same time, same place tomorrow?" I asked as I went to open the door.

"Yes," he laughed. "See you then. Sleep well."

Sleep well was exactly what I did after I sat with everyone talking about our night. Gabriel was exuberant. He was practically bouncing off of the walls with Melly right along side of him. Brad was being a good listener as always. He just smiled lovingly at Melly as she rambled on about what it felt like to phase. Talon sat next to Taylor and I reading his werewolf book in deep thought.

Unlike Melly and Gabe, I didn't feel like talking. I didn't know if I could even begin to put into words the vast amount of power I felt tonight. There were no words. No one could possibly understand the intense need I had to feel my bare feet on the forest floor. I wasn't prepared to explain anything other than my need for sleep.

I woke up the next day excited and ready for my night. I wanted that feeling back. I wanted to hunt, but wasn't able to. There were too many people in the forest. We all felt that it was better if we stick to the supply my father had filled the cabin with instead.

The next day came just as fast as I had hoped. I didn't say much all day and luckily Melly kept Jenny busy with video games. My parents hadn't surfaced from their room and no one disturbed them. Almost everyone else just hung around reading books and talking except for

Gabriel who was out walking around the lake the majority of the time. He was just as excited about tonight as I was; only I didn't let my anticipation show. Taylor stayed by my side but never pushed me for information. He knew that I would talk when I was ready. I loved that about him. When we laid down last night I showed him a picture in my head of what Timber looked like as a wolf but that was the extent of our wolf talk.

Night began approaching and I grabbed my post wolf outfit, tied it around my waist and headed out the door with my brothers and sister after I hugged Taylor as tight as I could. I was so ready to feel whole, not some person cut up into bizarre shaped pieces. My prayers were consumed with the hope that tonight would be the night that placed all of the pieces where they needed to go.

I said goodbye to Taylor and headed towards the cabins with Melly. Timber and the other counselors were standing around talking amongst themselves when we arrived. He smiled and walked towards the cabin as Melly left to meet her counselor.

"I would ask you if you're ready for tonight, but I already know the answer," Timber said sitting in a chair across from me inside the cabin.

"I have never been so ready for anything in all my life," I said excited. "I do have one question though."

"And what's that," he smiled.

"My brothers, sister and I couldn't help but notice that we were the only ones out tonight."

Timber nodded. "You wanted to run tonight, correct."

"Yes."

"Well there you go. We asked the others to stay home. After what I saw in you last night I don't think there will be a problem with you controlling your thirst. I compared notes with the others counseling your brothers and sister and we all felt like you guys needed to stretch your legs. Are you disappointed?"

"Not at all," I smiled. "I was just curious."

"Awesome, then let's do this," he said walking over to the window. "If you start to feel the overwhelming need to feed, let me know and phase back immediately."

I nodded my head and he opened the shade. I could feel my body begin to shake uncontrollably. I took a deep breath as the heat overwhelmed me once again. This time he didn't have to tell me to open my eyes. I knew I had phased. Without wasting time, I walked towards the door and whined. Timber laughed and walked over to me.

"I'll be right behind you. Your brothers and sister are waiting for you," he said opening the door.

I slowly walked out of the cabin, sniffing as I went. There waiting for me were three of the prettiest wolves I had ever seen. I knew immediately who they were. Each was a different color. All of them were extremely fluffy. The largest wolf was dark brown in color. He was taller than the others, towering over them. I knew immediately that wolf was Gabriel. Next to him, only a little smaller in size was a cream wolf. The vast amount of love in Talon's green eyes gave him away immediately. Next to him, much smaller in size, was a chocolate brown wolf with a splash of hot pink fur on her back.

*Go figure your wolf would have hot pink somewhere,* I said making the same sound in my throat as Timber when I laughed.

Timber's voice brought me back out of my head. "Haden, would you like to see yourself before you explore the night?" Timber asked standing above me with a mirror in his hand. I nodded my head and lowered the mirror so I could see my reflection clearly.

There before me was a beautiful white wolf with light green eyes. I was radiant. I looked nothing like the disturbing visions I had once played in my head.

*You are so pretty Haden,* Melly said.

*Yes she is, now can we run already?* Gabriel was getting antsy. I said yes and he was gone.

Timber gave us all permission to run through the forest and excitement began filling my soul again. I took off running, feeling the icy forest floor beneath my paws. I was empowered; me and my wolf.

As I ran, I thought of how far I had come in only a matter of months. I had looked death in the face and won. Evil had chased me, yet I had escaped. I had learned about myself in ways I would've never imagined. Through it all I had come out on top. God had given me a family which surpassed my wildest dreams and most importantly, I had Taylor. God had blessed me in so many ways. I stopped running and tilted my head up. I howled calling up to the heavens. I was crying. My puzzle was finally complete.

Howling filled my dreams that night. Tears of happiness flooded from my wolf. She was free, for now anyway. It was no secret that the peace we all felt wasn't promised to last long. Signs of the impending future were everywhere. You could see it in the dreary look on my mom's face every time she looked at my father. It was in Gabriel's uneasiness, Talon's knowledge quest and in the way Taylor held me tight at night. Just like a category five hurricane, we all saw it coming but there was nowhere to hide. We were chosen to face it head on.

No matter how hard I tried to escape my destiny, God wouldn't let me. It was obvious every night we trained. I was faster than my siblings. I was more agile and all of my senses were unfathomable. Just as Timber said, I was different and it was obvious.

I sat alone on the snow covered forest floor alone, enjoying the silence and asking God for guidance. Thankfully everyone was in their cabins except for a few stragglers out walking.

All day long something dark had been nagging at my heart. I didn't know what it was, but I didn't like it.

"Want some company?" The sound of Talon's voice startled me.

"I'd love some," I nodded.

"I've seen that look before. What's bothering my sister on a beautiful cold day like this?"

I shook my head and pulled my knees up closer to me. "That's just it, I don't know. Something just feels wrong."

"I don't know why. You're doing even better than I thought you would. You're definitely a natural."

I thanked my brother for his confidence in me and laid my head on my knees with my face looking at him. "Something's wrong Talon, I just know it. Something bad is going to happen and I won't be able to do anything about it."

"The only advice I have is to pray," he said quietly. "Sometimes God gives us little nudges to help us wake up and feel what's coming. Maybe He's nudging you so you are prepared when the time comes. You can't avoid the truth forever, Haden."

Talon was right. Even though I had embraced the new me, I hadn't embraced the prophecy. If anything, I ignored it like it was a plague following me everywhere I went. If anyone mentioned the Ice Moon, I cringed.

I nodded my head and stood up. "Thanks for sitting with me. I think I'm gonna go stretch my legs before dinner. Will you tell Taylor that I'll be home soon?"

"Sure, I wouldn't be late if I were you. As hungry as Gabriel's been lately you might not have any dinner left if you're late," he teased.

Talon headed back towards the cabin and I went in the opposite direction, phasing into my wolf. I ran until I was out of breath, stopping to lay in a pile of leaves by a tree. I closed my eyes to rest when I was transported to a place I had never seen.

Without knowing how I got there, I was in a long, empty hall. Its white walls made me feel like I was in a mental institution. I heard voices and froze. Two tall, pale men turned a corner and were walking down the hall towards me, laughing as they talked. My breathing sped as they drew nearer. The one closest to me looked in my direction but didn't see me somehow. It was as if he looked through me. A cold chill ran across my skin when I looked into his dark reddish-brown eyes. They were the same eyes the murderer in the forest had.

Once the men were gone I began running down the hall. I felt like a gerbil in a cage. Everywhere I turned, there were halls— one connected to another. I was trapped in some kind of maze and I couldn't get out.

More people passed me as they walked through the fluorescent lit halls. They all had the same sinister eyes and none of them could see me. When I realized that I was invisible I ran faster, trying to find my way out. Hall after hall only led to more halls until I finally came to a large silver door with a sign that read, *Authorised Personnel Only*.

I looked around and opened the heavy door which led me into a tunnel of sorts. I walked past the muscular, dark haired guard, thankful that he couldn't see me and continued on my way. What I saw when I walked through the first cluster of people was unlike anything in my wildest imagination.

The tunnel was made of clear glass, surrounded by water all the way around except the floor. Its dome top exposed hundreds of fish and sharks swimming carelessly above my head. The floor was covered in shiny white tiles. Everywhere I looked there were those people with sinister eyes.

"Have you seen him yet?" a woman dressed in black asked her friend as they walked past me.

"No, they won't let anyone in," the woman hissed.

"I heard he smells delicious," the first woman whispered.

"I know where they're keeping him." The woman looked around and leaned in to whisper in her friend's ear. "He's through the doors and down the elevator. From what I heard, his scent is so strong you won't need help finding him . . . *if* you've made it that far. Arkos won't let him out of his sight. No one has a chance of seeing him," the woman moaned.

Curious, I followed the directions the woman gave and found my way to the doors. Slowly I opened the metal door and found the elevator she spoke of immediately. I walked into the glass elevator and stood in front of two men wearing all black, praying that I was still invisible. Down we went, deeper and deeper into the water. I had never seen anything like it.

When the doors opened I ran out as fast as I could, running down the halls until I saw the room where there hostage was kept. A huge man stood like a statue keeping guard at the door. I looked at him and then slowly opened the door. He never flinched so I crept inside. The room was pitch black and it took a moment for my eyes to get acclimated. Sitting on the couch was a man, frail and hunched over. His hands were hanging down by his side. Slowly, I walked over to him trying to be quiet.

*Sir, are you alright?* I whispered.

He didn't respond. I asked him again and still... nothing. He couldn't hear me. I got down on my knees in front of him and tilted my head to the side so I could see his face. Right as my eyes rested on his bloody face, I took a deep breath and screamed.

*Taylor!*

I opened my eyes and was back in the forest. I shut them again and howled as loud as I could. Timber was right, it had only just begun.

**~Come join Haden and Taylor as their journey continues in Ice Moon's highly anticipated sequel, Forsaken. Coming Soon~**