

FORSAKEN

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This book is dedicated to all those who have ever felt forsaken.
You are not alone.

Alone

Time was of the enemy

Anger raged within

Something hidden beneath the sea

Something not my friend

Closed my eyes and breathed in deep

Like acid in my lungs

Take me from this hell I'm in

Oh what will I become

My God has left my soul to dwell beneath the shadowed night

I cry and scream and call your name but nothing makes it right

My aching spirit trembles

Deep within -my soul

Fading fast within me

The pain I can't control

Silent screams fill my mind

Can you hear me call

Of course you can't, you're gone from me

I'm forsaken after all

Genesis 6:4

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came into the daughters of man, and they bore children to them, these were the -mighty-men who were of old, the -men of renown.

Preface

*Oh God, not him too. It can't be. I will **not** lose him again.* My heart raced like a mustang fleeing from a storm as I stared helplessly at Taylor. If anyone in the room knew what this news *really* meant it was me. There would be no happy ending, not now, not until...*I ended it.*

Only the sound of breathing was audible as everyone fought to gather their thoughts. The recent revelation made my stomach turn and suddenly I had to fight the rising bile in my throat. My eyes scanned the room, stopping on my mother's tear stricken face before coming to rest on the man who held my heart. The truth was out; its bitter taste flooded my mouth with the force of a raging river. No matter what I wanted to think, there was only one reality and it was disturbing. Taylor was in grave danger and *no one* could change that. It was only a matter of time until the news of his calling spread like wildfire, consuming everyone in its path, including Arkos. Silence filled the room with its daunting presence and I began to tremble. My mind refused to comprehend the words I had just heard. Once upon a time, my life was simple. It was believable. *Once upon a time* I knew who I was, who Taylor was. Now I knew nothing.

1. Beautiful Beast

The first few weeks at the cabin were some of the most bizarre and intense times in my life. They were also by far some of the most special. I was a new person, a girl with a purpose chosen to walk a path never before traveled. It was a path I didn't accept at first.

It hadn't been weird enough that over the course of the past year I'd found out I was some prophetic girl chosen to bring her people out of exile. It also hadn't been enough to find out that I was half vampire *or* that my parents were really my aunt and uncle. Nope, clearly that wasn't bizarre enough. Neither was me falling in love with my *supposed* brother *or* finding out that we weren't related

at all. There seemed to be no end to the weirdness in my life. One thing I knew for sure; I was no normal girl.

The past year of my life truth had reared its unrecognizable head multiple times, tearing down the imaginary world I had once known to be reality and replacing it with something greater. This something was way bigger than anything I could have ever imagined. With each bite of truth I took, old memories began to take on new shapes. Feelings once unexplained now had meaning. It was strange, yes, but it all finally made sense.

Forever etched in my memory would be the day I was told about my birth mother's side of the family...the wolves. The day I found out that I was half vampire and half werewolf was the day I stopped waiting for the weirdness to end. Instead I began to accept it. Running from the truth wouldn't change anything. It would still be the truth no matter where I hid.

I knew now, better than ever, that I could never escape the craziness of my life. So when I went to the cabin to meet the other werewolves in the dead of winter, I chose to embrace the experience instead of fighting it. Meeting my inner wolf was like finding water in the desert. I had been so thirsty for the truth no matter how insane it was. My soul longed for it. For years my life had been a puzzle missing numerous pieces, their absence leaving gaping holes in my life. Finally the abyss of confusion was filled.

The weeks following what I call "my awakening" were spent amongst the other wolves. We were in constant training, learning how to control our individual wolves. With talk of an impending war, it was imperative that we were able to call upon them as needed.

The Alpha wolves' initial fears about my brothers, sister and I losing control once in wolf form faded rather fast. Fear that our thirst for blood would increase and possibly become uncontrollable, putting others in danger, was quickly forgotten. To their surprise, we all exuded more control than any of the other new wolves. Instead of being unstable, we were all quite the opposite. Not one of us struggled with our new selves. Embracing and controlling our wolves the way we did quickly placed us in the role of teachers rather than students.

Each one of us had been able to phase at will by the second night of training except for Gabriel, who had his phasing under control by night three. Talon, Melly and I knew that it wasn't that Gabriel *couldn't* phase back on demand. Instead, we were all pretty positive that it was more the fact that he didn't want to. After Talon had a talk with him there were no more issues, and miraculously Gabriel was in control of his wolf just like the rest of us, phasing back on his counselor's demand.

Once the group showed progress as a whole, a family night was scheduled. The time had come to show our loved ones just what we were. I was excited about phasing again; most of the wolves were. There was one person, however, who would have avoided this very night at all costs. My mother still hadn't accepted the fact that her husband and adopted daughter were some strange creatures of the night. Her resistance was really hard on my uncle turned father. He and my mother had hit a road block in their marriage. Its unfamiliar territory was almost more than she could handle. Over the last couple of weeks, she had pulled away from my father. It was my prayer that tonight's family gathering would ease her fears once and for all.

Thankfully the day flew by quickly because I was beginning to get impatient. Ever since the first time I had phased, there was a new hunger deep within my soul. The feeling of my paws on the forest

floor was quickly becoming my drug. Running while at one with my wolf fulfilled an ache deep in my soul only *it* could fill.

We all gathered in the living room of the cabin before walking back to the forest where tonight's festivities would take place. My father looked at us and then back at his and my mother's bedroom door where she hid.

"Let's do this," he said, forcing a smile.

We all knew that my mom not going was tearing him apart inside. He was a strong man and would push through anything. Losing his partner, even momentarily, was definitely a blow to him. All it took was one look in his eyes to see how broken he felt.

Once we were deep in the forest, our family and friends were asked to sit together in the hundred or so rows of chairs. The Alpha wolves had brought a large television monitor and placed it above the stage for all to see. We had been told that the purpose of tonight was for our families to watch a few wolves phase and interact with others in human form. This was an extremely important part of the process. Our family and friends would sit in the audience while a few of us would take turns phasing on stage.

Standing by the large television screen were the Alpha and elder wolves in human form. It was their job to point out who was who. One wolf after the other was called to the stage and asked to transform. Thankfully I wasn't chosen. Maybe Timber knew I had enough on my plate already. As each wolf would phase and play with their coach, people would clap as if it were a show. I wondered silently if any of them realized just how serious this really was.

After the last person took their turn phasing into his wolf and back into human form again, the Alphas excused all of the people from the stage. Timber walked toward the microphone, taking it in his hand and smiling proud.

"What a great night," he said happily. "We've got a terrific group of protectors here with us tonight. Lee would be proud."

Timber went on to talk to our family and friends about certain things he felt were important. He began by speaking about some of the first things that were covered in the book they gave to us right after we arrived only a couple weeks prior to tonight. The book was no ordinary one for sure. It definitely wasn't one you'd find in your everyday book store.

Written by the Alpha wolf, Lee, it was an intense read to say the least. Its pages were filled with history and stories about our ancestors, the Warrior Wolves. Everyone had been asked to read it in its entirety when we first got to Swan Lake. Timber, second in command only next to Lee, had made it perfectly clear how important it was for us to read it. We were advised to soak in every word on its pages. In order to gain a better understanding of whom and what we were, we needed to be educated on the history of our kind. My memories of holding that book in my hands for the first time were still clear as a bell. I had wanted no part of it. I began reading it, simply going through the motions, that is, until I phased for the first time. When I finally met my wolf, my outlook on everything changed. That included Lee's book. I began devouring it any chance I got.

Even with all of Lee's knowledge on our kind, the book held in it nothing about mixed breeds, which is exactly what my brothers, sisters and I were. Half vampire/half werewolves were new, starting with us. Up until we were created, vampires had only blended with humans...and werewolves with none. It was previously thought that the mixing of vampires and werewolves was impossible. It seemed that my family changed that thought rather quickly. When it came to my brothers, sister and I, how we would react to phasing and life as a wolf was anyone's guess. We all took it in stride and were pleasantly surprised with the outcome. We were naturals.

Lee emphasized that it was important to understand that we came from werewolves who had morphed over time into a new breed referred to as Warrior Wolves. Unlike our distant ancestors, the ones in fables, these new wolves were created not out of evil, but instead good. This particular breed of wolves used their instincts and natural fighting abilities to protect the weak, not harm them. We were also informed that the werewolves in movies did indeed exist, at least in some sense. This particular breed of wolves was very smart, cunning creatures that in our day and age lived a pretty normal life, residing in close-knit colonies near highly forested areas where they could phase undetected. Having evolved some with the times, they weren't to be feared as those in fairytales unless you angered one. They were notorious for being unable to control their tempers, so it was important that they keep to themselves as much as possible. Over time, they had been forced to become more civilized creatures in order to stay hidden. Instead of ravaging villages like their predecessors, they were forced to feed on what animals and humans crossed their paths. They had done such a good job of hiding themselves that their locations to this day were undisclosed, from what I heard. I could only pray I never came face to face with one.

My ancestors, the Warrior wolves, had trained themselves for many years to survive as humans, eating only human food. They were in complete control of their wolves and their cravings were almost non-existent. Over time, some warrior wolves became passionate about rehabilitating werewolves. Many made this their life's work. When all was said and done, the two breeds had mixed, creating a much more emotionally stable breed in comparison to their predecessors. They set up colonies worldwide, almost all adapting to feeding solely on animals. Feasting on humans was almost unheard of with this breed. We were told that there was an occasional slip up every now and then, but it usually never made the news since it looked to humans as if it had been an animal attack. In order for their large packs to stay under human radar, they had no choice but to feed on animals so as to not bring attention to themselves. Times had changed for them over the years, and they had no choice but to change too. Now it was my turn.

I sighed as I thought about my mom and her debilitating fears about who we were. Everyone had tried multiple times to assure her that we weren't a part of the frightening vision she had burned in her brain. No matter what was said, she wouldn't listen. A werewolf was a werewolf in her mind, and there was no changing that . . . not yet anyway.

My sweet mother had been a basket case for months. Ever since she found out that Taylor and I were both half vampire, she hadn't been the same. No one could blame her, especially me. Honestly, I was surprised that she hadn't had a nervous breakdown yet.

As if she didn't already have enough to deal with after finding out that her children were what some called "creatures of the night," the news that Taylor and I were in love should have pummeled her, as it would have any normal person. The fact that her adoptive children wanted to get married had rattled her some, but even still she managed to maintain her composure. At first it was obvious by her

forced smiles that the revelation that things were changing weighed heavily on her heart, yet somehow she found the strength to take it day by day.

It wasn't the realization that things were changing at the speed of light or that Taylor and I were head over heels in love with each other that threw her over the edge. It wasn't even that I was part wolf. Those reasons weren't what tore her world apart. There was only one thing that had thrown her into a silent world of depression—the night she found out that her husband, my biological uncle and adoptive father, was a werewolf. That news shattered her heart into a million tiny pieces. After finding out that she was married to what she deemed a monster, she couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye. This devastated my dad and it hurt us all deeply. My parents had been a picture perfect couple who had the glass in their relationship frame shattered in a matter of seconds. It seemed no one was immune to marital discord.

My mother's reaction of retreating from our world and my father's would have made family night even more important should she have agreed to go. It was supposed to be a time for our families and friends to ask as many questions as needed in order for them to have a better understanding of what their loved ones would become. As much as my father had wanted my mom to go, he didn't push her when she said she'd prefer to stay home. The pain in her soft voice was so thick that none of us spoke a word. There were certain rules in the Warrior World. One was to not force ourselves upon anyone. That included our loved ones.

By the second night of my phasing I had already broken one of the rules. That night had been my breakthrough. It was the very first time I truly embraced my inner wolf. When Timber excused me that night, I ran through the forest, feeling its cold floor beneath my paws and relishing my newly found freedom. Stopping, I sat and closed my eyes, breathing in the night's air, when out of nowhere a disturbing vision of Taylor consumed my mind. This new one shook me to the core. I knew all too well from previous experiences not to underestimate my visions. They weren't to be toyed with, as some had indeed come true. In this one Taylor was bloody and beaten, sitting alone, his head hung low, with his arms by his side in a dark room.

Opening my eyes with a start, I immediately called Taylor's name in my head while the visions melted away. I closed my eyes and asked him to meet me outside behind our cabin. I needed to see his face. I needed to see that he was all right. It was in moments like these that I was so thankful for the special power God had given me. Sending thoughts into Taylor's mind had proven to be helpful on more than one occasion. That was just one of the many powers I would eventually possess. Taylor's birth father, Aramis, a leader in the underground vampire world and soon to be my father-in-law, told me more than once that this was just the beginning for me. No one really knew what I would be capable of doing, and that included me. Being able to put words and pictures in Taylor's head was just one of the bonuses of being the prophetic child born under the Ice Moon.

When Taylor met me outside of the cabin, I grabbed his hand and ran with him to a part of the forest where we could be alone. Deciding not to share my recent vision with him, I suppressed the disturbing pictures in my mind as well as my fears and instead told him about my night. I laughed and cried while he listened intently, smiling at me so brightly it lit up the sky. When I asked him if he wanted to see me phase, he didn't hesitate in saying yes. I closed my eyes and called upon the animal in me, bringing her to life in one quick moment. When I opened my eyes, I looked up to see Taylor's perfect face smiling down at me, his clover green eyes on fire.

He got down on his knees and looked directly into my eyes. "You are so beautiful, by far the most exquisite wolf I have ever seen," he said petting me. Instinctually I nuzzled my head in his hand and told him I loved him in my mind.

"I love you too," he said softly, still petting my head.

"You heard me," I practically yelled, having phased back, quickly covering myself with the dress I had brought.

"Yes," he chuckled, as he looked away so I could put my clothes on. Ruining clothes was the only annoying thing about phasing. I had to make sure I brought some with me and grabbed them fast. That night I had them on the ground. I was supposed to nod and give Taylor warning so he could turn around, but when I realized that he heard my thoughts in wolf form I forgot all about that. Luckily he was a gentleman and turned around before he caught too big of an eyeful. I would have to be more patient when phasing back next time.

Those weeks at the cabin with all the other wolves would be etched in my mind forever. I learned so much in such a short period of time. We all had, including Dad, who was still learning a valuable lesson in patience. It took a while before he could phase in front of mom. She just couldn't bring herself to accept the whole wolf thing. Dad was a natural just like the rest of us. His excitement radiated off of him unless Mom was around. It was hard to watch how sad he was. This was the first time in their marriage that he couldn't share his feelings with her. It was obvious that it was extremely hard on him, but anytime anyone would talk about it he would insist that she would come around when she was ready. The faith he had in my mother never wavered.

After the first family night we were then encouraged to invite our friends and family out for family night number two, where counselors and our families alike would watch us phase in person. If any were uncomfortable, they weren't forced to attend. My mom was one not attending, which was no surprise to anyone. She stayed back at the cabin with Roger, her favorite vampire friend, keeping her company. Taylor, our friends Brad, Kiernan and Jenny, as well as Nanny Lena and even her brother Lenny, all showed up for this part of the learning experience. It was important that we were all comfortable with each other. My eldest brother Gabriel was more psyched than anyone. He loved a good show, especially when he was the center of attention. He was an attention hog. Earlier that day he had teased Jenny, my ever bouncy best friend, that she could take a ride on his wolf's back. She just giggled like a school girl, which I knew meant that she was considering his silly offer.

Phasing night with family and friends went off without a hitch. By the end of the evening, you could see the humans all cuddling with their wolves to keep warm. Being half and half, our body temperature wasn't quite as hot as pure wolves. We were still warmer than humans and definitely warmer than vampires, which explained why Taylor's skin had begun feeling cold to me some time back.

One of the biggest shocks I had during this learning experience was sometime around the beginning of week two. The wolves were all in human form waiting for Timber to talk to us when I heard my name called. I turned around to see a bright face smiling at me. My old friend Anna, from grade school, was walking toward me.

"Oh my gosh! You're a wolf," Anna said, practically jumping up and down. "I had no idea."

"I didn't either until recently," I laughed, shocked to see her vivacious, freckly face.

"My brother Jason is here too. His wolf is huge! You've got to see it! Where's Taylor?" she asked, looking around. "I bet his eyes look way cool on a wolf."

Sensing a little too much enthusiasm in Anna's voice about Taylor, a burst of jealousy shot through me like a lightning bolt.

"That's an interesting story actually," I snickered. "We just found out that we're not really brother and sister. We were both adopted, so he's not a wolf like I am." Right as I started to tell her that he was a vampire, I caught myself and stopped. It was none of her business.

"Oh wow, that *is* interesting. He's here though, right?" Anna got up on her tip-toes and peered through the crowd.

Jealousy reared its ugly head again and I had to steady my breathing in order to stay calm. I knew exactly why she was asking where he was, and I didn't like it. "Yep, he's here, but he's busy with my mom. She's having a hard time dealing with this."

"Oh that's a shame. Maybe I should take a run over there and say hi." Anna's voice was filled with excitement.

"Now's not such a good time," I said, planning my escape.

I didn't really know how I was going to get away from her, but I knew I had better leave before the jealousy bug bit my heart any harder. Anna began rambling on about how she had had a crush on Taylor when we were in school together. I silently bit my tongue while I contemplated what to do next. I don't really know what made me try my little experiment, but I'm glad I did. I pictured Melly's face in my head and called her name mentally. Then I asked her to come save me. In seconds Melly was by my side, her eyes huge.

"Hey, Melly," I said, thanking her in my head. "Anna, this is my sister Melly."

"I didn't know you had a sister." Anna didn't bother to suppress her confusion.

"Me either till recently. It's amazing isn't it? I actually have two brothers and another sister too. Our parents died when I was a baby." I watched as my words formed a haze of confusion in Anna's head. "And, I'm the prophetic one everyone's talking about...interesting, huh!"

A twinge of guilt washed over me right as I realized what I had done. Never before had I spoken those words aloud, and here I had gone and used them as a weapon. I knew all too well that everyone was intimidated by *the chosen one*; even the wolves had been educated on my powers. Timber had promised that my secret was safe with him and the elders until I was ready to announce who I was. Even though I wasn't ready, I had just blown my own cover because of jealousy.

I could feel Melly staring at me intensely, and suddenly I wanted to find the nearest hole to crawl in. I knew in my heart that Anna meant no harm. After all, I sure couldn't blame her for wanting to see Taylor.

"Oh wow," Anna choked out. "Does Tay know about you?"

Did she just call him Tay? I asked in my head. Melly started to laugh, and I began nodding my head yes like a bobble head.

"Yep, he knows," I said, trying not to puke.

Looking extremely at a loss for words, Anna excused herself only after asking me to tell Taylor hello for her.

"I'll tell 'Tay' you said hello," Melly winked, before snickering.

After Anna started to walk off, I nudged Melly in her side.

"What? You don't think 'Tay' will want to hear his message," she laughed.

I rolled my eyes at her and smiled. "Thanks for coming when I called you. She was getting on my nerves."

"Saving you is my job, right?" Melly laughed. "Um, one question though. How did you speak to me without us being in wolf form?"

"I don't know. I just did," I admitted, shrugging my shoulders.

"Well, you might just want to try that special talent out a little more. You know... see who all it works on. That might be one of those special powers they all talk about you having. I would totally milk it if I were you."

It had taken some time, but eventually I got used to everyone assuming that I possessed a vast amount of unknown power. The truth was that if I did, it was news to me. According to "the prophecy," a special child with a birth mark of a crescent moon was to be born under the Ice Moon, a span of time when the moon was miraculously covered with a thick layer of ice. God *supposedly* sent this special child to one day bring his or her people, the vampires, out of hiding where they had been since Arkos and the Stidoniums forced them there. This child was to bring peace to all. Unbeknownst to me until this last year, I was that child.

My biological father, Landon Kenward, was a *very* powerful vampire and one of the first of his kind. He was also Taylor's father's best friend and blood brother. He and Aramis Kenton were bound together by their craving for blood and an oath of friendship until my father died along with my birth mother while protecting me. Arkos, the ruler of the Stidoniums, the evil vampires, was also their blood brother, that is until my father and Aramis, Taylor's father, fell in love with my mom and her best friend, Alexandra. Arkos hadn't taken the news well, to say the least. Mixing blood with humans was considered to be dirty. He threatened my father and Aramis. When they told him they weren't going along with him, he became irate and declared war, sending his troops out to kill any vampires trying to mix.

Both my and Taylor's parents lived for some time in hiding at Kenton Manor until Arkos got his hands on the first part of a multiple part prophecy given to my Nanny Lena's people, the Seers. After reading the prophecy, Arkos ordered all babies born during *any* phase of the Ice Moon to be murdered. This is why my parents were killed . . . all because of me.

Taylor, being only a few months older than me, was born under the first phase of the Ice Moon. In order to protect him, his parents had his Nanny Mena take him to America a couple of months before I was born. It was only just recently that he met his birth parents for the very first time. Aramis and Alexandra Kenton were two of the most amazing people. In some ways I envied Taylor in that his parents were still alive. I would never be fortunate enough to meet the people who gave me life, and that made me sad. Arkos took their life in search of mine. Somehow he got wind of my identity and their location, forcing them to be prepared to flee at a moment's notice. Men stormed the dwelling where my parents and my siblings and I hid. Only moments before, Nanny Lena had come to get me and taken me away. My parents were both killed while protecting me. My two older brothers, Gabriel and Talon, were lucky and escaped, but my sisters weren't so lucky. Both Melly and our oldest sister, Kathryn, were kidnapped and forced into a drug-induced amnesia. To this day, Kathryn still has no clue of her true identity and remains Arkos' favorite confidant, or so we're told. Melly's story was a little different. Thanks to Talon, today she knows exactly who she is. Recently she walked away from Arkos' rule with her friends, Roger and Marcus, and never looked back. Today we were all together, all of us but Kathryn.

I, being the prophetic child, was sent to live with my mom's brother and wife, where I would spend the first eighteen years of my life not knowing my true identity. Instead, I would grow up as a normal girl with normal friends, thinking my need for blood was just a rare medical condition. The older I got and the harder my thirst was to control, the harder it was for me to accept their explanation. One quiet afternoon, they finally explained their deceit to me. As much as I wanted to be mad at them, I couldn't. I knew they were only trying to protect me.

Biological parents or not, I loved them more than life, and as far as I was concerned they would always be my mom and dad. They had been forced to keep my true identity from me; I knew this now. When I finally found out the truth about my past and who I really was, I was also informed that I had special powers. This too was news to me. The only special power I knew I had was tying a cherry stem into a knot with my tongue, and that hardly counted as special in my opinion.

Within recent months, one power in particular had surfaced. At first I thought I was crazy. Things like my running speed and agility had increased, but I never considered that to be anything out of the ordinary, even though I probably could have beaten a cheetah in a race. It wasn't until I began being able to communicate with Taylor mentally that I noticed something odd was going on with me, and it wasn't until recently that I found out that I could put words, pictures and thoughts into Melly's head too. My mental power was relatively new to me. I didn't know where it began or where it ended; only time would tell.

The night Melly heard my thoughts in human form was the first night I realized that I was *really* different from everyone else. Melly suggested I test my mind power out on our brothers to see if it worked on only a chosen few or anyone I wanted. Thus, the first of my prophetic training sessions began. Every time I tried to put thoughts or words into their minds, it worked. She was right; I could communicate with others using my mind. I could send anyone I chose pictures, words, or just say something in my head and somehow they heard or saw it all. All I had to do was focus on their face in my mind and then my thoughts transferred into their head. It was almost unbelievable.

So many terrific things had happened over the course of those weeks at wolf camp, but like the saying goes, all good things must come to an end, and eventually there were only a couple days left before Timber went back to Nostovia, where the Alpha, Lee Leleux, my great-great-grandfather, lived.

My mom's time was up too. The classes were almost over and she was fixing to be faced with her worst fear --seeing her husband as a werewolf. At this point, almost everyone had phased in front of their loved ones. Even Roger had made it out to come see us a few nights. Those that hadn't seen their loved ones phase yet had a special couple of nights lined up. Timber wanted no one going home without knowing the wolf they lived with.

My mom had no choice but to witness my dad phase now. She was a nervous wreck all day long on the day she and Dad had their meeting with Timber scheduled. She wouldn't even look at my father. She was drenched in fear; it was more than obvious. We all assumed she was fighting tears so she didn't break down in front of our guests. When it came time to leave, she asked Taylor and me to go with her. Even though I knew Timber would be gentle with my mom, I agreed to go. Anything that eased my mom's fear was worth trying. Timber was an awesome person. He knew that there were no words to comfort my mom. Only by dealing with this head on would she be able to overcome her fears. She literally needed to see that her husband was still the man she married; he would just be a little hairier every now and then.

We all walked through the forest to the area where the stage had just been, and there sat Timber on the ground, holding a small, furry white puppy.

"Welcome," he said. "Have a seat."

We all did as asked except for Dad, who stayed standing. I felt so sorry for him. I could tell how nervous he was. I had witnessed first-hand just how hard the past few weeks with Mom had been on him. How Mom would handle this, no one knew. What we did know was that we were a family and would all be there for her. I saw Taylor reach over and place mom's tiny hand in his. She looked up at him, her eyes filled with tears, and forced a small smile. Timber stood up, still holding the tiny puppy. He walked over to where my father was standing and bowed in front of him before shaking his hand. He then turned to face us, looking at my mom.

"I will not say I know how hard the past few weeks have been on you Sidney. I would be a liar to do so. You have your hands full with all of the special people in your life, that's for sure. What I do know is that God chose you to be their wife and mother for a reason. You have shown and taught love unconditionally, in such a way that molded these kids, as well as your husband, into heartfelt warriors," he said, his smile soft and understanding. "Your love for them has played, and will continue to play, a vital role in their lives --your husband especially. Sidney, he is of a royal bloodline. Yes it was his ancestors that were evil, but it was also his ancestors that changed all of that. Your husband is not to be feared by you. On the contrary, I have no doubt that after tonight you will quickly embrace his wolf. It is beautiful and strong. It is a warrior with a heart of pure gold. His wolf couldn't hurt a fly unless his family was threatened. To prove that to you, I have borrowed this little guy, Jack. Before you approach your husband, I thought you would like to see how his wolf will interact with what would be a light snack for those that you fear." He looked at my father and smiled, "Whenever you're ready, Jacob."

Dad looked at Mom but said nothing. He only smiled what was the most genuine smile I had ever witnessed. I looked at her as her eyes met his, and for a brief moment I felt like the rest of us were all intruding on their privacy. The way they looked at each other was so intimate that I got goose bumps. Mom's eyes never left his face. Her tears began to fall silently to the ground and Dad began to shake. I could hear her heart speed up, but just like with the rest of us, Dad was his wolf before she could process the change itself. He was absolutely beautiful. He was cream, a shade darker than my brother

Talon was, with a brown patch of fur on his left ear making him look like an overstuffed toy. Mom never looked away, but instead kept her eyes locked on him.

"He's beautiful," she said softly.

"Yes he is, and as gentle as they come," Timber said, placing little Jack down on the ground.

Jack ran straight to Dad, who began playing with him, nudging little Jack softly with his nose while Jack jumped around, full of excitement and energy.

"What you are seeing, Sydney, is proof that your husband is safe. You see, if he were a normal werewolf, Jack would have already met his demise, but instead Jacob is playing with him. When Jacob phases he doesn't lose who he is; he just becomes a more complex creature. His human self then blends with his wolf and they become one. He thinks just like he would in his human form. He has emotions just as you do. His senses are different, yes, but only stronger. He is still the same man you go to bed with every night; only now, he can protect you and your family better."

Mom listened to Timber as she watched Dad continue to play with Jack, who was enjoying his play time with my father as he nipped at Dad's nose.

"Why don't you stand up and walk over to him," Timber said. "I promise you that it's okay."

She looked at Taylor, who nodded at her but said nothing.

Slowly she got to her feet and began walking to where my father stood only about fifteen feet away. My dad stopped playing with the puppy and watched my mom. Timber picked Jack up and stepped aside, giving them room. When Mom got close to Dad, he lay down on the ground. She looked at Timber.

"It's a sign of submission. He is lowering himself in front of you. I have never seen a man do this for their wife before. It's quite special."

That seemed to comfort her some. She stopped in front of Dad and dropped to her knees. Slowly she reached her hand out towards him until it came to rest on his huge, fluffy head. She began petting him, and he moved his head instinctively, enjoying her touch. After a few minutes we could see her relax. I could hear her heart slow down and I knew she had just crossed over. She was falling in love all over again. Dad slowly moved his head to look into her eyes, and she burst into tears. Her little body began shaking uncontrollably. I started to get up to go to her, but Taylor stopped me. I sat back down and watched. Timber nodded at me and smiled. Mom's crying was just getting louder. It was killing me not to try to comfort her, but I waited just a little longer and then it was obvious why Taylor restrained me from going to her. After Dad gave Mom a minute to cry, he slowly belly crawled until his head was in her lap. She kept petting him as her tears continued to fall. Then Dad's wolf slowly sat up and looked at her. Her crying continued, but she never moved away from him. He licked one of her tears and her crying picked up even more. When he laid his head on her shoulder, Timber came over to us and told us that Taylor and I could go back to the cabin; she no longer needed us. All she needed was our dad. Timber assured us that he wouldn't be too far from them, and then he left too.

Neither Mom nor Dad ever went into detail about the rest of that night, but it was obvious to everyone that something very special had taken place. As a couple they were changed forever after that

night. Mom's frisky attitude quickly returned, but she never looked at my father the same ever again. She looked at him deeper, staring into his eyes with such intense love that it made my heart swell. She had fallen in love with my father all over again and it was incredible to witness.

Soon our time had come to go home. After we said our goodbyes to our new friends, we all packed in our vehicles and headed back to our individual lives. I was leaving a completely different person than when I had first arrived. The weak part of me was only a distant memory. Through much prayer and many outings in the woods, I had come to the decision that I would trust in God. I would allow Him to lead me where He wanted. For the first time in my life I felt complete. The entire ride home I talked more than I had in years. We were only a few weeks from Valentine's Day, and I was beyond excited to start planning my wedding. It felt as if my life had just started. I wasn't going to die after all. I was going to live, and live I would.

2. House on the Hill

"If you don't put that down right now, I'm gonna hurt you Kiernan," Jenny huffed. "Give it here!"

"Nope, not gonna do it. Finders keepers, losers weepers," Kiernan laughed as he ran through the front door into my house.

Jenny growled angrily, zooming past me, chasing Kiernan into the kitchen where I followed, my eyes wide.

"Something is not *found* when you stole it, moron!"

Jenny was on one side of the island in our kitchen with Kiernan on the other. Before I could ask what he had stolen, she climbed on top of the island and Kiernan darted out the door. I watched as his short legs carried him as quickly as they could. Impressively enough, he was pretty fast for a human.

"I'm gonna kill him when I get my hands on him," she blurted out, practically knocking me down as she jumped off the island.

Today had started off as a somewhat quiet day. It was one I had originally imagined to be filled with bridal magazines and floral shops. So far I was wrong... *really* wrong. Shaking my head, I figured... *what the heck*, and followed my short blonde friend into the backyard where I could see Kiernan running toward the forest holding his hand up in the air. Jenny was on his tail yelling his name. Right as Kiernan reached where the trees began, I could see Brad and Taylor coming out of the forest after their morning hunt.

"Stop him!" Jenny yelled as she continued to run.

He stole something of hers and he won't give it back, I said in my mind so that Taylor could hear me. Before Jenny and I reached Kiernan, Taylor did, and in one swift motion whatever Kiernan was waving in his hand was now in Taylor's possession.

I watched as Taylor looked at it and smiled.

"Don't say anything. I know, it's *awful*... which is precisely why it's going to be burned," Jenny grunted.

"It is not awful and I won't letcha burn it. I like it," Kiernan said, snatching it out of Taylor's hand. Taylor just looked at me and shook his head, grinning.

"Don't you dare run off with it again Linky... I'm not kidding. I *will* hurt you." Jenny walked up to him and ripped it out of his hand.

"You were cute," Brad said peering over Jenny's shoulder. "I don't see what all the fuss is about,"

"It is *not* cute Brad; it's scary and it's going to be burned." Jenny looked at Kiernan with a dirty look and huffed.

"Can I see it?" I asked, keeping my distance. I knew Jenny, and I knew that she was like a ticking bomb when it came to pictures of her past.

Begrudgingly she handed it to me and I stifled a laugh. She was right; it wasn't a good picture of her. "How did he find this?"

"Ugh, we were in my room..."

Did she just say that they were in her room? I questioned in my mind. Taylor laughed, nodding yes, and I bit my tongue so I wouldn't join him. Jenny no doubt noticed my sad attempt at not finding her last statement comical and immediately explained herself.

"We were in my room because Kiernan needed a ride. His stupid mini-van broke down *again*. Anyway, I had just picked his stranded butt up when my mom called and told me she needed me to mail something for her ASAP. So I swung by my house with Beevis over here, and that's when he stole the picture out of my room."

"I didn't steal; I borrowed," he smirked.

"You stole it! See if I save you the next time Layla refuses to work for you."

Kiernan started to say something but was cut off at the sound of my father's voice. "Family meeting in five minutes. Jenny, you, Brad and Kiernan will join us," he called from the back of the house.

My heart froze as Dad shut the door behind him. "He's calling a family meeting? This can't be good."

"I wouldn't worry," Taylor said, trying to comfort me. "I'm sure it's nothing."

Taylor's words didn't have the effect he was hoping. Ever since my last vision of him broken and bloody, I had been on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary. I wasn't going to let that vision become a reality.

Brad walked alongside me to the house as I pondered the meaning of my father's words. "Melly told me last night that Aramis had some news he too wanted to share. Maybe that's why Jacob's calling

a meeting." Brad's attempt to put my heart at ease was just as pitiful as Taylor's. I loved them both, but there was nothing either one of them could do to calm my over-extended nerves.

"Maybe so," I mumbled.

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted Kiernan grab Jenny's picture again.

"Fine... if it's *that* important to you, you can have it. Just don't you dare show anyone else or you're in for it... got it?"

"I wouldn't think of it," Kiernan gloated, as he placed the picture he had originally stolen in his back pocket.

When we got to the living room, my father was sitting with my mother on his lap. "All right guys, are you ready for the latest news?" His face was happy and calm. I definitely didn't sense anything off kilter, which allowed me to calm down some. Both he and my mom looked content. That was definitely a good sign.

"I just got a call from Aramis. It seems he's been working on a surprise and he wants us to take a trip to England so he can show it to us."

I looked at Taylor and then back at my father. "Should we be concerned?" I asked, praying the answer was no.

My father laughed and shook his head. "Not at all, Haden. This is a good thing."

"Can we know what it is?" I questioned. For some reason, my father was enjoying the secrecy. I, however, was not.

"I can't tell you all the details Haden, but I can tell you this; you'll need to go pack your bags. We're to be on the Kenton's jet in the next few hours."

"But what about the wedding?" I choked out, wondering if everyone had forgotten that Taylor and I were getting married.

"We won't be gone that long, honey," mom interjected, "probably just a few days, maybe a week at the most."

Jenny raised her hand.

"Yes, Jenny," Dad laughed.

"Can we go too?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact Aramis wants everyone who's available to come."

Jenny jumped up and grabbed Kiernan's hand. "Come on Linky, we've got packing to do."

I waved goodbye as I watched them vanish out of the room. Brad was the next to leave. He was going to go find Melly and meet us at the jet.

When they were all gone, I looked back at my father intently. "Dad, what's going on . . . for real?" I wanted answers and I wasn't going to leave him alone until he spilled it.

"Tell her Jake. She'd probably rather find out from you," my mom pleaded with him.

"Tell me what?" I loved my parents, but they were really starting to grate on my nerves. Weren't they tired of keeping secrets from me? I was definitely tired of being left in the dark.

"It's really no big deal, Haden," Dad insisted. "It's definitely nothing to get upset about. Aramis has just been working on renovating a house of sorts." He looked at my mom's face as if he were searching for the right words. "With the threats you might be facing in the future, he wanted to have a secure hiding place for you to stay. It's not ready yet, but he's ready to show us."

"How long have you known about this?"

"He spoke of it shortly after we met. I thought it was a terrific idea," Dad said, realizing I wasn't too thrilled with them scheming behind my back.

"And if I don't think it's a great idea?" My words were dry, but I didn't care.

"You might not now, honey, but you never know what the future holds," Mom added casually.

"I know that I won't be some caged animal." I shook my head in disappointment. "I've already told you both. I'm not hiding from anyone or anything."

Taylor had been sitting next to me holding my hand quietly until now. "Haden, don't you think you might be overreacting just a little?"

I shot him a look of disbelief. Was he siding with them? "Um, no... I don't."

"I'm just saying . . . it might be a good idea to humor my father. If worse comes to worse, we might need somewhere safe for our family and friends to stay."

Taylor knew exactly how to get to me. He had a very valid point and he knew it. I might not need a safe place to hide but Jenny and Kiernan definitely would. "Fine, you win. I'll start packing right now." I kissed him on the cheek and left him and my parents alone.

In my room, I began tossing clothes on my bed while talking under my breath. *They think I'm some weakling. They have no clue. For people that think I'm a prophetic person they sure don't think I'm capable of taking care of myself*, I huffed. I froze as I heard laughter come from my door. Right as I turned toward it, Taylor's face was in front of mine.

"Is that so," he chuckled.

"Were you spying on me?"

"What if I was?" he grinned, melting my heart.

"Well then, I'd just have to teach you a lesson," I said bluffing.

Taylor stepped back a little and motioned with his hands for me to bring it on. As embarrassed as I was that he heard me talking to myself, there was no comparison to the fire now burning in my soul. I continued to stand there, helpless to the effect he had on me. No words would come out of my mouth. Looking at his perfect face caused my thoughts to become frozen somewhere between my brain and my mouth. I walked closer to him, keeping my eyes locked in his. I got up on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his neck.

"If this is me being in trouble, I'll have to remember to be bad more often," he teased.

I said nothing. Instead, I leaned in closer and placed my lips on his softly before pulling away. "I love you more than anything." His light green eyes danced in mine as I watched him.

"And I you, Haden . . . and I . . . you." He bent down, kissing me again. When he pulled away, I was beginning to feel woozy from the power he held over me.

Biting my lower lip I asked him a very serious question. "I was thinking."

Taylor's eyes got big as he pretended to be scared.

"Hey! No picking at me . . . I'm being serious," I laughed.

"My bad . . . go on Haden. I'm all ears."

"I was thinking . . . how about we elope?"

By the look on his face you would have thought I asked him if we could raise baby monkeys after we got married.

"Elope? You would seriously not include Mom and Dad in our wedding?"

Bathed in guilt, I told him of course not. "They could come too . . . if they wanted."

He laughed, "*If* they wanted to come? Did you take your vitamins this morning?" he teased. "Why don't you get back to packing, silly girl." He kissed my head and said he'd meet me downstairs.

I personally didn't find the humor in my question, but I did know that he was right. Mom and Dad weren't the only ones who would kill us if we were to elope and not tell them. I would just have to be patient a little longer.

As the sun faded and the moon rose that evening, we all boarded the Kenton's jet and headed for North Yorkshire, England, where my future in-laws lived. I had come to love Kenton Manor almost as much as I loved my childhood home. Even still, I was in no mood to be travelling to England. I was supposed to be at home in the States planning my wedding.

After the plane took off, Kiernan raised his hand and made an announcement that silenced everyone. "I wanted you all to be the first to know. I won't be comin' back to Montana the old fun Kiernan you all know and love."

Jenny looked at me, wide eyed... *What's he talking about?* She mouthed. I shrugged my shoulders and looked back at Kiernan. Jenny's guess was as good as mine.

"I'm gonna be comin' home a vampire, like these fine people," Kiernan said, motioning to Brad, and Taylor.

"Bahahahahaha," Jenny busted out laughing. "Psh, whatever."

Kiernan didn't find her too amusing, and for the first time it really looked like he was upset with her. "I wasn't joking."

Jenny tried to stifle her laughter, when Brad spoke up. "Buddy, it's really not all you think it is."

Kiernan wasn't convinced. "I've made up me mind. I'm gonna have that big ol' brother of yours do the job for me Haden."

"Gabe?" I asked in shock. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Kiernan, he's not gonna change you."

I was happy when Taylor spoke up before I could get even more upset. I couldn't believe that anyone would ask to be a part of this craziness.

"I think it might be a good idea if he were to be changed," Taylor approved.

I almost choked when I heard his words. *What in the heck are you doing? Kiernan will get himself killed!* Taylor's eyes looked at me calmly and then back at Kiernan. Everyone on the jet was hanging on Taylor's words, trying like heck to figure out what he was doing.

"Kiernan, I think you should learn a little bit more about our kind first. I'd be glad to teach you once we get to Kenton Manor, if you'd like."

As if light bulbs started coming on in our heads all over the plane, we all suddenly *got it*. Kiernan was quick to want something without realizing the repercussions. Taylor knew that there would be no way he would want to go through with it when he saw how we had to live. Kiernan couldn't kill a flea, much less a grizzly bear and drink its blood. Taylor was brilliant.

"I'd be glad to help too," Brad offered.

Kiernan's face was glowing as he looked at Jenny. She just rolled her eyes and looked down at her perfectly manicured nails. He wanted Jenny to be his, and no doubt thought that this would bring him that much closer. She had no idea how lucky she was that he loved her the way he did.

Feeling relatively tired, I closed my eyes and leaned my head on Taylor's shoulder, where I let myself drift off to sleep until Taylor woke me up as we approached the landing spot. I had practically slept the entire plane ride.

We were all thankful when we landed. The plane ride was smooth, but none of us enjoyed being confined to relatively small spaces for long. Fresh air was our drug. Once we arrived at Kenton Manor, we all took to our rooms for a little rest before we were to meet back at the jet in a few hours.

Soon enough, we were boarding the Kenton's private jet once again. As we all took our seats, Jenny spoke up. "Does anyone have any idea where we're going?"

"Sure do," Melly answered. "We're headed to Dover, Kent. We'll be meeting everyone at the house on the hill."

"The *house on the hill*? You knew where we were going and didn't tell me?" I was starting to get annoyed again. What was it with everyone?

"You never asked," she laughed. "I would have told you."

Kiernan and Jenny laughed with her while Taylor and Brad smiled. I grabbed my new book out of my bag and started reading it in an attempt to ignore them all.

After we landed, we piled in the SUV waiting for us and I didn't make eye contact with anyone, including Taylor. I was having a pity party and I wasn't going to invite anyone to join me. They could all bite me; no pun intended.

"What in the heck is *that* thing," Kiernan blurted out, staring out the window toward what appeared to be a large castle.

"That's it." Dad sat up a little straighter, peering out of his window. "It's everything he said it was."

The closer we got, all I could see was castle everywhere. It sat up high on a plush, green hill overlooking the water. I was speechless. Dad smiled at me, and it was as if I could hear him reminding me that this was all done for me. When we came to a stop, we all got out one by one. Taylor held my hand while I stepped down and looked up at the immense, beige brick castle surrounded by plush, green grass and a few relatively smaller homelike buildings.

Jenny tapped my arm and pointed to the side house next to it. "This place is freakin' *huge*," she whispered.

I didn't know what to say. Just like her, I was in shock. She wasn't kidding. The house, or better yet the castle on the hill, was massive. It was unlike anything I had ever laid my eyes on.

Dad began walking as if he knew exactly where he was going, and we all followed until we could see Aramis walking toward us.

"Hello everyone; welcome to Kenward Manor." Aramis turned around, motioning to the castle and then looked back at me.

"Did you say *Kenward* Manor?" I choked out.

"Yes Haden, I did. Your father would have been so excited that you're here. He worked very hard on this for you."

I felt myself start to get woozy, and Taylor's arm was around me in seconds. "I'm fine," I assured him.

"I know this must be overwhelming for you," Aramis said simply. "Maybe we should have told you before you arrived."

I looked from left to right at the largest castle I had ever laid my eyes on. "Was this our house?"

"No Haden, it wasn't," Aramis grinned. "Your parents were way more modest with their finances than this; that is until they realized your life was in danger. *This* beautiful piece of artwork was built in the 12th century to be used for the army," he said while admiring it. "Your father bought it while your mother was pregnant with you. He wanted to have a safe place to raise you. He was very aware that we too might have to relocate even though I told him otherwise. He was always thinking about others, which is why he purchased such a grand location. If Kenton Manor was jeopardized, we were more than welcome to come here and live with your family. Landon was a smart man. He knew without a doubt that it was only a matter of time. He wanted you to have somewhere to stay that would ensure your safety. He and your mother didn't want to be separated from you. What he didn't know was that we would be found before he would have a chance to finish repairing the castle and its tunnels. In the end, he and your family were forced to run and take cover in what they thought was a safe house. Sadly you were found only hours later."

"Did you say tunnels?" I couldn't believe any of what I was hearing.

"This is no normal castle, Haden," Aramis continued. "It has tunnels woven underneath it, stretching their arms out in various directions. Your father thought it would be the perfect place for your family to live. If you were ever in need of escaping it would be easy, and if you were ever under attack it would be almost impossible for them to get to you. When Landon died, he left Kenward Manor to me to oversee until you all were of age. This castle belongs to you and your brothers and sisters."

I didn't know what to say. I was standing in front of a huge sign of the love my father had for me. The castle may belong to all of us, but it was bought to protect me. It was incomprehensible.

"Would you like to see inside?" Aramis asked, studying my face.

I nodded yes and Taylor squeezed my hand. "You're doing great," he whispered.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and fought the impending tears. *Thanks. I still wish we would have stayed home.*

"Soon we'll be back there planning our wedding," he said softly in my ear.

I smiled at my best friend and lover and kept walking, putting one foot in front of the other. We got to the two massive front doors and Aramis opened one door, allowing us all to go in before him.

Jenny instantly gasped. "This is incredible!"

The grand entrance melded into the largest room I had ever seen. It made the Kenton's home look small.

"Well, I'll be a hot-n-spicy chicken in the sun, this place is crazy! I don't think I'm ever going home," Kiernan laughed, looking up as he walked. He was right; it *was* a sight to behold.

"If you think this is big, you should see where Lee lives in Nostovia," my dad trailed off, deep in thought.

My mother's eyes shot lasers into the side of my father's face where she stared. "And you would know this how, Jake?"

"Pictures, honey. I saw pictures when I was younger. There were rumors that his estate was so large he eventually turned it into a school for wolves. I never thought much about it until now. I'll have to ask Timber the next time I see him. Nostovia might be a good backup plan should this location ever be compromised."

"I'm afraid that might be harder than you think, Jake." Aramis pointed to a painted portrait that hung above a huge stone fireplace. "That's Lee with Landon's creator, Aspen. Once upon a time Lee and Aspen were very good friends. Aspen's pride along with his intense greed eventually put an end to their friendship. This painting was done a very long time ago indeed. Lee doesn't take too kindly to vampires anymore, and Aspen is the reason why," Aramis said, sighing as his eyes fell upon the painting again. "Long ago, Aspen approached Lee and presented him with a deal he thought Lee couldn't refuse. He had found a way, he said, to make an army of vampires, creatures so strong they would almost be invincible. These vampires would make the fiercest, most powerful army anyone had ever witnessed. Aspen knew that one of the main things standing in his way of this endeavor was the Warrior Wolves. It was imperative that he have Lee's approval and cooperation. Yet instead of waiting for his friends answer, he hastily began creating vampires at a rate which made training them on how to control their blood lust virtually impossible. Soon enough, it became viral. Even though Aspen was choosy with whom he imposed *the change* on, several of his followers weren't quite as careful. Instead, they began creating vampires unethically. One attacked Lee's wife, taking her life. She was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and it ended her life abruptly. Right then Lee made an oath that the wolves would never coincide with vampires ever again." Aramis looked at me and smiled. "As you saw at your wolf camp, Lee has a good heart. He knows vampire blood runs through your veins. He also knows that it's not your fault. A true leader knows that there are exceptions to every rule, and sometimes they must rewrite them for the good of mankind."

My father stared up at the picture as he spoke. "I had no idea that's what took her life. What about Haden and her brothers and sisters? The fact that they're mixed has to have some bearing on his former decision. After all, Timber has been very helpful to us. Is it possible that Lee changed his mind?"

"My friend," Aramis said, smiling kindly at my father, "you don't realize how lucky you are that Timber agreed to walk through this with Haden. There will be no changing Lee's mind. He's a good man, but there will be no wavering on his part. He will stand by his words, even if things have changed. Timber being so eager to help has no relevancy on Lee's stance. Lee values Timbers opinion, that is true, but it will not change his own. If Timber wants to help protect Haden, Lee won't stand in his way. I can guarantee you, however, that he will offer no help."

While they continued to talk, I looked up into the picture at the two men who stood so grandly, one next to the other. There before me was the man that changed my father into a bloodsucker, and standing next to him, only a little shorter, was Lee, my great-great grandfather. There they stood, the head warrior wolf and head vampire --together. It was like catching a glimpse into a very bizarre dream.

Lee looked like a normal man you would see walking down the street in the upscale part of town. Although he appeared to be very approachable, there was something in his large green eyes that

spoke volumes, something that warned onlookers to be careful with what they did or said around him. Every short hair on his head seemed to be in perfect place. With his thick muscular build and a broad smile, I could tell he was quite the looker in his time. Dressed in a black high-necked sweater, he stood next to a tall, rather pale man with a dark, pristine pony tail. The tall gentleman was dressed in a black shirt with a black cape draped over his shoulders looking way more fearful than Lee. Something in his eyes bothered me instantly as opposed to Lee's deep wolf eyes which flooded me more with love than fear. I recognized those eyes immediately. After all, I saw them every time I looked at my uncle turned father and every time I saw my reflection in the mirror.

I continued to stare up at the picture when Aramis's phone went off. "If you'll excuse me for just one moment," he said with a smile before walking off.

"I'da given ol' whatever his name was a piece of my mind for sure. He would have never taken me wife's life. I'da taken him out first," Kiernan blurted out.

"I doubt it was *that* simple Kiernan," Jenny said, rolling her eyes. "Besides, you would have been his lunch."

"Don't be doubtin' me, me bunny. If anyone ever so much as laid a hand on ya, it would be the end of 'em. I don't care how big they were."

I watched as Jenny's face lit up, a slight smile spreading across it. She grabbed Kiernan's arm and laid her head on his shoulder. "That was the sweetest thing you've ever said to me."

Kiernan froze, surely in shock that Jenny was actually touching him. Aramis returned and Jenny pulled away. I caught her eyes and she smiled sheepishly. It was about time she realized how much Kiernan loved her.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to postpone our tour of Kenward Manor for now. It seems we have some sort of problem in one of the tunnels that needs my attention," Aramis said apologetically. "Alexandra will be expecting you all at our house. Nanny Mena has prepared a nice late lunch for everyone."

My father shook Aramis's hand and in no time we were back on the Kenton's private jet headed back for Yorkshire.

"Well, that was interesting," Melly grinned. Brad held her hand and nodded in agreement.

"It *was* quite a sight to see," my mom said, in awe. "I've never seen anything so large."

"I could build you one if it would make you happy," my father said, kissing the back of my mother's hand.

"Oh Jake," she blushed. "I wouldn't trade our home for all the castles in the world."

"Y'all are so cute," Jenny sighed, right as there was an announcement from the pilot.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it appears we have a slight problem."

I looked into Taylor's eyes, fear flooding my soul.

"I just received word from Mr. Kenton that I am to fly you all back to the States. He sends his apologies."

"This can't be good," I insisted.

Tension seeped in the plane, silently fueling my fears. Right as I was about to dial Talon, the phone next to my father began to ring. He looked at my mother, whose eyes were the size of silver dollars, and then picked it up slowly.

"This is Jacob... Hello Aramis... Yes, I see... Is there anything we can do? I understand... Yes, I will... Please keep me informed. Will do... Goodbye."

We all stared at him quietly, waiting for him to speak.

"Kenton Manor is on fire," he sighed, shaking his head.

My mom gasped and I felt my heart begin racing when Taylor squeezed my hand. I could hear his heart racing right alongside mine.

"We shouldn't be going home," Taylor said through his teeth. I knew all too well that he wasn't about to lose his birth mom after he just found her.

"Aramis insisted we return to America, Taylor. No one was hurt, so let your heart rest at ease. He does *not* want Haden there right now. He believes that someone got wind of her visit and the fact that the castle has been relatively empty. He believes it was a warning. They want us to know that they're coming for her and they don't care who they hurt in the process."

"Okay, so let's drop Haden and Mom off and then we can head back. We can't *not* help them." Taylor's words were covered in sorrow.

"Son, think... Aramis has all the help he needs right now. Haden needs you to stay with her. She needs all of us. Aramis and I believe that they are doing what they can to get her alone. It is our job, Son, to see that that never happens."

Taylor leaned back in his seat and sighed, looking at me. "You're right." He put his arm around my shoulder, pulling me next to him.

"Um, doesn't anyone want to know what I have to say about this," I interjected, irritated.

"They probably don't," Jenny laughed.

I shot her a look of disgust. "And why is that?"

"Seriously, Haden, I'm your best friend. Anyone who knows you knows that you would want to turn this plane around and go find the people who are looking for you."

"And what's so wrong with that?" I bit back.

"Well, let's see... hmm... maybe the fact that you could... oh I don't know... get killed!" she said with a laugh. "You're fearless, Haden. It's a cool quality when you're dealing with humans. In case you haven't noticed, you're not."

I rolled my eyes at Jenny. "I *know* what I'm up against isn't human. I get that. What I don't get is why we're always hiding from them. Why can't we just face them and get this over with? I want my life back."

"Little sis, as much as you want to be ready, you're not. It's not time," Melly objected.

"Who said it's not time?" I griped.

"I say it's not." My father sat straight up in his chair and looked into my eyes. "Haden, I need you to trust Aramis and me. We both have your best interest at heart."

"I just don't get how either of you can tell *me* that it's not time. I'm the chosen one, not y'all."

"*Haden*," my mom sighed, shocked at the tone of my voice.

"It's true Mom. *I'm* the one who was chosen. Shouldn't *I* be the one who decides when this all comes to an end?"

My father stared intently at me. "No."

Looking at him, I didn't know whether to be annoyed or confused. "Huh?"

"Do you have your Bible with you?" he asked in a serious tone.

"Yes."

"Get it out please."

You have got to be kidding me, I thought to myself as I bent down, opened my purse and pulled out my compact Bible. "Okay," I huffed.

"Turn to 1 Peter 5:6." I did as my father asked. "Read it aloud, please."

Seriously? Was this really the right time for a Bible lesson? Fine. "First Peter, chapter 5 verse 6... humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." When I was done reading I looked at my father, waiting for him to speak.

Dad smiled at me. "God will exalt you in *due time* Haden. Now is not His time. It's really that simple."

Okay, so he had a point. Thanks to him and my mother, I too knew the Bible. "Okay Dad, how about, Philippians chapter 4 verse 13? I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. How about *that* verse? That one would say that I can take them down . . . now."

"Nope, nice try, honey, but that verse isn't saying that you are supposed to rush God's timing. When it's His time you will be able to do all things through Him," he smirked. "Do you have any more Bible verses that you'd like to bring up?"

Knowing I was defeated, I shook my head no. My father was well versed in the Bible. It was pointless. Besides, I knew in my heart that he was right. It may very well be *my* time to take all of those evil, blood thirsty, human feeding schmucks out, but it wasn't God's time. I knew all too well that my time and God's time were two totally different things.

"You win, Dad," I admitted. "I'll tell you what, though . . . when it *is* God's time, I'll be ready and they won't know what hit them." I was as serious as a heart attack.

"I have no doubt," he agreed.

"Since we're having Bible time," Jenny laughed. "I'd like to share one of my most favorite Bible verses." She grabbed the Bible out of my hand and I sighed. *Oh my... here we go.*

Taylor laughed, smiling at me as he listened to my thoughts. That one was pretty loud.

"Erm erm, okay... let me see if I can find it. It's in Proverbs somewhere," she said, flipping through the pages. "Here it is! I just love this one. It's awesome. Okay... here we go. Proverbs 26:11, as a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly." We all laughed as she spoke.

I too knew that verse well. *Vomit eater, vomit eater, you had a wife and couldn't keep her. You're a fool, you know it well, keep it up and you'll go to...* Taylor shook his head, laughing as he continued to listen to my childish thoughts.

"What? It's true," I laughed.

Everyone except Taylor looked at me like I was crazy.

"They didn't hear your thoughts," Taylor whispered. "They think you just had some strange outburst," he chuckled under his breath.

Oh, I laughed. *I get it.*

"Yes it's true, that's what makes it so funny," Jenny said, totally missing how weird my outburst was.

My mom, however, hadn't missed a beat. I guessed it was time to reveal my secret to my mom. I hadn't told her of my ability to communicate with Taylor mentally for fear that she would freak out even more. She was just finally getting used to all of the weirdness in our lives.

"Mom, I know one of my powers now."

She looked at my father and then back at me, frozen.

"It's no big deal, really. I can just put my thoughts into others' heads. It started with Taylor and then I learned that I could do it with Melly. Taylor's the easiest. I don't really have to try with him."

"I don't understand," she choked out.

"Here's how it works. I just picture the person I want to hear my thoughts before I say something in my head. I can also project pictures into their head if I want."

"Have you ever done that to me?" she asked, her voice raising an octave.

I knew I was on thin ice. Even though she wasn't my birth mother, she was still my mom. I knew her well enough to know that she definitely wouldn't approve of me wandering into someone's mind uninvited—especially hers.

"No ma'am."

Jenny and Kiernan stifled a laugh. I shot them both a nasty look and then looked back at my mother.

"I have never tried it on you, Mom." *She's gonna kill me, isn't she?* I said in my mind so Taylor could hear me.

Taylor chuckled and my mom gave him a, *you better be quiet*, look. He stopped immediately and then I laughed.

"I'm so glad that you two find this so darn funny, but I don't. I understand that you're going to be able to do some special things, Haden, but I will not let you abuse them. Do you understand me?"

"Yes ma'am," I breathed.

Dad smiled and poured my mom a glass of water. "I find this bit of information extremely interesting, Haden. Have you ever tried it out on me?"

"No sir."

"Would you mind trying?"

Seriously? I looked at Taylor and he smiled, finding it comical.

Brad spoke up for the first time the whole trip. "Can I say something?"

We all nodded yes.

"I think that this is a remarkable gift and could come in very handy. I think that Haden should practice on all of us . . . with our consent of course," he said, smiling at my mom."

"I agree," Dad grinned. "No time like the present."

"Okie dokie," I sighed, "you first, Dad."

He nodded and I took a deep breath. Closing my eyes, I pictured a huge steak with a baked potato loaded down. I opened my eyes and he was glowing.

"That was incredible. You made me hungry. You sent me a picture of steak and baked potato, correct?"

I nodded yes, and he clapped his hands. "All right then, now pick someone else and don't tell them it's them."

As much as I hated to admit this, it *was* kinda fun. I closed my eyes again and pictured Jenny's cute little face. *Wanna grab a coffee after we get home? Maybe Zach's working.*

I opened my eyes and she piped up. "It was me! You asked me if I wanted to grab a coffee with you when we get home. You also said that Zach might be there." Jenny was practically jumping up and down.

"Yep," I smiled.

This time I wouldn't close my eyes. I thought of Melly and asked her if she wanted to go with us. She smiled and said yes. She and I had been playing this game for a couple weeks already. The more I practiced with her, the less difficult it had become. It was *really* easy for me to send thoughts to her.

"This is fantastic, Haden," my father approved.

I smiled at him and debated whether or not now was a good time to tell them about Taylor's talent of dream invasion. Before I could come to a conclusion, Taylor squeezed my hand. I looked at him and he nodded no. For now I would keep his secret safe even though I didn't think it was fair.

"Hey, what about me?" Kiernan blurted out, unhappy that he hadn't been chosen yet.

"My bad," I laughed. "Give me a second."

I closed my eyes and pictured him driving Taylor's car.

Kiernan gasped. "Heck yeah, Taylor's gonna let me drive his car when we get home."

I laughed as I watched his face glowing like a little boy who just got his first battery-operated fire truck.

"I wouldn't count on that, buddy," Taylor said, shaking his head at me. "You're unbelievable."

"I know," I sighed. "It's one of the reasons you love me."

He pulled me closer to him and kissed my head. "You know me too well."

The rest of the plane ride was like a crazy type of Pictionary. My father was convinced that it was the perfect time for me to practice my newfound talent. Everyone else agreed, so we spent the rest of our time in the air with me talking to my friends and family in my head. *Only* in my world would this be considered sane, I laughed. *Thank you, God, for my family.* I could only hope that He heard my thoughts just as easily as everyone else did.

3. Death Trap

"Would you please just take it?" I said, shoving money in Jenny's hand.

"No, Haden. I refuse to take handouts . . . even from you." "It's not a handout, fool. You need to fix your car."

"So?"

"What do you mean... so? You need money and I have some. So here, take it."

She turned her back from me and walked toward my dresser mirror, puckering up her lips and checking her make-up once more.

"I can walk."

"Oh my gosh; you are so stubborn. Just take the freakin' money Jenny. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have had to quit your job and you would have money. So there," I said, knowing I had just won the argument.

"You know what," she marveled as she put more lip gloss on. "You're right. It *is* your fault." She walked over to me and took the money out of my hand. "I'll take this on one condition."

"Umm, okay," I laughed. "And what would that be?"

"You have to promise that you won't tell Kiernan my car's fixed."

Laughing, I promised that her secret would be safe with me as long as he didn't ask. She knew I was allergic to lying.

"So what are you up to today?" she questioned me as she neatly put the money in her wallet.

"Not much. I think I may just hang out at home and look through my bridal magazines. It seems everyone I know has plans. Taylor, Melly, Brad and Kiernan are off doing something highly secretive apparently. No one would tell me where they were going," I shrugged. "My parents have work they need to catch up on, and you have a date with your parents."

"I could always cancel," she offered.

"No way; go be with them. I'm fine. As a matter of fact, I think I might actually enjoy the silence."

"I still can't believe they all agreed to let you stay here alone," she marveled. "How'd you pull that one off?"

"Easy. I told them that I wouldn't put up with being suffocated. I assured everyone that I wouldn't leave the house, and somehow it worked."

"Sweet; well, I'm outta here. If you need me, I'm a phone call away."

I hugged my blonde friend and sent her on her way. I threw myself onto my bed and sighed. I was free. For the first time in who knows how long, I was alone. It felt great. I grabbed my mp3 player, put the tiny speakers in my ears and jumped off of my bed. Today I felt energized, and for some weird reason I had this huge urge to clean. So that's exactly what I did. I put on some white sweat pants, rolled them up and threw on an older t-shirt before arranging my hair in an up-turned ponytail. I looked pretty cute in a homely sort of way, if I did say so myself. As I cleaned, I happily sang along with the music.

When I was done, I grabbed the phone and ordered a medium pepperoni pizza with extra cheese. According to Taylor, I was a rat. Cheese was my other love. I had worked up quite the appetite. While waiting for the delivery person, I finished cleaning the kitchen floor. The doorbell rang and I froze. The last time I had opened the door to a pizza delivery person, it hadn't turned out so well for me. I shut my eyes and repeated Psalm 34:4 in my head three times. *I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.* Taking a deep breath I forced one foot in front of the other as I walked toward the door. *I can do this. I can do this.* I reminded myself that I was the one who called them as I looked through the peep hole. I smiled when I saw the scrawny boy on the other side of the door holding my pizza. I grabbed the cash off of the living room table and opened the door.

"Hi," I said, as I saw the boy's eyes open wide when he looked at my face.

"You're so pretty," he murmured, taken aback.

"Thank you," I laughed, assuming he had a thing for maids.

He shakily handed me the pizza box as I gave him the money. "Do you have a boyfriend?" he stuttered.

I chuckled. "Yes I do."

Looking defeated, he sighed, "Oh... that's a bummer."

"If you guys break up, you know where to find me," he said as he turned toward his little car.

"I'll remember that, thanks," I laughed under my breath.

I sat on the couch, setting the pizza box on the coffee table where I opened it slowly. I took a deep breath in, reveling in its sinful smell. As I took the first bite, I slid back, almost melting into the couch. It was the best pizza I had ever had in my life. Today was turning out to be a really good day. I sat up a little straighter and grabbed the TV remote when the home phone rang. I had promised I wouldn't answer it. If anyone needed to get in touch with me they knew to call my cell phone. The phone stopped ringing and then started again. This went on three times. Finally its incessant ringing was beginning to ruin my pizza high, so I got up and grabbed the cordless phone.

"Hello?" I answered, trying to disguise my voice.

"Jacob Leleux, please."

"He's not in right now; can I take a message?"

"Who am I speaking with?" the female voice asked.

"This is his daughter. How can I help you?" I crossed my fingers like some elementary school kid hoping I hadn't just given away too much information; so much for me lying low.

"Great. Haden this is Debora from Centennial Security systems. The alarm at Irish Brother's Coffee has been set off. Your father expressed that we should contact him before sending the police out. Would you please relay this information to him? If we don't hear from him or your mother in the next five minutes we will contact the police."

I thanked the woman and told her that I would go check it out myself before I hung up the phone. *Great*, I thought. I wasn't allowed to leave the house, but then again, who was going to stop me? I had no clue where anyone was and I wasn't about to call them. I was sure it was nothing, so I shoved one more scrumptious bite of pepperoni pizza in my mouth and ran upstairs to grab my purse. In seconds I was in my car and ready to go.

Glancing in the rearview mirror I put the key in the ignition, bringing my car to life, and backed out of the driveway slowly. I turned on the radio as I pulled out of the driveway and blared the crunky tunes flooding out of my speakers. As if I were the carefree girl I once was, I lowered my windows, letting the ice cold air fill my car and reenergize my spirit. With a quick breath, I drove toward the main road on the outskirts of our property. Taking a smooth right turn, I was on the road and headed toward the coffee shop. Somehow I missed seeing a patch of ice, causing my car to spin. Never had I been a fan of driving during winter, and now was no exception. Instinctively I told the car what to do and pulled myself out of the spin. *Phew*. I exhaled.

Before I approached the vicinity of the coffee shop my family had recently acquired, I could see smoke in the air. *What the heck?* I leaned in closer to my steering wheel as I tried to see where it was coming from. *Dang it, that's coming from Irish Brother's.*

I gripped the steering wheel and sped up. When I pulled into the parking lot, I could see flames blazing inside. I jumped out of my car and ran toward it. I went to grab my phone when a familiar voice filled the air.

"Long time no see, Haden."

Walking toward me around the other side of Irish Brother's Coffee was Derrick with Sean by his side. Never had I imagined that my ex-boyfriend and his best jerk of a friend would be standing in between me and Irish Brother's as it burned, shooting flames in the air.

"Did you do this?" I choked out.

Looking back toward the burning building and then again at me, Derrick grinned. "I've never been much for stale coffee," he laughed, amused with himself.

I started to dial 911 when Sean stepped toward me.

"Don't come any closer," I demanded.

"Aw, don't be like that." Derrick grinned, showing his teeth. He watched as I stared. "Looks good on me, huh? I knew you'd like it. Now maybe you won't be such a prude."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," I muttered.

"I'm like you. I've turned. Now we can be together. I called you to me through fire. How's that for romantic?"

How's that for sick? I said in my head, my lips never moving.

He licked his lips and smiled while confusion registered on his perfectly-complected face. Someone had changed him in an attempt to get to me. This was getting ridiculous.

"Derrick, if you leave I won't tell anyone that it was you who lit the coffee shop on fire," I begged.

"Leave? Not without you. You belong to me. Let's go," he said, walking toward me.

Derrick stopped short as three motorcycles pulled up. Patrick, Collin and Zach jumped off and walked in front of me, separating me from Sean and Derrick. Zach turned around and winked at me.

Derrick laughed a sinister laugh. "I suppose you three think that you will be able to stop me from doing what I came here to do."

Zach laughed louder, sounding like he was howling again.

"I have one question for you," Patrick said stiffly.

"Really, isn't that interesting?" Derrick snickered, amused. Looking at Sean, he popped his neck and said, "Bear over there has a question for me. Let's see what he has to say before I tear him apart."

"It's simple, really. Of course you might not think so, considering your mental capacity," Patrick said calmly.

Collin laughed and shook his head while Zach popped his knuckles.

"Is today the day you would like to die?" Patrick's words were slow and precise.

Derrick moved his head to try to look at me and Collin moved in front of him, blocking me from his sight.

"You've got some funny new friends, Haden," Derrick said, enjoying the moment.

Patrick snapped his fingers in Derrick's direction to get his attention and Sean made a frightening sound like a feral cat.

"You might want to control your pet, if you know what's good for you," Patrick said, looking repulsed.

Derrick put his hand out to Sean. "Not just yet, brother. This is proving to be interesting."

I watched as Irish Brother's continued to burn. I thought about texting my father, but I quickly changed my mind when I heard Derrick growl.

"What was that question again?" he hissed.

"You will have one more chance to answer it right," Patrick warned. "Is today the day you would like to die?"

Derrick tilted his head up and laughed. "Sure, why not. I'd like to see you try."

Zach laughed and Sean ran toward him right as Derrick aimed for me. Collin pushed me back and turned, running toward the others. My breath caught in my throat as I hit the cold pavement. I looked up to see Zach, Patrick and Collin all phased into wolves. Zach's wolf was crazy. He kept running at Sean, who was jumping on the cars in an attempt to escape. Zach would stop and howl. He was laughing. Patrick and Collin were both fighting Derrick. Since Derrick's change, he was even more powerful. His strength was obvious as he threw Patrick off of him. Patrick yelped and Collin ran full force at Derrick, knocking him down and breaking his leg before taking a bite out of his shoulder.

I stood there shaking. My wolf wanted out. Right as I was about to phase, I saw Zach jump off of Sean's limp body and run toward Patrick, who was lying off to the side whimpering. I began to walk toward him and Zach growled at me, stopping me short. He ran over to where Collin and Derrick were now facing off. Derrick's broken mangled leg didn't seem to hardly slow him down. He looked like a maniac. I could only pray that Derrick didn't get a lucky shot again. Every time I would try to move closer, Collin or Zach would growl at me, forcing me to stay put.

Collin and Patrick's wolves looked at each other before Zach let out a little howl and both he and Collin took off running toward Derrick. Derrick escaped, but just barely. Patrick's leg had been disabled, which had him confined to where he sat, at least for now. It seemed the wolves healing powers were not to be compared to the vampires. I continued to shake while I watched them corner Derrick once again and take his life, or what was left of it. I stood, trembling as they all phased back. Collin ran over to Patrick and Zach ran up to me. He was wearing nothing but shorts.

"I guess the cat's out the bag," he laughed. "You okay?"

I nodded while I watched Collin help Patrick stand up. The fire was now raging.

"Dude, we've gotta get them outta here fast," Zach hollered toward his friends.

"I'm on it," Collin called out after he helped his brother to his feet. I watched as Collin disarmed a black Tahoe parked in the back of the parking lot.

"Be right back." Zach smiled at me and ran to help Collin drag Derrick and Sean into the SUV.

Collin drove away and Zach ran back to where Patrick and I stood.

Time stood still while I watched Zach grab Patrick's broken leg and fix the break.

"Dang dude, you *could* be a little more gentle," Patrick winced.

"Quit being a wuss, Patrick." Zach laughed and got up. "There, you'll be back to normal in no time." Zach turned to look at me. "As for you, you look incredibly hot."

"Zach, now's really not the time for your hormones to be expressing themselves," Patrick said, reprimanding him.

"My bad," he grinned, flirting with me.

Feeling the heat, I looked at Irish Brother's once more. The fire was now shooting through the center of the roof.

"The police will be here soon. There's no time to waste. We had better get our story straight," Patrick demanded, looking at both Zach and I. "We all arrived just now. We got here too late to see who set the store on fire."

I nodded, letting him know I understood.

"Zach, I'm gonna call Jacob. You stay with Haden. She doesn't look so great."

"I'm on it," he said, standing next to me as I watched Irish Brother's burn. "Raging hotness, huh."

I nodded my head yes but I didn't bother to look at him. I was in shock. His flirting efforts would have to be ignored.

"So Haden, whadja think about my wolf? He's pretty freakin' hot too, huh?" he insisted.

Wishing Jenny was here to take Zach's attention off of me, I told him yes. "You have a really cute wolf."

"You think my wolf is just *cute*?"

Thankfully I didn't have to answer. Sirens began blaring in the distance, and before I knew it flashing lights were everywhere. That's when I heard the tires squeal and saw Taylor's car fly into the parking lot. Both he and my father jumped out and ran toward me.

"Are you all right?" my father asked, looking me over.

"Yes," I cried.

He kissed my head and walked toward the police officers.

A fire truck pulled into the parking lot right as I threw myself into Taylor's arms and cried, shaking uncontrollably.

"It's okay; I'm here now," he assured me. "Let's get you home."

I was in no mood to argue. Instead, I held on tight to his arm and followed him to his car.

"What about my car?" I asked, worried.

"Dad will drive yours home," Taylor said as he opened the passenger door for me.

Our trip home was spent in silence. Visions of Zach, Collin and Patrick phasing into wolves consumed my head. Once we were home, we were greeted by my mother who had been waiting frantically by the door.

"Thank God you're all right."

I hugged her, feeling the warmth of her love embrace me. I felt safe in my mother's arms. I only wished I could feel this way forever. I forced a smile as I pulled away and told both her and Taylor that I was going to take a shower. They looked at each other and then smiled at me. No matter how bad they wanted to help me, they knew that there would be some things I would just have to work through on my own... this was one of them.

I turned the knob in the shower and took in a deep breath, feeling the scalding hot water pulsate on my back. So many thoughts were rummaging through my overcrowded brain. *Derrick was dead.* I wanted to cry. I wanted to be able to release the emotions I held deep inside. Yet for some reason, I was unable to. I had no tears for Derrick or Sean. Would they come later? That I didn't know. All I knew was that I was quickly beginning to realize that in all reality... I knew nothing about anything. *How could I have not known that Patrick, Collin and Zach were all wolves? Did my father know this when he bought Irish Brother's Coffee? If so, I had been in the dark about more than I thought.*

I shut the water off and grabbed my fluffy cream towel, wrapping myself in it. I put my hair in a towel turban and walked in my room toward my bed, where I sat. My phone went off with the sound of a text message and I grabbed it, sliding it open. It was from Jenny.

"Hey! Did you hear that there was a fire at Irish Brother's?"

I laughed sarcastically. *'Yeah, I heard.'*

"Wanna go check it out?" she asked, excited.

"No thanks; I'll pass."

"Suit yourself. I'll tell you all about it later."

I shut my phone and set it down on the table beside my bed. Eyeing my pillow, I decided to lie down. I pulled the towel away from my head and let my wet hair rest on the pillow. Shutting my eyes, I saw Derrick's evil stare in my mind and began to cry. *Why?* What happened to him? I couldn't believe that he was gone. Once upon a time he was my friend. I cried for his family until I fell asleep.

The vibrations from my phone startled me out of my nap. I stretched and grabbed it. It was Talon.

"Hello?" I answered groggily.

"Haden, are you insane?" he griped.

"Yes, actually," I said, trying to joke.

Not laughing, he went on, "Jacob told me what happened. What were you thinking, going to Irish Brother's by yourself like that? Were you trying to get yourself killed?"

"Maybe," I joked again. This time my attempt failed even worse than the last. He was silent. "I'm just kidding, Talon. Of course I wasn't trying to get myself killed. Dad wasn't home and someone needed to go out there."

"That someone shouldn't have been you. You have got to be more careful." Fear flooded the phone from Talon's end. It had me wondering if he knew something that I didn't. He wasn't one to overreact; I was.

"Gabe, Roger and I are on our way to you right now. Don't do anything stupid," he demanded.

"You've got it," I agreed.

I told my overprotective brother that I loved him and hung up the phone. It was seven thirty. I had been asleep for hours. I got dressed and grabbed some nourishment before putting a little make-up on. My stomach growled, reminding me of the pizza I had left behind. I wondered if there was any left. I would check when I got downstairs.

Once I was out of my room, the smell of roast filled the air. No pizza tonight. Mom had been cooking. Praise God. I loved her roast and vegetables.

"Hey there, hot stuff," Taylor teased from his room as I walked by.

I turned around and followed the sound of his voice. He was sitting in his chair reading a book. Putting it down, he got up and walked over to me. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?" He walked past me, keeping his eyes on me and shut the door. My heart began going crazy again, wondering why he had shut the door.

He strolled up behind me and moved my hair to the side slowly. I inhaled as he softly kissed my neck. "You smell so good." His words were soft; their heat had me almost hyperventilating.

I turned to face him. His eyes were light and determined. "I'm sorry I wasn't here with you today."

"I don't need a babysitter," I griped. "It wasn't your fault."

"I know that," he said, lacing his fingers through mine as they hung by my side. "I still wish I would have been here with you."

"Where were you exactly?" My question got lost somewhere in the air when he leaned in closer to me and gently kissed my lips.

"Somewhere *very* important," he whispered. "I was getting your wedding present ready."

"Really?" I said excited.

"Oh yes. You're gonna love it."

"I love *this*," I said, resting my cheek against his.

He moved, putting his lips right next to mine, barely touching them. I could feel his breath on my lips.

"I like *this*," he breathed.

Oh heavenly Father, I thought. *I want to be close to him so bad. Give me strength.*

"Soon, love." Taylor removed his hands from mine and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his chest and kissing me soft and slow. "Soon," he whispered in my ear, biting it softly.

He had me so lost in his touch that I suddenly forgot all about the drama earlier today.

"We had better get going. Mom and Dad have invited some guests over for dinner."

"Tonight?" I asked, confused. "Today of all days they invite people over? Man, so much for letting me breathe."

"You'll like these guests; I promise." Taylor grabbed my hand and led me out of his room. I stopped short outside of his room. He looked at me, worried. "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine. I just wanted to tell you how much I love you."

His facial expression softened. "I love you too, Haden, more than words." He kissed me softly and we began walking again.

"Hurry it on up you two," my father called as he passed us on his way out the door. "Your mom could use your help setting the table. Our guests will be here soon. I'm going out to the cellar to grab a bottle of wine. I'll be right back."

"Wine?" I looked at Taylor right as my mom sighed.

"I'll never have everything ready in time," she moaned from the kitchen.

We picked up our pace and began walking faster. Mom was hovering over the oven moving potatoes around.

"Need some help?" Taylor grinned.

"You have no idea. Would you guys mind setting the table?" Mom's words were chirpy like a little mama bird sensing the time her babies would leave the nest was approaching rapidly. Taylor put his arm around her and gave her a hug before he opened the cabinet and began getting dishes out.

"Oh no, honey, not those. We're using the china tonight."

Now it was Taylor who looked at me confused. I shrugged my shoulders and chuckled, finding him funny. Mom was unaffected by my laughter, thankfully, and continued flitting around the kitchen. Dad was back in minutes, putting the bottle of wine on ice.

"I wish we would have known they were coming sooner, Jake. I could have chilled the wine." Mom rushed past him and he tapped her backside. She rolled her eyes, smiling, and continued working.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it. Everything will be great." Dad winked at me as he grabbed the silverware out of the drawer.

"Who's coming for dinner?" I asked, sneaking a carrot from the platter where the roast and vegetables now sat. Mom slapped my hand and picked up the platter, handing it to my father, who put it on the center of the table.

Dad poured himself a glass of wine right as the doorbell rang. I watched as Dad left the room and Mom ran off to use the restroom. I looked at Taylor with a look of disbelief. Was I not supposed to know who was coming? He smiled and walked over to me, taking my hand as voices filled the house.

"Something smells incredible," the familiar male voice said.

"Is that Zach?" I whispered.

Taylor nodded and suddenly I had no more questions. Of course it was those three that were coming for dinner. They were wolves... three wolves that just so happened to save my life earlier today. My mom was making them a thank you dinner.

It was the next voice I heard that shocked me.

"It was very kind of you and Sidney to invite us over this evening."

Timber?

Taylor nodded yes again as we walked toward the archway entrance to the kitchen, stopping when we saw them . . . all *four* of them. Collin, Patrick and Zach stood quietly behind Timber. Zach winked at me when he saw me and Taylor squeezed my hand.

He's harmless, I chuckled.

"Maybe, but one can never be too sure of such things," Taylor whispered in my ear, giving me chills.

We all took our seats once my mother was out of the ladies' room.

Everyone bowed their head as Dad blessed the food. "Thank you Heavenly Father for this food. Please bless it. Let it nourish our minds and bodies. Thank you, Lord, for our friends who are here with us tonight and thank you for protecting our daughter today. In Jesus' name, Amen."

My mother and I began serving everyone when Patrick spoke up. "Thank you all for inviting us to dinner. It's been a long time since we had a home cooked meal. Our apartment kitchen isn't well suited for cooking for more than one, sadly. It seems we've all learned how to live on coffee."

"Speak for yourself, dude," Zach jumped in. "I've cooked up some amazing meals in that kitchen."

"Your spaghetti goulash, or whatever you called it, hardly counts, Zach," Collin said, laughing after he thanked my mom for serving him.

She told him that it was the least she could do after they saved my life today. Even though my mother had to be riddled with guilt from leaving me alone as well as the fear of what could have happened, she was doing a great job not showing it. She smiled happily as everyone talked, enjoying her well-prepared meal.

Once dinner was over, Mom and I cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher while the men talked. I started a pot of coffee and then sat back down by Taylor, who was totally engrossed in a conversation with Timber. A phone began ringing and Collin, Patrick and Zach all began rummaging through their pockets looking for their phone. Timber slowly reached in his shirt pocket and pulled his out, smiling. One look at the caller ID and his facial expression was no longer soft. He excused himself from the table and walked out the front door to take his call in private. The other three looked at each other and then at the front door. They reminded me of little kids anticipating their father coming home from work.

"So how long did you know they were wolves, Dad," I asked, figuring now was as good a time as any.

"He had no idea," Zach laughed. "None of you did. It seems that Coll, Pat and I are all born actors." Zach laughed and took another sip of his wine.

I looked at my father, shocked. "I was sure you knew all about this."

"Nope; you found out that they were wolves before I did, *but* I did find out that it was no coincidence that I was the one the previous owner of Irish Brother's Coffee approached about buying it. They wanted to keep an eye on you."

I got up from the table and began pouring coffee when Timber walked back in the house. He didn't look too happy. He took his seat, and I placed a cup of hot black coffee in front of him as he smiled warmly at me.

"I'm afraid I just received some rather unsettling news," Timber said, his voice solemn. "I just got word that one of our head wolves was killed in an attempt to be recruited. He refused and they took his life. He was found just north of here."

"I don't understand," my father said, putting his coffee cup down. "Recruited?"

"I too found it hard to believe at first, but I trust my source. There are vampires out there trying to recruit wolves to join their army." Timber took another sip of his hot drink and shook his head. "It's unbelievable really. I can't imagine who would be that crazy."

"I thought it was common knowledge how Lee feels about vampires," Taylor interjected.

"Oh it is, Taylor. That's exactly what makes that vampire's strategy so unfathomable. Not only would Lee not agree, he would fight against it. Whoever is trying to build this new kind of army isn't doing it for good and they don't care who gets trampled in the process. They have their eyes set on one thing and are willing to go to any lengths to get it. It is my guess that they are after Haden. They must

know by now that some of our kind are protecting her. Because of this, they are aware that they don't stand a chance at getting to her unless they join forces with wolves."

"How serious is this?" my mom asked softly.

"I'm afraid it's very serious, Sidney."

"They're trying to recruit werewolves too, aren't they?" Zach questioned in a serious tone.

"Yes, Zach, I believe so," Timber said before looking at my father. "Jake, you mustn't let Haden out of your sight. There *cannot* be a repeat of today. Next time we might not be so lucky."

"I can promise you that there won't be a next time." My father nodded his head in agreement while I sat in between him and Taylor with hundreds of thoughts swimming through my head.

"If it's Gavin who's behind this, I can find him and you guys can do whatever you want with him," I said, annoyed.

"I wish it were that simple, Haden." Timber looked deep into my eyes. "You are very brave . . . so is your wolf, but you must let us handle this. Until we know who is behind this for sure, you need to stay out of the spotlight. I am not asking you to do this. As your Alpha I am giving you a strict order. You are not to be alone." *As my head wolf?* I had only heard such things in movies.

"I'll see to it that she isn't alone." Taylor looked at me and back at Timber.

Great; you too now? I sighed, knowing my little bit of freedom had just come to an end. Taylor looked back at me, serious, and then looked away again.

I just so happened to glance over at my mom and she looked like she was about to cry. As hard as this was on me, I knew it had to be hard on her as well. I was so sick of living like this. If it was up to me, I would find the head jerk vampire, whoever he was, myself and tell him face to face what I thought about him. Looking around the room filled with wolves and my beloved Taylor, I knew there was no way that would be happening . . . not anytime soon anyway.

Timber looked at his watch and stood up. The other three followed. "It is getting late. I have to travel to Nostovia first thing in the morning. Lee will need to hear of this. I am meeting with him in an attempt to explain what is going on. It is my hope that he agrees to help us." He pushed his chair under the table and smiled at my mother. "Dinner was wonderful, Sidney. Thank you." Shaking my father's hand, he turned and walked toward the door.

"Hasta la vista, baby," Zach said playfully. Collin and Patrick both nodded before Dad shut the door behind them.

I shook my head and walked toward the living room where I plopped down on the couch like a resentful three-year-old in timeout.

"You do realize that this isn't up for discussion," Dad said, sitting in the chair next to the couch. I nodded yes and pulled my legs up next to my chest. "I know this is hard on you, Haden, but it's only temporary. When Kenward Manor is finished, you will be able to stay there while the rest of us find who

is after you and remove him from the picture." Dad reached across the side of the couch and put his hand on my leg. I looked at him and then at the blank TV screen, saying nothing. *If he thinks I'm gonna sit back and do nothing, he's lost his mind. Ugh... I wish everyone would leave me alone.*

"Did you forget I could hear you?" Taylor asked, sitting next to me.

"Honestly, yes I had," I grunted, jumping up from the couch. "I'm going upstairs to take a bath. Don't follow me," I demanded. I didn't bother looking at any of them as I left and ran up the stairs. I was mad. I was sick and tired of everyone trying to protect me. According to God, it was my job to protect them. Who cared if I had no clue how I would do that.

I ran into my room, slamming the door behind me. Frustration consumed my body. My wolf wanted out. She wanted to run. I looked at my window and then back at the door. Only a few moments of contemplation told me that my idea was perfect. I would jump from my window and they'd never know. My wolf would be free to feel her bare paws on the cold forest floor. Surely they had our land surrounded. I knew I was safe.

Opening my window, I jumped down quietly, shrieking as I landed in Taylor's arms.

"You didn't seriously think you would get away with this, did you?" he snickered.

"Umm... yeah... actually I had," I huffed. "Did you hear my thoughts?"

He set me down and looked at me amused. "No, I didn't. They were unusually quiet for you being so upset. It's one of the things that keyed me in to your little plan."

"Do Mom and Dad know where you are?"

He shook his head no and smiled.

"Well then, it won't hurt if I take a little run around the property, right?" I asked, pushing my lower lip out, pouting.

"It just so happens," he whispered, "that I know who's on duty tonight. I also know exactly where they're positioned. How about I make a phone call and let them know that we will be taking a stroll around the forest? That way they can keep a close eye on you."

"If you must," I sighed. I guess it was better than nothing.

Once his phone was shut, I didn't wait for him to start running. I ran as fast as my feet would carry me. Finally I stopped and leaned against a tree.

"Is it really as bad as Timber said?" I asked sadly.

Taylor took a deep breath before he answered me. "Yes . . . it is."

"Will we ever get married?"

He pulled me into a hug and I inhaled his skin, relishing in the moment. "Definitely."

For now that would have to be good enough. He took my hand and then tossed me on his back. I laid my head on his shoulder as he walked slowly toward the house.

Right before we approached the door, it opened and my father was standing under the door frame with a look of amusement. "I should have known. Don't tell me; I don't want to know. Just get in here before your mother realizes you two were missing."

Taylor put me down and I kissed my father's cheek. I told them both that I was going to take a bath . . . for real this time, before I ran upstairs.

When my bath was done, I texted Taylor and in seconds he was in my room, shutting the door quietly behind him. "Did you enjoy your soak in the tub?"

"I did, thank you," I said through a yawn. "Will you hold me until I fall asleep?"

"It would be my pleasure."

I got into bed and Taylor turned the light out. In seconds he was laying behind me with his arms around me, keeping me safe from harm.

"Will this mess ever end?" I asked, giving in to another yawn.

"Of course it will. For now we just have to do what we are told. We need to keep you safe so you can save the world," he teased, pulling me closer to him.

I closed my eyes and began to drift off to sleep when the sound of howling startled me. "What's that?" I whispered as we both sat up.

Trying to calm me, Taylor lay back down and pulled me down with him. "I'm sure it's nothing. Zach probably saw the light go out and was just telling you goodnight. He's on duty tonight."

Praying he was right, I closed my eyes again and the howling stopped. All I could hear now were the sounds of our hearts until Taylor began singing to me softly. I rolled over, facing him, and nuzzled my head against his chest where I lay until morning.

4. The Prophecy

"Thirty-five... thirty-six... thirty seven," Jenn counted softly as we stared out the dark tinted window of the rented black suburban.

"You have *got* to stop that," I griped. "You're making me nervous."

"Sorry," she whispered. "I just can't figure out why there are so many people going in there. What are they doing. making crack or something?"

Collin laughed. "Not hardly. We're *pretty* freakin' positive that this is a vampire training camp."

"*Oh*," Jenny said, enamored. "This may be a stupid question, but why are we here?"

"There's some talk that Gavin might be running this here freak show and I wanted to see if they were right. I'm watching for him. Haden insisted you guys join in on the fun," Collin said absently as he continued to watch vampires coming and going from the run down building in the middle of downtown.

"They think Gavin's in *there*?" Jenny asked, confused. "I thought you said he was charming Haden. All I've seen coming and going are really beautiful skinned, constipated looking people. In my book, that's hardly what I'd consider charming," she chuckled.

Collin looked at me, shocked, and smiled. "Gavin's charming, huh . . . tight. I've never seen a hot dude vamp. I agree with Jenny. They all look like something's stuck somewhere it shouldn't be," he laughed playfully. "Some of the chicks might be hot, though, if they weren't so uptight."

I grinned at Collin, assuming that pictures of all the female vampires he'd encountered in his life were now dancing around in his free-spirited mind, before I shot Jenn a look of irritation. "I never said he was charming, Jenn," I protested. "*What I said* was that he was well put together—not that he was charming."

"Whatever," she smirked.

Before I could think of anything to say to Jenny's "whatever," Collin's phone went off. Patrick was calling to tell us it was time to call it a day. We had already made quite a few people nervous by having me that close to what they thought was a hidden training camp for the enemy. I personally thought that they need not call it *hidden*. It was far from hidden. If it was indeed what they thought it was, the person in charge was doing a really bad job of hiding it—that is if they were trying to hide it at all.

I slid back into my seat as Collin backed out of the parking spot and began to drive off. Slowly I turned my head back toward the window when something, or better yet someone, caught my eye. There in the parking lot in front of the building as clear as day was Gavin, smirking. I moved closer to my window and he winked at me as Collin drove off.

That evening I tried my best to stay involved in the dinner conversation. Patrick and Collin were eating over again and were having an in-depth conversation with Taylor and my father about Lee's school for wolves. As much as I tried to partake in their subject of choice, my mind did more wandering than focusing.

I went to take my last bite of lasagna when the doorbell rang. Thankful, I jumped up and went to answer the door. I opened it to find my two big brothers smiling at me.

"She doesn't look so bad," Gabe teased.

"Was I *supposed* to look bad?" I asked sheepishly as he picked me up and swung me around.

"Hello, beautiful," Talon said, kissing my cheek. "Don't listen to him. It was a long plane ride and he had no one to harass."

I smiled at Talon and started to turn away when he gently grabbed my arm and looked into my eyes. "Looks like we need to talk," he whispered. "I see something hiding behind those pretty green eyes of yours."

Nodding yes, I told him that I would meet him at the gazebo in the backyard after dessert. Taylor would be working on my wedding present again, so my night was free.

Considering the company and the state of things, surprisingly enough the conversation was rather light and airy. A table full of happy go lucky wolves equaled a lot of howling laughter. By the time Taylor left, my cheeks were hurting from laughing all evening. Me being in a good mood made it all the easier for him to leave and for Talon and I to have some time alone to talk.

I cleaned up the dishes and excused myself as everyone continued to talk merrily around the table while they drank coffee and joked. Not long after I left, Talon did the same. I opened the back door and began my walk toward the gazebo. It was a cold, quiet kind of night, and it mirrored my heart perfectly. Guilt from not telling anyone that I saw Gavin was beginning to suffocate me. I sat down under the covering of the gazebo and exhaled as I saw Talon walking up.

"It's a beautiful night," he said, sitting next to me.

I agreed and fiddled with my engagement ring, waiting for him to speak again.

"I'm ready for you to spill it whenever you are." His words were slow and steady. Talon had never been one to rush things. He and I both knew from experience that sometimes in life we have no choice but to wait.

I glanced at him and then back at my ring. "I saw him again," I breathed.

"Where?"

"Downtown... in a rundown building. Collin took me there so I could identify him if I saw him. We never so much as caught a glimpse of him until we left. That's when I saw him standing there, shaking his head, all smug. No one else saw him, and I didn't say anything."

I could feel Talon tense. "Did Jacob know you were there?"

"No, of course not. He never would have let me go," I said, huffing. "I convinced Collin to take Jenny and I after I overheard him and Patrick talking about a possible training camp that they believed was being run by Gavin here in town. I literally begged them to take me. Patrick said no, but Collin said yes after I convinced him that I would be fine as long as he was there with me. Patrick knew I was going, but he didn't like it."

Talon was steadily shaking his head in disbelief. "You're one hard-headed girl, you know that?" He was not a happy camper with me.

"Not hard-headed—determined. I want this over, Talon. I want my life back."

"Getting yourself killed isn't going to accomplish that. I can tell you that much, Haden." He grabbed my hand and held it in both of his. "So you were able to identify him?"

"That's the thing . . . it's as if he knew we were there. Vampires came and went from the building the whole time we scoped it out, but Gavin was never one of them. It wasn't until right as we were leaving the parking lot that I saw him. He was staring right at me, smiling."

"Did he let Collin see him?"

"No."

Talon stood up, looking around, his fists clenched. "We need to get you inside . . . *now*." He grabbed my hand and pulled me up, practically dragging me to the house. "You are not to leave this house again—not until I tell you otherwise. Are we clear, little sis?" Talon looked at his watch and then back at me.

"As a bell," I sighed.

"You know I'm going to have to share this information with everyone, right?"

I nodded yes and imaginarily kicked myself in my butt. I knew all too well that Taylor wasn't going to be happy that he wasn't hearing this news from *me*. Tonight was going to be a *long* night.

"By the way, it wouldn't have killed you to let Collin and Patrick handle this alone. They could have identified him without you. They're trained for stuff just like this. I can't believe Patrick let Collin take you," he growled under his breath right as we got to the house. He opened the back door and locked it behind us, leaving me standing alone inside while he went off to find my father.

Surprised that Talon let me out of his sight, I ran up the stairs and straight into my room where I hopped on my bed and dialed Jenny. After the tenth ring I got her voicemail and sighed. She would be no help tonight. It looked like I was on my own.

After a long, pruning bubble bath I slipped into some sweats and sat in my chair, waiting for the beginning of what I assumed would be a very unhappy night for me. Before I could plan my escape, my phone went off with a text. *It's time. Meet us in the family room. Talon.*

Succumbing to my fate, I slowly got up and walked toward the door of my room, feeling like a little kid who had been trying to hide their failing grades from their parents. I was busted, and now I had to face the music. When I got to the living room, it was full. Taylor was talking to Talon, Gabriel, Melly, and Brad. His eyes caught mine as I walked through the door, and the look in his eyes wasn't one I was accustomed to. He was *not* happy with me *at all*. Patrick, Collin, Dad, and Zach were all sitting on the couch in a huddle of sorts, talking amongst themselves. Mom was nowhere to be found, and for a moment I was imagining sneaking out to go find her—that is until Melly came up to me.

"Girl . . . you are in *trouble*," she giggled. "What in the heck were you thinking?"

I shrugged and looked at the floor before answering her. "How mad is he?"

"He's pretty unhappy, but he'll live. He knows you too well to think you are just going to sit back and watch everyone else try to fix this without you," she smiled. "Quit worrying."

If she only knew how much I wished I could. I was so done with this whole thing.

"I should have told him," I whispered.

"Yes, you should have." Taylor's words shocked me, as he spoke while walking toward me and shaking his head in disapproval. "You could have gotten yourself killed."

"So I've been told."

Melly snickered and went to stand by Brad. My father asked us all to be seated. We did as asked while I prayed silently that tonight wouldn't be as painful as I was imagining. Taylor shook his head once more as he listened to my mind wander and kissed my hand. Thankfully Talon had already made the rounds, telling everyone about my sighting. He had made the blow without me there, surely in an attempt to lessen the severity of the reaction once I was present. From the look my father gave me as Talon began to speak, I wasn't so sure his plan had worked. *No one* was happy with me.

Gabe looked at me and laughed before he began speaking. "I'm not gonna beat around the bush. This meeting has been called for a couple of reasons. For one, it seems that we were right. Good ol' Gavin is enjoying his playtime a little too much. He is getting comfortable and sloppy. This is awesome for us. What this means is that soon he will slip up, and when he does we'll be waiting." Gabe looked at me and winked.

"Until then," Talon interjected, "it is imperative that we convince my dear sweet sister that she stay put. No more secret outings." Instead of looking at me, this time Talon's disapproving stare was directed at Collin, who smiled sheepishly. I wasn't the only one on the naughty list tonight.

Before I was allowed to leave, I was asked to tell everyone exactly what I saw and what time it was when I saw him. When that was done they let me leave, thankfully. I felt awful enough about keeping it from Taylor. I didn't need my brothers and father adding to my misery. The more I listened to them all talk that night, the more I realized that every one of them now planned on keeping twenty-four hour surveillance on me from now on. *Lovely*.

"It won't be forever," Taylor said, following me outside. He grabbed my hand and looked up at the stars. "One day we won't have to worry about *anything*. We'll be married. We'll have a house full of kids and you will be free from all of this, I promise."

I leaned into his chest and inhaled deeply. "You really promise?"

"With all my heart, I do."

I would hold on to that very promise for many months to come. It was the light at the end of my tunnel. Taylor had never lied to me before and I knew he wouldn't start now. What he didn't know was that as much as he meant the words he said, even he had no idea what our future held.

"I have one thing I have to ask of you, Haden."

"K."

"Don't ever keep anything like this from me again, alright?"

"I promise." I looked up to the heavens and thanked my lucky stars that I had someone in my life who loved me the way Taylor did. Now, if I could only be half as wonderful to him as he was to me.

The next few days were, oddly enough, stress free. Taylor took some time off from dealing with my wedding present to be with me. In an attempt to help me not feel like I was in some sort of prison, my brothers, sister, and Taylor had been doing all they could think of to get me out of the house. We all had been to the movies several times, and hunting in the forest had become something we now did on a much more regular basis. At first, their willingness to allow me to venture out even a little was shocking. I was assured that we were being protected from a distance. My father reminded me more than once not to let these little trips out of the house get to my head. He didn't want me assuming that I was allowed to go out alone. On the contrary, I was lucky to use the bathroom by myself. Even though I was constantly surrounded, my days were filled with laughter, a plus of being related to funny people. For my sake, during that time no one mentioned anything about Gavin or the gloomy cloud trying to hover over my life.

As luck would have it, everything changed again the day Nanny Lena and her brother Lenny requested a family meeting. When my father asked what it was about, their response had almost everyone's thoughts in an uproar. According to Lenny, they were unable to speak of it for safety purposes. Lenny's answer wasn't sitting well with anyone, including me. Never before had anything been top secret—that is until now.

Once they called the meeting, it was less than twenty-four hours before just about everyone was gathered in my parent's family room, including the Kenton's, who had arrived first thing this morning. My mom was trying her best to be a good hostess, offering everyone drinks, but it was obvious that she was just as nervous as the rest of us about the impending news.

Brad, our handsome GIJO looking, recently turned vampire, friend, Taylor, Gabriel and Talon all stood in a huddle by the front window, talking low. With the recent news that the attacks on teens had practically stopped while we were at Swan Lake, we were all really hoping that they hadn't started back up. I paced back and forth by the front door, waiting. I was by no means nervous; instead, I was filled with excitement. I was ready for whatever was to come.

"You're gonna walk a hole in the floor." Taylor's warm voice startled me. I turned around and grabbed his face, kissing him intensely and then letting go so that I could look back out the front window. "I like this look on you. It's cute," he said, standing next to me at the window.

"What look?"

"The one of a fighter; you wear it well. Everyone in the other room is wondering what awful news could be coming and here you are, excited at whatever it is . . . no matter what."

"Yep, that's me, the fighter. Put 'em up... put 'em up," I said, imitating the lion in *The Wizard of Oz*. Taylor and I had stepped into our own world, when the doorbell rang. I kissed his nose and flew to it, opening it as fast as I could.

"It sure is chilly out there," Nanny Lena said, smiling her warm smile as she wobbled through the door, Lenny following closely behind her.

I stared at them, analyzing their faces and their heart rates. There was nothing out of the ordinary, which immediately had me wondering what the "important" family meeting could be about. They had relayed to Mr. Kenton that it would change all of our lives and we had to meet as soon as possible.

I could feel Taylor staring at me, smiling. "What?" I asked, blushing.

"Oh nothing; you're just cute. I can see your brain working."

I stuck my tongue out, grabbed his hand, and pulled him with me into the family room where Nanny and Lenny were now sitting. Nanny was perched in the high back chair with her tiny feet dangling off, high above the floor. Lenny stood next to her as she talked to my mother and Alexandra, who were sitting side by side on the loveseat.

Nanny looked over at me and smiled before she cleared her throat and started talking to the room as a whole. "Well, we have some big news; big news indeed. Yes, siree."

Lenny nudged her chubby arm, forcing her to continue. "Yes, yes... well you see, something amazing has happened. Our great Uncle Henny called our mom Mertle, who called Lenny, who called me."

"Lena, please," Lenny said, trying to get his sister to spit out whatever she was about to say.

"Okay, okay, Lenny, I'm getting to it. So, you all know that our people had claimed that the prophecy had been separated into three different portions. Of course, no one had proof . . . until now." Her eyes were as wide as silver dollars. She looked around the room silent, like she was waiting for us to ask her a question.

"The second part of the prophecy has been found," Lenny said, giving up on his sister finishing what she started. "Not only was it found, but we know what it said." It was so quiet in the house that you could have heard a pin drop. Lenny cleared his throat and continued. "The original piece of the written prophecy is with our people, but we were notified immediately. We have come here to tell you all what very important information it contained."

"Well, let's have it," Gabriel said, standing behind the couch. "Wait, don't tell me. *I'm* the real prophetic child, not Haden. The first part was just to fool everyone," he laughed.

Melly slapped his arm and shook her head, laughing. "Psh, God's not *that* crazy. The minute your wolf would be out running, you would forget what you were supposed to be doing."

He laughed back at her. "And your point is what, pinky?" Gabriel couldn't help himself. He loved the splash of hot pink that Melly had dyed in her brown hair.

"Erm, erm," Lenny's mouse-like voice said before he continued. "As funny as you two are, this is serious. Everything has changed . . . and I mean *everything*."

Gabe's and Melly's smiles left their faces at the sound of Lenny's voice. He meant business.

"What we have learned will change everything. You see, there isn't just *one* prophetic child like we once thought, but instead there are *two* . . . and they are both in this room."

Silence

No one said anything until Gabriel spoke. "I told you it was me," he said, laughing as he flexed his huge biceps. No one laughed with him this time, and oddly enough he said no more.

"Lenny, who is it?" Mr. Kenton asked while he grabbed his wife's hand. They both looked at each other as if they knew something the rest of us didn't.

Lenny looked around the room and swallowed. "It's your son."

Silence

"I *knew* it," Alexandra exhaled softly, looking at Taylor who was standing next to me, expressionless.

"We both did, dear," Mr. Kenton sighed.

"*Me?* How is that even possible?" Taylor looked like he wasn't quite sure what he had just heard.

*Oh God, not him too. It can't be. I will **not** lose him again.* My heart raced like a mustang fleeing from a storm as I stared helplessly at Taylor. If anyone in the room knew what this news *really* meant it was me. There would be no happy ending, not now, not until... *I ended it.*

Only the sound of breathing was audible as everyone fought to gather their thoughts. The recent revelation made my stomach turn, and suddenly I had to fight the rising bile in my throat. My eyes scanned the room, stopping on my mother's tear-stricken face before coming to rest on the man who held my heart. The truth was out and its taste was bitter in my mouth. No matter what I wanted to think, there was only one reality, and it was disturbing. Taylor was in grave danger and *no one* could change that. It was only a matter of time until the news of his calling spread like wildfire, consuming everyone in its path, including Arkos.

Silence filled the room with its presence and I began to tremble. My mind refused to comprehend the words I had just heard. Once upon a time, my life was simple. It was believable. *Once upon a time* I knew who I was, who Taylor was. Now I knew nothing.

"Have you seen this supposed prophecy? Have you even seen the first one? I mean shoot, I am the "prophetic" child and I have yet to hear it read to me," I said, doing quotations with my hands in the air when I said the word prophetic.

"Oh yes, yes dear, we have both seen it. We saw the first part years ago before you were born and we just got back from reading the second part. It's amazing, really," Nanny Lena said, her eyes wide.

"Where was the second part found?" I asked, expecting her not to know.

"It had been hidden in an old vase that belonged to one of our ancestors. Someone bumped into it and it broke into a million tiny pieces. There inside it lay the second part of the prophecy," Lenny said, his eyes filled with pain.

I wasn't convinced. I was angry. I didn't want Taylor having any part of this mess. Without looking at me, Taylor grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

"Would you mind reading all of it to us?" he asked, not showing any sign of what he believed.

"Yes, please," my mom said as her eyes filled with tears.

"Of course; it would be our pleasure," Lenny said as Nanny handed him a crinkled looking, cream sheet of paper out of her big floral knitting bag. "I will read you each part separately, but remember, they were given to our people at the same time. They were only separated in order to keep them safe and out of Arkos' hands.

As the Ice Moon dwells amidst the nights' sky, a child, one created of darkness and light, will be given life. The chosen one will be known by the crescent moon they wear on their body. This child will be given graces by God, unattainable by man or beast. No such powers have yet to be seen. The chosen one's powers will increase rapidly once they reach adulthood. Their birthmark will become iridescent, calling all who see it to believe. Evil will hunt this child but will never catch it. It will dwell under the shadow of the wings of the Almighty and will shine His light to all. Darkness shall not prevail.

"Haden, that was your part. What I'm about to read is where Taylor comes into this. It is absolutely incredible, really. You two are definitely blessed," Lenny said in awe before reading the next part.

And still another child is to be born under the Ice Moon. They too will wear the mark of the crescent moon as a sign to all—they too will follow the same path as the other. Connected by grace, they will dwell together—one un-separated from the other through space and time. They will become one, melding together--the second with the first. Together they will fulfill what one could not do alone.

Lenny stopped reading and handed the paper to Mr. Kenton. "We need you to burn this. There can be no trace. For Taylor's safety we must keep it from Arkos and Gavin as long as possible."

Just hearing Gavin's name made me cringe. It wasn't like he didn't already have enough motives to kill Taylor. Ever since the night I drank his blood and he informed me that he would covet me for all eternity, he had been popping up in my life regularly. I knew he was just "biding his time," as he had put it. Gavin was convinced that I was to be *his* queen, no one else's. I was convinced that Shadow Walkers like him should be extinct. I didn't care how ultra-gorgeous he was. He was evil, and now he would have even more of a reason to try and get rid of Taylor.

"How do you know for sure it's Taylor they're talking about?" I asked, still not convinced.

Alexandra looked over at her son and smiled softly while she grabbed my mother's hand. "Taylor, honey, show Haden your birthmark."

Taylor turned to face me and looked deep into my eyes as he took his shirt off. Taylor had never been one to go shirtless, and the mere sight of his bare chest had me starting to breath all weird again;

that is until I saw the little smirk on his face, no doubt in response to my loud thoughts. I couldn't help it. Looking at him drove me crazy. I took a deep breath and tried to put my thoughts back where they needed to be . . . far away from Taylor's perfectly chiseled chest.

When his shirt was off, he turned around to where his back was facing me. Gasping, I almost fell over. There on his right shoulder was a birthmark identical to mine, shimmering. If you were to put them together, they would have formed a shimmering full moon.

"Holy shit," I said, without thinking. Gabriel roared with laughter. Everyone knew how I felt about cussing, but if there was ever a moment for it this was it.

Taylor turned around, grinning like he had just won the moon lottery. "Now you can't try to protect me anymore. I told you we were in this *together*." I would have been mad at him if he wasn't so darn gorgeous. I stood there in shock. *Can you please put your shirt back on? You're distracting me.* I said in my head. He laughed out loud and started putting his shirt back where it belonged—on his body, covering up his perfectness.

I didn't know what to do or what to think. This was insane! I looked at his biological mom, who was still trying to comfort my mother.

"Mrs. Kenton, if you knew about his birthmark, why didn't you ever say anything?" I asked in disbelief.

"That's simple, Haden. We didn't want him in any more danger than he was already in; just being born under the Ice Moon put him in harm's way. When he was born and we saw the mark of the crescent moon, we made the decision to have Nanny Mena take him to the States as quickly as possible. When you were born, we questioned whether or not we had imagined our son's birthmark, as you had the same thing. At this point, no one had ever heard of the second part of the prophecy. We chose not to share the information about Taylor's birthmark with anyone, including your parents. We believe this is what saved his life. To this day, no one knows how it got out that *you* had the prophetic birthmark, yet it did. Your parents would still be alive if someone wouldn't have told Arkos about yours."

As much as I wanted to be mad at Alexandra, I couldn't. What she said made perfect sense to me. Honestly, I would have done the same with my baby. No child deserved this.

"So what now?" Dad asked Aramis.

"Now we have two to protect. Now we need to be more aware and more careful of where we are and what we do," he said.

"Maybe they should go into hiding now. At least until they are both ready for whatever lies ahead of them," my mom said, looking around the room, surely hoping someone would agree with her.

"I'm not going anywhere. I refuse to hide," I griped, starting to get upset again.

"I'm with Haden," Taylor said, his face serious. "I promised her the wedding of her dreams and that is what she will get. She and I won't even consider it,"

Talon looked at me and smiled before looking at Aramis and my father. "I agree with both of them. Gabriel and I will have security upped so that they can have a normal wedding."

"Well then, it's settled. Hard headed one and hard headed two win for now," Mr. Kenton said, smiling an approving smile.

"Heck yeah, so let's get busy! We've got only the coolest wedding of the century to plan," Melly said, excited.

My brain started running again and this time I didn't know if I could keep up. All I knew was that I wanted to hunt. Taylor didn't bother to ask me if I was okay. I was letting him hear my thoughts loud and clear. I was far from okay, but for now I wanted to hunt in hopes that maybe, just maybe, it would clear my mind. Melly was quick to jump on the bandwagon when I asked her if she wanted to round up the gang for a family hunt fest.

She gathered up everyone and we all headed out the back door. I was in a sprint before anyone else, leaving them all in my dust, including Taylor. In seconds he caught up to me and then quickly veered to the right, giving me some space. I could feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins. I found my feast in no time. After I had my fill, I was still bursting with so much confusion, energy, and anger that I didn't know what to do. Visions of Taylor's birthmark were flashing in my head, and no matter what I did I just couldn't wrap my mind around it. *Not him too God... not him too.* Stopping short, I screamed as tears threatened to escape my eyes. I took a deep breath and phased.

When my wolf and I were one, I could hear voices in my head, but I tried to ignore them until I heard Talon say Taylor's name. *Melly phase back. Let her have some space. Go tell Taylor that she's fine. She just needs some time. I'll stay in wolf form in case she needs me.* I could hear Melly start to argue. Talon let out a growl and she gave in. The next voice I heard was closer. It was Gabriel. *Hey girly, run as fast as you can. Scream all you want. Talon and I are out here with you if you need us.* All I said was thanks, and then I ran, stopping eventually to howl and cry it all out. Being one with my wolf was like something I could have never explained. There were no words in the English language to do justice to the intense pleasure and wholeness I felt. I was at one with the world, or so it seemed.

I ran until I heard a sinister laugh. Stopping short, I turned my head toward the voice that caused the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up. To my left, leaning up against a tree with a devious smile was Gavin. He was staring at me with his arms crossed casually over his chest.

"Aren't you a pretty little puppy?" He put his hand out for me to go to him so he could pet me and I growled, showing my teeth. I was extremely careful to keep my thoughts quiet, but I knew it was only a matter of time until both Talon and Gabriel saw what I was seeing. "Aw, no need to go all rabid on me. I just wanted to come and say hi. You know, check in on my future queen. By the way, it was nice of you to come see me the other day. You should have come inside and said hello. I assume your puppy friend wouldn't let you. I bet your cute little blonde friend would have enjoyed a nice visit," he laughed.

Hearing him mention Jenny hit too close to home and I growled again, this time warning him that I wasn't playing. Staring intently at him, I knew it was too late. I had basically just sounded the alarm. In seconds, Gabriel and Talon would be looking at him through my eyes. The minute I growled, I heard Gabe's voice full of spite as he talked to Talon. *Dude... Can you see this? She's looking right at Gavin.* I wanted to phase back and tell him to get away from me, but I knew all too well that he would find it a show so I opted to stay one with my wolf. I growled again, this time more fiercely.

"All right, all right. I can hear that you called your puppy pack, so I'm leaving... but only for now. Tell your brothers I said hi," he winked and then he was gone, just like that.

Are you all right? Talon asked. Both he and Gabriel got to me in no time, one now on either side of me as they scanned the forest. Gabriel ran off in search of Gavin while Talon stayed by my side. I could hear him growling as his eyes continued to move from left to right. Within minutes Melly, Brad and Taylor were with us. Taylor stood in front of me, kissed my head, and then ran off with Brad and Talon. Melly stayed behind with me.

I phased back, putting my stretchy brown dress on and sighed. "Unbelievable."

"Sorry; I tried to stop Taylor but he had been keeping an eye on Gabriel and Talon in case you needed him. When he saw Gabriel take off running, he was only steps behind them."

"It's okay," I said, listening to see if I could hear anything.

They weren't gone too long before Gabriel was back in human form, talking up a storm. "He won't be so lucky next time. I'm gonna eat him for lunch."

Taylor and Talon said nothing. Neither one of them needed to use words for me to know what they were thinking. I saw them exchange a look of pure anger and I shook my head, wishing I wouldn't have been so sloppy with my thoughts. I should have never shown them Gavin. Even though Taylor and Talon wouldn't say it, I knew they were thinking exactly what Gabriel had said out loud. Gavin had won this round, but there was no doubt in my mind that he wouldn't win them all.

Everyone walked back to the house except Gabriel, who had phased back to his wolf after he and Talon talked. I was pretty positive that after seeing Gavin's face clear as day in their heads, they knew it had just begun. From this moment on, even more security reinforcement would be called in. I only *thought* security was tight. Apparently we were all wrong. While we walked back to the house in silence, I thought immediately of my father. He and Mr. Kenton wouldn't be happy about my little meeting— not at all.

When we got back inside, Roger, Mom, and Mrs. Kenton were all sitting around the table talking. Seeing Roger lit up my heart. Mom would need him to keep her somewhat sane after she heard what we were about to tell her.

"Hey, guys," Mom said. Once she saw the look on all of our faces she jumped up. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing to worry about," Taylor said, smiling at her. "Haden wasn't feeling well, but she's much better now."

I didn't know for sure why Taylor didn't want to tell them that Gavin was just in the forest behind our house, but I wasn't going to complain. If anything, I was happy with his decision. Dad could tell Mom if he wanted. I was positive that Taylor didn't want to worry them anymore than necessary. Blaming me was the easiest thing to do, and honestly I was totally fine with that. Times were changing. I wasn't the old Haden anymore. I was stronger. All I wanted to do was rip Gavin's beautiful head off, burn it, and then roast some marshmallows with his flames.

I could feel Taylor staring at me with a look of shock mixed with amusement. I knew instantly that he had heard my thoughts. "Sorry," I laughed.

Thinking I was apologizing for my earlier outburst, both Mom and Mrs. Kenton said it was okay at the same time.

"I would have said a lot worse," Roger winked. "I'm glad you're back inside by the way. It's about time we start planning the wedding of the year, which of course it will be because I'm the one who's going to decorate! It's going to be crunky!"

"Crunky?" I asked, lost.

"Crazy funky," Melly said, laughing.

"So you and Brad are getting married," I laughed, turning to look at Melly. "Cuz if it's a crazy funky wedding, then it's no doubt yours he'll be planning."

Taylor whispered in my ear that he was going to leave me for a while to go talk to Talon. I pretended I didn't know why, but I knew all too well why there would be more talk among them. I accepted my fiancé's sweet kiss and told him I would see him later.

Roger didn't skip a beat. "K, so I have decided that we need a Valentine's Day party. You know, a little pre-wedding party. I think we could all use some loud music and strobe lights," he said, glowing.

"I'm all there," Mom said happily. "Count me in," Alexandra added.

"Oh my," I laughed. "The moms are gonna get their grooves on."

"I am so there," Melly said as she started dancing around the kitchen table. Roger got up and started dancing with her.

Someone came up behind me, grabbing my waist. I turned around to see my oldest brother. Gabriel picked me up and then set me down before he started making the craziest, coolest sounds with his mouth. He was beat boxing. I had only heard it on television before now. Kiernan tried it once, but it sounded nothing like what Gabriel was doing. It had instantly turned into a party in the kitchen and I couldn't help but laugh. He was quite the fool, and his little talent was pretty darn impressive. I nodded my head to the beat while Gabriel continued. Looking at all the smiling faces in the room, I knew immediately that Roger was right on with his idea about a Valentine's Day party. It would be just what the doctor ordered.

That night all the boys had a private meeting in Dad's study, all except for Roger who had already promised me that he would be going over wedding details with me. It was time to start planning my dream wedding. For a few hours I pushed all of the bad stuff out of my head and let myself dream.

I was more than thrilled when Jenn showed up, even though she was supposed to work. I had so wished that Nanny Lena could have been there, but both she and Lenny took a flight out right after our family meeting. As the music played happily in the background, I started describing my idea of the perfect wedding dress and the entire table gasped.

"Oh honey," that's so beautiful," my mom said, in awe of my description.

"I agree, and I just so happen to have a designer friend who I can call up tomorrow. I'll tell him to get started on it right away." Roger was already writing down my detailed description.

Melly clapped her hands together. "Awesome. So what about the bride's maids of honor dresses?"

"Hot pink, of course," I teased.

Jenny shot me a look of disbelief. "You're kidding right? I mean I totally get having two maids of honor, but hot pink? You know how that color washed me out," she pouted.

As soon as I assured Jenny that I was only kidding, she exhaled and sat back in her chair, content.

"Next question," Mom said, "Have you two picked out a date?"

"Yes, actually," I smiled, "We were thinking April second. Our stone would be a diamond."

"It's couldn't be more fitting," Mrs. Kenton said.

We all continued to have a great time laughing and flipping through bridal magazines. Roger had spread them all over the table. Fighting a yawn, I happened to glance over at my mom. It had been a long day for everyone and it was obvious by her eyes that she was exhausted. I told my wedding planner, Roger, that I thought we should all call it a night. Neither Melly nor Jenny were tired, so they both decided to go play some video games. Roger left to go join the meeting and I headed up to my room where I got in my PJs and curled up with a book while I waited for Taylor.

5. I Met Someone

The next couple of weeks were somewhat tense around our house. The recent surprise visit from Gavin had both Dad and Aramis working overtime trying to come up with better ways to protect Taylor and me. The first thing on Dad's agenda was to call Timber and implore his services. All Dad had to do was explain Gavin's brazen visit and Timber was on board without any hesitations. He agreed instantly to help my father find more volunteers to watch the grounds around our house. I personally thought it was silly. Gavin was way too smart to make a second appearance so soon. Plus, he would surely pick a different place the next time he chose to make contact with me. If there was one thing I knew, it was that there would definitely be a next time. He was far from done.

I took a sip of my hot cinnamon mocha and turned down the road toward my house. A blanket of freshly fallen snow covered the ground, reminding me that spring was still a little ways away. I slowly pulled into the empty driveway, killed the engine, and waved at Patrick as he pulled up in front of the house where he parked.

Patrick and Collin were just a small part of my new life. Per my father, I was never to be left alone *again*. Everyone took a vote after the night in the forest, and just that quick I had what one might refer to as bodyguards. Knowing I wouldn't stand for being babysat, we agreed that I could go out whenever I chose, but I would be followed by either Patrick or Collin... for my own safety of course. I was fine with that. The guys were sweet and kept their distance, so I never felt suffocated. Lately it had seemed like I was spending more time with them than my own family. Taylor and the gang had been busy doing some secret project. I was busy trying not to feel like a caged animal.

Today was to be a day like any other, filled with coffee and a good book. After all, what else is there to do on a cold winter day when you're home alone?

I glanced in my rearview mirror to see Patrick wave back before getting out of my car and shutting the door. *Thanks Patrick. See you inside.* Nodding just once, Patrick went back to doing whatever it was he did in his car while being on guard duty.

Taking the first step onto the driveway, my shoes skidded across the ice, practically tossing me to the crunchy grass. Exhaling, I slowly put one foot in front of the other until I reached the walkway where I would practice my ice skating skills once again as I slid to the door. As I slipped the key into the lock, I caught sight of something out of the corner of my eye. It was a small mahogany box with some unrecognizable etched carving on top. I turned ever so slightly to make sure Patrick wasn't watching me, and then picked it up slowly, cradling it in my arms. I unlocked the door and my phone went off.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"Hello," Jenny whispered back.

I shut the door behind me and peeked out the front window, making sure that Patrick wasn't coming in just yet. Realizing I had a little time to work with, I walked quickly into the living room and set my purse, coffee, and the mysterious box down on the table in front of the couch.

"Haden," Jenny said in a hushed tone.

"Yes?" I exhaled nervously.

"Why are we whispering?"

Snapping out of my head, I laughed. "Sorry, I was having a moment." I leaned back on the couch and stared intently at the strange box when Jenny asked me why I was being so weird. "I got a box." My words were soft and unsure.

"Huh?" Jenny chirped. "What do you mean . . . *you got a box?*"

"Someone left a box by our front door."

"Did you tell anyone?" Jenny stopped after her question and took a breath, laughing. "That's a dumb question; of course you didn't. What's in it?"

"I don't know," I whispered.

Knowing my best friend the way I did, I shouldn't have been shocked by what she said next, *but*, nevertheless, I was. It seemed my friend was always dreaming of imaginary worlds.

"Well, shouldn't you *open it*? What if it's important . . . like some magic potion or something?"

Jenny had never been one for patience, or secrecy for that matter. If there was one thing she excelled at in life, it was her vivid imagination. Ignoring her silly potion comment, I sat up straight and reached slowly across the table until my shaking hands found their way to the dark brown mystery box.

"Jenn, can I call you back in a minute?" I rubbed my fingers lightly over the etched marking adorning its top.

"Umm *no*, do you seriously think I'm gonna miss out on this? Besides, what if you open it and it contains a deadly poison? You could pass out and die and no one would know. If you stay on the phone with me, you'd at least have a chance of surviving," she said, proud of herself.

"If it has a deadly poison in it, I will be dead no matter what," I chastised. Listening to Jenny's crazy mental concoctions had my mind spinning in circles. Should I open it or wait until the others are home? What if there was some slim chance she was right? Feeling like an idiot for entertaining such ideas even for a second, I shook my head and tossed away her words. "It's not gonna have poison in it," I insisted.

"If you say so... don't say I didn't warn you," she laughed.

I knew there was no way I was getting off the phone with her now. Instead of trying, I gave in and told her that I'd stay on the phone with her but she had to be quiet. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. *Lord God, please let whatever lies in this box not kill me, Amen.*

"Tick tock... tick tock...", Jenny sang softly.

"Shh."

Jenny chuckled and then went silent, thankfully. I ran my hand across the marking one more time before I opened the box slowly, praying nothing would pop out at me.

The first thing I saw was a tiny note with my name on it in beautiful letters. ***Haden***

"Well." Jenny's impatience was starting to be unnerving. "There's a note with my name on it." "What's it say?" she whispered.

After everything I had been through with letters sent to me already, I was more than aware that I might not like what lay inside of this note. I also knew that I *had* to read it. I had no choice. Slowly I opened the small, thick piece of parchment paper and let my eyes rest on the first words.

Greetings from Nostovia,

It has been brought to my attention that dark forces have begun seeping out of their lairs in search of you, young Haden. Arkos will not share his power without a fight. It is my wish that my kind remain in the shadows. I do

not want our blood shed for theirs. I have made myself clear to the pack as their Alpha. The Battle the Stidoniums plan to wage is not ours to fight – not anymore. There is only one complication with my choice to remain silent during this time, you, Haden, are my great-great-granddaughter. My blood runs through your veins. Because of this, I have given permission to a handful of my top warriors to assist your uncle in protecting you, should they choose. Timber has taken it upon himself to oversee all who join forces with your family. In this Box lies a very special gift from me to you. You will at first notice its exquisite beauty, but don't be fooled. It is no ordinary present. It is a Crystal Epacse; something much greater than beauty lies within it. Tell no one of its existence and guard it as best you can. Only when the time is right will it serve its purpose. Should there come a time when your life is in grave danger, remember it. Place it in your hand. Close your eyes and rub it clockwise three times. In that moment your life will be spared. It will only be activated if it senses your life is in grave danger. Do not take this lightly. This Crystal Epacse is very rare. There are only a few in existence. Never let it get into the wrong hands. Keep it safe always. I look forward to the day we meet in person. Fear not through these trials, for you are made of good stock and will rise above the rest,

Lee Leleaux

"Whoa," Jenny breathed. "That was deep."

"Slightly," I exhaled the same time she did.

"I guess blood *is* the tie that binds after all. No pun intended," she laughed. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, what does it look like," Jenny huffed. "If you take any longer, I'm gonna get in my car and come see for myself."

I gently set the letter down on the table and inhaled deeply as I grabbed the small object wrapped in a piece of cream cloth. Slowly, I opened one side and then the other until the pendant was in plain view.

"It's beautiful," I whispered. I had never seen anything quite like it. It resembled a small glass leaf, its insides filled with numerous colors. The main color was a beautiful shade of kelly green. Inside it, in a swirling motion, were four shimmering colors; cobalt blue, a deep shade of sky blue, flakes of gold and silver also. Each one made their way round and round in a counter-clockwise motion. I rubbed my hand over the top and felt its silky softness against my fingers.

"Did you rub it?" Jenny asked excited.

"Yes, but I'm still here. I guess I'm not in any real danger," I laughed.

"Well that's good; now I can tell you why I called you. We're going out tonight, just us girls... me, you and Melly. I'll pick you up at seven."

Normally I would have resisted Jenny's crazy idea, but right now I was more interested in the strange Epacse I held in my hand.

"See ya then," I said in a daze before hanging up the phone.

I continued to caress the beautiful pendant when suddenly something dawned on me. There was so much more out there in the world than what I knew. There were worlds I had never seen and places I didn't even know existed. For a moment, I felt very insignificant in the scheme of things. Here I was in the beautiful state of Montana, caught up in my life. While I had been embracing my self-absorption, life was going on around me. There were indeed places that weren't feeling the evil I was at the moment; Nostovia was one of them. A longing grasped my soul as an infant reaches for its mother during a storm. I suddenly ached to see this world beyond my own. I wanted to know what lay just beyond my own imagination. What else was out there?

My eyes looked back at the Epacse in my hand and I couldn't help but wonder what this smooth piece of crystal held inside it. How would it save me if I was in danger? I guessed only time would tell. Until then I would have to think of somewhere I could keep it safe. I went into my room and stood still, contemplating the safest place for it. *My closet.* Walking into my closet I looked around, hoping the perfect hiding place would jump out at me. When it didn't, I let my eyes rest on my shoe boxes. *That's it. I'll hide it in a shoe box.* There sitting quietly was my Nike shoe box from the shoes Taylor bought me last Christmas. I pulled it down and took my favorite running shoes out, replacing them with the mahogany box. The crystal Epacse would be safe there.

I slipped the Nike box back on top of my boot boxes. *Perfect.* I decided to check my watch to see what time it was and I jumped. Somehow, time had escaped me amidst my thoughts. I hadn't even looked at the time when Jenny called. It was six-thirty already. Jenny would be here in only minutes.

I looked up at the Nike box and then looked back at my boots. *Oh yeah.* Tonight was definitely a boots night. I grabbed the box, dumped my black boots out, and put the box back. Skimming my closet for the perfect outfit, I stopped short on a new, slightly off the shoulder, black sweater, courtesy of Melly. Next, I rummaged through my jeans until I found the perfect pair, dark, form fitting, and sexy. Smiling, I slipped my arms out of my shirt and tossed it to the floor. I slid the sweater over my head, enjoying its softness against my skin. Kicking my pants off, I grabbed my jeans and pulled them up. Next were the boots. They were the blackest of black, matching my sweater perfectly, rising only a few inches below my knees. Tonight I would wear them over my jeans; their four-inch heels were sure to stop Taylor dead in his tracks. If I had my way, tonight wouldn't be, "girls only," for long. Suddenly I was feeling frisky. I was ready for some loud music.

Once my entire outfit was on, I turned toward the full-length mirror on the back of my door and smiled. I liked what I saw looking back at me. Just a little touch up on my make-up and I was ready for a fun-filled evening. Right as I put my lip gloss back into my make-up bag, my phone got a text from Jenny. *Melly and I are waiting outside in my car. Hurry it up chick!* One more quick look in the mirror and I was out the door. Noticing that no one had made it home, I left a quick note on the fridge letting everyone know where I was, not that they would need it.

I opened the door of Jenny's bug and Melly whistled. "If I wasn't your sister I think I would have a crush. You look hot! Where on earth did you get such a *great* sweater?" Melly teased.

I laughed and shook my head. "My stylist is awesome."

"Is she taking new clients?" Jenny jumped in. "Doesn't really matter. I'll just steal that sweater when you're not looking. Hey! Are those *my* jeans," Jenny asked as she backed out of the driveway, waving at Patrick.

I looked down at them and laughed. "I bet they are. I knew they looked familiar, but I couldn't place where I had got them."

Jenny and I sharing clothes was a common thing, just normally it wasn't pants of any kind. My two more inches of height easily turned most of her pants into weird looking capris. It just so happened with this pair that she accidentally bought the regulars instead of petites. In such case, rolling them up and accenting them with a cute pair of flats became the style as far as Jenny was concerned.

When we pulled up to the first red stop light, Jenny turned around, wide eyed. "So, did you bring the Copsypop?"

"The what?" I had no clue what she was talking about.

"*You know...* the Exsypip or whatever the heck that thing's called."

"The Epacse?" I asked, knowing I already had my answer. I should have known she couldn't keep her big mouth shut. At least it was only Melly with us. "It's pronounced, E . . . p o c ... s e e . You know, like epoxy, the adhesive."

"What do you need to glue?" Melly asked, looking at me all weird from the front passenger seat.

Jenny and I both laughed and shook our heads. "Don't worry about it, Mels. I'll tell you all about it later. For now, let's go party!" I said, excited.

We pulled up to the club and Brad's truck was parked in front.

"What's *he* doing here?" Jenny looked at Melly with a disapproving look. "Melly," she huffed. "You knew it was supposed to be a girls' night out."

Melly shrugged her shoulders and smiled sheepishly. "He asked where we were going. I had to tell him."

Jenny shook her head in disapproval as she found a parking space. Melly sprung out of the car before it had come to a complete stop and started walking toward Brad's truck. Unlike Melly, I waited until Jenny put the vehicle in park before I got out. Slowly I walked to the back of the car where I stood waiting for Jenny to apply one more layer of lip gloss on her already sparkly pink lips when I happened to look over at Brad's truck. The passenger door opened and out stepped my heart. Taylor's eyes caught mine and his smile lit up the night's sky, lighting up my heart along with it. Tonight was going to be a good night.

When Jenny was done with her beauty touch-up, she and I walked over to meet the others. Taylor said nothing; he just grabbed my hand, lacing his fingers in mine. His touch sent tingles down my spine. I laid my head on his shoulder as we walked.

"At least Kiernan's not here," Jenny sang happily as the club attendant stamped her hand.

"He's on his way right now," Brad told her.

"*Seriously?*" she huffed. "All I have to say is that he better not mess with my mojo tonight."

I looked at Jenny like she was crazy. "Your mojo?"

"Yes, my mojo. Don't be judging, Haden. I am not leaving here tonight without dancing with at least ten cute guys."

Jenny didn't dance with ten cute guys that night, but we did all have a really good time. Even though Jenn's initial reaction about Kiernan coming was less than pleased, she was a trooper all night, dancing with him a couple of times. I didn't leave Taylor's side once. The smell of his cologne had me weak with every breath I inhaled, and I basked in it. With the way the nightclub's lights reflected in Taylor's eyes, they had me mesmerized all night. Being in love was better than anything I would have ever expected. Who needed drugs when there was love?

Once we got home, I spent the first part of the night with Taylor's arms around me as I dreamed of our wedding day. It couldn't come fast enough. The next morning, I awoke to a little note resting on the pillow next to mine. *Have I ever told you how beautiful you are to me?* I kissed the note and smiled. Oh how I loved that man. There were no words.

The night of the Valentine dance sprung up like the first flowers in spring. Excitement filled the air as Roger finished the final details. I couldn't wait. I wanted nothing more than to feel music spread through my veins again. The night at the club had been the first night in a long time that I had let myself have fun. Not once did I think about Gavin or Arkos or any impending war.

I looked in the mirror and smiled at the woman looking back at me. She had come a long way in a short period of time and I was proud of her. She was beautiful. Her misty green eyes shined brightly with truth and strength. I smiled approvingly again as I stared at my reflection. The floor length candy apple red dress I wore melted to my body perfectly, showing off my curves, yet still leaving plenty to the imagination. I believed in beauty, but I also believed in modesty. The new strappy red heels I had just bought accented my Valentine dress perfectly. This would be my and Taylor's first Valentine's Day together as a couple, and I was elated. I leaned closer to the mirror to make sure my make-up was on perfectly before spraying a light spray of perfume on my wrists and neck. I wanted to look hot for my future husband.

I called him in my mind to tell him that I was ready and would be downstairs soon. After one last quick glance in the mirror, I ran my hands through my hair and left the room. When I got to the stairs, he was waiting for me at the bottom. My breath caught in my throat the second I saw him standing there in a black button-up shirt with a tie the color of my dress. He was perfect in every way. I took a deep breath and smiled softly at him. I could smell his entrancing scent from where I stood. Walking slowly down the stairs, I kept my eyes locked on his. His lips curved up in a slight smile as he watched me approach him.

"You are a breath of fresh air," he said, staring deeply into my eyes. "Remember that night in your dream when you were so ready for us to take our relationship a step further?"

"Yes," I said softly.

"As beautiful as you look tonight, I will be the one having control issues," he said, helping me off the last step.

He kissed my lips softly and took my hand, leading me outside where our limo waited. Roger had gone all out. He had rented a room at the local hotel and four limos for us and our closest friends. Coming from money definitely had its perks. We were meeting everyone there except for Mom and Dad, who were running a little late. Ever since their day in the forest, they had been spending a whole lot of time alone in their room. Taylor and I never said anything, but we were pretty sure they were just having another honeymoon. It was pretty cute, actually.

We got to the hotel to see it covered in red lights in honor of Saint Valentine. I stepped out of the limo, when suddenly a sense of dread washed over me, stopping me dead in my tracks.

"Are you okay?" Taylor's voice was drenched with concern as he watched me stare off in the distance.

"I'm fine... I just... *feel* something."

"What is it?"

"I don't know," I said, shaking my head. "Whatever it is, it's not good." I had no idea what was going on. All I knew was that the minute I stepped out of the limo my stomach got queasy. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck were now all standing up and I was beginning to shake. My wolf wanted out. I took a deep breath in an attempt to control the shaking that was now starting to overwhelm my body. "Something's not right, Taylor."

"You wanna go home?" he asked, trying to read my expression.

I took a deep breath, narrowing my eyes as I looked around us to see if I could find any explanation for the sudden overwhelming sense of evil surrounding me. I couldn't, so I forced a smile and told Taylor that I would be fine. There was no need to make him worry more than he already was. He, of course, knew better, but he said nothing.

Hand in hand, we glided to where the party awaited us. Taylor opened the door and we walked into Roger's imagination decorated in red. Roger definitely needed to look into becoming an interior designer. His flair for beauty could alter anyone's mood—even mine. Clusters of shiny red and silver balloons hung all over the large room, accenting the red and white "twinkle lights," as Roger called them. It took me no time at all to find Melly and Brad, who were dancing in the center of the dance floor. Melly was dressed in a short red and hot pink dress that was one-shouldered. Her right arm was covered in a long red sleeve while her left arm was bare and shimmering. At our last little excursion to the mall, Melly had bought some body glitter and was trying it out tonight. She looked like a model. Her red high-heel boots were beyond hot. The way she and Brad danced together, anyone would have thought that they had trained together since childhood. I was in heaven watching them dance.

"Let's show our friends how it's done," Taylor teased, the twinkle in his eyes melting my heart.

"Oh yeah... lets," I agreed.

He led me to the middle of the dance floor, where we said hi to our friends before he pulled me into his stone-like chest. He kissed my lips hard and started dancing with me. My entire body was on fire. At any minute I expected sparks to start flying off of us. I would never get over how well our bodies fit together. As we danced, I thought about our matching birthmarks. We were one . . . forever.

I looked toward the door as it opened and saw Jenny coming in, her head instantly going with the music. When Taylor saw her walking toward, us he told me he was going to get us a drink while I went to talk to Jenny. She was as cute as always, wearing a form-fitting white shirt with a pastel pink and white mini skirt over white leggings. On her little feet was a pair of white flats. Her skirt flowed while she walked, making her look like a princess.

"Hey!" Her voice was filled with excitement.

"Hey yourself! I thought you would have been here before us," Jenny was always early when it came to parties.

"I *was* early, but then I met someone," her smile was as bright as the strobe lights.

"Oh really, where is he?" I asked, looking around.

"He's coming later," she grinned, blushing. "He is the hottest thing I have ever laid my eyes on. I almost passed out when he started talking to me. You have *got* to see him. I asked him to come inside, but he said he had made other plans before meeting me. I did get him to say he would try though." She was absolutely bubbling over.

"Well, happy Valentine's Day to you then," I laughed, enjoying her bubblyness.

I grabbed her hand and dragged her to the dance floor where we danced like we had when we were kids, carefree and full of life. It wasn't long before the room filled with people, all ready to party. Roger had called in some of his friends from Seattle and Jenn had asked some from our high school friends to go. The weird looks Taylor and I received seemed to be endless. We couldn't be mad. After all, the last they had heard, we were brother and sister. Anyone in their right mind would be weirded out by us holding hands. It wasn't like Taylor and I had sent out announcements letting everyone know that he and I weren't brother and sister after all. Leave it to Jenny and Melly; they made their way around the dance floor telling everyone who would listen that we weren't related. I can't even remember how many people came up to us to get the details. There were only a few who seemed more interested in dancing than our soap opera worthy news.

Finally at one point in the night, Roger grabbed the microphone and made an announcement that would put an end to most of the stares. "Hello all! A happy Valentine's Day to you! I hope that you have enjoyed yourselves this fine evening. We have the whole night ahead of ourselves, filled with tons more music and fun. I won't take up too much of your dance time, but I do have an important announcement to make. Some of you here are acquaintances of Haden's and Taylor's. Those of you who aren't, listen too; it's a tale you'll definitely find interesting. Haden and Taylor were raised as brother and sister, but as new information would reveal, they aren't. As a matter of fact, they are engaged to be married." The gasps around the room were so loud that I looked down at the floor.

"They're all in shock," Jenny said, laughing as she relished in the gossip of the moment. "This is so freakin' awesome. Look at their faces! Where's my camera when I need it?"

Taylor squeezed my hand slightly as Roger continued.

"Oh but yes, it is a wild tale, but true to its colors none the less. Anywho, they are here and we should all congratulate them on their tasty news. Roger raised his glass and aimed it in our direction.

Here's to Taylor and Haden, the most perfect couple in the entire world, even if they would have really been brother and sister," Roger said, laughing. "May you guys have a great wedding, which of course you will because I will be the one coordinating it. I raise my glass up to you both! Happy Valentine's Day, you two. You deserve it!" People from all around us began hollering our names before drinking. I wanted to hide. Taylor, who now had his arm around me, just stood still, smiling. I could only dream of being so calm.

Much to my dismay, the weird looks merged into hoards of curious people coming up to Taylor and I all night long wanting the juicy details. Roger just kept smiling at me like he had done me some huge favor. He had no idea that I would have preferred the weird looks to all the unnecessary attention we were now getting. Jenny thought it was awesome and soaked in every second of it. Brad asked Taylor to go see the new grill he had put on his truck while Melly, Jenny and I entertained the locals. Personally, I wanted to go stare at his truck too—anything to get away from all the attention. It had begun to look as if a long line had formed leading up to where I now stood in between my sister and my best girlfriend.

I can't even begin to describe some of the unusual questions I was asked. In minutes I just knew that Jenny was going to start charging money. My sweet best friend had always enjoyed attention. It was definitely nothing new. My sister, on the other hand, enjoyed *me* getting attention. In my opinion they both had issues, *but* I loved them all the same so I stood there like a good little girl and answered away.

Finally, the stupid line started dying down and eventually I texted Taylor telling him it was safe for him to come back in. Within seconds of my phone being shut he was by my side.

"How'd it go?" he asked, pulling me into his arms.

"It was okay. Lots of questions about if I had a crush on you since we were little. My favorites, though, were the ones who told me they had always known I was into you," I said, rolling my eyes. "People can be so weird. Oh, and how could I forget Angela, who said that she would have had incest babies with you if given the opportunity?" Taylor looked at me as if I was lying. "I am totally serious. She has had the hots for you since junior high. From the looks of it, she still does. Ew," I shuddered.

"She was nasty," Jenny laughed. "I don't even know how she found out about the party."

"Roger has the hookup when it comes to just about anything, including the schools address book," Melly said, swaying to the music with Brad as they stood next to us.

"Hey guys, I have to run and make a call real quick," Jenny said while reading a text. "It's *him*," she whispered in a song-like fashion in my ear as she shut her phone. "I'll be back in a little bit."

I knew the look plastered on Jenny's face. She was hot for Mr. "I met someone" hook, line, and sinker. I stared as she practically skipped out of the room. Feeling someone's eyes on me, I turned to see Brad watching me as I watched her.

"She's a big girl you know. She can take care of herself," he said, finding me comical.

"I know, but sometimes she acts on impulse. Rational thought and Jenny don't go together in the same sentence," I said as my stomach started to get queasy again.

"She'll be fine," Taylor said, grinning at me.

"I'm so glad you guys find me amusing, but seriously, when Jenny's hormones start jumping she has no clue how to shut them up. Instead, she jumps with them, all the freakin' way to tragedy."

"Would you like me to go find her and bring her back?" Talon was now standing beside me. Although I knew that she would probably love nothing more than to be rescued by Talon, and who could blame her, I also knew that it would lead to nowhere. It would only bring on a whole new world of issues, issues that would involve tons of chocolate and tears for Jenny. No, I couldn't have Jenny hoping that Talon had pulled her away from her new someone because he was interested in her. If that were to happen, her feelings would be squished like a little, insignificant bug.

"No, thank you. Taylor's right; she'll be fine." Even though I brought myself to say those words, I knew the minute they rolled off my tongue that I didn't believe them. I had known every guy Jenny had dated since we were kids and now here I was left in the dark. Some new guy entered her life, and for the first time I had no clue what was going on.

"Aw, let mama Haden be," Melly teased. "She just cares about her friend. Don't you worry your pretty little head, sis. The guys are right. She's a big girl. Why don't you come dance with me?"

Melly grabbed my hand, winked at Taylor, and led me to the dance floor. I took a deep breath and asked God to take away my worries. Once I let the music tickle my veins, I began to let go and enjoy the evening once again. I could feel the beat pulsating through my body when someone started beat boxing to the music. Like everyone else in the room, my eyes flew to the stage where Gabriel moved to the music, microphone in hand. His beat boxing had the crowd going wild. People around me were all staring in awe as he took center stage with his uninhibited talent.

There was only one person *not* caught up in Gabe's moment and that was Jenny. For now, though, I knew I would just have to silence the nagging feeling in my gut that was screaming trouble. The last thing I wanted was to look like was an overprotective mom, so I grabbed the imaginary duct tape and pretended to place it over my big, fat mouth. Instead of going to check on Jenny, I joined the crowd and enjoyed my big brother's show. I had to admit, he was *really* good.

After I succeeded in shutting up the mama side of me, I began having fun again. It was hard not to when Taylor was by my side. My body was on fire and I had no choice but to concentrate on not letting it get out of control. When he held me close, I was immediately drunk in his mere presence. Control was a word that the Haden of the past knew better than the Haden of the present. Quite the contrary, the Haden of the present knew what it was like to be without Taylor and she was impatient. *She* wanted him in every way possible—now.

As the music played on and the laughter took on immeasurable depths, I continued to succumb to the romanticism of the night. It was perfect in every way. When a slow song would come on, I no longer had to hide my once embarrassing feelings toward Taylor, but instead I could embrace them. I wasn't ashamed to nestle my head in his neck. Tonight he was my fiancé, soon to be my husband, and I wanted to burst wide open from all the excitement growing within me. I wanted to scream to the world that he was mine.

I had never been a huge fan of Valentine's Day until now. Never before had I grasped the true meaning. My Catholic upbringing had taught me that St. Valentine was a man, a priest, killed on

February 14th, approximately the year 270 after he had refused to renounce his faith. He was caught marrying Christian couples as well as helping any Christians who were being persecuted under Emperor Claudius in Rome. While imprisoned, he gained the Emperor's favor until he made a grave error by trying to convert him. Poor St. Valentine was beaten and stoned to death. According to Catholics, even death didn't let him off the hook. It seemed God had other plans for him. Saints are supposed to keep busy interceding for the living. That included St. Valentine restoring sight to the jailer's blind daughter. A very well-known legend went as far as to say that St. Valentine even penned a farewell note on the young woman's door, saying, "From your Valentine." I knew the legend and I knew of the love behind all of Saint Valentine's actions. What I didn't know was how he felt during his actions. I had no idea what that kind of selfless love felt like, that is, until I was in Taylor's arms. I felt the love of Christ in those arms. All the stories I had been told became real when he held me close. I now knew exactly what it felt like to love and be loved unconditionally. Never before had I grasped it. It was just too big, even for me, the *prophetic one*.

I laid my head on my future husband's shoulder and closed my eyes, relishing in the slow beat of the love song echoing in my head.

"Hey, can I cut in?" I opened my eyes to see Jenny's face glowing as bright as the sun. I looked at Taylor, who nodded and turned to walk to where Talon and Gabe stood by the stage. Jenny grabbed my hand and led me to some couches placed up against the back wall by the refreshment tables.

"Haden!" Jenny shrieked. "I'm in love. He is *totally* the one, Haden. Oh my gosh! You can't imagine how perfect he and I are together. He is uber-sensitive, and what a listener. Oh and his eyes... his dreamy eyes. They're to die for. I was so caught up in them that I could hardly speak. I just wish he wouldn't have had to go so you could have met him," she said, the excitement literally bouncing off of her words.

I sat there listening to my friend babble on and couldn't help but wonder if she had been drugged, even though I knew better. She was all kinds of infatuated and I, better than anyone, knew that no drugs were needed for that to happen. I just wished it wasn't so easy for her to take the plunge into *Love Land*. It seemed she had free passes. This time, though, something was different. She almost seemed like she had seen God.

"So does Mr. Perfect have a name?" I asked as she stared off into space.

"Yes, it's Michael. I *love* that name!"

I laughed. "Does this Michael have a last name?"

"Well, of course he does," she chuckled. "I just don't know what it is yet. I will soon. He's gonna call me tomorrow so we can go out," she said giddily.

Jenny's eyes were dancing with the gazillion twinkle lights. "You're in love, but you don't know this guy's name? *And* he was too busy to meet your best friend?" I asked, probing her,

"Oh gosh, no; he *so* wanted to meet you, but he's a doctor and he had to go to work. He promised that he would meet you soon," she said, barely able to stay in her own skin.

I knew in that moment that the next words to roll out of my mouth were wrong. I wanted to tell her that she was stupid. I wanted to tell her that she didn't know this Michael person from Adam, but I didn't. Instead, I bit my tongue and told her I was happy for her. There was no doubt in my mind that I had been through way too much over the past year. So much so that it was most likely clouding my thoughts in a way that was causing me to be a slight bit overprotective when it came to those I loved. So, for the next few hours I listened to Jenn go on and on about perfect Michael until finally the love fest was over. For now I would continue to silence my ever growing suspicions that something in Michael land didn't feel right.

Roger had thrown the party of the year, to no one's surprise. Everyone had a blast, including Mom and Dad who showed up late, both looking like they had been caught with their hand in the cookie jar. I could only hope that one day Taylor and I would wear those very expressions. I could only hope that all those I loved would.

6. Platinum Promises

"Oh, my gosh... I told you I had been eating too many cheeseburgers lately," Jenny griped as Melly tried to zip up her dress.

"Oh hush; you'll be fine," Melly said, straining. "Now suck it in sista."

The wedding was only days away and here I sat in shock as I watched Jenny suck in her stomach.

"There," Melly said, proud. "Perfect."

"Perfect? I don't think so. I'm going on a diet right now." Jenny spun around slowly to get a better look at her reflection in the mirror. "Not so bad."

Next it was my turn. I could feel the butterflies begin to dance in my stomach when the sales lady brought out my dress for me to try on. Standing up, I grabbed it and found the closest dressing room where Melly followed.

"I will never understand why they make these dressing rooms so small when most wedding gowns are so big," Melly said as she shut the door behind us. "It's just dumb if you ask me."

In seconds, my clothes were off and Melly was helping me slip my gown over my head. Thankfully, unlike Jenny, I hadn't been eating too many cheeseburgers. My dress fit just as perfectly as it did the first time I tried it on.

Melly opened the door, freeing me from the confinement of the tiny dressing room. Slowly I walked until I reached the pedestal in front of the mirrors. Melly pushed my back slightly, edging me on. Taking her hint I stepped up, walking until I stopped, and faced the center of the mirrors.

"I look beautiful," I gasped. "It's perfect."

"Someone phone the fire department." Roger's voice rang out behind me. "Haden's so hot, she's gonna catch the place on fire." I smiled at his reflection in the mirror, excited to see him. "Well, we know one thing for sure," Roger said as he walked up to where I stood. "No one will be upstaging the bride in *this* wedding."

The rest of the day flew by in a flash. For the evening ahead I was hoping I would be able to spend it with a movie and Taylor, but sadly it didn't work as I had hoped. From what Melly said, there was a time crunch on my wedding present from Taylor. Whatever it was sure had been taking up a lot of everyone's time.

Instead of spending the evening with my fiancé, I was in the presence of one of my other most favorite people in the world, Talon, only the most perfect brother in the world. I laid my head back on the couch and tossed some popcorn in my mouth while he put in a movie.

"Before we watch the movie, there's something I want to give you," he said softly as he stood, his bluish-green eyes sparkling.

I sat up straight and turned to face him.

"I'll be right back. It's in the car."

I watched as he walked off, leaving me alone with my thoughts. How my life had come so far in such a short time was almost too much for my brain to comprehend. God had blessed me in so many ways. I lost what I thought was one brother to gain two. It was unbelievably surreal.

Talon was sitting beside me again in what seemed to be mere seconds. "Here," he said, handing me a small black velvet box. "They were our mother's. She would want you to have them for your wedding."

A wave of emotion flooded my heart before I even had a chance to open it. I looked into his eyes and then down at the box, opening it slowly to discover a delicate pair of pearl and diamond dangle earrings.

"They're gorgeous," I choked.

"Mom wore them on her wedding day. They're yours."

I looked at the earrings again and hugged Talon. "You're the best brother in the world, do you know that?"

"As a matter of fact, yes I do," he joked. "Just don't tell Gabriel. You know what a girl he can be."

The movie started and we both sat back, silently enjoying the show. I cherished moments like this. There was no question in my mind. I was by far the luckiest girl in the world. As the second movie came to a close, I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I knew I was hearing voices coming from the kitchen across the house.

"Someone should tell her," Taylor's voice filled the air. *"She deserves to know what's going on. Collin was almost killed tonight"*

"No, son, she doesn't need to know, not yet. Let her enjoy your wedding. Then we'll tell her."
Dad's voice was soft and stern as he demanded Taylor keep the newest drama from me.

"She'll notice that Collin's not around."

"I'll handle that," Dad sighed.

"If he shows up at our wedding I'll rip him to shreds. That's a promise," Taylor said, as a matter of fact.

"You won't have to." Talon assured him. *"Collin went into Gavin's territory alone. He was asking for it. Besides, I don't believe that Gavin would ever attempt to hurt Haden."*

Suddenly there was silence before the whispering continued.

"Are you kidding me, Talon?" Taylor's voice was filled with shock. *"That's all he knows how to do."*

"On the contrary, Taylor. It is my belief that he has feelings for her. He wouldn't ruin her wedding day, no matter what his future plans are."

I had heard enough. I got up and tip-toed to the stairs, where I quietly went to my room. *Gavin attacked Collin?* It made no sense. I knew that Gavin was supposed to be some horrible creature. It was more than obvious that he would go to crazy lengths to keep Taylor and me apart, yet something just didn't make sense to me. Collin wasn't a threat to Gavin unless Gavin had tried to get to me tonight, which I knew had to be wrong. Talon had been with me all night, his car parked in front of the house for all to see. Collin was no dummy. There was no way he would have gone to Gavin alone. There had to be something more to the story, something Dad, Taylor and Talon didn't know.

Once in my room, I quietly went to my closet where the *Epacse* was hidden. I got the box down and opened it, taking the crystal pendant into my hand. There was a knock at the door and I jumped, quickly putting it back in its hiding place.

I opened the door to see my mother's beautiful face looking back at me. "You weren't sleeping, were you?"

"Nope," I grinned. "Come in."

"I can't. Your father and I are fixing to go to bed. I just saw your light on and wanted to tell my little girl goodnight. After all, I don't know how long you'll be sleeping down the hall from me," she said, fighting tears.

She opened her arms and I flew into them just like when I was a child. Her embrace made everything seem right in the world. She kissed my cheek and left.

The morning of my wedding, April second, was here before I knew it. I awoke to the comforting smell of French toast and two very excited faces in front of me, one wearing a towel on her head and the other smiling brightly next to her.

"Wake up," towel-headed Jenny said vivaciously. "This is only the most exciting day in the history of the world!"

"Yeah, come on sleepy head. We let you sleep late. Now it's time to get up and get busy," Melly added. "Prince charming will be ready and waiting for you in a few short hours."

I lay in my bed frozen for a moment before it all sunk in. I was getting married today! I was getting married today to my best friend. *Today!* Holy cow! It was *today!* I jumped out of my bed, still half asleep, and started to lose my balance. Both Jenny and Melly busted out laughing.

"Whoa Nellie; take it easy. We have more time than that," Melly laughed, handing me a cup of coffee. "Compliments of your husband," she winked.

"My husband," I choked out as the words filled my ears.

"Yes, your husband. He met me outside and gave me this special cup of coffee that he swore you would need after last night. Looks like he was right," Melly laughed.

Taylor and I had always thought that bachelor and bachelorette parties were silly. We had no urge to try to hold on to our single selves. Instead, we were running as fast as we could to our future as a married couple. Our friends, however, always tried to find any excuse to have a party. Roger rented a club and told us it was an early wedding present. It had been a blast. We danced all night long, which was why I was allotted a little more sleep time this morning. Everyone who knew me, knew that prophetic or not, I needed my sleep.

After the club, Taylor and I said our goodbyes by his car before he followed the guys to Brad's apartment where they would all spend the night. We had decided that we wanted to keep the tradition of the groom not seeing the bride until she walked down the aisle. It was really important to Taylor and me. This was our wedding, the one we weren't sure would ever happen. We wanted it to be perfect--no exceptions. He left and I rode home with Jenny and Melly, who were both spending the night with me.

"Hello," Jenny said, waving her hand in front of my face. "I think she's in shock," she laughed.

"All right, I know exactly what you need," Melly said walking over to my closet. "You need to hunt. Yep, that's exactly what you need, to hunt and run. That'll wake your butt up." She threw me a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. "Let's go mama!" I instinctively did as she asked, putting on my clothes as quickly as possible. "Jenny, while we're gone, get everything ready, k," Melly demanded happily.

"I'm all over it," Jenny smiled.

Melly grabbed my hand and pulled me out of my door. We both ran down the stairs, almost running over Arabella.

"Haden!" she screamed.

"Hey, beautiful! I'm so glad you're here. I missed you," I said, bending down to hug her.

"Where's Marcus, little mama?" I asked, looking around.

"He's with the guys doing guy stuff."

I couldn't help but laugh at how old she sounded. Before I could say anything else, Melly grabbed my hand back and told Ara that she should find Jenny and see if she needed any help. Then she pulled me away toward the back door. When she opened it, I almost fell over from shock. The backyard was no longer our normal backyard. Instead, it was a backyard out of a bridal magazine. My parents had insisted that Taylor and I stay away from it until our wedding day. They were so excited when Taylor and I had told them that we wanted to be married at home in the backyard where so many of our childhood memories lived.

"Surprise," Mom said, heading toward us from the middle aisle in between hundreds of white chairs. "I was hoping to keep you out until the wedding, but I should have figured you'd want to take a run in the forest to calm those nerves of yours."

"What do you think?" Melly asked.

Tears filled my eyes. I had never seen anything so pretty. "I love it! It couldn't be more perfect!" I said, admiring all the white flowers everywhere. Then I looked to the left where a ginormous tent stood. It was the biggest one I had ever seen.

"Oh yes, now *that* will be a surprise. You're not going in there until the reception," Mom grinned. "Okay girls, go get your run on and then come back and hurry. It's almost time."

Mom didn't have to tell Melly twice. She was pulling me through the vast amount of people scurrying around tending to last minute preparations. When we got to the forest we split up and ran. I didn't have to ask. I knew that there was more security than ever today.

Smiling, I enjoyed the feeling of my feet moving underneath me as they barely grazed the forest floor. I loved how the wind felt blowing through my hair. I took deep breaths in through my nose and out through my mouth as I ran, enjoying the speed. When I was done feeding, I called on my wolf and ran some more, stretching my legs.

Feels good, huh. Melly said.

I needed this; thanks Mel. I said, picking up speed. *What's a sister for if not to make you let off some steam?* She howled, laughing.

We ran a little while longer and then phased back so we could head back toward the house. I was nervous about how we were doing on time even though my concept of time was imbedded in my soul. I just didn't want to take any chances on my internal clock running slow today of all days.

When we walked into the kitchen Roger looked up, a look of horror on his face. "Oh dear, your hair looks like a family of birds decided to take residence on your head," he said, walking over to me to assess my bird's nest head further.

"I ran a little fast," I laughed.

"A little? It looks more like you flew, Haden. Here eat this." He handed me a piece of French toast and started touching my hair.

"Do I get some syrup?" I asked, looking around.

"Are you kidding? There's no time for syrup, especially when your hair looks like *that*."

Melly stood there laughing as she dipped her French toast in some syrup. She had only recently discovered that she too could eat food. She had grown up thinking that she was pure vampire, which to most caused human food to taste like rubbing alcohol. Ever since she was let in on the fact that she could eat, she had begun eating everything she could get her hands on. It was good for her that she didn't gain weight easily, thanks to her crazy wolf/vampire genetics.

"What are you laughing at, Mels? Have *you* bothered to look in a mirror? Oh my, I have so much to do," Roger said, looking stressed. "No time to waste girls; let's get this show on the road." Roger took Melly's plate away from her right as she was going to put another bite onto her fork.

"Hey, I was eating that," she pouted.

"There is no time. You can eat later. Now we must get busy. The guests will be here in less than two hours," Roger said nervously.

Thinking he had to be exaggerating, I looked at the clock and scarily enough he was right. It was almost two p.m. The wedding was at four o' clock. I almost passed out. "How in the heck did that happen? It was just 11:30 a.m.," I said nervously.

"Uh oh, looks like we both lost track of the time in the forest," Melly said, her eyes wide. Then a huge smile spread across her pretty face. "Okay, so let's get the heck out of the kitchen and get you into your princess gear. Prince charming will be here soon. Let's rock and roll!"

She didn't have to tell me twice. I turned and started to run out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"Wrong way," Roger said as I got to the top of the stairs. "We're going to your mother's room," he grinned.

I knocked on my parent's door and Mrs. Kenton opened it, all smiles. She hugged me as she let us all through. I looked around, wondering where I was. My parent's room had been transformed into the biggest dressing room I had ever seen. Their large room had all the furniture pushed up next to their queen sized bed on the left hand side. On the right, someone had put a three-way mirror and a pedestal for me to stand on.

The room was filled with feminine chatter and Roger, who was in party mode. He was telling everyone what they needed to do and where they needed to go. Mrs. Kenton and Arabella were already dressed. Mrs. Kenton was wearing a satin suit in a light shade of platinum. Her beautiful brown locks were lightly curled and hung below her shoulders. She looked like a million dollars. Arabella looked like a little queen wearing a white dress with a platinum satin ribbon around her tiny waist to match the rich platinum color of my bridesmaid's dresses.

Roger pulled me into the bathroom, which had umpteenth lights, make-up, and unrecognizable beauty things everywhere. He sat me in a chair and swirled me around to where my head could lay back into the sink, where he proceeded to wash my hair.

"And so it begins," Mom said. I could hear her fighting tears as she spoke, the flash of her camera making me blink.

I sat still, enjoying Roger working on my face and hair while we all talked and laughed. He used light shades of brown on my eyes, just how I liked. Earthy tones were my normal colors. I didn't want him to use anything else. After all, I wanted Taylor to recognize me when I walked down the aisle. Even though Roger was using my usual hues of browns and creams, today I looked like a princess. You almost couldn't tell that I had make-up on, yet my face looked flawless. When he was finished, I stared into the bathroom mirror in awe. I looked perfect. Never had I been so happy with the reflection staring back at me like I was today. Soft curls hung delicately on my shoulders with the sides gently pulled back like I had asked. I was never one to go all crazy with my hair. I was a wash and go kind of girl, but today was special. Today I wanted to look like a princess. I was just about to ask my mom to get my veil when Mrs. Kenton sat next to me and handed me a white box.

"Open it," she said softly, her light green eyes shining.

I opened the box to find a small diamond tiara attached to a white veil. I pulled it out of the box and held it up. It was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. I looked at Alexandra, who had put her ice cold hand on my arm.

"It was your mother's. She would want you to wear it today," she said, her voice kind.

My eyes filled with tears as I looked the tiara over. I couldn't believe that I would actually be wearing two things that my birth mother had worn on her wedding day. It was almost incomprehensible.

"Your father bought it for her as a wedding day present. She loved it as much as I know you will."

"May I?" Roger asked, taking it from me and putting it in my hair. It was so delicate. I watched as Roger carefully placed it on my head. I was speechless.

"I hate to be the happy moment party pooper guys, but we only have like thirty minutes left. I doubt seriously Miss "I'm never late" will want to be late for her own wedding," Jenny laughed.

I looked in the mirror and caught Jenny's reflection. She looked stunning in her sleeveless platinum satin dress. I had chosen those particular dresses because I had no doubt that they would complement both Melly's and Jenny's figures perfectly. I had been right. Melly came up behind Jenny and I almost fell over when I saw her. I had never seen Melly in a formal dress. She looked freakin' phenomenal. The floor length dress hung to her body in ways I had never imagined. She was sure to give Brad a heart attack when he saw her—hypothetically, of course.

"Come on people; no more crying," Melly demanded. "We have a wedding to attend. Oh, and I snuck a peek out the window in your room, Haden. Taylor looks *good!*" Melly laughed, knowing that would drive me crazy.

I jumped up off the chair. "Outta my way! The man of my dreams is waiting for me," I laughed, hurrying back into the bedroom so I could put my dress on.

In the corner of the room, to the right of the mirrors, hung my dream dress; it was patiently waiting for me. Roger's friend had brought my vision to life. It was perfect in every way. I stood and looked at it for a moment, in awe of its simple beauty. I hadn't wanted a frilly dress. I wasn't by any means a frilly girl. I wanted something simple, yet something extraordinary, and I was looking right at it. I had requested a white gown with just a hint of platinum color, giving it a shiny appearance. After all, I had earned the privilege of wearing white. It sure hadn't been an easy task. Its sleeveless bodice was form fitted to right around knee level, where it then flared out ever so slightly. The top of the bodice had a delicate design made out of diamond-like stones with just a hint of shimmery platinum beads mixed in. The rest of the dress was just pure platinum satin beauty. Simple and elegant.

"Shall we?" Roger said. "I don't want to rush you, but we're now down to twenty-five minutes."

I fought the lump in my throat and nodded. It took a couple minutes to get the dress on without messing up my hair. I had my eyes closed without even realizing it until Mom said, "Open your eyes, honey."

When I did, I couldn't believe what I saw. As I looked into the mirror, I was in shock at the woman staring back at me once again. Everything about what I saw was perfect. I was *really* getting married. I was *really* going to be happy. I turned ever so slightly so that I could see my birthmark on my shoulder. *Today I will marry my other half, my king*, I thought as I looked at the shimmering crescent moon. I had been advised not to wear sleeveless today, but I wasn't stupid. Everyone who was looking for me knew exactly where to find me today, birthmark or no birthmark. I wasn't going to change what I wanted on my wedding day out of fear.

"It's time," Melly said, lightly touching my arm. "He's waiting for you."

Her words brought the tears back to my eyes, but I was able to force them to stay put, for now at least. Roger was standing to my left holding my shoes.

Jenny grabbed my crystal strappy heels and got under my dress, putting them on for me. "You know I love you, right. I wouldn't be caught dead under anyone else's dress," she chuckled.

I couldn't help but laugh. My smile didn't last long before my nerves kicked in. I took a deep breath and started walking, putting one foot in front of the other. When we got downstairs, Roger left and introduced me to the wedding coordinator, or better yet, his assistant. Everyone took their places and then I heard the soft sounds of a violin and piano. It was time.

I was so lost in my own head that I hadn't seen my father walk up to me. "You look beautiful," he whispered with tears in his eyes as he laced my hand through his arm. "You look just like your mother. She would have been so proud of you." Silent tears fell down his handsome face and I started to cry. "None of that; it's your big day," he said, wiping my tears with his handkerchief. "You will always be my little girl, Haden, forever."

My tears began to fall like rain when he hugged me, and I was instantly thankful for waterproof mascara. I told him I loved him more than anything and that he would always be my dad right as the wedding coordinator motioned to us that it was our turn. I quickly wiped my face once more with his handkerchief, using my free hand, and smiled. Roger's helper smiled too as she handed me my tiny bouquet of white flowers sprinkled with diamond-like crystals.

With just one step I was on my way to fulfilling my dream. With every other step I was further and further away from the Haden of the past. She was quickly being replaced with the woman I had become, the woman who was on her way to marrying her destiny. I kept my eyes down until I heard a quiet gasp. I looked up to see the most unforgettable vision I had ever seen in my life-Taylor waiting for me. There my best friend stood in front of hundreds of people with a smile on his perfect face and tears in his clover green eyes. It had been him who had exhaled when he saw me.

Dad and I walked slowly down the aisle as the music played softly. I had seen the sea of faces when I had first looked up, but now as I walked I saw nothing but Taylor's angelic face. My eyes locked on his and I smiled at him, feeling silent tears fall down my cheeks. I didn't bother to stop them. They were in honor of today, a gift to Taylor. My heart was crying tears of joy.

When we got to the pastor, Dad kissed my cheek and then hugged Taylor before taking his seat with Mom. Taylor took my hand, and I could see the wetness of his tears on his face. He noticed mine at the same time and we both laughed softly. He wiped mine with his hand and we turned to face the pastor who was smiling down lovingly at us. I tried to pay close attention to everything that was said, but all it was a blur until it came time for our vows.

Taylor and I turned to face each other and he began, "Haden," he said, before taking a deep breath. "You have always had my heart. Today I give you my soul. God chose us for each other, the light of the Ice Moon as our shining star. I promise you that I will cherish you above all others. I will protect your heart and soul for the rest of my life." He kissed my hand and then placed the wedding band on my left ring finger.

When it was my turn, I too took a deep breath. "Taylor, I have never been one to follow others, as you know." He smiled and I heard chuckles from our guests. I smiled too and began again. "Today I promise to join my soul to yours, following wherever you lead. I promise to be the helpmeet you deserve. I promise to feed you when you are hungry and to give you drink when you are thirsty. I promise to love you all the days of my life. Today I give you me." I took his ring from Jenny and placed it on his ring finger, making him my husband. When the pastor said, "Kiss the bride," Taylor leaned down, slowly resting his head on mine and then he lightly kissed my nose before his lips finally met mine. They were soft and full of so much love that I was totally overwhelmed. Tingles burst through my body like fireworks.

"I love you immensely, Mrs. Kenton," he whispered, his lips still on mine.

"I love you too," I cried.

We turned around and the pastor introduced us for the first time as man and wife. The guests went wild and I exhaled happily. Clapping erupted along with screaming. Taylor and I looked at each other and smiled. We were married!

After tons of pictures it was time to party! We were immediately greeted by hundreds of our closest friends and family before Kiernan ran up to us. "Well hidey-ho Mr. Batman and Mrs. Catwoman! Aren't you two just visions! I say you're both due a pretty good party wouldn't cha say. Just follow yer ol' buddy and let's go get our groove on."

We walked into the tent, and yet again I was blown back by how beautiful everything was. There were large round tables on either side of the tent, and a walkway down the center that led to a huge

dance floor with a DJ behind it. Iridescent white balloons were everywhere, the ceiling covered in tiny white lights. The table linens were all white with white chairs that had platinum bows tied around them. Each table had centerpieces of crystal roses, my favorite. Taylor squeezed my hand and I smiled up at him.

"I am so . . .," I stopped, not knowing what I was going to say.

"You're so beautiful." Taylor rubbed the back of his hand across my cheek.

"Get a room," Jenny hollered from across the room, laughing. She was already on the dance floor dancing with Zach, who nodded at us as he continued to slide around the dance floor.

After talking to Gabriel and Talon, the Nannies and Lenny came over to where we were. We talked to them for a while before we were greeted by even more relatives, ones we had never met from Taylor's side of the family. After my mother's passing, Alexandra had made sure to get back in contact with her family in the States. She told me that she had come to realize just how important family was after she lost my mom and her son.

I was quickly pulled out of my thoughts when I heard Kiernan announce in the microphone that it was time for the bride and groom's first dance as husband and wife. I squeezed Taylor's hand and grinned big as I followed my husband to the dance floor. He pulled me close as the most beautiful song began playing. It was one of the songs Taylor had written me while we were apart. We swayed as the piano played in the background.

"You are a vision, Haden," he said, staring into my eyes.

"Thank you," I said, feeling my tears resurfacing. I was so engulfed in the reality of the day that I was having a hard time knowing if it was real or just a dream.

"It's real. I promise," he smiled.

"Does it ever have to end?" I cried, my eyes closed and our faces now close enough that our noses were touching each other.

"This part, yes, I'm afraid it does, but it will only get better from here on out. Personally, I'm excited about my wedding gift to you."

"Oh God! Taylor I didn't get you anything," I said, crying harder. "I got so caught up in the wedding preparations that it totally slipped my mind."

"You did give me something. You gave me you. That's all I have ever wanted. Besides, I owed you for my Christmas surprise. I thought I would just wait until our wedding night to give you yours."

I laid my head on his shoulder and listened to his slow heartbeat, enjoying the moment while I could. "Our wedding night," I said aloud.

"Yes, our wedding night. It's here," he smiled, pointing outside the tent where it was starting to get dark. "If I have my way, it will be a night you never, ever forget."

I wanted nothing more than to spend every night in Taylor's arms with him as my husband. I wanted *nothing* more than to be one with him, especially physically, but I would have been lying if I would have said I wasn't scared, because I was. I had saved myself for him all of my life, and tonight I would belong to Taylor body and soul. My mother had given me the birds and bees talk when I was younger. Back then it grossed me out and I pushed it as far from my mind as possible, telling myself that I would never ever do such things. The older I got, however, the more I began to wonder if I hadn't been a little too hasty with that decision. The more I was around Taylor, the more that question was answered. I had definitely been too hasty. Tonight I wanted every part of my husband. I was ready. I was scared. I quickly pushed my fears aside. I wasn't going to let them surface and ruin my reception.

We went on to dance the night away with our guests and each other. It seemed everyone under the sun was there. Dad had insisted we invite Anna and Jason as well as their mom even though I wasn't so sure, especially after the last time I saw her. Across the room, she stood next to her brother, who was talking to Gabriel. Anna was staring at Taylor. I took a deep breath and smiled at her as I put my hand on his back.

A couple hours into the reception Melly pulled me aside, asking me if I would mind if she altered her dress a little. I, of course, said that I didn't care. When she came back in, I laughed out loud. She had cut her dress right above the knee in a slant. She had apparently left her shoes wherever she had left the material. She walked in almost in a skip and I watched Brad as he turned to look at her. He smiled his southern smile as he looked her up and down.

When she got to him, he picked her up and kissed her before setting her back down.

Jenny was too busy flirting with Zach all night to notice anything. Kiernan spent most of the night with the DJ, who was letting him help, and when he wasn't there he was dancing up a storm with the Nannies on the dance floor. Mom, Dad, and the Kenton's all sat at a table talking most of the night. Arabella and Marcus danced together while Barney and Haylee roamed around meeting all the guests. Gabriel spent most of the night hanging out with some of my and Taylor's friends from school. From the look on his face, I could safely assume he found them amusing. He found all humans amusing. Talon could be found a lot of the night talking to Jenny when he wasn't sitting with the Kentons. It was perfect, every second of it. I couldn't have asked for a better night. Best of all, I had Taylor beside me all night. There were a couple times he made my breath catch in my throat as we danced, his body close to mine. I would just smile at him and try to control my breathing. I knew that quite a few people in the room would be able to hear my crazy heart as it tried to pump out of my chest.

Eventually it was time for us to leave. I was beyond excited about my wedding present. It didn't take me long to realize that everyone had been in on it. That only piqued my curiosity even more. They were all closed mouthed, even Jenny and Kiernan. I couldn't help but wonder how much *they* had been paid to keep their mouths shut.

We said our goodbyes to everyone except Talon, who was nowhere to be found. "Where's Talon?" I asked Taylor, not wanting to leave for two weeks without telling him goodbye.

"He was tying up a few loose ends with your present for me. He said he'd be back here before we left. Would you like for me to call him?"

"No, that's okay," I said, sad.

When we walked outside, Taylor said he would be back in a minute with the car. I watched as he went around the corner, and sighed. Everything was perfect. I looked up at the sky, marveling at how beautiful the stars were.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Talon said, now standing next to me.

"Yes it is," I agreed as a smile spread across my face. I was so thankful that I would get to say goodbye to him.

"You were great tonight, Haden. Mom and Dad would have been proud of you. I was."

"Thank you," I said, turning to face my brother. "I am so glad you are in my life, Talon. I feel like you have always been there with me." Tears began to take residence in my eyes once again and I looked at the ground.

"That's because I have been. I prayed for a baby sister and God sent me you," he said, still looking up at the sky as he put his arm around me. "Did you know I used to sing you to sleep every night after you were born and even sometimes after they sent you away? I would sit outside your window after you fell asleep and sing to you."

"You did?" I asked, in shock.

"Yes, like I said. I promised her."

"I wish I knew Mom."

"You do. Every time you look in the mirror, it's her who's looking back at you." He looked down at me as Taylor pulled up in the car. "You've got a good man, Haden. Have a great honeymoon. No worries; you two will be safe. I promise." He kissed my head and removed his arm from around my neck.

I got up on my tip-toes and kissed his cheek before I turned to get in the car. "I love you."

"I love you too," he said with a gentle smile on his perfect face.

"Hey... what the heck... am I chopped beef?" Jenny yelled, running over to me.

"Seriously, did you think we were going to let you guys run off and not let us watch you drive away?" Melly said, following Jenny with Brad and Kiernan behind them.

"I told them to let you guys go, but you know women; they never listen," Gabriel laughed. Jenny ran over and hit his arm. He started acting like he was going to box with her and she laughed at him with childlike enthusiasm.

It was the most wonderful sight. So many people we loved had come to see us off. Then again, maybe a couple had come to see how I was going to squeeze my dress into Taylor's car. It took a minute to get me all stuffed in, but eventually we did it. Taylor rolled down the windows and we waved as we drove off.

"Oh no, I forgot my luggage," I said, panic stricken.

"It's in the trunk," he smiled.

"Aw, you thought of everything."

"I would like to think so, yes. I'll let you be the judge of that, Mrs. Kenton," he winked.

"Oh I will, Mr. Kenton," I chuckled, enjoying the sound of my new name.

We drove for a little while when I finally asked him where we were going.

"It's a surprise, but first I have to run by the cabin," he said, keeping his eyes on the road.

"The cabin? As in Swan Lake? You have to run by the cabin on our wedding night? For what?" I asked, utterly confused.

"I need to do something there, but it won't take long, I promise, and then we'll be on our way. Don't worry, we have two weeks together."

I looked at him as if he were nuts, but I knew better than to second guess him. If he needed to run by the cabin then so be it. I leaned my head back and enjoyed the ride as my husband held my hand.

7. Honeymoon Haven

"Wake up beautiful." I opened my eyes slowly at the sound of Taylor's voice. "Oh my gosh; did I fall asleep?" I asked, traumatized.

"Yes," he chuckled. "That's okay, baby." Grabbing my hand, he gently helped me and my semi-poufy dress out of the car.

"Where are we?" I asked, looking around, seeing only forest and the paved road we were parked on.

"We're at your surprise," he winked. "I need you to do me a favor and put this on." He handed me a blindfold.

"Okay, then what?"

"Then you get on my back." His smile was huge. He was totally enjoying the fact that I had no clue what he was doing.

"You want me to get on your back in *this* dress?" I asked, laughing.

"Um, yeah," he nodded, looking thoroughly amused. "Of course, you could always rip a little off." His eyes were shining as bright as the stars.

I knew he was expecting me not to do anything that crazy so I did the exact opposite of what he thought. I stared at him, narrowing my eyes slightly, and I ripped the lower half of my dress off in one

quick motion. It instantly became a mini skirt of sorts. His face went from playful to serious in seconds. I watched him swallow, the anticipation of our first night as a married couple washing over his gorgeous face. He was clearly enjoying what he had just seen.

His lips curved up into the crooked smile that had tormented me for months. "Girl, I hope your nap left you refreshed," he said before swinging me around on his back. "Put your blindfold on."

I did as he asked and he took off running. We stopped in seconds and he set me down softly on the ground. "Surprise." Slowly he removed the blindfold from my eyes and aimed my body to where it faced my wedding present. "Open your eyes," he whispered, his voice blending with the cool night's breeze.

I gasped. "You didn't," I said through tears as my eyes danced in amazement. Directly in front of us stood a two-story cabin, its windows lit with a soft glowing light. A wraparound deck cradled the bottom floor where purple flowering plants hung, sending out a sweet smell into the night air. "You bought me a cabin?" My words fell out of my mouth in a rippling wave of shock. I couldn't believe what I was looking at. It was the spitting image of one I had shown him in a magazine right after he proposed to me. Immediately I had fallen in love with it. I stood there in shock.

"Not exactly," he chuckled, enjoying my reaction. "I built it...with some help, of course. I thought that it would be fitting to spend our first nights as a married couple in a cabin of our own. It *was* a cabin we were in when I first kissed your beautiful face," he said, putting his arms around my waist from behind me. "You ready to start our life together?"

"I was born ready to love you," I said, my heart glowing as bright as the full moon shining down on us. Before I knew it, he scooped me up into his strong arms and carried me over the threshold.

Putting me down just on the other side of the front door, he pulled me into his arms, kissing me with such soft intensity that a tingle ran all the way down my back. My first reaction was to pull back so I could control my heart rate. I had become so accustomed to restraining myself that it was second nature to stop myself before going too far.

Taylor looked at me and smiled devilishly. "We're married now; it's okay."

He was right, there was nothing stopping my heart from beating as fast as it wanted to. I stood on my tip-toes, put my arms around his neck, and softly set my lips on his. I pulled away, smirked at him and then he moved in closer to kiss me, his wife, again. This time I returned his kiss with such intensity that he could have no doubt how serious my love was for him. I put my hands through his straight, thick brown hair as he cupped my face in his hands. I moaned, feeling my body on fire. Our bodies were moving all over the place. I hadn't even had a chance to look at our new cabin. I didn't care. I was too busy breathing my husband in. My back was suddenly up against the wall, his lips on my neck. I was insanely hot for this man in front of me.

He stopped and picked me up, tossing me over his shoulder. He ran up the stairs, setting me down gently in what I was assuming was our bedroom. I turned around to see a king size, four poster bed made out of huge logs draped with chiffon and covered in numerous cream pillows. I turned around and almost passed out. Taylor stood only feet from me with his shirt off. His six-pack abs made my heart instantly jump in excitement. There were no words for his perfection. His pale skin looked like silky cream, his chest calling out to me.

I stood frozen, unable to move, when my eyes met his. Never removing my stare, my body instinctively began putting one foot in front of the other. Taylor stood still, waiting, his face serious. When I reached him, I put my hands on his chest and kissed his nose. Bending down, he kissed my lips softly before carrying me to the bed where we would begin our life together as husband and wife.

We spent the entire night in each other's arms consummating our marriage, our souls melding into one. I woke up the next morning in the most perfect state of contentment, my head on his bare chest. I leaned up to look at the clock. 1 pm. I laughed.

"You okay?" he asked, pulling me back into his arms.

"I'm better than okay. I'm unbelievably perfect."

He propped himself on his elbow, facing me. "Last night was the best night of my life," he said as he smiled softly at me.

He was so sexy. I wanted to melt all over again just looking at him. I didn't say anything. I just continued to stare at his gorgeous face.

"Haden, if you keep looking at me like that we're never going to leave this room."

I continued to hold his eyes in mine and in no time he gave in to his wife's desires. The weight of his body on mine was like the very first bite of chocolate after a really long diet. It was delicious and I savored its taste in my mouth immensely.

We spent almost all of our time at the cabin those two weeks getting to know each other as husband and wife. The first three days we hardly left our room. We were too busy relishing in each other. I wanted to learn every inch of his body, and that I did. Every time we would decide to leave, one of us would look into the other's eyes and it was on again. All we did was drink each other up day after day. It was perfect. It was heaven.

The last few days, we did manage to venture out to hunt more often. Once we would go back to the cabin, it never failed; he would say something that caused such intense chills down my spine. I had to have him close to me yet again. I was so thankful that we had two weeks for me to at least try to get my uncontrollable urge to consume him every waking minute out of my system. If that feeling for him didn't ever leave, at least I would have the memories of a time when I could embrace it. Loving him was all I wanted to do. There was nothing in the world that could have made me happier. I had my Taylor all to myself, *finally*.

Day in and day out I spent in a wave of emotions. My mind was no match for my body, which was ready for a marathon of love making. I had tasted my husband's insane amount of love for me and couldn't get enough.

One day, Taylor surprised me with a beautiful breakfast of crepes, sausage, and eggs when I awoke. Sitting at our table, all I could see was how sexy he was as he put each and every bite in his mouth. I tried to silence my physical longings, but every time I tried they did nothing but get the best of me. According to Taylor, I had the look of a very determined huntress on my face. I indeed knew what I wanted and got what I needed every time Taylor's eyes met mine. Neither one of us could refuse the

other. Both my body and my mind longed for these days to never end. Sadly, I knew better. All good things must come to an end; that included my delicious honeymoon.

Those two weeks were undeniably the best weeks of my life. I didn't want to go home, but I knew that the time had come. There was no point in fighting it. The real world was still out there beyond the stars and it was waiting for us to rejoin it.

Over the past months we had learned to face the reality that we were different from others. Taylor and I had a whole new world to answer to, a world full of greed, malice and evil. It was a world that wanted me dead and soon him too. The comfort it gave my soul to know that Taylor would be by my side every step of the way no matter how hard it would be made everything seem brighter. The fact that he and I could come together every night and refuel on each other was a great comfort to my soul. Our time had finally come. No one would tear us apart ever again. We were one now, forever. With us together, nothing was impossible.

The morning we were scheduled to go home came all too fast. I awoke early that morning with a nagging sensation in the pit of my stomach that something wasn't right. There had been nothing to give away why I felt this way, yet I couldn't shake it.

I wasn't ready to go back to the real world, especially with the new ill feeling in my stomach. I wanted just a little more time with my husband before the realities of our lives came at us full force. Living in my little fairy tale world the last two weeks had been a dream come true. I just wasn't quite ready to give it up.

When Taylor came back inside from loading the luggage into the car, I put my lower lip out making a pouty face. "Do we *have* to go home? Can't we stay just one more week?" I begged.

Laughing, he walked over to me and took me in his arms, kissing my pouty lower lip. "I wish we could stay longer, love. I want nothing more than to spend every moment of every day for the rest of our lives with you in my arms, but you know we need to go home," he said, smiling down at me.

"Fine, you win, but I'm not happy about it." I stuck my tongue out at him and he chuckled.

"Everything's packed and in the car. I'm ready whenever you are, gorgeous."

I looked up into his clover green eyes and smiled seductively. "I was thinking . . . maybe we should tell the cabin goodbye properly. It *has* been good to us."

"Oh you do . . . do you? Well if you think that's what's best, then who am I to argue?" Taylor flung me on his back and ran up the stairs when his phone rang, stopping us right outside of our bedroom door. "It's Talon; I should probably answer it."

I nodded and his face went serious as soon as Talon began to speak. I couldn't hear what was being said, but whatever it was *wasn't* good.

"We're on our way right now," Taylor said, hanging up the phone. He looked at me, his face serious, "We need to leave right away."

"Why? What happened?" I asked, not wanting to give up our last moments alone.

"Haden, Jenny's missing," Taylor said, watching me closely.

His words stung my soul. "What do mean... *she's missing?*"

"I don't know for sure. All Talon said was that she was missing and we needed to come home now."

"How long has she been gone?" I asked as my head started to spin in circles.

"I don't know, baby, but we've got to get out of here now. Let's go."

I followed Taylor down the stairs and out the door of our magical cabin. Reality had set in all too fast. He opened my car door and I got in, feeling numb. "Are they sure?" I asked when Taylor hit the main road.

"Yes," he said as he floored it. "They're sure."

Our car ride was quiet other than the hum of the engine. Taylor held my hand the whole way home. It comforted me, but only a little. I kept asking God to watch over Jenny. If she was really in trouble, I knew that she needed protection. The thought that someone would go after her had never crossed my mind. It was obvious now that I hadn't been thinking clearly. Of course she was vulnerable. She was my best friend and she was human, 100% human. She was definitely in trouble. The more I thought about it, the more my stomach turned.

"I think I'm gonna throw up," I said, breaking into a cold sweat.

Taylor knew with one quick look at me that I wasn't kidding and he pulled over. I barely got the door open before my beautiful breakfast exited my stomach in an unrecognizable form. Taylor was at my head in seconds, holding my hair back.

"I'm better now, thanks." All I could think of was what an ending to two perfect weeks.

When he saw that the nausea had passed, he got back in the car and punched it again. Now he was racing home for two reasons. He knew by the looks of me only minutes before that it was probably a good idea to get me home sooner than later. I felt fine for about another half an hour and then another wave of nausea washed over me.

"Pull over, pull over!" I practically yelled, trying to stop myself from tossing my cookies all over his pretty car. Yet again, in no time at all he had the car pulled over and my hair pulled back. I hung my head in between my knees and emptied the contents of my stomach all over the side of the road. "I'm so sorry," I said, slowly lifting my head to look at him.

"Don't be sorry. I'm going to get you home as soon as I can," he said, moving the few runaway hairs out of my face.

We were back on the road and I was feeling better, other than the black hole feeling that was now in my stomach. I grabbed my purse and tossed a piece of peppermint gum in my mouth. The cool mint flavor was a Godsend since I couldn't brush my teeth.

"Are you feeling better?" Taylor asked, concerned.

"I feel a lot better. Don't worry about me. I'll be okay." I smiled at him in hopes it would reassure him enough. "The gum is helping. I think my nerves are just shot. I can't grasp that Jenny's missing. There has to be some sort of misunderstanding." I knew in my gut that I was wrong, but I was going to think that until it was proven otherwise.

"Well, I would tell you not to think about it, but I know better," he said, squeezing my hand. "Can I get you anything, love?"

"No I'm okay; just get us home."

"You got it." He floored the car, and I watched impatiently as the trees blurred by us.

I was feeling a lot better until we pulled up to our house and I saw all the cars parked everywhere. There were so many. I only recognized a few of them. The closer we got, the sicker my stomach felt. Taylor opened my door and I got out slowly. He held on to me as we walked to the front door, which was oddly enough unlocked. The first face I saw was Talon's. There was no expression on his face and I could feel that what he was about to tell me wasn't just bad, but awful. So many voices were buzzing in my head. They were all coming from the direction of the living room.

"How bad is it?" Taylor asked.

"Bad, I'm afraid. We found her car," Talon said, looking directly at me.

"Her car?" I choked, "Where?"

Talon looked pained when he spoke, "On the side of the road. It had a flat."

"Well then, she's probably not missing. She obviously had car trouble. I'll just call her," I said, excited.

"You can call her, Haden, but she won't answer. We found her car a few days ago. Her purse, cell phone and keys were still in it. The driver's side door was open." Talon looked at Taylor and then back at me. I'm sure they were both worried about how I would handle the news.

Tears filled my eyes and my entire body tensed as I filled with anger. "Days ago? Why didn't you call us?"

"We were hoping we would find her sooner but we've looked everywhere with no luck."

"Do her parents know?"

"No, they don't. They called here asking if you were back."

"They can't know. Jenny wouldn't want them to worry. Someone will need to call them and tell them that she's um . . ."

Taylor put his hand on my lower back. "There's time for us to figure it all out."

"Where's Gavin," I asked, fighting the intense anger building inside me as I began to shake.

"We don't know. Gabriel is checking out a lead right now. We *will* find her," Talon assured me.

"If you don't, *I will*. I'll kill him if he hurts her." My voice was full of venom. I was done with Gavin's games.

"Haden, you don't know that he's who has her," Taylor said, trying to make me feel better.

"You're right. I don't know that he does, but I also don't know that he doesn't. If he does, I will kill him myself. It's a promise."

Taylor knew that it was my anger speaking. I had never hurt a flea. He lightly kissed my cheek before asking Talon about all the people in our living room. Talon said they were friends called in to help, local wolves and vampires alike. As they talked, I walked into the room filled with stranger's faces and pictures of Jenny spread out on the wall.

My mom ran up to me and hugged me. "I'm so sorry, honey," she cried.

"Don't be mom; we'll find her." I looked around the room and walked over to the fireplace where my and Taylor's father stood. I nodded at them both and then turned to face the crowd that had gathered to help my friend.

"Hello." I waited for the room to quiet down before I spoke again. "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Haden, Jenny's best friend. I want to thank you on behalf of Jenny for being here. I want you all to know that what you're doing is appreciated and that I will do whatever I can to help you find her. In my room I have a shirt of hers that she left here. I will bring it down so that you can take turns sniffing it in order to have her scent. I'm afraid that we're up against the real monsters, so you all will need to be on guard. They will eat you for lunch if given the opportunity. Don't give it to them. I will be praying for you all," I said, feeling my stomach turn again.

I hurried out of the room and ran up the stairs into my room where I found the toilet in my bathroom as soon as I could. Mom, Mrs. Kenton, and Taylor were with me in seconds.

"Is she okay?" Mom asked Taylor.

"Her nerves have taken a pretty big hit today," he said, holding my hair back while rubbing my back as I dry heaved.

"Maybe I should get her some crackers." Mrs. Kenton's voice rang out like a bell.

"That would be great," Mom said, kneeling next to me.

I put my hand up behind me. "No crackers please; I'll be fine." I wiped my mouth and pushed myself back from the toilet. I felt like I was on stage.

"Honey, I think you need to rest." Mom's voice was filled with worry.

"I'm okay. Once the shock wears off I'm sure I'll feel better." I hoped I would feel better at least. I wasn't going to be much help to Jenny puking my guts up.

"Love, maybe you should rest for a couple hours and when you wake up if you feel better we can go look for her ourselves. You saw all of the people downstairs. There are tons of people out there. You need to rest, please." Taylor pleaded.

I started to get up and Taylor had to catch me before I fell. "Um yeah, maybe that's a good idea," I said, feeling really weak. "Will you stay with me?" I asked him.

"Of course."

Mom and Mrs. Kenton excused themselves after I told them where to get Jenny's shirt, and Taylor and I sat down in my bed. I lay down on my side with him behind me, his arms wrapped around me, holding me tight.

"Don't worry, baby. I'm sure a nap will help. You know, we didn't get much sleep for two weeks straight," he laughed softly.

"That's very true," I said, letting out a small laugh while trying to ignore the tears attempting to spill out of my eyes. "I am pretty tired. I just don't know if I can sleep. I'm so worried about her," I said, starting to cry.

"God knows where she is, love. Don't forget that. Rest your eyes for a while so we can go find her." Taylor kissed the back of my head. I inhaled deeply, breathing him in, and was asleep instantly.

I woke up with my husband's strong arms still around me. I rolled over to look at him and was shocked to see his big green eyes open. He was smiling at me. The first thing out of his mouth was that I looked better. He asked me how I was feeling and I could honestly say that I did feel better. Naps had never been my thing, but today I was thankful for them.

One thing was really bothering me physically, however. I was ravenous! All the throwing up had emptied my stomach and it needed to be refilled. I was dying for a hamburger!

He laughed at me. "I'll feed you soon; I promise."

We got up and took a quick trip to my not so hidden room for some liquid nourishment. Luckily, Mom and Dad had stocked it before we returned home. We hadn't discussed where we would be staying after the wedding since there had been so much drama beforehand. Now wasn't exactly the time to start talking about buying a house.

When we were done and I was cleaned up, I felt a whole lot better. I was ready to get some food and then find my best friend. I knew she needed me. When we went downstairs it was empty, unlike how it was when we left it. There was a note from my parents saying they were out with the search team. My phone rang as we were about to walk out the door. It was Melly. She and Brad wanted to meet us when they found out where we were going. Apparently she was hungry too. When we walked outside, Kiernan was walking toward the door.

"Hey you," I said, noticing immediately that his usual glow was gone.

"Hey. Where are you two off to?" His tone was dry.

Taylor told him that we were going to get some food before helping the others. Kiernan too asked if he could tag along. We said yes, but in all honesty I wasn't too sure that he really wanted to. In the car ride he was unusually quiet.

"Kiernan, we're gonna find her," I said, turning to look at him.

"I'm gonna kill the arse who took her."

I had never seen him look like this. It was obvious that he hadn't slept in days. Someone had taken the love of his life and there was no way he was going to sit around and do nothing.

We walked in the restaurant and spotted Melly and Brad sitting in a huge back booth by the window. Melly smiled at us, but it was far from her usual happy face. Brad's looked like it had those first months after losing his parents and little sister. Taylor and I had been away having the time of our lives while our friends were out looking for Jenny. I felt awful inside. Taylor squeezed my hand and I knew that he had heard my thoughts. He was trying to assure me that it wasn't my fault, but I knew in a way it was. Jenny had been missing for days while her best friend was breaking in every room in her cabin with her new husband. I felt another squeeze on my hand and I said, "*Okay, okay,*" in my head.

When the waitress came to take our orders I was ready. I wanted a mustard burger with extra mustard, extra pickles, seasoned fries and a huge strawberry shake. Taylor looked at me and smiled. I couldn't help but smile back.

"You wore her out, eh?" Kiernan said, smiling, but only slightly. It was good to see that there was still a little light left in him.

Brad and Melly snickered. Taylor leaned over and kissed my cheek. "Are you guys so sure it wasn't the other way around?" he teased.

The whole table burst out laughing, including me. He had actually made me blush. I was just enjoying the temporary smiles on everyone's faces. Sadly, they were quickly replaced with one of seriousness as we started to talk about Jenny. They told Taylor and me that she was supposed to meet Melly a few nights ago and never showed up. It didn't take them long to find her car on the side of the road. It looked like someone had stopped to help her and they took her after she got out. They were pretty sure that she didn't go willingly since she left her purse and cell phone in her car. Plus, the fact that they found her car door wide open made it pretty obvious what had happened. There was one thing that confused me. With what they had said, I couldn't see how it could be Gavin who took her. With his powers over women there'd be no doubt that she would have gone with him willingly, no questions asked. He would have definitely let her grab her things and shut her car door. None of it made any sense.

"Has anyone heard anything? I mean, has anyone called, maybe someone holding her hostage for something? *Me*, maybe?" I asked, looking at them.

"No one has contacted us," Melly said, dipping a fry in ketchup.

"I'm calling Talon," I said, getting my phone out of my purse.

"No need; he and Gabe are on their way here. I called him to let him know where we were," Melly said, smiling.

Right as she said that, I looked out the window to see Gabriel and Talon pulling in the parking lot on their Ninja motorcycles.

Right as they walked inside, Gabe spotted us. "What's up?" he hollered across the restaurant before checking out the waitress as he walked toward us.

"Ew Gabe, seriously," Melly said, rolling her eyes. "Must you?"

"Must I what? Appreciate women? Why yes, Mels, I must," he laughed out loud.

Talon was expressionless as he listened to Gabriel and Melly go back and forth. I was steadily inhaling my mustard burger, which was almost gone. Thankfully I was feeling a hundred percent better than I had earlier. Taylor was right. That nap really had done wonders.

"So where are we at?" Brad asked Gabriel.

Gabe looked outside. "We're at Bob's Burgers," he laughed. "Ouch!" Gabriel said, looking at Melly. "Why'd you kick me?"

"Cuz you're being a turd, that's why," she said, big eyed as she threw a french fry at him.

He picked it up and ate it while he laughed. "Thanks Mel."

Kiernan was staring at Gabriel straight faced. It was scary to see him like this. There was no humor on his face whatsoever, only anger. I didn't like where this was heading, so I asked Gabriel to be serious before tempers flared.

"We're no better than we were three days ago. I wish we were. We've checked all over. There's been no sign of her. I've asked. I've threatened. I've got nothing." He said as he grabbed a couple of fries off of Melly's plate and tossed them in his mouth.

"We're not giving up, though," Talon added. "She's out there and we're going to find her. We won't stop until we find her."

Kiernan watched Talon's face intently. "Where do we go next?" he asked him.

"I've got some connections in surrounding cities. They're checking all the motels. We'll just keep retracing our steps until something comes up."

I took one more sip of my delectable strawberry shake. "What do we do now?" I asked ready to go find my friend.

Talon looked at his watch. "We go to your house and meet the others. We're doing another search this evening."

I didn't even know where to begin looking for Jenny. Either way, I was ready to find my friend. I stood up anxiously. "Well then, what are we waiting for?"

Everyone put their money on the table and we all headed out the door. As Taylor held the door open for me, I quickly turned around to see where Gabriel was when I accidentally caught sight of him out of the corner of my eye. He was handing something to the waitress.

"He did *not* just give that girl his cell phone number, did he?" I asked Taylor, shocked.

Taylor was already laughing. "Yes dear, I believe that is exactly what he did."

"He's insane!"

Taylor just shook his head and laughed as he opened the car door for me.

8. Beautiful Disaster

Dinner had been wonderful going down, but coming up was another story. My overactive nerves had been hard at work once again. Thankfully, a quick trip to the porcelain god once I got home eased them momentarily. Ever since I found out Jenny was missing, I couldn't seem to keep anything down.

I sat impatiently on the couch, playing nervously with a string of beads as I sipped my lemon water. My father and Mr. Kenton, along with some other men I had never seen before, huddled around discussing where everyone would search. Personally I was tired of waiting. I wanted to leave *now*. I couldn't understand why they were taking so long.

Adrenaline pulsed through my veins like a caffeine high and I bowed my head slightly, closing my eyes for a moment. *Jenny, if you can hear me, I'm coming for you. We'll find you, I promise.* I opened my eyes and lifted my frazzled head to see Kiernan staring out the window. He looked so lost. Taylor stood next to him, his lips moving slowly while Kiernan continued to stare off into space. Just as I thought I would get up and go talk to them, the huddle of men dispersed, and before I knew it, Taylor was by my side holding my hand. *Finally, now we can get this show on the road,* I griped mentally.

It took a whole lot less time for our specific locations to be handed out than for the men to choose them. Dad walked over to Taylor and me, smiling.

"K, guys. You are going to team up with Roger and Marcus. Y'all will be searching Billings."

"Billings? I don't want to search here. You guys have already covered the whole city, Dad." My words were full of annoyance. It was only seconds before I grew a brain and realized what they thought they were doing. "Oh, I see. You want to keep me where you can watch me."

Mr. Kenton walked over, surely hearing the conversation and feeling me tense up. He looked lovingly at me and began to speak. "Haden, your father is right. We need to keep you and Taylor safe. We have more watchdogs here; no pun intended," he laughed.

Dad and Taylor laughed right along with him, but I didn't find anything comical. I looked at Taylor sharply and his smile faded the minute his eyes met mine. *This isn't gonna fly Taylor! Fix it, please*, I begged.

He looked at me and then back at our fathers. "Is there any way around this? I think Haden's right; her senses should be used for some other city. You guys have already combed through this one."

"I'm sorry, son," Mr. Kenton said. "We've made up our mind. You two will stay here so we can provide adequate protection."

I stood still, shaking my head in disbelief. *Unbelievable*.

"Haden, honey, I'm sorry, but it's for your best interest; Taylor's too," my father insisted.

I told them not to worry about it as I turned to walk away. I needed to talk to Kiernan, who was still standing by the window, staring off into the oblivion. "I'm gonna find her, Kiernan," I whispered, laying my head on his shoulder. He didn't move. "Don't worry, she'll be fine."

He turned his head slowly to look at me, sorrow swimming in his glossy eyes. "We *have* to find her."

I turned around to see where Taylor was. In deep conversation with Dad and Mr. Kenton I knew I had a little time so I turned back to Kiernan and whispered. "You and I will find her together. Listen closely. Meet me in the driveway in five minutes. Don't tell anyone. *I mean it.*" He nodded one small nod, not giving even the tiniest change of expression, and went back to looking out the window.

I walked by Taylor and sent him a message mentally. *I'm gonna go change my outfit before we leave. I'll be down in a little bit*. He turned his head to where I was and nodded, smiling hesitantly. He knew me too well. I didn't have much time. I ran up the stairs and straight into my room where my purse waited for me. If my family wanted to play this game, so be it. I wasn't some weakling. No one was going to stop me from finding my best friend. I was outta here.

I grabbed my purse and opened the window where I leapt to the ground. Thankfully no one was out back. I snuck by the windows until I was in the driveway. I immediately kicked myself. My car was blocked by at least five others. *Lovely*. Looking around, I saw Taylor's Maserati calling to me. I laughed out loud. *Go figure*. Sneaking past a few people here and there talking amongst themselves, I quietly slipped into the car. I lowered myself as I watched for Kiernan. As if he had a clock imbedded in his soul, he was outside walking toward the driveway right at five minutes. *Get in the passenger's side of Taylor's car*, I said, picturing his face.

He did as told and I brought Taylor's car to life. I put it in reverse and backed out of the driveway as fast as I could. I knew it was only a matter of time before Taylor was following me. Now they had no choice but to let me search where I wanted.

"You're crazy, you know that?" Kiernan said, impressed.

"Yep, don't ever forget it buddy," I teased. "You and I will find her ourselves. They can all bite me."

Kiernan laughed, and the first smile I had seen all day spread across his momentarily perky face.

"As Jenn would say, hold on Linky. We're in for a wild ride." I smiled and floored it right as I saw Dad's beamer pull out of the driveway. "Taylor took Dad's car instead of mine," I laughed.

"Oh boy... you... are... in... *trouble*," Kiernan laughed heartily.

"Oh good lord, you have *no* idea." The beamer was catching up with me quickly and my phone began buzzing. "Hello," I answered, trying to suppress a laugh.

"I knew you would do something like this." Taylor's voice was more amused than anything. "You're one hardheaded woman, you know that?"

"Yep, I am. They left me no choice," I said stiffly.

"I'm not saying I blame you. You should have left with me, though. Can you at least pull over so I can drive? Marcus and Roger are with me. One of them can drive the Beemer."

I laughed. "Why? Are you scared of me driving your car better than you?"

"Not hardly. I was more thinking about you needing to toss your cookies while driving," he casually added.

"Oh . . . *that*" He had won and he knew it. I pulled over at the first place I could. "Taylor's gonna drive us wherever I want to go," I told Kiernan.

"I'm impressed. I take it ya knew this would happen." Kiernan was looking at me like I was some famous person. He was clearly star struck.

"Yeah, you could say that. I just know my husband," I chuckled as I pulled over.

"You *are* cat woman," Kiernan teased.

"Yep, and here comes my batman."

Taylor didn't say anything at first. He just shook his head and smiled at me. I walked over to the passenger's side door and looked back at Roger who was walking over to the driver's side of the beamer. He winked at me and I laughed. I knew he would approve. How anyone could think I wasn't safe with them was beyond me.

I slipped in the seat and turned the radio on. Justin Timberlake filled the car and I began nodding my head to the beat.

"Where to, beautiful?" Taylor pulled back on the main road and began moving to the music too. I laughed.

"She's in Bighorn."

Both Kiernan and Taylor looked at me. "You *know* this," Taylor asked.

"I'd bet money on it. I have no idea why, but I can tell you that she's there. I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

"All right then, buckle up Kiernan," Taylor demanded. "We've got somewhere to be."

I opened my phone and called Roger.

"Hello, hottie," he answered. "Nice move by the way. I've taught you well. So where are we headed?" I told him what our destination was and he laughed. "You surely are one of a kind sweetie. See ya there!"

Bighorn was only about an hour east of Billings. If Taylor drove fast we'd be there in thirty minutes. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. I still wasn't feeling the best. My stomach felt like there were little bubbles dancing around. Something definitely wasn't right in that department.

As I began to drift off to sleep, visions of Jenny began running through my mind, stopping on what looked to be some sort of Bed & Breakfast place. I spotted a sign but couldn't make out what it said. Keeping my eyes closed, my concentration on the sign was broken when I saw two men dressed in all black come out of the establishment. Following closely behind was another man. He too was dressed in all black, a dark hood covering his head. More men continued to pour out of the quaint two story house-like structure. My eyes went from the hooded man to the others when I gasped. One had a body draped over his shoulder. The body was limp, blonde locks hanging loosely.

"Jenny," I yelled, startling myself out of a deep sleep. I sat up straight, practically hyperventilating as I looked around the car.

"It's okay, baby. You're okay." Taylor grabbed my hand and started to pull over.

"No," I yelled. "Don't pull over. She needs us *now*. Hurry, Taylor!"

By the tone of my voice, he knew I wasn't kidding. He pulled back on the freeway and floored it. I held my head and cried, tears falling from my eyes like rain.

"It's worse than I thought," I choked out, hardly able to breathe.

Kiernan's head was in between Taylor's and my seat. "I knew it." He slammed his fist into the back seat.

"Kiernan, don't freak out. We don't know anything for sure." Taylor tried to calm him down, but we both knew that that just wasn't going to happen. This was bad . . . very, very bad. "What did you see, baby?" Taylor asked as he handed me a tissue out of the glove box.

Through a steady stream of tears I relayed what I saw, each vision making me shake more.

"Honey, you have *got* to try to calm down. Your wolf is a little too big for this car," he teased, trying to lighten the mood. I nodded and began trying to steady my breathing. When Taylor deemed that I was all right, he picked up his phone and called Roger and Marcus who were still right behind us. Telling them what I had seen, Taylor told them that we all needed to be ready. We didn't know what we would find. He hung up with them and dialed my father.

"I know," Taylor said sighing. "Yes, she knows it wasn't smart. Yes, she's sure that's where Jenny is. No, we're not alone. I brought Roger and Marcus with me and Kiernan was with Haden. Yes sir. I will call you when we get there. Love you too." He hung up the phone and sighed again. "He's not real happy with you, but that's okay. He'll get over it."

"I don't care how he feels about this Taylor. Jenny needs me," I said, finally taking a break from crying. We were almost there. The closer we got, the larger the gaps of silence in the car became. "Take a right." Taylor did as I said and I took a deep breath, letting my senses kick in. "Go around that curve... and that one... Now take a left by the stop sign. See that white fence... take a right as soon as you can past that and follow that road."

He did as I said, asking no questions. God was guiding me and he knew it. *Father in heaven, please lead us to Jenny before it's too late.* 'Right there,' I yelled. "Take a right! It's down this road, I can feel it!" He punched it and I began unbuckling.

"What in the heck are you doing? Put your seatbelt back on, Haden." Taylor's words were serious but before he could enforce them, it was too late. We were there. I practically jumped out of the car before it came to a complete stop.

"This is it! This is exactly what I saw." My stomach was doing flips and my wolf was screaming that she wanted out. *Not now Haden... calm down,* I demanded myself. Jenny needed me to stay calm.

In mere seconds I was surrounded by the boys on all sides. "Is she in there?" Roger asked.

"Shh." I held my hand up and closed my eyes. Tilting my head back I took in a huge breath, filling my lungs with the recent scents from the air. "She's not, but she was," I cried, running toward the front door.

Marcus jumped in front of me, barely beating Taylor. He held his huge hand out, restraining me from taking another step as he opened the door slowly, checking to see if we had company. "Coast's clear," his deep voice said, calling us in.

It was definitely a bed and breakfast, but strangely no one was there. I could smell Jenny's shampoo. "She was here. I know it," I cried.

"I smell her too." Taylor led me to a chair where I could sit. "You're doing great, baby. You'll lead us to her," he insisted.

I sat in the chair looking around and hung my head low. How had I missed her? Who were those men? This was *all* my fault. I looked up slowly. All the guys were whispering amongst themselves, not paying any attention to me. Without them seeing, I got up and walked to the front porch and exhaled, releasing some of the unwanted tension that was consuming my soul. When I looked back up, what I saw shocked me to the core. Less than three hundred yards from me was Gavin, smiling devilishly. My breathing began to increase rapidly.

I looked behind me. The guys were still talking intensely. My posture straightened right as goose bumps covered my body. It was now or never. I took a deep breath and focused on Gavin's face. *Where's Jenny, Gavin?* He smiled again and shrugged his shoulders. In a moment of what I know now to

be pure insanity, I looked at him again, narrowing my eyes. *Have it your way. Looks like I'm gonna have to kill you.* With a sinister laugh, he lowered himself and motioned for me to come to him.

Without a second thought, I jumped over the porch, landing on the ground with one quick motion. My feet began moving underneath me, as fast as lightning. Gavin stood still looking amused as I approached him. I ran full force knocking into him, my body falling to the ground. He didn't move. Instead, he laughed as he put his hand out to help me off the ground. I growled at him and jumped back up, feeling my stomach starting to get queasy again.

"Where is she, Gavin? I'm not kidding."

"Oh I know you're not kidding, Haden," he laughed.

"Where... is... she?"

"What if I told you that I don't know?"

"I wouldn't believe you," I hissed. "That's a shame," he smiled.

"Haden," Taylor yelled. I could hear him running toward me.

"Well, I can't say it hasn't been fun," Gavin teased. "Until next time, princess." With that he turned and ran toward the forest.

I took off after him, but I was no match for his intense speed. It almost appeared as if he was flying. I fell to my knees on the ground and threw up. Taylor was at my side in seconds. Marcus and Roger flew past us. Kiernan, being human, couldn't keep up with anyone, poor guy. Getting to us way after everyone else, he was spitting and kicking the ground, cursing his slow legs.

I curled into a ball and cried. "I should have killed him."

"No . . . you should have called *me*," Taylor said, unhappy with me. I shook my head no and continued to cry. "Haden, I am not the same weak person I was when his people took me. I'm stronger now. History won't repeat itself, honey. Quit trying to protect me. I'm not going anywhere." Taylor was now rubbing my head.

I could hear Marcus's and Roger's footsteps as they returned. "We lost him," Roger griped. "I seriously had no idea how fast he was!"

"It's a Nightmare thing," I moaned through tears. "He's practically invincible and he knows it. That's why he's so cocky."

"He won't be cocky for long," Taylor said through his teeth. "His time will run out sooner or later. He doesn't have God on his side; we do."

I didn't want to hear it. I wanted my friend. She wasn't okay. She needed me and I failed her. I was too late.

"It's never too late, Haden . . . never . . . Don't you ever forget that," Taylor said, holding my face softly in his hands before kissing the tears under my eyes. "Let's get you home."

I agreed, but only because I had no idea where Jenny was now. Our only lead was a bust. No matter how hard I tried to sleep on the way home, I couldn't. Visions of Jenny's limp body consumed me.

Back at home, Mom, Dad and the Kentons were waiting for us in the family room. None of them looked too amused when we arrived. They were none too happy with my childish actions.

"You could have gotten yourself killed," my mom said, her lower lip trembling.

"But I didn't," my words were empty.

What Dad said next froze me instantly. He looked right at Taylor and I. "We've done some thinking. This is more serious than we first thought. We've voted and have come to the conclusion that you guys will be leaving in the morning to go into hiding." He looked right at me. "As your father, I am demanding that you do as I say; no ifs ands or buts."

My eyes blew up in size. "I'm not going anywhere," I said, looking at him like he had lost his mind. "I'm sorry, Dad, but I'm not leaving until I find Jenny."

He smiled at me. "I knew you'd say that. Of course you don't want to leave without finding her, but Haden, honey, you have no choice. You and Taylor are in trouble and we need to keep you safe. Jenny's disappearance has proven just how serious this has become. We have no time to play around with this."

"Who said anything about playing around, Dad? It's *my* fault that Jenn's missing and *I* will find her. I can't do that in hiding."

"No you can't, you're right, but we have plenty of people who can look for her while you and Taylor are safe. I will not take no for an answer," Dad said, sitting straight. "It's an order."

I looked at Taylor, wondering why he hadn't said anything. He looked at me and then at Dad. "If that's what you think is best, we will do what you ask."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. How could he totally overstep my feelings like that? Jenny needed me. I was now stuck in some house somewhere.

"Haden, Dad wouldn't send us away if we were Jenny's only hope. They'll find her. We need to do what he has asked," Taylor said, looking at me lovingly. "If you have any more visions we'll let him know."

I loved him, but I wasn't happy at all. They were *making* me leave. I looked over at Kiernan who was staring out the window again like a lost puppy dog. "Where are we going," I asked, mad.

"Back to Idaho," Taylor's father said.

"Idaho? Why? They already found me once in Idaho. Besides, what's so special about Idaho," I asked, wondering what on earth they were all thinking.

"Potatoes," Gabriel laughed as he walked in the room with Melly, Brad and Talon. "Potatoes rock!"

Melly laughed with him. I shot them both a look of annoyance. "Seriously, why Idaho? Won't they just find us again?"

"We don't believe so," my mom interjected, trying to take some of the heat off of my father. "Honestly, honey, we think that it would be the perfect place. They would *never* think you would return to your last hiding place. That's what makes it brilliant. Our main goal, sweetheart, is to put you and Taylor somewhere they won't think to look for you. There's a quaint little town not too far from Boise. I called a friend of mine who has some property over there and she has agreed to rent us a few houses in the same subdivision," Mom said, smiling softly at me. "We're all going. You two will leave first with Melly and Brad. We got you houses next door to each other on the same street. The rest of us won't be too far behind you. Our main goal is to keep you and Taylor safe. That's all that matters to us."

"And under the radar," Mr. Kenton added. "You all will stay there until we have time to beef up security at Kenton Manor or until Kenward Manor is ready. Our ultimate goal is to take you all back to the UK where my people can be of more service. It is where everyone will be the safest. Mrs. Kenton and I will be flying back tonight in order to keep a close eye on the workers. They're still repairing damage from the fire."

"So this is what it's come down to . . . us hiding?"

"I'm afraid so, but only for now. This part won't last forever." Taylor's father spoke to me as if I was his daughter, love flooding his eyes.

"Fine, let's do this," I said, looking around.

"That's my girl." Taylor's lips found their way to my head as he put his arm around me. I scooted closer and took a deep breath in, letting his glorious scent comfort me in a way nothing else could.

"Don't worry, shorty, we'll find Jenny and give whoever took her what they deserve," Gabriel said as he winked at me. "It will be my pleasure."

"I'll be right there with you," Kiernan told Gabriel.

"Little dude, I welcome it." Gabe held his fist out and tapped it to Kiernan's.

Kiernan actually smiled a genuine smile. I knew that Gabriel must have felt sorry for him. We all knew that Kiernan would be more of a hindrance than help, but his heart was hurting so loud that we all heard it, including Gabriel. I saw Talon shoot Gabriel a small smile and look of approval. I wasn't the only one my birth mom would have been proud of.

That night I washed clothes while Taylor sat with Dad and Brad talking in Dad's study about our trip. Melly hung out with me while Mom was upstairs packing for her and Dad.

"So do you have any idea what car we're taking," I asked Melly, wondering if she and Brad knew more than I did.

"Not sure exactly, but I do know that Mr. Kenton bought us all new cars."

I stopped folding clothes and turned to look at her. "Did you just say that he *bought* us all new cars?"

"Yep. Everyone agreed that we needed to be as incognito as possible and that meant we needed cars that no one recognized. Oh and you might want to dye your hair."

"Me? Why me? You're the one who looks like a diva skunk," I laughed. Melly laughed with me and I went back to folding. "I can't believe he's buying us new cars. That man has a crazy amount of money," I said, shaking my head.

"I know, right. He said he would just sell them when we were done, no big deal."

"Yeah, no big deal," I rolled my eyes. "Hey, where are Roger and Marcus gonna be?"

"They're going to keep looking for Jenny at first. Hopefully it won't take them long to find her. Then we can all be together again. Once more help arrives, Roger's going to meet us in Idaho. Marcus and a couple of his friends are going to stay here and look after the house and cattle."

That night I asked Taylor if we could sleep in his room. I could feel Jenny's presence in mine and there was no way I would be able to sleep. I laid my head on his bare chest and let the sound of his slow and steady heart lull me to sleep. I woke up the next morning to an empty bed. I sat up straight and ran for the bathroom. I was going to be sick. I came out of the bathroom holding my stomach. I sat on his bed, my head hanging low.

"Good morning, beautiful," Taylor said as he walked in the room before he looked at me.

Noticing how green I looked, he set the breakfast tray he had been carrying down and ran over to me. I tried to tell him that it was nothing, but he wouldn't listen to me. He said he was going to take me to the doctor before we left. I just nodded and laid my head back against the headboard. When I started to feel a little better I ate the beautiful breakfast he had prepared for me while he made an appointment for me with the family doctor.

The doctor's appointment came and went, giving us the answer I had already suspected. He said exactly what I thought he would. Apparently I had a stomach flu which was being aggravated by the severe amount of stress I was under. All I could do was wait it out. He was insistent that the fact I could eat was a good sign. There were a few flus going around. According to him, mine was the least severe. Good news for me. Lots of rest and water and I would be one hundred percent better soon. We went back to the house to meet Melly and Brad and set out again for good ol' Idaho. All I could think about was having another one of those tasty mustard burgers. That darn thing had consumed way more of my thoughts than necessary.

Once our vehicles were loaded and goodbyes were said, we were on the road to pick up our new cars. Our car, however, was no car. Instead, it was a forest green minivan. Brad and Melly were sporting a dark blue Trail Blazer. I laughed the minute I saw them in it; so much for their beloved black

vehicles. They weren't the only ones shocked by their new ride. Taylor's facial expression was priceless when the gentleman handed him the keys and pointed toward our new van.

"This is going to take some getting used to for you," I teased as I watched Taylor's jaw drop.

His expression went from blank to a huge smile. "Maybe we can fill it while we're away," he winked, catching me off guard.

I had no idea if that would be possible, but I laughed and laid my head on his shoulder. For now I would enjoy the moment and pretend that I could have kids even though I was pretty positive it would be impossible. Adoption would always be a possibility once this mess would be over. After all, we would already have a minivan. We were halfway there. We loaded our new grocery getter and were on our way. We had only one stop to make first, Bob's burgers.

The trip was long but pleasant enough. I only had to stop and throw up a couple of times thanks to the altitude differences. God had blessed us with beautiful weather as we drove through the mountains and I was thrilled. When we were a couple of hours from our new home I spotted a gas station and made Taylor stop. I ran in and hunted until I found banana moon pies. I grabbed three and a coffee. I ran to the Trail Blazer and tossed one of the moon pies into Melly's lap as she rolled her window down, looking at me all crazy.

"Thanks, girly," she said amused.

"No problem," I yelled, running around the front of the minivan to get in.

"A banana moon pie, hmm," Taylor said, wearing a smirk on his sexy face.

"Yep, I bought you one too," I said, ripping into mine and shoving the tasty treat in my mouth.

"No thanks, I'm good," he laughed as he backed out of the parking space.

"Good, I was counting on that," I mused. I had already eaten the first one and was quickly opening the next one.

"I'm so glad to see that you're feeling better."

"Me too. See, the doctor was right. It was just a bug and now I'm starving."

When we pulled up in front of our new house I looked at Taylor and then back out of my window. It was the tiniest house I had ever seen. It was a cute one story, but it was really small compared to the one we had grown up in. We got out of the van and walked toward our new little home, hand in hand. I had already made up my mind that no matter what, I would make the best out of this situation no matter how annoying it was. Idaho had never done anything to me. It just wasn't my home. Brad and Melly parked in what was to be their driveway and walked over to where we were. Our homes looked almost identical from the outside other than a slight variation in color. Taylor opened the door to the house and we walked in with Melly and Brad behind us.

"This is *cute*," Melly said, looking around.

It *was* cute, just really small. When you walked inside, you were literally in the living room. It had three small bedrooms and two baths. The carpet was a beige color, which thrilled me. I couldn't imagine it having some dark primary color that was hard to match furniture with. The living room was covered in sunlight from the two back windows. Someone had kindly left the blinds open.

"Our first home," Taylor said, putting his arm around me.

"Yes, our first home." I hadn't thought of it that way until now. Suddenly everything looked a little brighter. That had a whole different ring to it. I would just have to focus my energy on making this cute little house a home, mine and Taylor's.

"At least it has a fridge," Melly called from the kitchen.

"I wonder if we can install intercoms in our houses so that we can talk to each other," I said out loud.

"I don't see why not. I'll run to Lowe's tomorrow," Brad said.

I looked out the window and could suddenly see myself growing a cute little garden in the backyard. This entire situation might not be so bad after all. I was strong. With God's help, I could totally handle this whole hiding thing. Well, I *was* strong when I wasn't puking my guts up at least. Our next stop was Brad and Melly's house. Its layout was identical to ours but reversed. Melly looked like she was in heaven. No one would have ever had to force her to play house with Brad. She practically skipped around her house, showing Brad the rooms and closets. She was even excited about the overhead fans. Her excitement was contagious. I knew the furniture wouldn't be arriving until the following morning, but I was ready to decorate now so I looked at my husband and asked him if he could find a Bed Bath & Beyond on his GPS. In minutes we were all piled in our minivan headed to Eagle, a nearby city.

I looked over at Taylor and I was suddenly on the verge of crying. He looked so good driving the minivan. It killed me to think that he may never have a reason to. He was meant to be a daddy. It was beyond obvious looking at him. I quickly turned to look out of the window so no one could see my eyes. We were at Bed Bath & Beyond in no time. Melly and I left the boys in our dust, grabbed two carts, and were ready to shop when she stopped suddenly and started to cry when we approached the towels.

"What's wrong?" I asked, seeing Brad rush over.

He grabbed her, turning her toward him. "What's wrong, Mels?" His face was full of fear. It was the sweetest thing I had ever seen.

"I can't do this, Brad," she said quietly as tears fell down her beautiful face.

"Can't do what... buy towels?"

"This," she said looking around. "We're not married."

"Oh, that's all," he said laughing.

"That's all?" She looked at him like he had just said the cruelest thing she had ever heard.

"Well, I was hoping for a better time to do this, but our relationship has always been different." Brad's face was covered in a huge smile. "What the hell." Brad pulled a box out of his pocket and I looked at Taylor wide eyed. Taylor was wearing a smile as big as Brad's. In the middle of Bed Bath & Beyond, Brad got down on one knee. "Mels, would you do me the honor of being my wife," he asked, looking up at her.

Melly was crying with a look of pure shock on her face. I was crying right along with her. Taylor grabbed my hand, lacing his fingers through mine. His eyes were filled with tears too.

"Yes! I will marry you, Brad!" As Brad put the ring on Melly's finger, people around us started clapping.

So much for not attracting attention, I thought, and Taylor laughed.

"Anyone up for a quick flight to Vegas?" Brad asked. "I need to make this beautiful woman my wife as soon as she'll let me."

We left our carts right where they were and darted for the door. Our shopping spree would just have to wait. We all had a flight to catch. Taylor called Dad and let him know our little detour. He wasn't too thrilled about us drifting off track, but he didn't bother to argue. Our first home in Idaho would just have to wait. We had a wedding to plan; a really quick wedding. I wanted to cry again when my thoughts went to Jenny. She would have wanted to be there to support Brad and Melly. I forced the lump in my throat to go back down. I was *not* going to ruin this for them. They both deserved to be happy.

When we got to Vegas, Taylor actually agreed to separate so Melly and I could do some shopping. We had a wedding dress to buy. I was on the phone the minute we got there, setting everything up. We found Melly's dress immediately. It was perfect. It was so Melly, minus the small fact that there was no pink anywhere on the dress. It was a long, form fitted, moonlit silk gown, no frills, no poof, just simple beauty. There was only room for Melly in that dress. It was classy sexy, sure to drive Brad crazy, which was exactly what she was hoping for. Everything was set. They would be married in less than twenty-four hours.

The night of their wedding, Melly was more than ready to become Mrs. Bradley Stevenson. She had waited a lifetime for this. Looking like a moon goddess in her dress, I reveled in how far our lives had come since we found each other; tonight was a dream come true. I couldn't wait for them to be married. I stood quietly, watching her as she did the finishing touch ups on her hair, when my stomach did it again. I grabbed it as a layer of cold sweat washed over my face. Running to the bathroom, I bonded with the toilet once again.

"Haden, did you ever go to the doctor?" Melly asked, concerned.

I lifted my head a little. "Yes, he said I had the flu. All I can do is let it run its course. I was really hoping it was over. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry. If you want, we can wait until you're feeling better," Melly offered.

"Are you kidding me? No way, I'm feeling better already. I just hope I don't get y'all sick."

"You can't. I've got an iron stomach," she laughed, putting her earrings in.

We met the boys in the front of the Chapel I had set the reservation with. They both looked like models. Brad's face was priceless when he first saw Melly. They smiled at each other like little kids and we took a seat until their names were called. Walking into the little chapel I couldn't help but notice how cute it was. It was quaint, just like the movies portrayed. Except this one was pristine and there was no sign of Elvis. It was perfect. I grabbed one of the disposable cameras I bought and started snapping pictures. I wanted to remember this night forever.

Their little wedding was just what it should have been, intimate. The way they both looked in each other's eyes as they said their vows was breathtaking. I was thankful I got to be a part of their special day. I only wished Jenny could have been here too. She would just have to see pictures when she got home.

After the wedding, Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson wanted to do a little sightseeing before going back to our new homes. I reassured everyone that I felt fine and we spent the rest of the night getting to know Vegas. When we got to the hotel we all went our separate ways. Once Taylor and I were inside our room, I said I wanted to take a bath. He ran my bath water for me and then said he had something he had forgotten to pick up while he was out. I kissed him goodbye as I stepped into the bath. I could only hope it would relax my tense muscles. I said a quick prayer for Jenn and a prayer that God bless Brad and Melly's marriage. I then leaned my head back, closed my eyes, and prayed that God would bless us all. When Taylor got back, he walked into the bathroom with a small plastic bag in his hands.

"What's in there," I smiled.

"A pregnancy test."

I looked at him, confused. I didn't really know what to say. Did he really think that was even possible? He had heard the doctor. I had the flu. The doctor didn't even suggest a test. My eyes filled with tears as I thought about how disappointed he was going to be when it was negative. *Wishful thinking*, he had said. I thought he had been talking about his father choosing the van for us, but now I was sure he had been referring to himself. I got out of the bath and he handed me a towel. I wrapped it around myself and grabbed the box out of the bag.

"Would you like a moment?" he asked, his eyes warm.

I said nothing. I only nodded.

When he left I opened the box and took the test out. I had no choice but to take it even though it pained my heart to have to tell Taylor that I couldn't have children. I took the test and set it down on the counter by the wall. I washed my hands and took a moment to pray. *Dear Jesus, I am pretty sure what this test is going to say but if possible I would really like to be wrong.* I took a deep breath bracing myself and looked down.

"Taylor!"

9. Unrealised Dreams (Taylor)

As I lay in bed, my eyes resting on the most beautiful face ever created, my gaze drifted down to Haden's belly where our baby grew peacefully. Our baby--a precious miracle bestowed upon my wife and I by God. I put my head back down on my pillow right as Haden instinctively moved closer to me, snuggling as she laid her head on my chest. I inhaled her deeply into my lungs, filling my soul with everything that was right in the world. Leaning my head against hers, I closed my eyes and exhaled. Those two bright pink lines that changed my life only hours before instantly flashed into my mind, bringing it all back.

"Taylor!"

Haden's scream rang through my head like a church bell. What I saw when I opened the door was by far one of the cutest things I had ever laid my eyes on. With nothing on but a towel, she stood by the tub, trembling as tears streamed down her beautiful face. Plastered across her delicate facial features was a smile filled with confusion. No words escaped her mouth. Instead, her trembling hand held out the pregnancy test toward me while she cried.

I didn't need to see the pregnancy test to know what it said. My wife was pregnant. I had known it for a few days now. Honestly, I was more shocked that she seemed so taken aback. Looking down at what I would now refer to as the stick that would change my life forever, I looked back up at her and smiled softly. Haden was watching me closely, studying my face—no doubt waiting eagerly for my reaction.

After the past few days with Haden being so sick and the horrible news of Jenny's disappearance, I knew that it was detrimental to think before I spoke. As a guy, sometimes choosing the right words could be tough. What I did next would indeed be etched in Haden's memory forever. My beautiful wife was more delicate than normal; it was obvious in her frightened eyes. Quietly I set the test down on the counter and turned to face her. I kissed my favorite nose in the world and dropped to my knees directly in front of my wife. Placing my lips on her belly, I kissed where my second favorite nose lay growing, silently forming into a tiny version of myself and my wife. When I stood back up, I took Haden's wet face in my hands and kissed the tears on her cheeks.

"Only happy ones from here on out," I whispered softly before pulling her into my arms so that she could feel my intense love for her. Haden's tears fell like rain as she buried her head into my shoulder. I said nothing. Instead, I held her tight as she released all the emotions she had been trying to suppress. I knew that those tears belonged not only to our baby, but also to Jenny. After a few minutes, I picked her up and carried her to the bed where I laid her down gently. I got in next to her and pulled her as close as I could.

"Congratulations, mommy," I whispered as I kissed her head.

Her tears grew even stronger. "I'm gonna be a *mom*," she said, her voice soft and shaky as if she were still questioning it.

"Yes, you are—and a wonderful one at that. I have no doubt."

"But how? I didn't think it was possible." She was now leaning on her shoulder staring deep into my eyes.

"I can't say I have those answers, love, but we don't really need them do we? God blessed us. Let's just be thankful and leave all of the technical stuff to Him."

"What about Jenny," she asked as more tears started to fall down her face. "How can I be happy about anything when she's missing?"

I took a deep breath, praying about my answer. This would be a tricky one. I knew my wife well enough to know that those she loved were embedded in her soul. It was one of my favorite things about her. If Jenny was hurting, so was Haden. She would never be fully okay again until Jenny was home safe.

"Haden, Jenny would never want you to be miserable—no matter what. Our miracle is huge. She would be mad at you if you *weren't* excited. There is a tiny baby growing inside of you. It's okay for you to be happy about this while being sad about Jenny." I leaned up on my elbow to look in her eyes closer. "We will find Jenny, Haden. I have no doubts whatsoever. We will also be happy about our baby." I stopped for a brief moment and continued to read her eyes. My heart hurt as I felt the deep pain and confusion she was housing in them. "This baby," I said, placing my hand on her lower abdomen, "is a miracle. It's *okay* to be happy about that. I will call Talon tomorrow when we return to Idaho and get an update. For now, rest your tired head, love. You have a baby to think about now. We both do." Haden's smile was like the warm sun, sending chills down my spine; chills that only she was able to give.

I kept my eyes locked on hers and in an instant her expression changed. What was originally one of sadness, confusion, and pain had suddenly morphed into one of passion, causing me to lose track of everything I was saying. In mere moments, Haden's body began melting into mine. The love I had for this woman began oozing out of me uncontrollably. I drank her in, relishing in her sweet feminine sensuality. The curves of her body blew my mind. I gazed into her eyes, holding her stare as our bodies once again melded into one. My love for her was immeasurable. There were no words for the intense pleasure she gave me. This woman— this glorious work of perfection that was created just for me, was carrying my baby. I wanted to explode from the utter pleasure coming from all facets of my body... mind and soul. I bent down and kissed her belly again as she exhaled.

"I love you, Taylor."

"And I you."

"Never leave me."

I looked deeply into her eyes again and then kissed her, answering her with my lips.

I hummed softly until she drifted off to sleep. Leaning over, I watched as her breathing steadied. "I'll never leave you, ever," I breathed softly. Lying silently with my eyes closed and Haden asleep next to me, I thanked God for my blessings.

The next morning I was up before she was. Figuring that I would make use of the extra time, I snuck out of our room to get some breakfast when I ran into Brad.

"What's up buddy?" Brad was glowing.

"Just out to get breakfast for Haden."

"I was doing the same thing for Melly," he laughed. "Want some company?"

"Sure." I know that women think men never want to talk, but that couldn't have been more wrong in this instance, at least for me. All I wanted to do was tell Brad that Haden was expecting. Instead, I made sure I said nothing. I knew that she would want to tell Melly herself. Then again, I also knew Brad. My secret would be safe with him.

"You all right?" he questioned me with a look of confusion when I realized that my mind had indeed been wandering.

"I'm great actually," I smiled, not able to control the happiness flooding out of me.

"Well then, let's have it."

"Haden's pregnant," I grinned.

Brad stopped dead in his tracks. "Dude, y'all are gonna have a baby? Whoa. Congratulations." Brad hugged me all smiles. Brad was never a touchy guy, that is until he made the change. Haden attributed it to Melly's influence and I had to agree. Melly loved showing affection and it seemed that had rub off on Brad. "Did you buy her a test last night?"

"Yep. She's been *really* sick. I bought it more out of wishful thinking than anything," I laughed. "Who would have thought, right?"

"Melly knew," Brad said, amused.

Hearing Brad's words had me stopping short now. "What do you mean Melly knows? That's impossible. We just found out last night."

Brad shrugged his shoulders, "Some women's intuition thing. She told me the other day that she thought Haden was pregnant. She just didn't say anything to Haden. She didn't want to freak her out. It's been a rough week."

I had learned not to underestimate anyone, especially anyone Haden was related to. "Wow. Just don't say anything to Haden yet if you don't mind." I wasn't even sure if Haden believed it yet.

"I'm closed lipped dude, promise."

That wasn't the only thing Brad was closed lipped about. His first night as a married man had apparently gone really well... *really, really* well. All he divulged was that it was the best night of his entire life. I didn't pry. I knew exactly what he meant. I knew it well.

After Brad and I grabbed breakfast, I quietly slipped back into our room. My beautiful Haden was still asleep—her hair a pretty mess across her face. I set down the tray and slid under the covers behind her, where I took her into my arms.

"Mmm, something smells good," she moaned.

"I brought you breakfast. Are you hungry?" I kissed her neck lightly.

"Not if you keep doing that," she chuckled.

"All right, I'll stop so you can eat," I laughed. "I got up early and brought you some eggs and sausage. I was hoping you were hungry." She was now sitting up, smiling at me.

I opened the container that held the sausage, and Haden's face went pale as the smell overtook the room. I knew that look. She was going to be sick and quick. I shut the Styrofoam container as fast as I could, but it was too late. The damage had already been done. She flew out of the bed with the speed of light, running straight for the bathroom. I threw the container down on the table and ran to hold her hair back while she threw up.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized while her head hung over the toilet. I laughed. "What's so funny?"

"I just think you're silly, Haden. I was fixing to apologize for getting something that made you sick and here you go apologizing to me. Only you love, only you."

She wiped her mouth with a wash rag I handed her and then repositioned, turning her head to look at me, smiling. Right as I thought everything was okay, her smile turned into a frown accompanied by tears. "I am so ugly. Please stop looking at me."

I sent a prayer up to the heavens that God would give me the right words. I had no idea what had just happened. Now was definitely no time to stumble over my words. "Love, you are gorgeous. How can you think you're ugly? That's impossible."

"Because I am. And I smell like puke," she cried.

She was so cute that I accidentally laughed.

"It's *not* funny, Taylor. I'm gross. I don't want you seeing me like this," she said as she stood up and walked to the counter where she began brushing her teeth while she continued to cry.

Truth be told, everything about Haden turned me on. She was even beautiful while she threw up. Call it what you will, I knew I was irrevocably in love with this creature of God. I stood mesmerized, watching her in her pink satin night gown as she bent over the sink brushing her teeth. She continued to cry and all I could think of was melding into her again. I tried to shake off my thoughts and then decided that I was wrong in doing so. Instead I needed to let her feel how in love with her I was. I walked up to her when she was done drying her mouth off and slowly turned her around to face me. I said nothing. I put my lips on hers and slowly she began to relax, once again melting into my arms.

When I was done showing my wife how gorgeous she was to me . . . how much I needed her, and how she consumed every part of me, I fed her breakfast. This time I was smart and got her crackers and water which seemed to make her feel better. I knew a lot of things, but how to care for a pregnant woman wasn't one of them. I was learning quickly, however.

After breakfast I grabbed our luggage and headed downstairs to meet Melly and Brad. Melly's usual excitement about life was magnified today. As hard as I tried to listen to everything Melly was saying, I couldn't keep my eyes off of my wife. As silly as it sounded, she looked even more beautiful

today than yesterday. Every now and then, Haden would catch me looking at her and smile, making me count the minutes until we were alone again.

Thankfully the plane ride was as short as I had hoped. When we arrived back on our street we could see cars parked in both driveways and along the street. Decorations adorned Brad and Melly's house. It was more than obvious that Roger had arrived—so much for going incognito. I glanced over at Haden as she stared out the window into the sky. She looked so peaceful. Her mind had been unusually quiet today, but I knew that it wouldn't last long. I would just have to be ready to listen when she needed me. I lived for those very moments.

"Oh my gosh," Melly gasped from the front seat with Brad. "Look! They put up balloons and decorations for us Brad!" She was absolutely glowing . . . even more than normal and that was saying a lot.

"Hey Mels, would you mind if we met up with you in a bit? I could use a shower and change of clothes," Haden asked, smiling softly.

"Of course."

Haden smiled up at me and leaned her head on my shoulder. *I want some alone time with my husband.*

I smiled and kissed her head. *That's good, cuz all I can think about is being alone with my wife.*

When Brad parked, I helped Haden out and had our luggage in tow in an instant. Haden waved at Melly while I led her to our new house. As I unlocked our door I could hear the many voices coming from Melly and Brad's house. It sounded as if it were filled to the brim. I opened the door and let my wife through first. When I shut it behind me, she grabbed my arm and slammed me up against the wall. I stood there shocked, but not for long. It was only a brief moment before I was once again eating my wife up. She was the sexiest thing ever. After all, she was a huntress. Whether it was me she was hunting or animals, we were all at her mercy. One look and we were hers. None of us had any control whatsoever. Over the years, I had had been presented with many chances to take other girls into my arms and share my body with them, but I had chosen to wait. My parents made sure they pointed out what the Word said about waiting until marriage. My father also reminded me of the story of Adam and Eve when I began high school. He said it was important to know how things were designed to work; that many people would try to tell me otherwise, but that they were wrong. There was only one truth... one way of living that would truly ensure happiness in my future. I looked upon my wife and pulled her closer to me, kissing her deeper. *Flesh of my flesh*, I thought to myself. Long ago God placed Adam into a deep sleep and then he took one of his ribs. This rib was used to make Eve. I had always loved this story as a boy. I knew without a doubt that one day I would find my Eve. As for right now, I could kiss my Bible and my parents for sharing their faith with me; that is if my wife and I would stop moving all over the house.

Out of the blue, Haden's cell phone rang. She and I were lying on the floor together by this point. She had fallen asleep shortly after our last kiss and I didn't have the heart to wake her. I reached across her to silence the ringer but was too late. She grabbed it from my hand and opened it. "Hello," she answered groggily. In one quick motion she was on her feet. "Oh gosh, what time is it? I must have fallen asleep." She rolled her eyes at me and smiled. I just shrugged my shoulders. "We'll be there in a second." She hung up the phone and sat back down on her knees, pulling me up into a sitting position by

my hand. She leaned into me and kissed me before she jumped up once again. "I'm so hungry. I want some chocolate cake."

I laughed. "As you wish." I had to work at it, but I finally convinced her to go ahead of me to Brad and Melly's so I could get her some cake.

I jumped in the minivan and laughed, wondering if my father had guessed it too. Bringing the van to life, I pulled out of the driveway and set out in search of the treat that would satisfy my wife's craving. It was a little harder than I thought it would be to find chocolate cake, but I finally succeeded at my task. Today was turning out to be another great day.

On my way back home I received a text from my old phone. We had all been given new ones for the move and strictly instructed to do away with our other ones. I had meant to throw it away, but never got around to it. I opened the phone, not recognizing the number. *Want Jenny back. Meet me at 1282 Chesterfield Ct. in Boise- now. Come alone and tell no one.* I closed my phone and took a deep breath as I punched in the address into the GPS. I debated on calling Haden, but the more I thought about it the more I knew that she didn't need any added stress. I knew all too well that she would freak out, and I couldn't take a chance of jeopardizing our baby's health. Even calling Brad would have to wait. Melly would be by his side today and there's no way he'd leave and not tell her where he was going. I would just have to get Jenny and call Haden on my way home. This was too important. I put my foot to the accelerator and took off.

As I drove, images of Gavin jumped around in my head. I didn't know what I was getting myself into, but I didn't care. I promised Haden that I would get Jenny back and that I would do. I would never go back on a promise to her—*ever*. I pulled up to an empty lot where there was a note with my name on it attached to a lone light pole. I got out and looked around. I saw no one. The note had another address. *Fine, I'll play along.* I got back in the car and sped off as fast as it would let me. I was suddenly thankful that I hadn't told Haden about my recent text. Already it was blatantly obvious that someone knew approximately where we were. Now I had no choice but to play their game. If someone was watching me now, there was no way I would lead them back to Haden. I would rather die first.

I pulled up to the back of a warehouse and sent up a silent prayer before getting out. I wasn't stupid. I knew that this could end really badly, but I also knew that God was on my side. I opened the door and walked in. Standing on the opposite side of the room was Gavin, smiling resentfully at me.

"Smart choice to come alone. Of course, I always do love a visit with Haden," Gavin's voice rang with hatred toward me. "You have been one lucky guy to have her, Taylor. I'm afraid that your time has come to an end."

"Where's Jenny?" I asked, ignoring his words.

Gavin laughed, relishing in his control. "Jenny's safe, but sadly she won't be going home with you today."

"I'm not leaving here without her," I said through my teeth.

"No, you're not. You see, you're going nowhere." Gavin nodded his head to the left and then right. I could see vampires standing in the shadows. They were everywhere. I knew immediately that it

wasn't good. "I am, however, feeling generous today so I *will* let Jenny go. She just won't be going with you. *You will not be going back.*"

I had never been stupid, hasty yes, stupid, no. Right now I knew that Gavin meant every word he uttered. There was no way I was getting out of this situation, not yet anyway. My only hope was to bide my time. I looked from left to right, assessing how many men stood in the shadows. It was obvious how these creatures worked. Their souls were dark and tattered, and there were no consequences to their actions. Darkness embraced them like it did the night. The oppression in the room had me filling my lungs with spiritual soot, and I hung my head momentarily in defeat. My only option if I wanted to escape was to give them no reason to kill me. I closed my eyes and pictured Haden's face. *I love you.* I could only pray that she would hear me. Sadly, I knew it didn't work like that.

Gavin began walking toward me with an arrogant air about him. Unlike the last time we met, I was now wide awake and still full of energy. I could see him perfectly. I could see the seduction that had grabbed Jenny and it made my stomach turn. Something deep inside told me that Haden was next. He wouldn't stop until she was his. No matter what, I could not let that happen.

"You are smarter than I expected. You aren't going to fight are you, Taylor?"

I said nothing.

"Good. Then I will reward you with a letter. I know Haden well and I know that she would appreciate a goodbye letter from you."

"You *do not* know Haden," I growled.

Gavin tilted his head up and laughed. "You are naive. Did you think she did nothing but mope the last time you two were apart? That's sure not what it looked like as she drank from me."

"You're a liar." Acid dripped from my every word.

"Oh am I?" he chuckled. Gavin walked up close to me and held up his arm where two scars the size of Haden's teeth resided.

I cringed, trying to hold back the anger that was threatening to burst out of me. "That means nothing. You repulse her."

"Now, now, we both know that you don't believe that. Besides, the taste of Haden's kiss said otherwise. The taste of her mouth finding mine—how she couldn't help but push her body into mine as we danced. No, no, you're right. I *must* repulse her," Gavin laughed.

The anger in my soul burst into flames and I lunged forward. Gavin stood still, holding only one arm up. It caught my chest, swatting me away from his body like I was a fly. His strength was unmatchable, throwing me across the room with such force that my breath was gone. In seconds I was surrounded by vampires. Gavin motioned for them to back away.

"You're not playing very nice, Taylor. That's no way to thank me."

"Thank you, for what?" I asked, spitting blood out of my mouth.

Gavin inhaled deeply as he held his hands up, demanding the others not attack me. It seemed the smell of my blood had driven them into a blood-thirsty frenzy. "I will give you *one* last chance to remain in my good graces. After all, I would be lying to say that I do not find you intriguing, even amusing, but that's not to say that my patience isn't wearing thin." Someone handed him paper and a pen. "Here, you have five minutes to write Haden and tell her goodbye before I kill you," he laughed. "Should you choose not to, that's fine with me; it's Haden you'd be hurting. Imagine how she'd feel . . . her dear hubby leaves and never another word is heard from him. His body isn't found, but the van he was driving is. In it is his old cell phone that he was supposed to get rid of. It would only be right for Haden to listen to any messages, of course. Sadly, when she hears your girlfriend telling you that she can't wait until you two are together, what do you think it would do to her? Personally, I think Haden's stronger than you think she is and that she'd be fine. I'd see to that, of course. Then again, the choice is yours. I must remind you though . . . the clock is ticking and you have already wasted quite a lot of time." Gavin smirked and I clenched my jaw, attempting to restrain myself from lunging at him again.

I grabbed the paper and pen from him in one quick move, my jaw still clenched. I had made such a mess of things by not telling her where I was going. In trying to protect her, I did the exact opposite. She needed me now more than ever and I had walked into the enemy's territory unarmed. No one knew where I was. I had asked for it and Haden would pay the price for my carelessness. I owed her a letter from me. I wanted no part in writing this letter and yet I knew I must. I dropped to my knees and began writing as fast as I could.

Haden my love,

I don't know where to begin so I will start with I'm sorry. I tried to protect you today and in doing so I walked directly into a trap. Gavin wants you for himself. He will stop at nothing to have you.

"We don't have all day, Romeo. Tell her you're sorry and whatever sappy things you feel like writing, but make it quick," Gavin said as he walked around me, reading over my shoulder.

I am so sorry that I allowed this to happen. I love you more than life. I will return to you and the...

Gavin ripped the paper from my hands. "That's good enough. I'm sure this will suffice."

I wanted so badly to tell her that I too was a prophetic child and that she needed to remember that. God didn't choose me for no reason. She would need to hold onto that if I didn't return soon. It was impossible to remind her of that. So far Gavin seemed to be in the dark about that little piece of information, and I wasn't about to change that. If I had any chance of surviving I had to keep quiet.

I wiped my face as a tear escaped my right eye. I wanted to tell my pregnant wife that I loved that baby in her womb more than my own life. I had to survive this—somehow. They needed me.

"Personally, I don't know how Haden can be drawn to someone so weak." Gavin was looking at me with a look of disgust. "I find it ridiculous actually."

I looked down at the ground as I heard Haden in my head, *I love you baby! Thanks for driving all over for my cake. Your dessert will be waiting for you later.* I could hear the laughter in her thoughts. Tears began streaming down my face and I slowly looked up at Gavin. With every ounce of me, I wanted

to kill him, yet I knew that it would have to wait. There was no way I could take him on unprepared; not even thinking about his army of vampires. Given the chance, however, he was as good as dead.

"Take him away. I can't look at him anymore. Bring him where I said so that we can be done with him." Gavin turned to look at me once more. "Don't worry. After you're dead she'll be fine. I'll see to that."

10. Hurricane

Watching Taylor pull out of the driveway, I exhaled, pleased with my life. Never had I imagined I would be filled with so much happiness. Never before had I dreamed that I would actually be pregnant. Feeling refreshed after lovin' on my husband and my little cat nap, I skipped happily into the kitchen. Only seconds after I kissed Taylor goodbye, it dawned on me that I hadn't seen our kitchen before.

Waiting for me patiently all over the counters and island were presents, tons of them. Melly and Brad would just have to wait a little longer. I tore through the first one in record time. *Pots and pans*. Of course! My mom would have never left us empty handed. I would need to cook for my husband. Moving on to the next package, I laughed as I saw a bottle opener. If she only knew that I wouldn't be needing *that* anytime soon she would be ecstatic. I would tell her soon enough. Present after present I laughed at all of the new and exciting kitchen gadgets my mom had left for us. It wasn't long before I was opening the fridge. She hadn't forgotten anything. Even the refrigerator was fully stocked. My mother was a saint. I had no idea how she pulled it off but I was really glad she had.

I let my eyes scan the different cuts of meat and decided on chicken breast. Tonight we would have chicken alfredo, one of Taylor's favorites. I tossed all the boxes and paper to the floor, washed my new cutting board and a knife and began cutting the chicken. I washed my hands and turned on the kitchen radio while I continued to prepare dinner. I wanted our first dinner together in our new home to be perfect. He was right. Jenny wouldn't want me to ignore how special the news of our pregnancy was. Tears started to well in my eyes at the thought of her name. *Dear God, please protect her.*

With the last dinner preparation finished, I was ready to take a shower and head over to Melly's. In record time I was bathed and my hair was dried. I even managed to put on a little make-up. It had been hours since I had been sick and I was on cloud nine because of it. I shut the door to my new house and locked it. Stepping back, I glanced up at it and smiled, content. Maybe this would be fun after all.

Once at Melly's I was more than pleased that she wasn't upset that it took me so long to show up. Thankfully I had shown up just in time for the toast. I glanced down at my watch while I took another sip of Grizzly that Roger had brought with him to celebrate Melly and Brad's happy news. I was starting to feel guilty that I mentioned wanting chocolate cake to Taylor. He had been gone for over an hour, and even though I knew he was probably fine my stomach was in knots—my heart drenched in worry.

A knock at the door startled my already shaken nerves. I looked into my almost empty glass and then back up right as Roger opened the door. In walked Talon, Gabriel and three guys I had never seen before. They were all pretty tall guys, each one of them sporting dark hair except the one directly behind

Talon, his dirty blonde hair resembling Talon's. This one looked my way instantly as he walked in the house. A warm smile spread across his face before his eyes left mine to shake Brad's hand.

Gabriel didn't waste any time with introductions. "Everyone, these are your new friends. Think of them as silent watchers cuz that's exactly what they'll be. They're here to keep an eye on our sweet little prophetic couple," he said as he winked at me.

Talon and the warm smiler guy stood next to each other in the front corner of the room directly next to the door. As Gabriel continued his little speech, Talon's friend looked my way again, catching me staring at him. Instead of looking away, his light blue eyes smiled back warmly at me and he nodded slightly, acknowledging my stare. I hurriedly looked away, feeling like an idiot. There was something so familiar about him. The last time I had a similar feeling I found out the person was my brother. I knew better than to ignore my feelings. I also knew that I was pregnant and my hormones now had a voice of their own—a very emotional voice.

Gabriel introduced everyone to Noah, Payne, and Kasey, Talon's friend—who was now looking at me again. This time it was my turn to smile warmly. After all, I *had* been the rude one staring to begin with. To look at him standing next to Talon, it almost looked as if they could have been brothers. Kasey's sandy blonde hair was a little longer than Talon's, but not by much. It too just kind of hung where it pleased. His blue eyes were soft, radiating gentleness. They reminded me of the sky on a clear day. I hadn't realized that I was staring again until his smile got big in a playful, almost embarrassed way. It suddenly looked as if he were blushing. I looked away quickly, forcing my eyes to rest on Gabriel. He was safe to look at. I would get to know the others later when I didn't have a staring problem.

Everyone had just begun talking again when Gabriel and Talon got a text at the same time. They looked at each other with looks of determination, and without a word Gabriel left—two of the three guys following behind him. Talon whispered something to Kasey and then told us they had to leave.

"We just got texts that disclosed Jenny's supposed location. We're gonna go check it out. I'm sorry we have to leave so fast," Talon said before hugging Melly and shaking Brad's hand.

"And I didn't think this day could get any better," Melly said, excited. "Go get her and bring her home, Talon. We'll be here waiting."

"Maybe that's where Taylor is," I said—the words accidentally slipping out of my mouth,

"I thought you said he went to get you cake," Talon questioned with a sudden look of concern washing over his face.

"He did, but that was over an hour ago," I said as the reality of what might be began sinking in. "I thanked him in my head but I never heard back from him." I could feel the tears filling my eyes.

"He probably got the text too, Haden. I'm sure I'll get a call from him on our way there," Talon tried to reassure me. "I'll let you know as soon as I hear from him. He's probably just trying to surprise you."

I smiled and tried to swallow my tears. "Yeah, I'm sure you're right," I said, trying not to sound as freaked out as I was. It was all I could muster.

When they left, Melly and Roger came and sat next to me, one on either side.

"I'm sure he's fine." Melly was trying to get me to calm down. It wasn't working. My breathing was accelerating rapidly.

"It makes absolute perfect sense to me why he wouldn't have called you," Roger said, holding my hand. "Taylor is a knight in shining armor kind of guy, honey. He would love nothing more than to bring Jenny *and* your chocolate cake home." He looked at me with a look that said he knew he was right. I smiled in defeat.

"Yeah, you're right. That does sound like him. He loves to surprise me. I'm sure it's just my hormones talking." Right as the words slipped off my tongue I knew my secret was out.

"I knew it!" Melly jumped up and started bouncing around the room. "You're pregnant! You are, aren't you?"

I nodded, smiling.

"You're pregnant?" Roger looked at Melly and then back at me.

"Yep, we wanted to tell everyone together, but it seems I can't keep my mouth in check these days," I laughed.

Melly ran over to Brad, screaming that she was going to be an aunt, when Roger hugged me very gently. "Wow, that is amazing! We have a baby shower to plan."

I could see his brain picking decorations already. "No baby shower, not yet anyway," I smiled. "We just found out. There's plenty of time for that. Besides, we don't even know what we're having yet."

"Well, whenever you're ready, so am I." Rogers's enthusiasm was catchy. It had me starting to see pink and blue in my head when he told me that my weird feelings had to be the pregnancy. "From what I've read, pregnancy hormones are crazy!"

I looked at him, confused. "You know stuff about pregnancy hormones?"

"Oh gosh, yes, I used to want to be an OB/GYN. I have always loved babies, but as we all know there isn't a real need for vampire doctors," he laughed loudly. "Hey, maybe I could deliver yours."

"Hold it there cowboy. She'll need a real doctor," Brad said, looking at Roger like he had lost his mind.

"Oh he might as well be one, honey." Melly's words were kind. "You see, Roger isn't kidding. He must have read everything there is to read on the subject. He's also watched every baby show ever made." Melly's eyes were twinkling again. "Shoot, as much as I've seen and read, thanks to him, I could be your nurse."

Roger and Melly both shook their heads in agreement and Brad looked at me like they were nuts. I laughed right before I yawned.

"Looks like you could use a nap, little mama." Melly grabbed my hand, pulling me up from the couch. "It's lucky for all of us that our furniture came in."

"I'm not taking a nap," I protested, fighting her.

"Think of how happy Taylor would be to come home and see you rested versus looking like you're about to fall over," Brad said, winking at me.

"Fine, you win. I'll rest, but I'm not sleeping. I repeat, I am *not* taking a nap."

"Whatever you say, rest, nap... whatever... as long as you lay down," Roger said, smiling. "That little bambino needs you to rest so it can grow."

"How did I end up with so many parents?" I asked, following Melly out of the room.

"You just got *really* lucky," she laughed.

The minute I laid my head down on the pillow I took a deep breath. I had to admit that even though my mind wasn't tired, my body sure was. There was definitely something new going on inside of me. I closed my eyes, told Taylor I loved him in my head, and put my hands over my belly where our baby slept.

Before I knew it, someone was calling my name.

"Haden, honey, wake up sweetie. They're on their way back." Roger's voice sounded funny but I couldn't place it. I sat up too quick and started seeing stars, having to catch my head.

"You okay, sweetie?"

"I'm fine," I choked. "Jenny? Did you find Jenny?" "She's fine."

That woke me up instantly. My heart started pounding in my chest. "Taylor?"

"Honey, he's not with them."

"What do you mean he's *not* with them? *Where is he?*"

"We don't know." Roger's voice was dripping with regret from having told me.

I didn't know how to process what he said. I had to be having a nightmare. I started looking around the room, trying to wake myself up. Nothing was working. My breathing started getting erratic.

"Oh honey, we'll find him--don't you worry."

Roger's words started sounding like someone was mumbling next to me. I couldn't even really see his face. I was too busy calling Taylor in my head as I held my abdomen.

"Sweetie."

"Shhhh!" I screamed as I shut my eyes and listened. I heard nothing. I started yelling Taylor's name over and over again in my head, begging him to answer me, but every time I got the same thing—silence. I got up and walked to the corner of the room holding my head as I called out to my husband. *I need you, dang it! Answer me! Please baby! Please! You're scaring me!* I could hear whispers behind me but I didn't care. I couldn't stop calling him. *Taylor! Please baby-please answer me! This is freaking me out! I know you have to hear me! Oh dear sweet Jesus! Where is he? Please don't let them hurt him!* I couldn't stop crying. By now my entire body was shaking uncontrollably. I could barely stand. I felt a sharp pain in my lower abdomen where our little baby lay and I screamed as I fell to the floor. Someone's cold arms were around me catching me. I was being carried to the bed where I was gently laid down.

"My baby! Don't let it die! Please don't let it die! Taylor!" So many thoughts in my head came streaming out of my mouth.

"Gabe, take Jenny to the house Jake and Sidney will be staying at. Do not leave her side. I'll call you when I can. Haden can't handle all of this right now." Talon whispered his orders as he held his hand on my forehead. "Kasey, call Katie. Tell her we need her now!"

Within what felt like minutes some woman was hovering over me, checking my pulse. Before I could say anything else, another sharp pain shot through my abdomen.

"Give me my bag," the woman demanded. "She's going into shock. We've got to relax her, *for the baby's sake.*"

The room started spinning, and before I knew it everything went black. Suddenly I was back at the cabin in my dreams where Taylor had met me months before. I was sitting on the couch holding onto my knees as I watched the front door.

"*Don't turn around, love.*" Behind me came a distorted version of Taylor's voice—hoarse and broken sounding.

"*Why not?*" I asked, while still obeying his orders.

"*I don't want you to see me like this,*" he said, now standing directly behind me, his head leaning on top of mine. I could smell fresh blood... his blood. I didn't bother to stop the tears. "*I am so sorry,*" he choked out through tears of his own. "*I never,*" he stopped. His breathing was slow and labored. It sounded as if each breath were a miracle, drenched in severe pain.

"Oh God, *let me see you,*" I begged.

"No," he moaned. "*Let me finish.*" He stopped again to concentrate on his breathing. I continued to cry. "*I came to tell you how much... I love you and our baby.*" He lightly kissed my head. I could feel his energy was weak.

"No," I screamed. "*You will not give up,*" I said, turning around. I caught a glimpse of his bloody, swollen face and then he was gone—just like that.

I shot up into a sitting position, sweating profusely and hyperventilating. Somehow I was in Melly's extra bedroom. *Taylor! Baby! PLEASE answer me! I need you! Don't you dare give up! Never, do*

you hear me! I will never give up on you! No matter how long I screamed at him in my head, there was never an answer. I was alone. I grabbed my purse and ran out of the bedroom, making my way through the living room, flying by Kasey as I darted toward the front door.

"Hey, you're awake," he called as I ran past him.

I didn't look at him as I ran out of the house straight to the Melly and Brad's Trail Blazer—crying all the way loudly, not caring who heard. Thankfully they had left their keys in the ignition just as I had hoped. I got in, slammed the door, and sped off. I threw my cell phone out of the window watching it crumble to pieces in my rearview mirror and drove. All I wanted was my husband—nothing else would do. I got on the freeway and headed north. I told Taylor in my head to meet me at our cabin. I knew now that they knew approximately where we were anyway. They would never expect us to go back to our cabin. I drove and drove and drove some more, not bothering to get a motel. A few cat naps would have to suffice. Our baby needed me to take care of myself, but I needed to get to the cabin.

When I pulled up in front of our cabin, I scanned the area. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. During the drive, I had convinced myself that my husband would be waiting for me inside.

If he was really hurt, like I saw in my dream, I would take care of him until we could run away together... alone... where no one would ever be able to find us. I jumped out of the car and ran as fast as I could into our cabin.

It was dark but not empty. I inhaled deeply. My husband's scent wasn't the one flooding my nose. I looked toward the window and there stood Gavin as still as a statue. He turned slowly to face me. For once he didn't have the smug look that was usually plastered on his beautiful face. If anything, he looked somewhat shocked when he saw the look of pure misery on my face.

"I brought you something, Haden."

"How did you know I was coming here?" I asked, confused and mad.

"Never mind that. I came to give you a letter from your Taylor."

Hearing him say Taylor's name made my stomach turn. I had to fight my knees from buckling. "What did you do to him?" I waited for him to answer me before I would attempt to end his pathetic life. Where was God when I needed him?

"He was weaker than we expected," Gavin said slowly, watching me. "The details are of no importance. All you need to know is that he has what you humans call, *passed on*. I offered to let him write you a letter in his final moments. I am only here now to bring it to you. I will leave you to your grieving." I couldn't tell if Gavin's face looked pained or sickened by how I looked. He took a deep breath through his nose. "I *am* sorry for your suffering, Haden. I know that I'm not on your list of most liked people."

I cut him off before he could finish. "You would have to be a person first."

He nodded. "I was just going to let you know that ending him wasn't my intention." He set down the letter and what appeared to be a vial full of a thick red liquid substance on our coffee table and was gone.

I stood frozen in fear and disbelief as I stared at the table. Slowly I walked toward it and picked up the vial filled with blood.

Seeing Taylor's name on it, I gasped, feeling my stomach clench into knots. Somehow I forced my free trembling hand to pick up the letter smeared with blood across its front. Carefully, I opened it as if it held a secret inside. One tear after another rushed down my face. It was a goodbye letter. Taylor knew they would kill him. This letter was his only chance to apologize to me. Words filled with sorrow rested on the page where my husband left them for our baby and me.

With each blood stained word I read, a brick was put up around my soul—stopping anyone from getting close to me ever again. I dropped to my knees as the hurricane engulfed me. Thunder crashed hard against my mind—the wind ripping my soul apart. I could hear a car engine turn off, yet I didn't move. I was frozen in time, building a wall around my heart. I heard the door open, but only as a distant, hazy sound. My mind had already begun to shut the world around me out.

"Haden, it's Kasey, I'm coming in." The footsteps grew louder and then he knelt next to me.

I dropped the letter to the floor as I had no control over my numb fingers. Kasey picked it up and read it. When he was done he sat next to me silently while I cried, staring off into space. I lay down on the floor and he took my hand in his while I continued building my wall. He said nothing. He just stayed right next to me, silently weathering the storm by my side. The crying would cease and then without warning the tears would come back full force crashing hard into me, throwing me into a dark place in my mind.

I clenched the vial of my husband's blood tightly in my hand and sat back up on my knees. I slowly opened it, Kasey watching me closely. One part of me still had a tiny shred of hope that the vial was just one of Gavin's games. I didn't even have to bring the vial to my nose; the smell of Taylor's blood radiated out of it, catching me off guard. *No!* I yelled in my head. I knew the smell of his blood well. It was sweet and warm, its clove-like scent mixed with a hint of iron. Not knowing what to do, I quickly shut it back and began to hyperventilate. I couldn't control the emotions surrounding me. I felt like I was in a world of darkness—a world of lies and animosity. ***Lord do you not love me? Why? Why Taylor? Again? How could you take him from me again—take me instead! God why have you forsaken me? You chose Taylor and me and then you left us!*** The more I thought, the more tears flooded my eyes. They were never ending.

Kasey moved a little closer to me while I continued to cry my eyes out. Saying nothing, he slowly wrapped me in his arms where I continued to cry, shaking my head and screaming no. Had Taylor sent this stranger from the heavens to take care of me? When I stopped crying he picked me up and carried me to the couch where he lay me down. He left and came back with some water. Yet again he said nothing. He didn't have to. For some reason I knew exactly what he would have said. I drank some of the water and held the glass tightly in my shaking hands. I had lost so much from the tears, and the baby needed me to drink. *The baby...* I started crying harder into my glass as I drank. Taylor would never see our baby. It would never know its daddy's love. I wanted to scream and never stop.

Kasey took the glass and set it quietly on the table. He sat next to me on the floor with his back to the couch and said nothing. He let me have my time. I knew that even if I would have asked him to leave there was no way he would have gone. He had been standing close to Talon for a reason. It was pretty obvious that they were good friends. He wasn't going to leave his friend's sister to weather a category five storm alone. He was a gentleman. His phone rang and he turned it off before putting it

back into his jeans pockets. He stayed by my side for hours until eventually the fight between my body and soul was over and my body won—falling asleep.

I awoke under a blanket surely put on me by my new guardian angel. I could hear Kasey talking softly in the chair across from me. I kept my eyes closed and listened as the painful reality of my life sunk in again.

"No problem really--I'll take care of her. Sure. She's stronger than she realizes. No, there's no need. Tell everyone not to worry. She needs to grieve and I will be here if she needs anything. Sure will. later, Talon."

He hung up the phone and I slowly opened my eyes. I was numb in ways I never imagined. "Thanks," I managed to choke out even though I didn't feel like talking.

"No problem," he smiled softly at me.

"Do I know you? You look so familiar to me," I said, studying the soft features of his face as I had done when I first saw him.

He chuckled. "Not really, but I know you." "How's that?" I asked, sitting up.

"Here, drink this." He handed me a glass full of warm blood. "I went hunting this morning and I thought you might appreciate some fresh blood without having to venture out to get it yourself."

I nodded as I drank. "Thanks."

"To answer your question, I knew your parents before they passed. Talon and I became friends. We go way back."

"You knew our parents?"

"Yes, I did. They were great people. You look a lot like your mom."

"Talon's told me that too." When I set the glass down he was next to me with another full one and a plate with some crackers on it.

"You need to eat," he smiled gently at me again.

I smiled back and took a bite of the cracker, forcing myself to eat it even though all I wanted to do was run away. "You said you knew me? Did they have some group class on me so y'all could protect me better?" I tried to make a joke, but my attempt was pitiful.

He laughed slightly nevertheless. "No, not exactly. That would have been interesting though. I said that I knew you because I feel like I do. Talon and I have been close for a long time. When he would go to the states to watch over you, I would go with him. Oftentimes, when he was unable to go, I went instead. I have watched over you since you were a child."

He said that and then looked down before looking back up. I couldn't tell whether he was shy or slightly uncomfortable. "Oh," I said choking down another dry bite of cracker. "Yeah I guess you would

know me then. I'm sorry I can't say the same. Thanks again for last night." Taylor's perfect face flashed in my head and tears started to resurface in my swollen eyes.

"Don't thank me, Haden. It was my pleasure. I'm glad you let me stay. I'm not going to leave you. I'll try to stay out of your space, but I am here if you need me." Warmth radiated off of Kasey in a way I was unfamiliar with. I had been under the impression that vampires were cold to the touch, yet here I sat with Kasey less than a foot away from me and the most comforting warmth flooded off of him like a soft winter throw blanket. I smiled softly and looked at his face. It was one of the most genuine looking faces I had ever seen. I had no doubts that he was telling me the truth. He had no plans of getting in my way.

"Thanks, I don't think I could handle my family or friends even right now," I said, starting to cry thinking of how I missed out on seeing Jenny.

Kasey got up and sat on the table in front of me, facing me. "Would you like to know about your friend Jenny?"

I nodded yes. I was afraid I couldn't speak through the tears.

"She's okay—a little shaken up, but okay. She asked about you. Melly told her what was going on and she asked to tell you that she loved you and missed you. She wanted you to know that she's all right."

At this point I was bawling again. There was no controlling the emotions pouring out of me. "Did she see ... ?" I couldn't say his name.

Sadness overtook Kasey's face. He shook his head no. "I'm afraid she didn't."

I nodded as I cried. "Of course not." I leaned over and cried with my head in my hands. Kasey leaned into me and put his arms around me. "I am truly so sorry, Haden," he whispered. "Taylor was a great guy. I felt like I knew him too."

"Yes, he was," I sobbed. *Was?* How could I have said that? It was so final . . . but wasn't it? Yes . . . it was. I would have to accept that, but no one said how long it had to take me. I would never let go of him—never. I would love that man until my final breath.

"I needed him so much," I said softly through tears. "I know you did."

I pulled back and looked Kasey straight in his sky blue eyes, searching his soul. "Did you know that I'm pregnant?"

"Yes, I did. That's great news."

I stood up and walked toward the window. "That's just it . . . it's supposed to be great news. It *was* until someone killed my husband." My voice got louder as I spoke through the tears. "He was my life. It's not fair! This baby inside of me will never know its father. What am I supposed to do with that? Some prophetic child I am," I huffed, shaking my head as my eyes focused on a plaque that said *Love Makes a House a Home*.

He got up and walked over to where I stood, not getting too close. I looked at him quickly and then back at the plaque before me. His eyes were overcome once again with sadness. I could feel him. He was searching for the right words to tell me. I knew there were none.

"You're right," he said softly. "It's not fair—it never will be. We both know that your husband went looking for Jenny in hopes of bringing her back to you. Taylor was trying to make you happy at all costs. It's true love at its best. We all make our own decisions, Haden. He made his. Quite honestly, I would have done the same. Some of the most passionate decisions one can make have the ability to cost quite a bit." Kasey's voice was full of what almost sounded like regret. "God never promised us fairness."

"God? What *about* God? You mean the God who left Taylor when he needed him? The God who let my unborn baby's father die? If that's the God you speak of, I don't want to hear about Him."

"No, that's not the God I'm talking about. I'm talking about the God who never left Taylor's side even in the end—the God who can create light out of darkness. That is the God I speak of—the God who loves you—the God who chose you—the God who sees your pain. He never promised us that life would be fair. Actually, he pretty much said it would suck most of the time." He looked at me and then began again. "It's what we do with the life we're given that counts. You're strong, Haden. Taylor knew that—we all do. You will make it through this and that little baby will know its father—we will all see to that." He walked closer to me and set his hand on mine. "You will never be alone and neither will that little baby. I promise."

11. Deliver Me

"Get dressed."

"Huh?" I asked as I placed the last bite of scrambled eggs I was being forced to eat in my mouth. "Why do I need to get dressed?"

Kasey smiled lovingly at me. "You don't need to know everything. Just go get dressed and you'll see soon enough."

Two weeks had passed since the day Gavin ruined my life. Kasey had hardly left my side. His gentleman-like ways reminded me of Brad. I hadn't had to worry about one single meal or my nourishment the entire time. He had taken care of it all.

"If you say so." I had no urge to get dressed, much less go somewhere. Honestly though, I had no fight left in me. Kasey had been so good to me that I kind of felt like I owed him. I slowly got up and headed for the stairs.

"Not up there... back that way," he said pointing to the downstairs bathroom. "I hope you don't mind, but I took it upon myself to fetch your clothes and toiletries for you."

I changed my direction and forced a smile. "Thanks." Seems he knew that the last place I wanted to be was my and Taylor's bedroom even though I was pretty positive that I had no more tears left. For the past few days it seemed impossible to cry. Not that I was complaining; my body was just in need of a break.

I walked into the bathroom and looked around, shocked. How well did he know me? There, sitting on the counter as if I myself had placed them there, was a simple pair of jeans and t-shirt. Everything I could have possibly needed was right in front of me, including something to hold my hair back if I wanted. Instead, I did a quick wash of my hair in the sink, wrapped it up in a towel, and then thought I heard my name called. Slowly I cracked open the door and poked my towel wrapped head out. Kasey's head whipped around and a huge smile spread across his face.

"Did you call me?" I asked, utterly confused by his facial expression.

"Nope," he laughed.

"What's so funny?" I couldn't help but ask even though I probably should have kept my mouth shut. With all the recent happenings my guard had been up and I was way crabnier than usual.

"Nothing's funny. I just think your hair turban is quite becoming on you."

"Well, if that's all, I'm going to go back to getting ready," I huffed at myself as the look on Kasey's face sunk in. He really did think I was cute.

I heard a slight chuckle escape his lips and I shut myself back in the bathroom where I continued to try to make myself look human again. I looked in the mirror and sighed. I looked dreadful. Days of constant crying had taken its toll on my eyes. They were bathed in sadness, dark circles cradling them with an embrace from deep within my soul. A tear escaped my eye, letting me know that my wet friends hadn't abandoned me, and I wiped it away quickly. *Now's not the time, Haden.*

I finished getting ready and stepped out of the bathroom, wishing I could go to sleep for a very long time. No matter how hard I pretended that things would be okay, I knew better. Nothing was okay without my husband. I would *never* be okay.

"Looks like you're good to go," Kasey said with a smile.

I nodded. "As ready as I can be." My less than pleasant words didn't seem to faze him. He obviously knew me better than I realized. "Where are we off to?" As I spoke, Kasey looked down and I saw a backpack and a duffle bag. "What are those?" I asked, really confused.

"We're going camping," he grinned. "You need the outdoors."

I didn't know what to say. *Camping?* I asked in my head, staring at him.

"Yes, camping. Wow, that was impressive, Haden. Talon told me how you could put your thoughts into others' heads. What a gift," he said, impressed.

"Some gift," I huffed. "You can have it."

"Thanks," he said excited. "That would rock! I'll be here all day, so pass it on whenever you feel like it."

Catching me off guard with his response, I couldn't help but laugh.

"And she laughs. Beautiful." Right after the words were out of his mouth he grabbed the bags. "Shall we?"

Nodding again, I accepted my fate and followed Kasey out the door. We walked for at least an hour until finally he stopped in an extremely thick part of the forest.

"Perfect." Kasey inhaled deeply. "I love the smell of the forest, don't you?"

"Yep, it smells foresty," I said sarcastically. I had no clue what had gotten into my mouth. I was never this obnoxious. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

Ignoring my rude response, he asked me to try something for him. "Close your eyes and take in a deep breath." I looked at him like he was crazy. "Trust me, Haden . . . the forest is welcoming us."

Okie dokie, I thought quietly. "I should probably warn you; the last time I did this I ate a bear."

Kasey laughed, finding me comical. As if a brick was just thrown into my gut I hunched over in pain. Visions of Taylor in the forest flooded my mind. No, I screamed mentally. *No, please... no more visions.*

Kasey came up behind me and helped me sit. I shook my head and apologized as I rocked back and forth.

"*I can't do this.* I have to go home. I need to . . . I need..."

"What Haden? What do you need?"

"I need my husband," I yelled. "I *need* Taylor."

There they were again; the tears I had thought were all but lost came streaming down my cheeks. They were there all the while, biding their time until I was ready to summon them once again.

"Make it stop! Someone make it stop!" I wrapped my arms around my legs and continued to rock back and forth. "God hates me," I choked out through tears. "Why does He hate me?" Kasey didn't say anything. He put his arm around me, holding me close as I sobbed, my chest heaving. "I want to die." Jumping to my feet I startled Kasey. Mascara dripping down my cheeks, I knew I had to be a sight. "*Please,*" I begged. "Please kill me, Kasey. End this misery for me. I beg you!"

I took a brief breath in between heaving sobs and looked deep into his eyes, begging him with my soul to deliver me from my misery. The look in his eyes caught me off guard. I had never seen so much pain in anyone's eyes before. For a moment I wondered if maybe they were just a reflection of my own.

"You don't mean that, Haden." Kasey's words were soft.

"But I do. I *want* to die. The baby and I want to be with Taylor. *Please*," I screamed. In a split second a sharp pain shot through my lower abdomen and I fell to the forest floor. "My baby," I screamed through tears. "I didn't mean it. Oh God, please don't kill my baby."

Kasey left my side but only for a second, returning with the backpack. Rummaging through it he opened a small flask and told me to drink.

"What's that?" I asked, frightened.

"It'll help you. Drink it, Haden.... trust me." Kasey's blue eyes bore into mine, flooding me with incomprehensible peace and I knew he was right. I put the flask up to my lips and took a sip of the bitter drink before laying back down on the forest floor.

He started to walk off and I reached for him, grabbing his hand. He set the container down and sat beside me, squeezing my hand lightly. Feeling an intense wave of peace wash over me with his touch, I began to feel my eyes get heavy and closed them for just a moment. When I opened them it was dark.

"There you are," Kasey smiled as he set a glowing book down.

"What was that drink?" I asked groggy.

Kasey smiled lovingly. "It was nothing much, just a few really helpful herbs. Nature has a lot of healing properties."

"Oh," I said as I watched the glowing book grow dark. "Was that book *glowing*?"

"Yes it was," he answered, smiling ever so slightly. I sat up carefully and searched his eyes with mine as he set the book gently in the backpack. "It was a gift from Nostovia."

Wondering if maybe there were some sort of weird drugs in whatever it was he had me drink, I asked him if I heard him right. "Did you say Nostovia?"

"That I did," he answered, amused.

"But you're a vampire." I sat up straight and stretched. "I thought Lee didn't like vampires, that he hasn't for years."

"Indeed."

It didn't seem like he was going to budge. "Yet you have a glowing book from there. That's only a little weird, Kasey."

"It was a gift from an old friend," he said casually.

"You're not going to tell me about it, are you?"

"Maybe later. For now I would like to know if you would do me the honor of hunting with me."

As curious as I was about the weird glowing book, the idea of hunting seemed more enticing at this place in time. Before he could say another word, I was up on my feet. It had been way too long since I had stretched my legs. Instinctively I took a deep breath in through my nostrils and exhaled, pleased. "You were right. The forest smells great."

Kasey laughed. "I knew you'd come around. Ready?"

As the word left his mouth, my legs began moving underneath me. I left him in my dust. Right as I hopped over a huge log I thought I heard him chuckle.

After I fed, I looked around and noticed he wasn't anywhere to be seen. *That's weird.* I thought. Slowly I began walking back to where we had originally stopped to camp when I heard him clear his throat. I looked up in the direction of his voice and laughed. He was perched on a branch, motioning for me to come up and join him. I shook my head no and he motioned with his hand again.

"It'll do you good," he called down to me.

Not wanting to argue, I climbed the tree and sat next to him. "It's pretty up here."

"Yes, it is."

Kasey leaned his head back on the tree and sighed as he popped a piece of gum in his mouth, offering one to me.

"No, thanks."

I watched as he stared up at the heavens while chewing his gum. He had to be something pretty special for my brother to let him stay with me. Kasey was good looking, to put it mildly. His crystal blue eyes were almost intoxicating if stared into too long. His voice was deep, yet not too deep. Everything about him was perfect. I looked down at his hands, which were resting on his legs, and wondered how old he was. There was a maturity about him that didn't match his young features. He caught me staring at him again and smiled, putting his hand on my leg.

"You'll be fine," he assured me.

"How can you be so sure?" I asked, fighting back tears.

"I've had a little experience in this department. Trust me when I say that you'll be fine. It won't be easy, but you will make it through this."

I sighed and stared back up into the night's sky. "I sure hope you're right."

"I am, I promise."

My new friend was really starting to grow on me, kind of like an old teddy bear, its simple perfection most obvious on those sad, dreary days, asking nothing of you other than to allow it to weather the storm by your side. I could think of worse things than having my own personal teddy bear. Of course, he looked more like a model than a stuffed animal but I wasn't complaining. I could definitely

think of way worse things. I looked over at his solemn face and was thankful that tonight my thoughts seemed to be keeping quiet.

Eventually our sky watching came to an end and we headed back to camp where Kasey quickly assembled my tent. He blew up an air mattress and covered it in beautiful flannel sheets.

"I'll be out here if you need me," he said, standing outside as he opened the door to my tent, letting me in. "Sleep well, Haden."

I thanked him and walked into my motel a la forest. My breath caught in my throat when I saw how pretty it was in there. Neatly placed beside the beautifully adorned air bed were a small lantern, a glass of water, and a book waiting for me. Turning around sharply, I walked back out of the tent and stood directly outside, staring at Kasey intently.

"Is everything all right?" he asked as a look of concern covered his face.

Tears filled my eyes again from the rush of emotions and I hugged him, wrapping my arms around him loosely. "Thank you," I said softly as I felt the wetness of my tears fall on my lips. His solid body seemed to soften just a little as I rested my head on his chest where I released more of my overwhelming pain.

"There's no need to thank me," he whispered. "I'll be right here with you as you go through this. I won't leave you alone." He kissed the top of my head and said something I would never forget. "You won't ever have to be afraid again."

Our camping trip only lasted one brief night, but I could now see why Kasey was so insistent upon me going. It had served as another tool for my healing. I had a long way to go, but that night was the first step. Part of me had died right alongside my husband. Kasey knew as well as I did that there was nowhere I could go to retrieve it. It was gone forever. In order to reconnect with the part of my heart that *was* still alive, I would need to work through this. Ignoring it, which was exactly what I originally wanted, wouldn't get me anywhere. Kasey told me that in order for me to begin the healing process, I would have to look it in the eye and accept it for what it was . . . my own personal hell. Both my baby and I needed this. I had lost my best friend, yet that didn't change the fact that I was the prophetic one. With that came responsibilities. I had no choice but to move on. I *had* to be strong. My thinking I couldn't wasn't an option. That night out in the forest as I held Kasey and cried, I told him that I was so angry; all I wanted to do was yell. I will never ever forget what he told me.

"Then yell," he said softly.

I looked up at him as if he had just told me purple monkeys were flying our way. "I *can't*, Kasey. What if someone hears me and thinks something's wrong?"

"Trust me; it's just you and me here tonight. No one will hear you. I've got it all covered. If you need to yell . . . then do it. No one's stopping you." Kasey took a step back and opened his arms slightly.

Looking around the forest confused, I looked back at Kasey. "You mean that Talon and Gabriel aren't lurking out there somewhere listening to us?"

He shook his head no.

"What about Patrick and Collin?"

He shook his head no again, this time smiling. "It's just you and me. They knew you were safe with me.

This was a first. I couldn't even fathom the trust my father alone, not even thinking about Talon, had to have in Kasey.

"Well." he said, waiting.

"Well what?" I was so taken back that we were really alone; I had no clue what he was talking about.

"Are you gonna yell? Personally I think you should. It'll make you feel a little better... just enough to let you get some sleep. Tomorrow if you feel like yelling again, we can come back out here. I'm always up for a trip in the woods." His smile was lighting up the night.

I didn't know how he did it, but now I had no urge to yell. If anything I was kind of tired. A yawn began to surface and he laughed slightly.

"We can wait till tomorrow. Go get some sleep."

That night visions of Taylor ran through my mind with such an intensity I found it hard to breathe. Instead of suppressing tears, I did as Kasey said; I embraced them. I needed to grieve. It was the first night I didn't fight my emotions. The raw pain tore at my soul like fire ripping through the forest, burning everything in its path. I relaxed my body and gave in to the intense pain consuming my heart.

The next few weeks of my life were spent living in a hazy cloud, somewhere between hell and earth; my reality was anything but real to me. Kasey was diligent in his promise to me. He was never far away in case I needed him, which I did more often than not, even though I didn't realize it. The new truths of my life were only tolerable because of the innocent life which now grew peacefully in my womb. With each passing minute, I became more painfully aware that my husband was not coming home to me.

Only a few days after we returned to the cabin, Melly and Brad had showed up to check on me. I begged Kasey to ask them to go away. I was in no shape to talk to anyone, and the last thing I needed was them feeling sorry for me. I wanted no attention. All I really wanted was to be left alone. I had taken residence on the couch, my new home, when Barnabus slipped through the front door, making his way over to me while Kasey talked outside with Melly and Brad. As I pet Barney's big basketball head, I leaned closer to him and laid my head against his. Exhaling, the realization that my life as I knew it was over forever filled my soul yet again with a sense of dreariness. The sweet puppy looked at me as if to say that he had heard the news and was heartbroken with me. His eyes were full of sadness while he watched my face before sitting next to me and laying his head on my legs. When Kasey came to the door, he called him but Barney refused to move, eyeing him sternly.

Kasey grinned at the oversized puppy. "You know what buddy, I don't blame you. I'll go ask your mom if you can hang out here with us."

He smiled largely at me and turned, heading out the door.

It had been weeks since that day and Barney rarely left my side. When he wasn't with me, he was next to Kasey who oddly enough had made the hell of my life seem slightly tolerable. I kissed Barney's head as I wondered if God would send a message up to Taylor for me. I knew God existed, but I wasn't really sure how fully. With the little strength I still possessed, I sent up a prayer. *Lord God, I don't really know what to say. I am an empty shell without Taylor in my life. I thought I knew You all these years, and now I don't think I do. I can't understand why you would take my husband from me—from our baby. The God Kasey speaks of is one I don't know. If You are what he says You are, then I need you. I need you to heal my heart... if that's even possible.* I sighed and closed my eyes as the tears fell silently down my cheeks. *God please tell Taylor that I love him. Please tell him that I will be okay—we both will. One more thing, please tell him that I will love him until I die.* By now the tears were yet again a steady stream, and even though over the course of the last weeks they had become fewer and fewer, they were still there ready to make an appearance whenever called upon.

I heard the door open and knew that Kasey was back from hunting. I tried to dry my eyes so the poor guy didn't have to suffer through more of my emotional issues than he had already.

"Hey there, you two." Kasey's voice was so full of warm kindness that instead of my tears stopping they picked up speed. I waved as I buried my head into Barney's neck, trying to hide my face. When I heard his footsteps approaching me, I knew I was busted. He knelt down to pet Barney's head. "Haden, I know something that will make you feel better."

I slowly peeked my face out from my warm hiding place to question him with my eyes. "How?" I choked out.

"Can I pray with you?" His blue eyes were so gentle, probing mine for the answer.

"I guess," I said, unsure. "I've already tried to pray. It doesn't work, Kasey. Besides, I don't really have anything nice to say to God as of right now," I huffed as I sat up. "It's His fault my life sucks. I don't even think He cares about me."

"That's fine, just come kneel by me and I'll do all the talking."

Begrudgingly, I knelt down next to him, Barney on my right. I watched as Kasey put his hands together and then bowed his head. I did the same. "Father, I come to you today on behalf of my friend, Haden. Lord, she is so full of pain, anger, and confusion over the loss of her husband. She is full of fear of what her future holds, and most of all she is confused about you. Heavenly Father, I ask you today to please send your spirit down to comfort her, to guide her, and to show her your love. I ask you to give her strength and to bless her and her little baby. Above all, I ask you to deliver her from these trials. In Jesus' name, Amen."

I got up and sat back on the couch where I stared off into the fireplace—zoning. "Thank you; that was beautiful." As far as I was concerned, his prayers were in vain. I didn't think God cared too much about me anymore. As for Kasey, that was a different story; I knew he did, and I appreciated all he had done for me. If he wanted to talk to God about me and for me, I was cool with that.

"No problem," he smiled as he sprung to his feet wearing a huge smile. "So, since you're so agreeable today I thought I'd take another chance and ask you one more question."

I couldn't help but smile at the innocence in his eyes. "K, shoot."

"Well I was thinking that maybe you'd like to go hunting with me today."

"Hunting? Hmmm, I don't know if I can."

He laughed a full laugh, "Don't know if you can? Now that's funny."

I sat up a little straighter and cocked my head. "How is that funny?"

He was still smiling at me as I spoke. "That's just the silliest thing I have ever heard, Haden. *You*, not able to hunt? *Please...* That's a joke. Besides, don't tell me that your pretty wolf wouldn't like to stretch her legs. It's been weeks since our camping trip. I think it's time we take another walk together." He winked at me and I laughed softly. "There she is. Now *that's* a pretty smile. Come on, you know you want to."

I don't know what it was about Kasey, but I had a really hard time telling him no. He was so genuine in his actions, and his words were always so full of compassion.

"Fine, I'll go if you insist," I smiled largely, not bothering for the first time in weeks to fight it.

After I excused myself, I changed my clothes, putting on some jeans and a t-shirt and wrapping a dress around my waist. I looked in the mirror at my pitiful reflection and decided to put on a little make-up. I brushed my hair for the first time in days and put it up into a ponytail. When I got back downstairs he was sitting at the kitchen table reading a magazine.

Kasey and Barney looked up at me at the same time. "You look beautiful," he said, his genuine smile warming my heart and making me blush.

Venturing into my and Taylor's room for the first time had been anything but easy. I never wanted to go there again, not without him, yet I knew I had no choice. If I were to heal, I had no choice but to embrace the pain. I was proud of myself for pushing through it. I walked in the room slowly, smelled my husband, and cried, lying in our bed where I hugged his pillow tightly.

When I had drained myself of all the tears I had, I got up and splashed water on my face. What I saw when I glanced in the mirror made me cringe. I was a mess. In that instant, I realized how awful I must have looked the last few weeks. I knew it was time that I start thinking about someone other than myself. Kasey had been so wonderful to me. Today I would repay him just a little by making myself somewhat presentable. By the look on his cute face, it had worked.

"Well whatcha waitin' for eh?" I teased.

"So you went upstairs and drank some feistiness, huh? K... I can dig it." Kasey set the magazine down and Barney sat up at attention. "I take it you're ready," he said, lifting one of his eyebrows as he smiled and shook his head, amused.

His little eyebrow look caught me off guard. It was hysterical. "What's up with the facial expression?" I asked, finding humor in his lifted eyebrow.

"Oh nothing, you're just awesome—that's all. Let's go, shall we?"

"We shall." It was my turn to laugh.

Feeling the wind blow as I ran through the forest was like finding water after a drought. I drank it up. When I was done hunting I felt something I hadn't in weeks --happiness. I smiled to myself and ran far back into the woods where I phased, howling up into the heavens. I felt really good for the first time in weeks. I had missed my wolf. Kasey was right. I needed this more than I knew. I ran all over the forest, enjoying the cool air. This was it, my first view of the sun after the rain. My life would never be the same without Taylor, but I was alive. It was time that I start living again, even a little. Our baby deserved it. Taylor would have wanted that.

When I was done running, I decided to go find Kasey and show him my wolf. After all, he had never seen it... or had he? I ran for who knows how long without finding him and then I heard him chuckling.

"Hey pretty puppy. Looking for someone?"

I looked up to find him perched on the branch of a huge pine tree. He definitely had a thing with heights. The last time I found him high up in a tree, he told me how much he loved to feel close to heaven. In that moment, I wished I knew God the way he did.

I howled, my laughter filling the air with happiness. Kasey laughed along with me and then jumped down.

"Aren't you one gorgeous puppy?" He got on his knees and started to reach his hand out to pet me. "May I?" I lowered my head and moved in closer to him. His hand felt so good running through my fur. I sighed, enjoying the moment. "You're incredible, you know that?" he whispered lovingly as he pulled his hand back. I looked up at him and tilted my head, confused. "You're gonna be just fine, Haden." He stood up and climbed back up the tree. "I'll be here if you need me," he said, showing his sweet smile again. I nodded and ran off.

As I ran, stretching my legs, my head filled with a million thoughts. The first being that Kasey's words were right. I *was* going to be okay. I could feel it. I was going to be better than okay. I would make Taylor proud. No more pity party. I had been blessed. Most people would never experience love like I had. I had been wasting time whining about losing him, when in reality there were so many people who would die never knowing a love like he and I shared. I was one of the lucky ones. Five minutes of being in Taylor's arms was an unimaginable blessing, one I would never forget.

The more I ran, the more my emotions morphed from sadness into excitement and then finally into anger. I resisted the urge to howl and let out my anger. I didn't want Kasey to think something was wrong. I sat for a second as the anger consumed me and took deep breaths, listening to the trees blowing in the wind. *Deliver me God. Please. Deliver me from all of this anger and pain. If You're out there... please. I beg You.*

I got back up and decided I would run until I couldn't anymore. When I was ready to stop, I phased back. Spotting a nearby tree, I leaned up against it and looked up into the sky. It was in that very moment that I suddenly wished that Talon was there with me. I closed my eyes and pictured his beautiful face. I missed him immensely.

"Ask and you shall receive."

I looked quickly to my left where the voice came from and there stood Talon, watching me, smiling.

"You're here!" I almost couldn't catch my breath; I was so excited. I ran over to him and hugged him tightly as I started to cry.

"I told you I would *a/ways* be here for you," he said, holding me.

Hearing his voice filled me with indescribable emotions. I was beyond happy to see him and yet I couldn't stop crying. I pulled back and looked at his angelic face. "I'm just so happy to see you. How long have you been keeping tabs on me?"

"Me, keeping tabs on you, psh... *never*" he smiled. "I've been here every day. I rented a cabin nearby and Kasey has so kindly kept me up to date on how you were doing."

"But he told me it was just him and me here."

Talon laughed. "What he told you was that it was just you and him in the forest."

"How come you never came to see me?" I asked, pouting.

"I figured that you could use some space. Besides, I heard that Barney was taking great care of you."

I laughed. "Yeah he's a terrific dog. Melly might not get him back." I weaved my arm through his. "So, Mr. secretive, who else is here with you?" I had no doubt that someone had come with him, if not a few someones.

"Marcus and Gabriel. You know how they get when they're worried. I'll say this much . . . it's been a challenge keeping Gabe locked up," he grinned. Talon's face was like a star lighting up my night as he spoke.

I was surprisingly thrilled to hear that both Gabe and Marcus were here at Swan Lake, not far from where we stood. "That's awesome. Barney will be thrilled!"

We walked until we came to the tree where Kasey was still sitting up high, smiling and reading a book. "I see she called you--just as you said she would. You know your sister well."

Talon looked down at me and smiled.

"You knew I would call for you?"

"I had a good feeling, yes. I assumed that when you were one with your wolf you would need me and I was ready and waiting."

"You are so good to me," I said, leaning my head on his arm.

"Just doing my job," he said as his phone rang. "It's Mels. You wanna talk to her?"

I knew that it was time. My fire was burning. I was angry. I was finally healing and now I was ready to face the rest of the world. "Sure," I said, grabbing the phone and answering it. "Hello?" I answered, trying not to laugh. I could only imagine how shocked she would be to hear me answer Talon's phone.

"Haden?"

"Yep."

"Haden! Oh, Haden... Heck yeah! Brad... Haden answered the phone!" Melly's screaming was just as funny as I had imagined.

"Melly?"

"Oh yeah. sorry, Haden! I'm just so shocked to hear your voice. You sound great! How are you? Brad and I have been going crazy worrying about you. I've called Talon every day to check on you. I told him he should have let us come stay up there too, but he insisted it wasn't a good idea."

I took a deep breath in, relishing my sister's happy babble, which had become second nature to her since meeting Brad. "Honestly, I'm okay. I had a great caretaker." I looked at Kasey and smiled.

"Oh yeah. Kasey's a doll, huh. So can we come up there and keep you company or are you comin' home?" I could hear Melly packing as she talked to me.

"Are you packing?" I asked, listening closely.

"Yep, if you say yes I want to be ready," she laughed.

"How can I say no to you? I do have a question though."

"Anything."

"How's Jenny?"

"She's okay. We'll tell you all about her when we get there, if you want." Melly's voice sounded weird but I couldn't place it, nor did I want to.

"Where is she?" I asked, curious.

"I'm coming, Brad. Hey, Haden, I've gotta run. Brad's yelling at me. He's already in the truck," she laughed. "To think, he thought I was the impatient one. See you soon—love you."

She hung up the phone before I could ask her my question again. I looked at Talon, who was staring at me, surely awaiting my question. Before I could ask he answered.

"She's with the Kentons."

"She's in Yorkshire?"

"Yes, she's waiting for all of us."

"What do you mean she's waiting for us?"

"When you're ready we need to leave. It's not safe for you here."

"I am *not* leaving. This is my home."

"Haden, think about what Taylor would have wanted. That baby needs you to stay safe."

He knew that would get me. I would do anything to protect my baby. I glanced at Kasey, who was looking at me with a look of sadness on his face.

"I agree with your brother. You aren't as safe here as you will be there. You need to be where there's constant surveillance, Haden. We can't afford to take any chances."

I shook my head in defeat. "If you both think that's what's best then I won't argue." Both of them smiled and we began walking back to the cabin.

I took in a deep breath. "Where's y'all's cabin, Talon?"

"About two miles from here, why?"

I looked at Talon and then at Kasey and smiled. "Wanna race?"

"Are you serious?" Talon's expression was total confusion.

Kasey's, however, was a different story. He was already turning around and lowering himself, never taking his eyes off of me. "Whenever you're ready."

Talon looked at Kasey and then back at me and laughed, lowering himself to join in our fun. He gave me quick directions, and on his count of three we were all gone running. Talon was insanely fast; his fluid-like movements were calculated—his body at one with the wind. Kasey was a different story. He ran and then climbed up a tree where he swung from a high branch to the next tree and then to the next. His height obsession was insane. I laughed until I noticed that Talon was ahead of me. I had been too busy watching Kasey to notice that my brother was winning. I clenched my jaw and picked up my speed. Right when I could see the cabins lights, Kasey jumped down from a tree right next to me and smiled before he passed me like a burst of wind.

No way, I thought to myself. Sadly I got to the cabin after both of them. I stood laughing as I shook my head while I caught my breath. "I can't believe you two won."

"Actually, your brother won, truth be told." Kasey was sitting calmly on the bench by the back door.

"We all know you would have won, Kasey, if you hadn't been tree hopping," Talon smiled.

"You can't prove it," Kasey laughed playfully, looking at me. "You're pretty darn fast yourself, Haden—considering."

"Considering? Considering what?" I saw the playful look in his eyes yet again.

"Aw nothing, I just doubt that most pregnant women could have run that fast," he said approvingly.

I don't know how it was possible, but I had forgotten that I was pregnant while I was running. Somehow my cluttered head had taken a tiny break from all the fear, darkness, and heartache that had recently taken residence in my mind. I smiled, thanking God for delivering me from the mess of my life—even if only for a brief moment.

I put my hand on my belly and smiled at Kasey. "When I have this baby we'll race again, but next time you won't want to waste your time tree hopping."

He nodded his head, smiling at me. "You've got yourself a deal."

We walked into the cabin to find it empty. Talon grabbed a note from off of the fridge. "Marcus and Gabe went to check out a possible lead. They should be back before the morning."

I insisted that we wait for them until they got back even though Talon tried to get me to go back to my cabin to rest. After much talking, I finally convinced my brother that the baby and I were fine.

We spent the rest of the night lying on the forest floor under the blanket of stars, talking like kids. I knew that life was never going to be everything I wanted it to be, but I also knew that I was extremely blessed to have the love surrounding me that I did. I thanked God for my new friend and my doting brother as I counted the stars. It was time for the next season of my life to begin. It was time to go home.

12. Hidden Wonders

"Ouch, ya big oaf. Watch where you're putting those big ol' feet of yours."

I could hear laughter coming from the kitchen as I pried my eyes open. Kasey was sitting in the chair across from the couch where I had been asleep. I could only assume that late in the night he had kindly carried me back to the cabin.

"Quit being such a baby, Mels," Gabriel said, laughing playfully.

"Oh... I'll show you a baby. Take *that*." Gabriel's laughter now resonated through the entire cabin as Melly punched him. "Not too bad for being a baby... eh," she joked, her voice raising an octave.

"In all honesty. it was pretty weak," he teased, filling the kitchen with his bellowing laughter once again.

"You are so asking for it, Gabriel Kenward. If you know what's good for you, you're gonna back away from that stove so you don't mess up the breakfast I have been slaving over."

I glanced over at Kasey who was smiling at me while I eavesdropped on my brother and sister. I'm sure he too was finding their childish bickering just as amusing as I was. A tiny laugh escaped my lips, and within seconds Melly was standing in front of the couch, her eyes open wide.

"Real nice, Gabe, you woke Haden up." Melly's words didn't match her cheery facial expression at all. "Well since you're awake now, thanks to dork boy, I need a hug."

I sat up and hugged my beautiful sister tight. Thankfully I didn't want to cry. Kasey smiled at me again as he set his book down and left the room.

"You look delightful." Melly's words were full of excitement as she rubbed my belly. "How's my niece?"

"Your *niece*, huh," I giggled.

"Yep, I have no doubt. Little Melly Jr. is right here growing strong so she can come out and play with Brad and Barney and me. Isn't that right, little Melanie?" Melly was now speaking to my stomach. I continued to laugh as I stretched.

Melly started sniffing and turned her attention back to the kitchen where Gabriel was surprisingly quiet. "Oh no, please don't tell me that you're burning the sausage, Gabe." Melly huffed and was gone.

"Me, burn it? Nope, that's all on you little sis. You're the one who left me in here *all by myself* with your precious breakfast." Gabriel laughed and moved out of her way. Looking in my direction his face was glowing as he did a once over on me. "You don't look *that* bad." Melly hit his arm. He ignored her and walked over to me.

"It's okay," I insisted. I know all of y'all have been talking about me and how funky I looked," I said. "I'm cool with it."

Before Mel and Gabe could try to convince me that I was jumping to conclusions, the front door opened and in walked the most beautiful bald black man ever. Marcus's smile and his pearly white teeth lit up the room. I couldn't have been happier to see him. "I think you're beautiful as always, Haden."

After kissing Gabe on the cheek, I walked over to my large dark chocolate friend and snuggled into his huge chest, inhaling him and sighing as a safe feeling washed over me. "I missed you, Marcus."

"I missed you too, Haden." I heard him snuffle but chose to ignore it. Marcus was a tender heart like me. I knew better than anyone that no matter what he said, he felt just how much I was hurting inside and it hurt him deeply. "I brought you a book," he grinned. He pulled a black book with white clouds framed in a silver lining out of his black shoulder bag. *Finding light amidst the darkness: How to see the silver linings in your life in times of suffering.*

"Aw thank you, Marcus." Truth be told, I had more of an urge to mop the kitchen floor than to read a self-help book. I looked up into the dark brown eyes of my friend and smiled lovingly. Right there, smiling back at me was a silver lining to my cloud, an angel sent to bring light to my darkness. Maybe the book was magical; all you had to do was read the title for it to start working.

"It's a good read. I read it yesterday," Marcus said, pleased.

"You read the entire book yesterday?" I asked chuckling.

He smiled again, showing the amazing contrast between his chocolaty skin color and his white teeth. "Yes ma'am."

Gabe walked over to us and looked down at the cover of the book I now held in my hand. "Nice. I'd read it if reading weren't for wusses," he teased. Marcus shook his head and smiled.

I rolled my eyes at Gabe and hit him with my book before leaning my head on Marcus. Just standing next to him gave me an immediate sense of wellbeing. I had never been able to place it, but Marcus had always had that amazing effect on me. Taylor used to call him my walking sanity. No matter how crazy I felt inside, Marcus's presence had a calming effect on me.

Thinking Taylor's name jabbed my heart like a freshly sharpened sword, gashing deep into my soul. I took a deep breath and pushed it down as fast as I could. I would *not* give in to self-pity today. I had made a promise to myself last night while sitting with Talon and Kasey. The realization that even though I had so much to be sad about, I had even more to be happy about, overtook my thoughts as I watched my brother and Kasey tease each other playfully. Both would toss a glance in my direction off and on throughout the night to make sure I was still hanging in there. There was no denying that I was blessed.

I decided in that very moment that it was time for me to be a big girl, pull my boot straps up, and get ready for the battle ahead. Right after this baby would be born, Gavin and I had a date. This next time there would be no dancing. There would only be me giving him what he deserved. Thoughts of Gavin instantly did the trick. I didn't want to cry anymore. I was mad. I could feel my breathing pick up as I visualized hunting Gavin down and killing him.

"Whoa, someone's thinking some serious thoughts," Gabe snickered. "I want in!"

I didn't say anything. I just rolled my eyes at my brother and turned, heading upstairs. "If anyone asks, I'm going to get dressed," I said, not bothering to look back.

"Don't be gone too long. Breakfast's almost ready," Melly called from the kitchen.

I ran up the stairs skipping every other step. I needed to be alone. I walked into our room, mine and my dead husband's, breathing heavily. I closed my aching eyes and put my hands through my hair, fighting screaming.

I didn't want to wait to make Gavin come face to face with his maker. I wanted to find Gavin now. I wanted to tear him apart limb by limb as I looked at our bed—the bed our love created a little baby in—a baby who needed me to calm down and think. I sat down on the floor right where I stood and pulled my knees into my chest while I tried to steady my breathing. *Breathe, Haden*, I demanded myself. *You have got to calm down for the baby*. Slowly my breathing regulated. Breathing in slowly through my nose, I closed my eyes once more and pictured my wedding night. Taylor's arms felt like heaven, enveloping me in his love. Opening my eyes, I looked over at the bedside table where the wild flowers he picked me now stood, wilted. I shook my head and felt my eyes fill with tears again. No matter what

the future held, I would make sure that I never forgot that special time or the intensity he loved me with those unforgettable nights.

When I regained my composure, I got dressed and headed out my door. I stopped short at the top of the stairs when I heard Melly and Talon whispering downstairs.

"Mels, it's too soon. She needs more time." Talon's voice was serious.

"No, it's not. She's not a child, Talon. She needs to know about Jenny *now* and she needs to know that we found the van Taylor was driving."

My stomach began turning into knots as I listened.

"She doesn't need any more trauma, Melly, and neither does that baby. It's imperative that we protect her at all costs." Talon wasn't budging. I could hear the seriousness in his voice.

"May I say something?" Kasey interjected.

"Of course," Talon said.

"I may be overstepping here, but I feel that I have a pretty good idea what Haden would want. I have spent the last weeks with Haden and I have learned much about her. I watched her fall apart with such grace it made my heart swell. Right when I would begin to worry, she would pick herself back up again, renewed with such strength. a strength that I have only seen in creatures touched by the very hand of God. With each fall she would rise up with a renewed spirit. This is commonplace with her. I saw it again today. The strength she possesses is to be feared and respected. In all of my life I have only witnessed a few as tough as she is. Yes, she has had a rough time. Healing from the intense hell she experienced won't be an easy journey, but Haden is no ordinary woman. Talon, it's my opinion that she be told the truth . . . all of it. I think she needs to know." I could hear Kasey take a breath before he continued. "Talon, buddy, she needs to know everything or she will constantly feel like something new is being thrown at her. When it's all laid on the table for her, she can then assess it and her healing will truly begin. As she heals, her strength will continue to grow. I know you're worried about her, my friend, but I can promise you that she will come out of this on top. God chose her for a reason. This is all a part of her journey."

There was momentary silence until Marcus spoke up. "I agree with Kasey. Haden is the bravest person I've ever met. I vote we tell her."

Following Marcus, Brad spoke up. Hearing his voice caused the knot in my stomach to tighten. "I'm with them, brother. We need to tell her everything... now. She deserves to know. She would want to be there for Jenny."

"I agree with you all," Talon said, his voice brimming with sadness. Haden *is* strong. She *is* brave, but she is also my sister and she is in pain. I can't see telling her yet. She needs more time."

"I agree with my brother," Gabe jumped in. "Have you guys seen her... *really* seen her? You can't be for freakin' real with all this "let's tell Haden" business. She is *not* invincible. We need to let the poor girl breath before throwing her whole world down the toilet." Gabriel's voice was more stern and angry than I had ever heard. "It's just not cool that everyone here wants to watch her crumble."

My tears were silently flowing in a steady stream down my flushed cheeks. My body trembled profusely while I tried to control my breathing as it escalated. Leaning my head against the wall I closed my eyes and focused on calming down. *Dear God, help me.*

I could feel the tension radiating from downstairs before Talon spoke again. "Gabe, I don't think that's what they're saying at all. We all have Haden's best interests at heart. Now that I've heard everyone's take, I have to admit that they've swayed me. She won't go through this alone. None of us will let her fall apart, big brother," Talon said calmly.

"I'll back you, brother, but my vote is still no," Gabe insisted.

"It's settled then. We'll tell her about the van and about Jenny's pregnancy after breakfast." The second Talon's words reached my ears, my stomach felt as if someone hurled it into my throat. I quietly ran back into my room and found the toilet as fast as possible, emptying my stomach contents into the toilet bowl. I cleaned my face and brushed my teeth as my brain sped with hundreds of thoughts chasing each other around.

Jenny, pregnant? It can't be. I spit the toothpaste out and looked at my pale reflection in the mirror. This wasn't the first time in my life that I didn't recognize the person looking back at me, but it was the first time that the reflection scared me to pieces. I looked around hurriedly. I needed to get out of here. I needed to get away from everyone—from everything. My eyes met the window and I knew exactly what I was going to do.

I opened it slowly and assessed the area outside. Luckily no one was out back. I assumed that they were all still having their talk about me and my vulnerabilities downstairs. I flung from the window to the closest tree and then climbed down and phased, running as fast as my four legs would carry me. I didn't stop until I got to the very back of the forest where I knew that there were no rental cabins. I was right in the middle of tons of immense trees, protecting me from the outside world. I was safe to think, or so I thought, as I howled, calling out to God. *How could you!* I screamed. *Do you hate me!? Take me away from this! Please, God! I can't do this anymore. I'm done!* I stopped howling and began running again, growling as my feet moved underneath me.

It wasn't long before I heard Melly, Talon and Gabriel's thoughts in my own head. They too were in wolf form and tracking me as I ran. It would only be a matter of time before one of them would find me. I kept my mind quiet and phased back. I knew that my scent was all over the forest, so the only way they would find me was to see me. I would just have to make sure that didn't happen. Talking to them wasn't on my itinerary. In one brief second, I decided to phase back and climb the highest tree I could find and sit there quietly. Taylor was the only person in the world who knew where my private escapes took place. My brothers and sister would never think to look for me there and I had never shared with Kasey my love for perching in trees even though I had been tempted a time or two. It was the only place I had a chance of escaping them all.

Sure enough, I was right. I watched quietly as they made their appearance hundreds of feet beneath me in wolf form, none of them bothering to look up. Finally I was safe to be alone, to cry the new wave of tears building behind my swollen eyes. All I wanted to do was release all of the hatred and pain that was quickly building up inside my soul. As soon as I was sure they had given up, that's exactly what I did.

I leaned my head against the tree and cried like a baby for the millionth time. They had found the van Taylor was driving and no one had told me. How dare they keep something like that from me! I was really getting tired of them treating me like a baby. Kasey was right. I deserved to know. No matter how hard I had tried recently to accept the fact my husband was dead, I couldn't. I would wake up out of a dead sleep, in a cold sweat, feeling that Taylor needed me to go to him, yet I had no idea where he was. As soon as the sleep was far from my eyes, I would look around and realize that it had all been a dream. This happened every night since I first heard the news.

I had been trying desperately to convince myself that Taylor was gone forever, yet there was still a small part of me that just couldn't believe it. I had imagined over and over again that Gavin was lying—that he was playing a cruel trick on me. Even having opened the vial of blood he gave me, I still didn't believe him . . . but now . . . with the van being found . . . it was all fitting together. He was really gone. Here in the forest with the trees, Brad and Talon's words rang out in my head over and over again. Taylor was gone forever and Jenny was pregnant. Jenny needed me.

My tears flowed until I had no more. I lay down on the large branch as I allowed my mind to drift off, relishing in the memories of my beautiful husband. Memories of him and me as small children playing freeze tag with our friends. Memories of him and me as teens, watching movies all night while we ate popcorn on the couch, laughing. I hardly had a memory that didn't include him. I squeezed my eyes shut tight and pictured his perfect face the night he proposed to me, his tender words filling my soul as he spoke. I saw him on our wedding day as I walked down the aisle; the way his clover green eyes glistened with tears had my tears flooding my eyes faster than they could fall. I held his stare in my mind until another memory replaced the last. There he was, getting out of his car on our wedding night before blindfolding me. I remembered how he put me on his back and carried me to the cabin he had built for us. A dark realization suddenly consumed me. There would be no more piggyback rides—ever. There would be no more long, slow kisses in his arms. There would be no more marital embraces under the stars where our birthmarks could shine like the sun, forming into one. There would be no more Taylor and Haden. There would be no more me. That Haden was dead and I had no choice but to accept that fact.

I knew that Taylor would want me to move on—to be strong for our baby and to fulfill God's purpose for my life, whatever that may be. I knew all of that, but it hurt *so badly*. I could hardly breathe. Never in my life had I ever felt such intense pain. As weird as it was, I was finally embracing it. The pain kept Taylor alive to me. I never ever wanted to forget anything about him. No matter what my life held for me, there was one thing I knew; I would be stuck in those moments with my husband forever. I would never let go of him . . . *ever*. I thanked God for our baby as visions of Taylor continued to dance in my head lulling me to sleep. When I awoke it was still dark but I wasn't alone.

"Do you always sleep in trees?" Kasey was sitting on the branch next to mine, smiling curiously at me.

"Not normally... no," I said, trying to remember how I had gotten where I was.

"I have to admit, it was a smart hiding place. Not too many people climb the tallest tree they can find to be alone." His tone was playful.

"How did you find me?" I asked, impressed.

"Well, it just so happens that I know one other person who does the same thing."

"And who would that be?" I joked.

"Me," he said, still smiling. "Although, I must admit that I have never ever slept in a tree. Of course, I don't sleep." Kasey laughed softly as he pulled a pine needle off the tree.

I laughed with him. Then slowly I sat up and looked deep into his eyes. "Thank you."

"For what?" It was obvious that I had confused him.

"For telling everyone that I deserved to know everything. I heard you all. You were right. I can't move on if I keep on hurting. The healing has to start somewhere."

"Oh," he said, looking at his pine needle. "I learned a lot while spending the past weeks, or should I say couple of months, with you. You're not like anyone I've ever met. It's obvious that you're a fighter even when you don't realize it."

"Kasey, will you tell me what the others wouldn't?" I watched him, hoping that he would. "Please."

He lifted his head up and moved his dirty blonde hair out of his face. "They found the van a couple days after you and I came to the cabin. From what I was told, it was wrecked and Taylor's blood was all over it. It was a pretty awful site."

I swallowed hard trying not to throw up when Kasey looked at me, troubled. "Did I say too much?"

"No, please go on. I need to know." I wiped the tears from my cheeks and listened.

"They didn't tell me much more—just that it was pretty obvious that he was no longer alive." He looked back down at his hands. "I'm so sorry, Haden."

I nodded and continued to cry. "He was such a good person, Kasey. He had more love in his heart than anyone I have ever met." I looked at him and smiled through my tears.

"I would love to hear about him if you feel like talking." It was obvious by his tone that he was genuinely interested and not just trying to make me feel better.

"Well," I sighed through a smile. "Taylor was... different. He was unlike anyone I had ever met. He was honest and extremely giving. I can't remember one time that he put himself before others. As a matter of fact, I remember a time when we were little and he saw a homeless man on the side of the road. He begged our mom to let him give him all of his money he had been saving. My mom couldn't say no, of course, even though she probably wanted to. Taylor had been saving that money for two years to buy a piano he wanted. He had saved three hundred dollars and gave it all away without even blinking an eye. He never said another word about it. My parents were both shocked—not me though. I knew how big his heart was."

"I can see why you loved him."

"Everyone loved him. He was Taylor. There was nothing about him not to love. He was my everything. Even still, I can't spend the rest of my life dwelling in what could have been. He wouldn't have wanted that. He would have wanted me to be happy. So for him and him alone that is exactly what I am going to set out to do.

Kasey's blue eyes were staring softly into mine as he listened. I froze for a second and stared back as if I was in some sort of a trance before looking away. "Will you tell me about Jenny now?"

"Sure. What all did you hear?" he asked.

"Just that she's pregnant. Who is the father? How far along is she?" I wanted all the details he had if I was going to be any help to my best friend.

"No one knows who the father is. There, of course, are plenty of speculations. Even Jenny doesn't know. What we do know is that he was not human."

I sat up straighter and looked deep into his eyes. "Are you telling me that she's pregnant with a vampire's baby, Kasey?"

"Yes, I believe so."

I put my hand to my mouth and exhaled, shocked by his words. "Poor Jenny, oh my gosh, is she all right?"

"The Kentons are taking good care of her. Don't worry; she'll be okay. She's anxiously awaiting your arrival. From what I've heard, she's more worried about you than anything. She's a sweet girl."

"Yes, she is." I stared off into space, trying to let what he had said sink in. "I need to go to her now." I started to move and stopped dead in my tracks, grabbing my stomach.

Kasey immediately jumped up. "Haden are you all right?"

"Yes, yes! Come here."

Kasey was by my side instantly. I took his hand and put it on my tummy where my little baby wiggled happily.

Kasey looked at me, his crystal blue eyes shining with excitement. "She's moving."

"*She?*" I laughed quietly, shocked that both he and Melly thought they knew what sex my baby was. "You think it's a girl too?"

"It's just a feeling I have." He looked at his hand, which was placed softly on my stomach, and shook his head. "I have never felt anything so amazing. There's really a tiny life in there. God never ceases to amaze me."

I couldn't help but chuckle. I put my hand on his and sent a message out to my Taylor one last time. *I'll be okay. God sent me a friend to walk through this with me. Fly free my love. You will always be in my heart—forever.*

As he held his hand with mine on my womb, we sat back down next to each other and silently enjoyed the hidden wonder within me. My baby was happy. It was telling me that it was okay. I was going to be okay.

13. Devils in the water (Taylor)

Fly free, my love. Those words could have only meant one thing. Haden was convinced that I was dead. How could she not? I should have told her I was okay before they brought me here. I should have reminded her that I too was a chosen one. All the "should haves" wouldn't stop eating away at my brain. I felt my way through the blurry room to the glass wall and slammed my fists up against it as hard as I could when I heard a sinister laugh behind me.

"Your stay hasn't been satisfactory?"

I turned to face the blurry figure of a man with dark black hair and then turned back to the window.

"Have you not been treated well?" the serpent's slithery voice questioned.

"If you consider being held against your wishes, being drugged so your equilibrium doesn't function properly, and having your vision purposely blurred *"satisfactory"* then yes it's been a very satisfactory stay," I said sarcastically as I blinked my eyes trying to relieve the fogginess that now consumed me.

The man laughed. "You're quite amusing, Taylor. I like that. Humor has always intrigued me." I could hear the man walk toward the couch and sit. "I *am* quite sorry about having to hold you hostage. It wasn't my original intention. At the request of one of my own, I saw that it was in my best interest to keep you here with us."

I said nothing; instead I leaned my head against the glass and fought the bitter taste of revenge in my mouth. The man on the couch cleared his throat as he crossed his legs before beginning to speak again. His voice was deep and slow. Even with my thoughts inconsistent and hazy, I could hear the authority behind his words. "I have watched you closely for some time now," he said before taking a drink.

My own thirst burned in my throat with such intensity that I would have jumped across the room to take the man's drink, if I had the strength. Feeling the newest drugs they forced me to ingest take effect, my legs began to give way and I slid to the floor, too weak to move.

"Please do make yourself comfortable," the man said, not skipping a beat. "As I was saying, you are extremely intriguing, Taylor. Being half human and half vampire should leave you *very* weak with all the cadendum coursing through your veins, but just look at you," he said, intrigued. "You're still fighting to retain what little strength and sensors you have... *incredible*. It is because of this I have come here to tell you that when you are ready I would like to have you join my team. To be quite honest, I think you

would make a terrific addition to Gavin. His strength surpasses all. He is by far my best soldier and you, Taylor, have somehow piqued his interest. It is my wish that you continue to win him over. It is him I want training you."

His last statement got my attention and I turned to face his voice.

"Please come, sit," the man continued. "I would like to introduce myself properly."

Clenching my jaw, I summoned what strength I could muster and stood up, holding onto the glass wall. Blurry visions filled the room as I stumbled to the couch opposite his where I sat staring at his blurry face, trying to make his features out. "Who are you?" I asked, emotionless.

"Yes, that's what we need, open dialogue. We must communicate if we are to be friends," he said, crossing one leg over the other once again.

"I am no friend of yours." My voice was harsh. It apparently amused him even more because I could hear him smile as he said his next words.

"Of course not, not yet anyway, but that will all change over time. I see much promise in you."

"Who are you?" I repeated myself.

"My name is Arkos. Your father was a dear friend of mine."

"Yes, I do remember him speaking of your friendship," I said, nodding my head up and down, "the one you had until you decided to try to kill my mother." Even though I couldn't see him well, I purposely bore my eyes into his face where his eyes would be.

"Ah, I see dear old Aramis is still distorting the story. I assume that he never told you of your mother and me. No matter. It's of no relevance now. I came here to visit you and see how everyone has been treating you. I can see, no pun intended of course, that you are somewhat discontent, and for that I apologize."

"Why have you not killed me?"

There it was again, the same sinister laugh. "Now why would I want to kill you? You are a chosen one of the most High... am I correct?"

I said nothing.

"I wouldn't dream of killing you, Taylor. You would be of no use to me dead."

"What use to you am I now, here? I can't even see straight."

"It's all about timing, really. You are here because this is where you are supposed to be. *This* is where you belong. It will all be clear to you in due time."

"Where in the hell am I?" I asked, annoyed with his vague answers.

The wicked man uncrossed his legs and sat up, moving closer to me so I could see his face a little better. "I see much in your future, Taylor. You remind me of me when I was younger. You just need the right mentor and you will do great things. You want to know where you are. I will tell you," he said casually. "You are deep in the water. The blue you see behind the wall you were hitting when I entered the room—that is the ocean. The fish and sharks are your constant companions. It's quite beautiful, actually. I know you will appreciate it as much as I when you regain your vision."

"And when will that be?" I spit out.

"When you can prove to me that you are not going to try to escape. Until then I'm afraid that I have no other choice. I am genuinely sorry for that. It is my hope that you won't be in this state much longer."

Arkos stood up slowly. I did as well, causing him to laugh slightly. "What about Haden," I asked through my teeth. "Can you tell me how she is before you leave?" I knew it was a long shot but I had to try.

"Of course... of course, Gavin has kept a close eye on your wife. I must say that I think he's grown quite fond of her as well."

I instinctively tightened my jaw in response to his words.

"No need to worry about Gavin, Taylor. Your Haden has moved on faster than even I expected. Once she was convinced of your death, she had no problem going on with her life. There is a new man in her life. From what I have been told, he has filled your shoes with ease."

He had to be lying. I knew Haden. There was no way that she would let go that fast. There would be *no* way that she would take anyone's word as fact when it came to my demise.

"You will learn as I did, Taylor, that women are not to be trusted, and that includes your precious Haden. You will see it as I do one day. For now I must be going. I enjoyed our talk immensely. We must do this again."

Before I could say anything else, Arkos was gone just as fast as he appeared. Left alone with nothing but repugnant thoughts of my pregnant wife in some other man's arms, I took a few steps toward the door, following Arkos, and almost fell over. I was too weak. I grabbed the couch, and with what little strength I had I picked it up and threw it against the only blocker from me and the sharks. The couch made a loud thud before falling to the ground. I stumbled to the large Plexiglas wall and screamed as I pounded my fists against it with no avail. I fell to the ground, screaming my wife's name, praying that somehow she would hear me calling out to her. *Haden!*

14. Darkness Dwells

I put the last of my PJs in the suitcase and zipped it shut as I exhaled. The time had come to leave my beloved cabin. There was nothing left here for me, not anymore. One day I would bring my baby back here, back to the place her father spent so many hours with family and friends building a home for us. He or she may never get to look into the eyes of their daddy, but one thing was for certain; they would never question his love for them. It was obvious around every corner of the cabin. Swan Lake in a sense had become my home and it hurt to leave. It held some of the most precious memories I would ever have.

I pulled the heavy suitcase off the bed, letting it fall to the floor with a thud, when my cell phone rang, startling me. I didn't recognize the number and answered it apprehensively. When I heard Timber's voice I exhaled, relieved that it was my favorite warrior wolf and friend.

"Hey there, she-wolf. I hope I didn't get you at a bad time."

"Not at all," I said, choking on more tears that had surfaced out of nowhere after hearing his voice. The last time I saw Timber, Taylor was with me, alive and well, and now—well now he was gone. It all seemed so unreal. I wiped my eyes and took a deep breath. "On the contrary, I had been meaning to call you to thank you for all your help. My life just went kind of crazy recently." I said pushing past the tears. Surely he had heard the news about Taylor. Being a guardian of sorts over me, he would have been notified immediately by my father.

Timber cleared his throat. "I was actually calling to offer my sympathies and see if there was anything you needed."

I plopped down on the bed and sighed. "Unless you have a remedy for a broken heart, I'm afraid there isn't much you can do for me," I joked halfheartedly. Timber wasn't stupid. He knew that I wasn't *really* kidding. There *wasn't* anything anyone could do for me. My heart was on a long slow journey and I was only along for the ride by force. We just weren't on the same page these days. I had decided to move on, for Taylor and our baby's sake. My heart was a different story. It didn't want to let go and stop hurting. The battle between my heart and mind seemed to rage on daily until finally I decided to respect it.

"Sadly, I don't have such a remedy... I do, however, know of something to heal broken bones quite speedily if you're ever in need," he chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. "Lee also wanted me to apologize for not offering you his condolences himself. He is a busy man these days." Timber stopped briefly before beginning again. "I know now's not a great time for you, Haden, but there is something I feel you should know. Things are changing in Nostovia. An unsettling feeling has flooded the forest recently. There are rumors that the location of our world has been compromised. If that's the case, it's only a matter of time until the rumors take the form of truth."

As I sat on the bed listening to Timber talk about his infiltrated world, I felt like an idiot. I had absolutely no clue what he was talking about. What did he mean, "His world?" I had never bothered to ask where Nostovia's exact location was. I just assumed it was in another country, not another world.

Before I could ask, Timber continued speaking. My scorching curiosity would have to wait. "With the recent happenings in your neck of the woods, it's made one thing clear. There *will* be a war, it's just

when that's the question. It's caused quite a buzz with our people. Normally we don't involve ourselves with your world, but now it's too late. It's only a matter of time, Haden. You need to be on guard. They *will* come for you."

I sat still while I rummaged through several questions in my head, hoping I would pick the right one, when Timber told me that he had to be going. He apologized for the abrupt goodbye and said he would be in touch soon. Feeling like someone stole my burger from me right as I was about to take a bite, I shut the phone, staring at it. *That* was weird.

Never before had I heard anticipation in Timber's voice. Today though, it was definitely there. Listening to him warn me, I had no choice but to believe him. I would do just what he asked. I would be on guard. My baby's life depended on it.

I lay down on the bed one last time and pulled Taylor's pillow close to me, inhaling what was left of his sweet smell. His scent was still fresh even though it had been months since his head last rested on it... a gift from God maybe. The fact that he seemed close to me in that instant was all I could think about. Burying my face in his pillow, I inhaled everything that was left of him, letting it resonate through my body like a surge of electricity. He was still fueling me in spirit. I smiled, feeling his love engulf me.

No matter how much I tried to convince myself that I would be okay without him, it was nothing but a lie. No matter how happy things would appear to be on the outside of my life, my heart would be shattered into a million pieces and nothing could repair the damage done. I had to be strong for our baby. Without him that would be impossible. That's when I realized that I didn't ever have to let him go. I would keep him with me always. I placed my hand over my belly where our baby slept. "Your daddy will always be with us in you." I closed my eyes and pictured Taylor's gorgeous face. *Forever*.

"You ready?" Melly poked her head in, all smiles as usual.

Springing up, I felt a wave of dizziness wash over me. Melly ran over to me, and in seconds Talon was hovering over us.

"What happened?" his eyes met hers and then mine.

I laughed seeing how frantic they were for no reason. Melly joined in my laughter but Talon only rolled his eyes, smiling. When we were all finished giggling, I told them that my pregnancy book said that sometimes expectant moms get dizzy when they sit or stand too fast. Clearly I brought it on myself. Luckily they believed me.

"K, I'm ready to go," I said, pointing at my luggage.

"Awesome," Melly burst out. "Bummer you packed for nothing. Her laughter filled the room.

I looked from her to Talon, who was shaking his head again and smiling. "Aramis wants us here a little longer while Kenton Manor is getting its security beefed up. Timber called in some wolves to hang out here until we leave. Swan Lake's packed. No pun intended," he laughed.

"That was a *good* one," Melly giggled, impressed. "I'm rubbing off on you."

Talon put his arm around her neck, pulling her toward him playfully and then releasing her. "Thanks, Mels. I'll take that as a compliment."

A sudden knock on the doorframe got all of our attention. There Kasey stood silently, leaning up against the doorframe grinning. My eyes accidentally locked into his as he began to speak, only looking away after he winked at me. "It's about time we get going."

Totally confused yet again, I looked at Melly while lifting my hands and shoulders. "Am I always the only clueless one here?"

Shaking her head no, her eyes darted from Talon to Kasey. "Not this time, sis. So where are we headed gentlemen?"

"A bonfire with friends," Kasey answered with a smile.

Instantly, excitement surrounded Melly like the sun. I might not have grown up with my sister, but in the time I had been around her there were quite a few things I had learned rather fast.

One of those things was Melly's intense love for fire. Many a night she and Brad could be found out back sitting in front of a fire, the coral hues of the flames dancing across their perfect faces.

Melly looked like she was about to jump out of her skin. "Does Brad know?" Kasey and Talon both nodded yes consecutively. "Alrightly then, see ya downstairs." And with that she was gone like a flash of light. Talon offered me his hand to help me off of the bed and I accepted, thankful.

Unfortunately, the idea of a huge fire with tons of people surrounding it didn't thrill me like it had my sister. Maybe it was because of everything I had already been through in my life. I was getting to where I could smell trouble miles away. They couldn't fool me. This was a meeting of some kind. Timber's call had already thrown my flags up. There would be no ghost stories and s'mores tonight. If I was right, it would be an introduction into the future of our kind and what that would mean for us new bloods. The purebred wolves were sent here with us for a reason. I was pretty darn positive that it wasn't *just* to protect me. If Timber was right and their world had indeed been infiltrated, it was time they step it up. This wasn't just the vampire's problem anymore. Somehow, in the still of the night it had morphed into something much larger. It was now the wolves' problem too.

Laughter immediately pulled me out of my head, bringing me back to earth with a quick jolt. I had been so consumed in my thoughts that my walking speed had apparently slowed down drastically. I was now trailing behind my brothers and sister with Kasey by my side. His gentle snicker made me smile reflexively. Narrowing my eyebrows, I questioned his eyes with mine. "What's so funny?" I asked with a smile. "I'm just taking my time and enjoying the night air," I laughed.

"Oh is that it," he said, his grin spreading across his face even wider. "It's quite incredible you know... I can *literally* see how fast your brain is working. I take it you have a lot going on in there?"

Picking up my walking pace, I chuckled. "Yeah, you could say that." I didn't feel like volunteering information on how my brain was spinning in circles, so I smiled sheepishly and continued walking faster. Voices grew louder the closer we came to the meeting grounds. Smoke rose above the trees, encircling them almost as if it were a barrier.

"I love the smell of burning wood," I blurted out of nowhere. "It reminds me of camping trips my parents took us on when we were little." Kasey smiled, listening attentively as I spoke. "I've loved fire for as long as I can remember. Not as much as Melly, but I have always found peace deep within its flames. I could get lost for hours staring into them."

Kasey began to slow as we approached a slight rising in the mountain. "Are you sure you're feeling up to this? If not, we can turn around and go back."

There was no end to this man's kindness. I took a deep breath, pulled up my big girl pants, and said that I would be fine. Whatever was going to be talked about tonight was definitely something I wanted to know. I was so over being left in the dark. It was time I got over myself and started thinking of what was going on around me.

Crossing over the mountainous hill, we could see people gathered at the bottom. They were sitting in a large circle surrounded by forest trees with a huge fire at their center. The clearing appeared to have been created for this very purpose. It reminded me of early Native Americans who commonly sat amongst themselves sharing stories of their past. I could only wonder what stories tonight held.

As we approached the crowd, I could hear Zach's laughter fill the air. "One more time... seriously, all I need is one more time and I'll take you down."

The closer we got, the better I could see Zach and Collin's silhouettes in front of the fire, lit up by the orange light. They were arm wrestling and all eyes were on them.

"Dude, give it up. You are not going to win. Collin's the champion, brother," Patrick laughed. "There's no way your scrawny butt's gonna beat 'em."

I chuckled at Zach's enthusiasm. The sound of my laughter brought everyone's attention to where we were standing. Zach caught my eyes and winked before looking behind Collin, wide eyed. Every muscle in his face tensed up. Collin was now looking at him like he had lost his mind, that is until Zach mouthed something slowly to him, never removing his eyes from the distance behind him. Collin turned around slowly, loosening his grip, and Zach slammed his arm down on the large rock. "Sucker," Zach choked out through bellowing laughter. "There's nobody back there." Zach jumped up and began high fiving people. Collin walked over to Patrick, shaking his head as he put his hand out. Patrick reached deep into his pocket, and now shaking his head as well, he handed Collin money. Zach was at his side instantly, happily removing the money from Collin's hand. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you," he chuckled, walking off.

Kasey and I found empty seats easily enough. People were standing all over conversing. The night was cool and inviting. It had my wolf ready to run. Biding my time, I listened as Kasey and Talon talked amongst themselves until Zach plopped down next to me. "Heya sexy."

Blushing, I tried to ignore Zach's comment. I felt anything but sexy. Thankfully the bouts of morning sickness were only a memory now. It was the swollen abdomen that had me feeling like a bloated Oompa Loompa. Last time I checked, Oompa Loompa and sexy shouldn't ever share a sentence. "What's up Zach?" I smiled.

Before he had a chance to reply, a familiar voice rang out asking everyone to take their seats.

"Timber's here," Zach gestured toward the glowing fire where Timber stood previously unnoticed. "We haven't seen him in weeks. They told us he was away on business," Zach whispered. "This *must* be major." Zach leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he watched Timber intently. The crowd was silent the minute he spoke, the many chairs filling quickly one by one.

Once everyone was seated, Timber sat on the large rock Zach and Collin had just been dueling on. He nodded at those gathered around him and looked up to the heavens. "The night is our home. It is our element; its moonlight sets us free. It has been a safe place to roam because of our ancestors. We have been able to protect the weak in the still of the night for as long as I can remember." He looked down on the forest floor and then directly at me. "That is . . . until now; we fear the safety of the darkness is no more. This is why I asked you all here tonight. Something is happening and we must not be ignorant. You, my new friends, are in the dark about certain things. It was safer to keep it that way . . . but now . . . well now things have changed. You must know everything."

Timber's words sounded like gibberish to me. I glanced over at Kasey, who kept his stare on Timber, and wondered just how much he knew.

"Each one of you has known that Lee stood clear on our kind's stance with the impending war. Wolf residents of Nostovia were not to get involved unless specifically requested by me. Some of you here tonight were the select few I approached. I am here tonight to inform the rest of you that things are worse than Lee and I once thought."

Listening to the intensity in Timber's voice had me wanting to run back to the cabin. I didn't need words to tell me that what he was about to say wasn't just bad, but dangerous... for everyone.

"The information I give you tonight may seem broken," he continued, standing back up, "and some of it will be. Know this, I will tell you what you need to know as you need to know it."

While Timber talked, Talon and Kasey whispered back and forth intently. Leaning in closer to Kasey so I could eavesdrop, my bare arm accidentally touched his, sending sparks flying through my arm. Without looking at me, he pulled his arm in closer to his body. I had never felt anything like it. The initial feeling I could only describe as a warm zap, which flowed into a cool breeze all the way to my core. I took a deep breath in through my nose and sat back in my chair. I was apparently losing my mind.

While my body sat there tingling, Timber motioned for Kasey to come to him. Kasey approached Timber and hugged him. When Timber introduced him as his lifelong friend, I looked over at Talon, confused. He had his gaze fixed on Timber and Kasey. I wasn't even going to bother looking at Zach. I doubt he knew any more than I did. Then again, I was probably wrong. I didn't need to feel like there was no end to my ignorance any more than I already did, so I stopped trying to see if anyone looked as shocked as I was.

Timber stepped aside and looked over at Kasey who flashed his winning smile at Timber, thanking him for his introduction before addressing the many sets of eyes glued on him. "I wish our meeting each other for the first time were under better circumstances. However, that isn't the case tonight. First, I would like to tell you a little about Nostovia, your homeland . . . and mine."

"I thought Lee hated vampires," I whispered in Talon's ear. "How can Kasey be from there?"

"Just listen," Talon whispered back.

"I chose to live in Nostovia many years ago. It was a place of milk and honey . . . everything you could ever imagine resided within that beautiful land. When my services were requested in Europe and the US, I left my homeland but returned often."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Zach raise his hand. "What were your services?"

Kasey stood silently at first. He looked in my eyes briefly and then back at Zach. "I'm a Guardian." No one made a sound, even though I'm sure I wasn't the only one wondering exactly what that meant. All that could be heard was the crackling of the flames dancing in the air. "Because of my job, Timber asked me to speak with you all," he breathed. "Sometimes the world and the people in it aren't what they seem. Humans tend to look at everything as if it were one dimensional. You all were trained to do the same thing, but by your own nature this isn't so. You were born seeing every possible dimension. It is time you take that back . . . tonight. I want you to leave here with your eyes opened for the first time in your lives. There is another kind among us, walking in the shadows. You've never heard of them until now, for it was forbidden to utter their name. They are more dangerous than fifty of you put together. They have unmatched strength. They're knowledgeable, swift like the wind, and indescribably intriguing. They have the ability to entrance others, penetrating their innermost thoughts. To them it is a game. They are real, and they are braver than ever. Years ago, God punished them, and now they're mad. Haden's mere existence has caused quite a stir amongst them."

Every word he uttered reminded me of Gavin. He was a Nightmare. To describe him adequately one would immediately point out his strength, speed, seductive nature and his intelligence, yet never once had I been told that we weren't to say their name. If anything, it was quite the opposite, being tossed around loosely. Nothing was making sense.

"What are they called?" a teenage boy called out to Kasey.

"I'm afraid this is where it gets tricky. I can't tell you that information--not yet."

The boy looked at Kasey and then back at Timber. "How can we know what we're looking for if we don't know what they are?"

Timber spoke up. "You will know. Your senses won't fail you. When the time is right, we will talk more of this. For now the subject is closed." Timber looked around at everyone's somber faces. "We may not be at war now, but don't let the stillness of the night cloud your sight. It is coming, whether it is a year from now or even ten years. It's only a matter of time. The darkness has begun to grow weary." Timber looked back at Kasey, who nodded before taking over the conversation again.

"It's time we tell you a little about Nostovia. You may feel like you know it from Lee's book you read. If so, you couldn't be more wrong. Nostovia is unlike any place you've ever seen. It's not of this world."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Nostovia wasn't of this world? Someone was losing their mind. I should have known better than to venture out tonight. My subconscious was obviously playing tricks on me. *Not of this world*. Psh, I laughed to myself.

Kasey looked over at me, his crystal blue eyes staring into mine. "Some of you may have a hard time finding this information truthful. Let me assure you that it is. You will not find Nostovia on any map you own." I looked down at my hands, breaking the stare. He was dead serious. "Its location was

previously unknown to the ones we spoke of. We are afraid that Nostovia's location has now been compromised. We must all be on guard as the future plays out."

"And in the meantime, what can we do?" Brad asked, his jaw muscles tensing.

"In the meantime, we wait. Don't let your guard down. If any of you see anything suspicious, let either Timber or me know immediately."

The whole conversation was crazy as far as I was concerned. Something was out there, but they wouldn't tell us what? Instead we were supposed to have our antennas up. None of it made any sense to me.

Kasey answered a couple more questions and then came to sit by me again. The minute he sat down, his arm grazed mine, and once again some sort of electric shock sizzled my skin softly, sending a wave of cool heat throughout my limbs. I was completely clueless as to what was happening. All that registered in my head was that he had some sort of electric charge running through him all of a sudden. I had heard about people like him, but had never met any. I couldn't be surprised that he didn't tell me about his weird issue. If it were me, it definitely wouldn't have been something I shared with others. Of course, I would have been lying to myself if I would have said that the rush through my body didn't feel incredible. My own senses were heightened with each accidental touch from Kasey tonight. As Timber closed the meeting, I stood up and turned. Making sure no one was watching me, I began heading back toward the cabin. I was in need of some peace. None of what was said tonight made any sense to me.

"Are you all right?"

There it was again, that hot and cold sensation. Kasey's hand was on my arm. I turned, ending up closer to him than I had planned, the heat from his touch rushing through my body lighting it on fire. I had no clue what was happening. "Yes, I'm fine," I choked out, trying to maintain my composure. I wanted nothing more than for him to pull me into his arms. As much as I hated to admit it, I needed to *feel* loved and that's exactly what I felt oozing off of him. Kasey's touch felt like icy fire. It felt like home, a home I had never been to. His eyes bore into mine and I froze, my body tingling from his touch. He released my arm and I let it fall by my side. He opened his mouth as if he was about to say something. Instead, he swallowed and looked up into the sky. "Can I walk you home?" His words were warm and soft. I didn't speak in fear that I would stumble over my own words, regretting them forever. I nodded and began walking again. Neither one of us said a word as we walked, not stopping until we reached my bedroom door.

"Goodnight," he said softly, his blue eyes taking away my breath. There was something behind them. Something I hadn't seen until now.

I got up on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek softly, feeling my lips tingle. "Goodnight," I said before closing my door behind me. Sighing, the tears began to fall. I wanted my husband. I needed him. I felt *so* alone. Going to Kasey wasn't an option. I just couldn't. Using him was out of the question, and that's exactly what I would be doing. After I changed into my pajamas, I fell into bed. Beating my fist into my pillow, I cried until I drained myself of all energy I had left before falling asleep. The next morning, everyone was bright eyed and bushy tailed, except me.

"We've got to get going or you're going to be late for your ultrasound," Melly informed me. "Are your bags packed?"

I nodded yes as I slowly put another bite of egg in my mouth. Our time at Swan Lake was coming to an end. The security measures at Kenton Manor were finally beefed up and ready for our arrival. Everyone around me was on cloud nine . . . everyone but me. I didn't want to leave the US. When the time came it would be like leaving Taylor behind. That thought killed me, bringing tears beating down behind my eyes.

Today was a big day and I too was supposed to be excited. It was the day that most pregnant women looked forward to, the much anticipated day of my gender ultrasound. We were driving back to Billings where I would hopefully find out whether the little angel kicking around in my tummy was a boy or a girl. After that, we would be boarding the Kenton's jet and off to Europe I would go again. My little baby would be born in North Yorkshire, England, by far one of the prettiest places I had ever seen. Even though I probably would have chosen to have it in the States, it comforted me to know that it would grow up with its daddy's parents. Mine had promised to be on stand-by when the time came for me to deliver.

Taylor's death wasn't easy on any of us, especially his parents. The unfairness of it all was overwhelming in so many aspects. His parents had just gotten him back. To have him ripped from them so unexpectedly was torture. There was no rhyme or reason for what God had allowed.

"Yep, we're ready," I said, rubbing my belly, which had now made its existence quite clear. I had aged another year and my abdomen had flown the coop. Thankfully, no one had pressured me to have a party this year. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't celebrating anything, even my birthday.

I looked back down at my belly and smiled. My little baby bump was my favorite thing ever. I had part of Taylor inside of me and it was obvious to the world. Thankfully, I wouldn't have to give that up for months. "I am so thirsty," I laughed as I got out of the bed.

"We've got that taken care of. Marcus was bottling blood this morning for you so you'd have plenty for the trip," Melly said, grabbing my bags. "I can't wait to know whether I'm having a little niece or nephew. Hey, that reminds me, when is Jenny's ultrasound?" Melly was tossing my heavy bags over her shoulder as if they were filled with feathers.

As soon as I had been informed that I was under cabin arrest weeks ago, I immediately asked to call Jenny. Unfortunately, I wasn't allowed. Gabe mumbled something about the phone being traced. I thought it was a little weird since I was sure that everyone knew where I was anyway, but I was in no mood to question so I assumed it was Jenny's location they were talking about. Instead of talking to her over the phone, I was allowed to communicate to her through Marcus who had kindly been emailing her for me. "She said that she had scheduled it for next week. She wanted me to be there," I said happy as I anticipated sharing that with her. Melly nodded and was out the door with my bags so we could make my appointment on time.

The drive was long and uneventful. I rode alone with Melly and the guys all rode together. Melly tried to be chipper, but there was no way to lift the dark cloud that hovered above me today, no matter how happy today *should* have been. I missed my husband. I missed him bad.

After all the paperwork was filled out, I sat quietly in my seat. The waiting room was filled with largely pregnant women and their husbands. I looked down at my wedding ring and rubbed my belly. All the guys had insisted they come with Melly and me, so all but one were standing next to the seats where Melly and I sat. Zach, on the other hand, was sitting next to the only other pregnant woman

without a man. He was facing her, listening intently as she spoke. I tried hard not to pay attention to the stares we were getting. It wasn't every day that a bunch of vampires and vampire/werewolves were in an OB/GYN waiting room. The other women couldn't keep their eyes from the guys' perfect faces. I surely wasn't one to blame them. They were all extremely handsome men.

My name was called and I got up reluctantly, all eyes on me of course. Melly took my hand and led me through the door. I swallowed the lump in my throat and turned to look at Talon, whose eyes were teary as well. He smiled softly and nodded, urging me on. Once we were in the room and I was all set up, the technician made a comment, assuming that Melly and I were a couple. Her comment made me laugh even though I didn't feel like it.

"Oh gosh no, she's not at all my type," Melly giggled.

The ultrasound technician put the warm jelly substance on my belly and began to move her wand thingy around while we watched the small black and white screen quietly.

"Here's the head... and the spine." The tech continued, measuring as she went. "Do you want to know the sex?"

Her question froze my voice in my throat. I hadn't thought I'd be given a choice.

Melly's eyes were staring holes into me. "Of course you do," she smiled, probing me to answer the woman's question.

I looked at Melly, searching her eyes for strength, and then back at the unbelievably skinny technician while she continued rubbing the goopy wand on my belly. When she looked back at me to get my answer I softly said yes. At this point Melly had moved from the chair to my side, staring intently at the screen.

"It looks like a black and white blob to me," she laughed.

"Oh no," the tech said, "It's much more than a black and white blob. See right here. That's the face. See her eyes and her nose? Now, let's see what this little baby is."

I could no longer hold back the tears when she stopped and said, "Ah, just what I thought. You're having a sweet little girl, mommy. Congratulations!"

Melly started jumping up and down. "I knew it! It's a little Melanie," she laughed as she cried, filling the air with happiness.

Once the tears stopped, I got dressed, wearing a perma-grin on my face. I was going to have a daughter. I was in awe. I followed Melly out to the waiting room where the guys were still the center of attention. All of their eyes turned to me when I walked through the door. Talon was in front of me in seconds, his eyes studying mine.

"We're all having a little girl," I cried through my smile.

Marcus clapped his huge hands together and laughed. "A little Haden; you can't get any better than that!"

Talon put his arm around me and kissed my head. "Congratulations, she's gonna be spoiled rotten."

"So, Gabriella it is," Gabriel laughed.

"No way Jose; no one could handle a little you," Melly teased.

"Congratulations, beautiful." Brad said before pulling Melly into his arms.

Kasey was the last to speak. He walked up to me and bent over, putting his face next to my belly. "Welcome, little princess."

When he stood up, I hugged him and the baby kicked his stomach. He pulled back, smiling. "She kicked me," he laughed.

"I think she likes you," I said playfully.

Thanks to our eclectic group, it had become a show of sorts in the waiting room. As I saw the receptionist slide open the foggy looking sliding glass window and stare in our direction, I told Kasey that we should probably leave the waiting room and out we went. All the pregnant women would have to go back to watching their soap operas to get this much excitement again.

We were on the jet in no time at all, and for the first time I didn't sleep during my flight. I felt great. Actually, I wanted to shop. For the first time in who knows how long I wanted to spend money. Everyone turned and looked at me.

"Totally," Melly agreed.

"Did I miss something? Totally what?" I asked confused.

"When you're excited your thoughts get a little loud," Talon whispered in my ear.

"Oh, my bad," I laughed out loud.

"If Roger would be here he would be singing," Melly said happily. "He would have been so excited that you are getting back to normal." Melly stopped short the minute the words were out of her mouth. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"That's okay, you're right. I am getting back to normal," I smiled, trying to reassure everyone that I wasn't lying. I caught Kasey looking at me, his blue eyes twinkling, and I smiled back.

"So Talon, are the wolves meeting us at the Kentons," Brad questioned.

"Actually, they're in planes around us," he said while reading his book.

Apparently I had watched too many action movies growing up. I could have sworn that I heard my brother say there were wolves in planes all around us.

"Are you saying that we are being surrounded by planes to protect Haden," Melly asked, beating me to it.

"Yes," he said, not looking up.

"Am I the only one that finds that a bit odd?" I asked.

"Yes," Talon said, still not removing his eyes from his book.

"Wow, that must be a darn good book," I said throwing my gum wrapper at him.

He looked up slowly and smiled before going back to reading. "It is... and no... you can't borrow it," he snickered.

"You know I'm not the president of the United States or anything, right?"

"Yep," Talon answered softly. "But you could be if you wanted to." He winked at me and then shifted his attention back to his book.

"You guys are nuts," I said, rolling my eyes.

"We all care deeply for you and refuse to let anything happen to you." Kasey's voice rang out like a gentle dove filling the air with affection. A weird feeling overtook my stomach when my eyes met his. I hurriedly looked away to see Melly staring right at me, her eyes open wide.

"Kasey's right, Haden," Marcus added, completely oblivious to the weirdness in the cabin right along with Talon and Brad. "We can't take any chances."

I looked down at my hands and then back up at Kasey, who was still watching me. His lips curled up ever so slightly in a smile and then he went back to reading his book like Talon had.

I could feel Melly's eyes still on me. "We are so gonna talk later," she mouthed.

When the plane landed it wasn't soon enough. I was the first one out of it and tripped going down the stairs. Luckily Roger caught me.

"Well hello to you too," he laughed. "What an entrance." His bright smile was just what I needed.

"Roger!" I hugged his neck. "I didn't know you were meeting us here."

"Hey, I'm the only one who has missed all the fun lately. Of course I would be here waiting for you, and for you," he said, putting his hand on my belly after he set me down. "Well, I'm dying to know. Is it pink or blue?"

"It's a girl." The words came out of my mouth as if I had been saying them forever.

"I love pink! This little princess is going to have the party of the century," he exclaimed.

"Roger, you're too much," I said, laughing. "There's no need to throw her a party. She's not even born yet."

"It's not about you, dear. It's about me. Do you realize how long it's been since I was able to throw a party?"

"I say let him do it. You could use some fun," Kasey said as he walked past us.

Roger's phone chirped with a new text right as he was about to speak. He read it quickly and smiled. "Sorry about that, Jenny wanted to know if you guys had landed yet. She's been going crazy all day waiting to see you. She had a bit of a scare and we had to take her to the doctor today."

"Is the baby okay?" I asked, worried.

"Yep, it's fine *and* we know what she's having too, but she won't let me tell you," he huffed. "Oh well, we better be off before they send out the firing squad to find us."

When we turned down the Kentons driveway, my stomach got queasy again.

Kasey grabbed my hand. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'll be okay," I said, questioning my own words. I knew that he knew my answer wasn't quite as honest as it could have been, but he let me have my moment. Everything was a blur once we parked. I walked through the familiar halls now guarded by oversized pale men who all nodded at me politely. I stopped and turned to Talon. "Can I please speak to Jenny alone when we're inside?"

Talon exhaled and looked at everyone around us. "I knew you would ask this. Of course you can. We'll all be in the kitchen if you need us." Gabe started to say something until Talon looked at him, silencing him with his stare.

When we entered through the huge doors, they walked to the left toward the elevator and I stopped right before the door in front of me where Jenny waited. I had no idea who was *really* behind the door. All I knew was that she would no longer be the Jenny I last saw—the carefree Jenny of the past. No, this Jenny had been changed. I was sure of it. I could feel her from where I stood. This Jenny was different.

I slowly opened the door and my breath caught in my throat. There she stood, less than twenty feet from me, facing the fireplace. She was looking at the pictures on the mantle. Her straight, wispy blonde hair was no longer short and spunky, but instead it was long, hanging softly to the middle of her back. She turned toward me, her belly protruding from her body just as mine was. Her face was paler than I had ever seen and her blue eyes were now dull in color, framed with dark circles underneath. I had to fight myself from bursting into tears. What had they done to her?

"Haden," she choked as she started to cry.

I ran over to her and hugged her tight, not letting go. We cried together, releasing the pain we had both so desperately been trying to hold in. My best friend was back.

"I'm *so* sorry," she said through tears. "I'm *so* sorry I wasn't there for you and I'm so sorry that I was stupid. I'm just *so very sorry!*" Jenny's petite body shook uncontrollably in my arms as she sobbed.

I took her tired face in my hands and told her that she had nothing to be sorry about. It was I who should have paid more attention. *I* should have been a better friend.

"No, it's not your fault. *It's not.*" she cried. "You warned me but I didn't listen."

I pulled her hand and led us to the couch where we sat. I held her cold hands in mine. "You're so cold."

"I have been since . . . since I got pregnant." She looked down at the floor.

"Who, Jenn? Was it Gavin? I need to know."

"I honestly don't know. I saw who took me but now I can't remember much. His face is blurry in my mind. There were a few of them. Some girl kept forcing me to drink. All I remember was how beautiful and strong they all were."

I knew all too well how vampires seduced women. I knew all too well how easy it was for Jenny to blame herself for getting pregnant—for being intimate with one—with a night walker. "Jenn, it's not your fault."

I could see the shame oozing from her eyes. "I wasn't raped Haden. I wanted it." Her tears were now streaming again from her eyes. "I don't know what was wrong with me."

I pulled her close to me again and let her cry on my shoulder. When she took a breath I spoke. "You may not have been raped, but you didn't know what you were dealing with, Jenny. Vampires are powerful and extremely seductive. Very few humans have been able to resist them, almost none actually."

"You did," she said, looking at me with so much sadness, and my heart ached with such intensity that I suddenly found it hard to breathe.

"That's true, but *only* because of my love for..." I stopped speaking and focused on maintaining what was left of my composure. "I was able to resist Gavin only because of my intense love for Taylor, Jenny. That's the *only* reason why." As much as I wanted to curl into a ball and cry like a baby, I resisted. I needed to be strong for my friend.

"Oh gosh, Haden, they killed him and it's *my* fault. *It's all my fault.*" Jenny's pain was as deep as mine. Oceans of it were spilling out of her heart as she spoke. I had spent the last few months dwelling in my own pitiful emptiness, blaming myself for Taylor's death, and all the while poor Jenny thought it was her fault.

"You listen to me, Jenny. It is *not* your fault that they killed Taylor," I began to choke on my words but continued. "He loved you and wanted to bring you home. That is absolutely *not* your fault."

"How can you say that? It's my fault Taylor's dead. If I wouldn't have been missing, he wouldn't have been out looking for me, Haden. That's the truth. It's my fault he's gone and it's my fault that there's darkness dwelling in me." She was now practically hyperventilating again.

"Breathe, Jenn, just breathe. We'll make it through this together. I'm here now and I won't leave your side."

We sat in silence for a while until she spoke, shocking me with her words yet again. "I almost killed it," she said sheepishly. "I made the appointment, but when I got there I just couldn't go through with it. I wanted it gone from me, Haden. I didn't want to be pregnant. Especially like this."

I watched as my friend continued to pour her heart out to me and imagined the fear pulsating through her.

"Now, I'm so angry at myself. Every time I feel his little movements I think of how easily it would have been to steal his life away from him before he had a chance. Is it weird that I love my baby? Is it weird that I love him even though he was made out of darkness?"

I stopped for a second and sent up a prayer for the right words. I had no idea where I was treading with Jenny just yet. It was more than obvious that she was beyond broken. She needed a miracle to heal her heart and soul. So did I.

"No it isn't weird that you love your baby. There is no argument that this little baby was made out of darkness, but it is also a part of you, Jenn, and you're good. I know things look dreary right now, but I promise you this--you and I will see to it that this baby never lays his eyes on darkness. Do you hear me? He will be good like his mommy no matter who his daddy is. I promise you that. Darkness vanishes when light shines on it.

I took her hand and put it on my belly. Smiling, I put mine on hers. "We're as close as biological sisters. We will raise our babies together to be happy little people no matter how dark their beginnings were, okay?"

I don't know how I got Jenny to stop crying, but all that mattered was that I had. We sat alone for another hour catching up. I did my best to tell how I made it through the weeks following Taylor's death. I told her all about Kasey and how he had been like an angel to me, lighting my way toward the future as he helped heal my present.

"You know," Jenny said, shrugging her shoulders slightly "God could have sent him to you to help you move on."

I wasn't surprised with Jenn's assumption. I too had wondered. "Believe it or not, I thought about that recently, but I just can't Jenn. I love Taylor *way* too much to ever let go," I said as my eyes filled with tears again.

"No one said anything about letting go of Taylor, Haden. You *never* have to let go of him, but you and I both know that he would have wanted you to be happy. He would want his baby to have a daddy."

She was right, but I didn't want to think about it. As I was fixing to tell her that I didn't want to talk about it anymore, a familiar voice rang through the air.

"You rang, my sweet bunch a love." Kiernan was joyfully shutting the door after letting himself in.

"Don't you ever knock?" Jenny griped, teasing.

"Not when you call for your baby's daddy," he chimed in happily. "Aye, look at you two. Yer two pregnant peas in the pod. Well, hello wee one." Kiernan was now kneeling in front of me talking to my belly.

Jenny shook her head. "Not to burst your bubble for the *hundredth* time Kiernan, but you are not my baby's daddy."

"Not biologically, no. I'm no blood sucker, true, but I can be if ya'd like," he said, looking devilishly at her while his hand rested on my belly.

I burst out laughing. "I missed you two so much," I said, enjoying the moment. "There was a time when I never thought I would get to see you two together again."

"Me bunny couldn't stay away from me if she tried," he laughed. "Besides, now we have us a wee one on the way."

"We don't have anything on the way, Kiernan," she huffed.

He sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "She doth protesteth too much," he laughed, sighing through his sweet smile.

There were so many things about my future that I was unsure of, but there was one thing that I knew for certain. I knew that life was short and that time with loved ones was more limited than we could ever imagine. These were the things that I knew. I would never again take any moment for granted—ever.

15. Bittersweet

That night, Jenny, Melly, and I sat up for hours talking like young girls, giving each other manicures and pedicures. My toenails hadn't looked this good in weeks. For a few brief hours, Jenny and I both seemed to set our problems somewhere where we didn't have to focus on them. I caught myself a couple times glancing up at the door wishing Taylor would walk in. Each time, I'd shake it off and bring my attention back to my friends.

I took a big sip of my Dr. Pepper when Jenny looked over at me, appalled. "Um, don't you know that's awful for your baby?"

Taken aback, I didn't really know what to say. "Yeah, kinda."

Jenny grabbed it from me. "I should probably take that from you then." Melly and I stared at her in awe until she put the straw up to her mouth and guzzled it, laughing hysterically as she set it down.

"You are still so gullible, Haden." She had gotten me. I needed to loosen up. After that, I grabbed my drink back and told her to get her own. Of course it didn't work; she just kept stealing mine.

At one point in the night Jenny sat up straight, her eyes wide, once again resembling her Boston terrier, Haylee. For a second I could see the old Jenny resurface. "I've got it! I know exactly what we need."

"And what's that?" I laughed, tossing some cinnamon popcorn in my mouth.

"Tattoos, that's what!"

"Huh," I asked, wondering if she was having some weird hormone surge.

"Seriously, Haden. Look how cool Melly's is. I think we should branch out and get one tomorrow. I'll pay," she smiled, pleased with her idea. Melly sat back and laughed, watching me as she waited for my reaction.

"You do realize that for one, tattoos aren't something you do when you have some *urge*. I don't want to be some old woman with a tattoo that I rushed into. Secondly, umm in case you haven't noticed, Jenn, we're pregnant. Pregnant women don't get tattoos."

Melly grabbed some of my popcorn and looked over at Jenny as if she were watching a movie.

"Who says, Haden? The pregnancy police?"

Melly laughed at Jenny's retort and I shot her a look of annoyance. She quickly coughed, trying to stop herself from laughing.

I didn't really know what to tell my hard-headed friend. It's not like I didn't like tattoos. Actually, I found them really hot. Right now hot was not a word that described me, which clearly meant that I had no business getting a tattoo; not yet anyway.

"Fine, you want a tattoo, Jenny? I'll gladly go with you. As for me, I'll wait until I have the baby and resemble a normal human being again."

Jenny couldn't argue with that, and of course she accepted my offer to accompany her the next day to get one. That night visions of fat, half-naked tattooed pregnant women stole my sleep from me. I was totally traumatized.

The next day came quickly and although it took some work we finally convinced the guys that it would be okay for us to go. They insisted that they follow us for safety purposes, and Jenny kindly insisted that they sit and wait for us in their cars. We girls knew times were getting scary and were in no position to argue. We also knew that there were times in a woman's life that she needed to do something alone. This was one of those times. Jenny took a seat and began searching through a gazillion pages of incredible tattoo artwork. It wasn't long before she called the tattoo guy over and whispered something in his ear as she pointed at one of the pages. He nodded, acknowledging her request.

"No problem," he smiled, walking off to gather what he needed.

Melly walked over to Jenny and tried to catch a glimpse. Jenn slammed the book shut. "Nope, it's gonna be a surprise."

Melly and I made our way to the waiting area where we watched the many interesting people come and go. When Jenny was done, she walked out looking like a pregnant model, some of her previously lost color returning to her cheeks. "Done," she sang.

"Me, me," Melly rang out. "I wanna see!"

Jenny paid the smiling tattooed artist and walked over to where we were now standing. She got a devious look in her eyes and slightly lowered her white, rolled sweat pants so we could see her new tat. I about choked when I saw it. It was perfect. There, on Jenny's lower back was a cute, fluffy white bunny rabbit with red horns.

"It's cute, but a little weird if you ask me," Melly said, confused at what I was finding funny."

"Kiernan calls her his bunny," I chuckled. "It has always driven her crazy."

"Yeah, he can bunny me this," Jenny spat. "My bunny will show him what's up. I'm not his cute *wee little bunny*" she said, mimicking Kiernan.

Melly shook her head, joining in the laughter as we all walked toward the door. "Jenn," Melly said, turning around to look at her. I could tell she was trying to restrain from laughing. "What if Kiernan *likes* your tattoo? He might already know you sport horns every now and then... just sayin'," Now it was my turn to burst out laughing.

"He'll never know," she smirked.

"Yeah right," I teased. Jenny slapped my arm lightly and I laughed harder. I didn't care what she said; he was her knight in shining leprechaun and she was his devilish bunny rabbit. They were perfect for each other. We walked out of the tattoo parlor to be greeted with three pair of eyes staring back at us. Kasey, Talon, and Marcus were analyzing Jenny, yet none of them said anything. Marcus smiled and opened the door for us. We all piled in the suburban, still slightly giggling.

During the brief ride home, a wave of exhaustion washed over me. I couldn't stop yawning. Looking over at Jenny, I noticed that she too looked crazy tired. Before Kasey or Talon tried to tell me that I needed a nap, I told them that I would be retiring to my room for a few hours. They both looked happy to hear it. Melly was immediately on her phone, waving at me as I walked off.

After a brief nap, I awoke feeling rejuvenated. I turned my portable mp3 player on, grabbed my newest book, and walked happily to the most popular family room at Kenton Manor.

Severed, bloody, and left to rot—those were the days of old. They were unspeakable days when those that came before us paid the price for our freedom, the streets engulfed in the name of the power of darkness. Evil hung midair while bodies lined the streets in a collage of corpses. The humans couldn't keep the streets free from debris, no matter their intent.

"Why are you reading that?" I could smell Kasey as he sat down next to me on the couch in the main living room at Kenton Manor, his warm sweet scent filling the air. "Don't you know that it's not good to read that kind of book while you're pregnant?" he teased.

"Who says?" I rolled my eyes. "The baby can't hear what's going on in my head and I wasn't reading aloud." My retort was harsh and I immediately regretted it. "I'm sorry. I'm just in such a rotten mood today," I huffed.

"Actually I bet she *can* hear you. I heard what you were reading the minute I walked through the door. Your thoughts were pretty loud," he laughed.

"Darn it! I can't seem to keep them inside of my head lately," I started to cry.

"Hey there, it's no big deal. I kinda like it," Kasey's voice was as comforting as usual. I looked at him and rolled my eyes again, this time playfully while I fought smiling. "Whatever you do, Haden, do *not* smile. Seriously, that would be awful," he laughed.

True to my recent lack of control, my face deceived me again. No matter how hard I tried not to smile, it was pointless; I did anyway. "It's a fake one," I said, sticking my tongue out.

"Yeah, looks like it," he laughed again.

The sound of his laughter immediately silenced my previous uneasiness. Reading a book about the last vampire massacre was less than pleasant, to say the least, but I somehow found it necessary. No matter how hard I tried to understand why the Stidoniums went on a killing spree, I just couldn't fathom it. All life was precious in my opinion and it wasn't anyone's to take. I sighed and shut the book while Kasey looked lovingly at me.

I laid my head on his shoulder and he took the book from my hand. "All joking aside, Haden, this is a pretty good read," he said, opening it back up.

"Yeah? I just started it. I saw Marcus reading it a while back and thought it looked interesting."

"I would guess that Marcus *doesn't* know you have it now, though. Am I right?"

"Maybe," I chuckled. "Okay, *no* he doesn't, but *hey*, he wouldn't have let me read it until the baby's born."

"And that would be a bad thing, huh?" Kasey chuckled. "I agree with you. I mean really... how could anyone *not* want you reading the story of the largest vampire massacre in history with all its bloody detail while you're carrying that precious baby in there?"

Seriously, you've already established that there's *no* way of her hearing anyone when they speak to her, right?" Kasey said this sarcastically as he moved closer to my belly where his head finally rested. "Hey there, kiddo, your mom seems to think that you can't hear what's going on in her head. Do me a favor and give your mom a good strong kick if you can hear me."

For weeks I had determined that my unborn baby and Kasey had some pact that I was unaware of. It was no secret, to me anyway, that she liked his voice above all others, and just as he asked her to she gave me a kick so strong that his head bobbed on my belly.

"Thanks," he whispered.

"Did you promise her something when she comes out that I don't know about?" I teased.

"Maybe, but that's for her and me to know and for you to find out," he laughed, sitting back up.

His eyes caught mine and they were glistening, tears in them making them look like huge baby blue diamonds. I froze as I stared back, my body immobile. He broke our stare to look down, and then in seconds he was looking back into my eyes. He moved his dirty blonde locks from his face and I saw a tear fall from his eye. I wanted to ask him if he was okay, but no words would come out of my mouth. All I could do was stare at this person in front of me— this man so full of what appeared to be love laced with pain.

He put his hand on mine and chills went down my spine right as the baby moved, surely sensing his closeness. "There's something I need to tell you, Haden." I watched closely as the pain grew in his eyes. "Once I tell you this, if you want me to leave I will. I just care way too much for you *not* to tell you."

Growing up I had never been one who lacked words, but right now I was all out. Instead of speaking, I nodded my head yes and sat quietly, waiting to hear what he had to say. He deserved for me to be a good friend. Something was obviously hurting him and I wanted to know what. Seeing him like this made my heart ache.

He spoke his next words slowly as he looked deep into my eyes while tears filled his own. "Haden, I shouldn't love you the way I do. I never intended to have these feelings for you. It's not right. I know this, yet I can't seem to turn away." He looked down at our hands and continued. "I have spent many a night kicking myself for how I feel, telling myself that I shouldn't stay here, but I can't bring myself to leave. I need to protect you... and her," he said, letting his eyes rest on my belly for a brief moment. "No matter what I do, I can't look away from you. I am here to protect you, yet I feel so much more." Kasey stopped, took a breath, and continued again. "I don't know how to make my feelings for you stop. You have taken control of my soul. There isn't a second that I'm not thinking about you or that little baby. I've tried to hide my feelings and look the other way, but with no choice of my own these feelings for you have taken control of me. I've tried so hard to let go of you, but I can't seem to walk away. I want you. I want *her*," he said with his crystal blue eyes glistening. He placed his free hand on my belly where my little princess kicked him happily.

Listening to Kasey's confession, my stomach felt like it had fallen onto the floor. I had no idea he had these feelings for me. Taylor's face was in my mind immediately and I pushed it out. I couldn't torture myself mourning for a man who would never come back to me. I could feel Kasey watching me while I tried to gather my thoughts.

"If you think it's best that I leave, I will understand." The sorrow in Kasey's voice engulfed the room.

I didn't answer him. I just sat there, frozen. I didn't know what to say. I had no answers. I couldn't think straight.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. I'll leave you alone." Kasey got up and I kept my eyes down, where they stayed until I heard the door shut quietly.

I didn't cry at first. I curled into the fetal position, lying down on the couch, and welcomed Taylor's perfect face in my head. That's when I cried. I closed my eyes while I talked to him in my head, pretending that he could hear me. *How could you leave me? How could you leave me forever? We needed you. Oh how I long for you to come to me in my sleep and hold me as you did before.*

I grabbed the soldered ruby and diamond key and lock pendant from my neck. The little key now rested perfectly inside the lock where it belonged. Once upon a time, the lock itself hung from Taylor's keys as a keychain, the key around my neck waiting to be reunited with its home. Now they were together, a gift from my husband. It had been a sign that we would never be apart again. I held the piece of jewelry tight and kissed it as I continued to grieve. Silently I cried, remembering Taylor giving me the pendant on our wedding night. "The key is finally in the lock where it belongs. To separate them, you would have to break them," Taylor had said as he placed it around my neck. "I will be with you forever." His words rung in my mind as if they were spoken only yesterday, and my heart swelled with fresh pain.

I'm broken Taylor. I'm so broken without you. What do you want me to do? I would be lying if I said I didn't care for Kasey because I do. There's something so special about him. I feel so warm and safe when he is next to me, but I don't want him, Taylor. Dang it! I hate this! It's not him I want, it's you! How could you leave me alone? After I asked myself that last question, the answer was instantly on my heart. I wasn't left alone. Kasey was sent to me right as Taylor was taken from me. Maybe it was divine intervention. I knew that he could never replace my Taylor, but there was no denying how different Kasey was. I had never met anyone like him. He had become my guardian angel and I honestly couldn't imagine my life without him in it. I couldn't let him leave me. I needed him. Besides, I knew in my heart that Taylor would've wanted our baby to have a daddy, and there was no doubt in my mind that Kasey would love my little angel as his own.

I sat up and wiped my eyes. Looking at my wedding ring, I knew I had to find him. Life was too short. I had already lost my best friend and husband. I wasn't about to lose Kasey too. I needed to tell him how I felt. Determination began pulsating through my veins. I wouldn't let myself lose anyone else I loved. I flung open the door and darted into the hall, practically running over Jenny and Kiernan.

"Whoa Nelly. Well, ya wanted to know where Haden was hidin' me bunny." Jenny huffed as he called her his bunny. "Looks like she beat'cha to it," Kiernan said, plastering himself against the wall as if I had thrown him there. Ignoring Kiernan's dramatic moment, I asked Jenny if she had seen Kasey. With a smile spread across her face, it was obvious that she knew why I was looking for him. "Yep, I sure have. Wanna tell me why you're looking for him?" she giggled.

"Umm nope, not so much," I said, annoyed. Now wasn't the time.

"Oh but I think you do," she teased while she watched me stare down the hall.

"Hmm... nope. Can you quit being difficult for two seconds and just tell me where he went?"

"I don't know if you should tell 'er, Jenny girl. By the look on the poor lad's face, I would say he could use some Haden-free time," Kiernan said, smirking at me, his eyes big and playful.

I fought the urge to hit him and walked off. "Forget it. I'll find him on my own."

"Haden, wait; I was just picking," I heard Jenny call out to me. I was in no way turning back around. She and Kiernan were beginning to be two peas in a pod and it was just a little past disturbing at this moment.

I made my way through the halls of Kenton Manor determined to find him when I ran into Talon reading. He was sitting alone on a bench in one of the many halls where they connected one to another.

"Is everything all right?" Talon examined my facial expression as he spoke, indeed sensing my urgency.

"Yes. Have you seen Kasey?"

"No I haven't. I'm sorry. Can I get you anything?" I didn't look in Talon's eyes. He was no dummy and would be able to read me like a book with even the smallest glance.

"No, I'll be okay. If you see him will you tell him that I was looking for him please?" I wanted to cry. I had no clue what to do or where he had gone. What if he left forever? Then what? I couldn't let that happen.

Talon reassured me that he would pass on my message before I turned and left, heading toward the garage. I couldn't pinpoint why, but there was something safe about the three-story garage full of cars. Maybe it wasn't safety, but instead privacy that drew me to it over and over again when I was in need of solace. I saw Nanny Mena coming around the corner and I picked up speed. The last thing I needed was one of the Nannies on my back. Already they were keeping too close of an eye on me as of late.

When I entered the garage I took a deep breath in. No one would find me here. I began wandering past cars, not knowing where I was going exactly. I just kept walking until I reached the second level where I stopped to look at myself in the mirrored wall. I stared at the bulge on my abdomen and shook my head, when I heard him.

"Hello, Haden."

I didn't turn. Instead I locked my eyes onto Gavin's reflection. "Can't you just die already? Oh wait, you already have," I hissed.

"Now now, no need to be rude. I came to check on you," he said slowly, calculated.

"I'm great thanks. Now leave." I turned around and stared through him. "Lucky for you I don't believe in killing while I'm pregnant, but it's probably better that you don't test me."

Gavin laughed softly. "You're pretty when you're angry."

"Are you kidding me?" I asked, annoyed.

"Not at all. It's a good look for you. I am enjoying it very much, thank you." Gavin's eyes looked at my stomach. "And the baby? Is it well?"

"It is none of your business," I hissed.

"I will take that as a yes," he laughed slowly.

"Why are you here?" His presence was testing my patience.

Pretending as if he didn't hear me, he totally ignored my question and instead asked his own. "Please tell me that you aren't falling for Kasey?"

"What did you just say to me?" I asked through my teeth as I instinctively began to crouch.

Gavin laughed louder. "So I see you are."

"I didn't say that," I hissed again, this time lowering my voice.

"Sure you did. It just amazes me that you would choose someone like *that* to take over in your life where Taylor left off. He isn't right for you. You deserve better, Haden. At least Taylor was a fighter."

I realized I was still crouching so I slowly straightened up. Gavin's last words stung, but I fought hard to ignore them. "Better? I suppose you mean you?"

"That is an option, yes."

"That is not an option. *You* will never be an option—ever."

"Maybe not, but I can say that your Taylor would at least understand *that* choice."

"Do . . . not . . . tell me what Taylor would think. His name is more pure than your tiny brain can process."

Gavin nodded as I began walking toward him, toward my way out. I stopped short with his next words. "Maybe so, but he isn't here, is he?"

I walked up to Gavin; stopping right in front of him and looking directly into his dark eyes, I whispered, "I will *never* choose you."

I knew instantly that I had walked into the dragon's lair, so to speak. I could feel the pull that all Nightmares exuded. His sensuality oozed off of his next words, flowing into my ears and melting a deep part of my heart. "You don't know who I am, but I know you. You won't hate me forever, Haden. You can't." Gavin's breath on my neck had me frozen in time, causing me to lose all sense of reality. "We belong together. You will see that one day. I will covet you all my days."

Before I could say anything else he was gone and I was a mess, left alone trying to grasp what he had just said. I attempted to pop my aching neck and continued walking back toward the house. Suddenly the garage wasn't quite as safe feeling as it had once been. All the security in the world didn't seem to be able to keep Gavin away from me.

When I got back to the house I was pleasantly surprised to find it empty. My hope was to make it to my room before I could run into anyone else. As I walked I replayed Gavin's conversation with me in my aching head. The more I thought about it, the more it angered me. He had spoken highly of Taylor. How dare he... how dare he even breathe his name?

I walked past the game room in my wing of the house and heard someone playing pool. Peeking in through the door, I exhaled. There he was, Kasey... alone. I took a deep breath and said a silent prayer, hoping God heard me. Kasey looked up and smiled softly before he made another shot. He didn't say anything. He just held his pool cue and watched me. The love in his eyes was flooded with pain.

I shut the door and walked over to him where I laid my head on his chest and inhaled. His scent was sweet and warm. He took a moment and then slowly wrapped his arms around me. We said nothing. After an unsure amount of time I pulled away a little, slowly and effortlessly. I got on my tiptoes and took in a deep breath right before I slowly led my lips to his. The minute our lips met, a spark of warm electricity shot through my body, giving me the feeling of a warm summer day and a cool spring night all at the same time. My lips rested on his as I took in the sensation while sharing my soul with his. Kasey's lips softened at the touch of mine, but he didn't move and neither did I. It was almost as if it was his first kiss. He seemed hesitant, yet he let me do as I wished. When I pulled away and looked into his crystal blue eyes, this time they were smiling back at me. Now it was his turn. He bent down and kissed me so softly, sending another shock wave through my body, returning the affection I had just shared. Not as two passionate lovers but instead as two souls comforting each other.

This was new to me. It was nothing I had ever experienced, and I knew it never could be. There was intense warmth about Kasey, something that gave me peace and security. Love literally oozed off of him. I knew my relationship with Kasey could never be the same as what I shared with Taylor. No one had to tell me this. I wasn't dumb. What I had with Kasey was special in a way that I would have to learn to accept as the norm. For now, I would have to be content with the security and love I felt radiating off of him instead of the intense emotions Taylor's kisses stirred up in me. I could feel the love behind Kasey's kiss and it soothed my aching soul, a sweet love that I by no means deserved. It was a love that I was sure would overflow to my baby girl. Taylor would be happy that I wasn't alone. He would be happy that God sent our daughter a daddy who would love her and her mommy so fully.

"So, how do you feel about losing a game of pool to a pregnant woman?" I teased.

"Bring it on," he laughed, his eyes looking like the summer sky.

I was just beginning to not lose, if that's what you'd call it, when the door flung open with Jenny and Kiernan behind it.

"Man you are so hard to find. I think you are the fastest pregnant women ever," Jenny said, waddling over to where I stood. Jenny looked at the pool table and then at Kasey. "Is she kicking your butt yet?"

"Something like that," Kasey laughed.

"Ah, so yer losin' huh, Haden? Gimme that." Kiernan took my pool cue and took over my game. "Now let's see who the girl is," Kiernan laughed, teasing Kasey.

"One of these days someone is gonna eat you for lunch if you don't learn to control your big mouth," Jenny griped.

"Shh, me love, I've got to concentrate on repairing the damage Haden did to her game."

Jenny pulled me away and whispered in my ear, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You know what. Don't make me beg."

"Beg for what? I have no clue what you're talking about," I chuckled.

"Why do you insist on being so darn difficult? Okay, so are you two together yet?"

"We're playing pool aren't we," I laughed a little too loudly. Both guys looked at me—one with a much happier expression than the other. It was pretty obvious that Kasey was whopping Kiernan's butt now.

"Oh my gosh, Haden," Jenny said, stomping her foot like she did when we were kids.

"Okay, okay, I'll answer you." The little three letter word I needed to say just wouldn't come off my tongue. I knew that it was true, but announcing it, releasing it into the air, made it all even more real. Taylor was never coming home. "Yes." There, it was out and I was free to let go. I could only pray that it would be that easy.

"I knew it! He is so freakin' hot! I mean he's no Talon, but boy he is a close second. You find the yummiest of creatures."

Listening to Jenny ramble on about my new life and how lucky I was brought instant tears to my eyes. Lucky? Was I really? I was in love with a man who was stolen from me. I would never see his perfect face or clover green eyes again. He would never hold me and sing me to sleep when I needed him to. He was gone from my life forever and yet I couldn't let him go. Even with God sending me someone as special as Kasey, I couldn't make my heart stop aching for my husband. Would it ever?

"Are you listening to me?" Jenny's voice was getting annoyed. She obviously could tell that my mind was not with her.

"Sorry," I apologized.

"That's okay. I was just telling you that after I have this baby boy and get my body back, I was wondering if you would think about hooking me up with that ultra-gorgeous brother of yours."

"Gabriel? Sure," I teased.

"Oh Lord no. Are you nutty? He's huge. Like statue huge—makes me nervous," she laughed. "You know who I meant."

"Of course I did." I looked up to see Kasey smiling at me as if I was the most beautiful thing ever, and I couldn't help but smile back at him. He was pretty darn cute himself. Maybe my future wouldn't be so bad after all.

Right as Kasey made another shot, the door flew open and in walked Roger, Gabe, and Marcus. "Can we play?" Marcus asked, his deep voice vibrating my chest.

"Only if you want to lose to Kasey," Kiernan huffed. "It's like he's been playing this dumb game for hundreds of years." Kasey smiled at Kiernan and then at me.

"I've just had some good news is all," Kasey said, flashing his bright smile as he playfully watched me.

Gabe ran over to Kiernan and took the pool cue from his hand. "Wrack 'em up brotha." I laughed as I watched Gabriel pop his knuckles and then his neck. "Give me whatcha got. I can take it. I ain't no pansy." Kiernan huffed at Gabe's words. "Just pickin', little dude."

Kiernan and Marcus started playing together at the table next to the one Kasey and Gabe were now playing at.

Roger stood by my side and grinned as he watched Kiernan dance around the table with his pool cue. "I've never seen your friend Kiernan play, but he's gonna have a fight on his hands with Marcus. He rocks socks."

"What did you just say?" Jenny laughed. "Rocks socks? That's freakin' funny." Roger blushed and walked over to Marcus who had just gotten three balls in, in a row. "Dang, he *is* good," Jenny exclaimed.

Marcus smiled kindly at her comment and then motioned for her to come to him. "Why don't you give it a try?"

Jenny laughed, "No thanks, I'll pass."

Kasey's eyes found mine once again, this time even more playful than the last. He had to have been thinking what I was. *Can Jenny and I play too?* I asked him in my head. He winked at me and stepped back. I laughed, taking his pool cue from him. *Thanks.*

Upon seeing me grab Kasey's stick, Jenny's face lit up. Gabe handed her his pool cue and laughed. "Oh heck yeah, now it's *on*," she mused. "Haden and I are gonna show you how it's done."

I looked at my friend and narrowed my eyes. "Bring it on sister," I grinned devilishly.

"Oh you know it!"

Gabriel laughed out loud. "This is gonna be more fun than I thought. Suddenly the room was filled with Timbaland blaring from the jukebox. Roger was walking away from it smiling. He moved his body to the beat as he walked; the flow from the music through his limbs had me momentarily somewhere else. I had never looked too closely until now, but suddenly it was so obvious just how incredibly cute he was. His boyish charm was adorable, and of course having rhythm never hurt anyone either. It was beyond me why he was single.

"By choice, Hun," he sang as he dance-walked past me. Apparently I was going to need classes on how to keep my brain quiet. Roger nodded, smiling as he and Melly danced together. "It's your turn, Haden," he said, motioning his head toward Jenny who was staring at me after she broke.

I got the ball I wanted in my sight and chalked up my stick. Leaning over, I tapped the white ball with just enough force to make it go right where I wanted, sending my ball of choice into the pocket I

chose. Instinctively my body began moving to the beat. Jenny laughed while she watched me walk around the table. She stood in front of the white ball, grinning. I winked at her and she moved out of my way. Having the ball in my sights, I bent over once again. This time though I looked up and my eyes met Kasey's. A strange sensation tickled my spine as I took my turn, missing the white ball altogether. Jenny and Gabe burst out laughing.

"I would have missed too if someone was looking at me like that," Jenny whispered in my ear with a chuckle before she walked toward the table to take her turn. Feeling like a total idiot, I tried to hide my blushing and stepped back, giving her some room. "Son of a freakin' monkey," she shouted. I watched as she kept trying to position her body. Her little baby bump seemed to be getting in her way. When she finally had enough, she sat up on the side of the pool table and situated herself until she was positioned how she wanted to be. Just as I knew she would, she nailed it, two of her balls flying into one hole. She jumped down and everyone was hooting and hollering. Enjoying the attention, Jenny lifted her hands in the air and began dancing, spinning around in circles, letting her long blonde locks fly—that is until she bumped into Kiernan. She pulled back, laughing, until she saw his face was plastered in pure amusement as he stared at her lower back.

"What was *that*?" he asked pointing to where Jenny's new tattoo lay.

"Nothing," she said spinning around and walking back to the table. Everyone in the room who knew what it was, was now laughing.

"I saw something," Kiernan said, not giving up. "Do you have a tattoo?"

"Mind your own beeswax, Kiernan," Jenny demanded.

Kiernan wouldn't have been himself if he would have left it alone. Instead, he walked over to me and looked me dead in the eye.

"Not fair," I griped, looking at Jenny. "Don't bring me into this."

"Oh fine, Linky, yes I have a tattoo." Jenny was hopping back on the pool table to take another turn, missing miserably. "See what you made me do?" she huffed, jumping down and walking toward us. "Here, now you can see." She lowered her light pink sweats just enough for him to see it, but only for a second.

Kiernan's breath caught in his throat. "Aye... it's sexy and you got it fer me, didn't cha?" Kiernan boasted.

"Don't flatter yourself, Kiernan. I happen to like bunnies."

"Sure ya do," he said, grinning from ear to ear.

The rest of the night Kiernan was on cloud ten. Jenny's feisty tattoo had taken him to a whole new level of happiness. We all just sat back and enjoyed the show.

16. Venomous Vixen

"What are you doing?" I asked Jenny as I watched her tiptoe down the hall toward the front door in her pajamas and bunny slippers. "It's three in the morning."

"Shh," she whispered, putting her finger to her lips and looking behind her. "You're gonna wake up the whole house."

Only minutes before I had been having a terrific dream about Jonathon Ryes Meyers when suddenly I was awakened by the creaking of Jenny's bedroom door. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I squinted at my friend, who still wasn't answering me. "You *do* realize that you're in your pajamas and it's literally the middle of the night."

Jenny turned around and walked toward me. "Of course I realize that, fool. I'm on a mission and you're disturbing me." I laughed a little too loudly and Jenny placed her hand over my mouth. "Seriously, Haden, this is not funny."

"What's not funny?" Melly's chipper voice rang like a softly shaken bell down the hall. "What was I missing?"

Jenny rolled her eyes once more and huffed quietly, "Stupid creaking door."

I laughed again and motioned for Melly to come closer so I could whisper in her ear. "We're on a mission," I teased, making fun of Jenny.

Melly's eyes got huge. "*Oh cool...* what kind of a mission are we on?"

"The mission of 'I'm going to kill my best friend if she wakes up the whole house,'" Jenny bit back before smiling. "Fine, if you two *must* know, I'm on my way to get a handspun chocolate shake."

Melly looked at me and then back at Jenny. "Right now, at three in the morning, you are going to leave to get a *handspun* chocolate shake?" Melly raised her eyebrows curiously at Jenny and then looked back at me. "Was she always like this?" Melly's laughter filled the hallway right along with mine.

"Laugh it up, sister," Jenny whispered to Melly, thankfully ignoring the fact that I too was laughing. "One day you'll be pregnant and then *I'll* be the one laughing at your big butt wanting something in the middle of the night. *Now*, if you two will excuse me, I have a date with a chocolate shake." Jenny started heading toward the front door again and Melly and I followed. "Now what?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"*Now* you have me wanting a chocolate shake too, so I'm comin' with," I said simply.

"Ditto," Melly added.

"Oh goodness, you two are unbelievable. *Fine*, you can come." I laced my arm through Jenny's and Melly did the same on the other side as we walked down the hall, all in our pajamas.

Less than an hour later, mission *Handspun Chocolate Shake* was complete and we were all back in our rooms snuggled safely under our covers. Sadly, as hard as I tried, I still couldn't jump back into the

happy dream I was in before Jenny's loud door woke me up. Instead, I rubbed my belly and sang to my baby until my yawns became more frequent, eventually forcing me to give in to sleep.

The next morning I awoke with a renewed spirit. I was a fighter. Today I would begin living like I was alive. I kissed my wedding ring and asked God to tell my husband that I loved him. Taking a deep breath, I checked the mirror one more time before I met the others downstairs. I had accidentally slept through breakfast thanks to our spur of the moment outing last night and was anxious to see Kasey. There was something so comforting about being in the same room with him. It was almost as if his spirit filled the vicinity with peace. It was unexplainable, but where I was mentally I didn't need an explanation. I knew from experience that peace was hard to come by. I would take it wherever I could get it right now. I put on a new layer of lip gloss and puckered up. Considering how fat I felt, I looked pretty cute. I smiled at my reflection and left the room. It wasn't long before I was standing in the midst of my family and friends.

"That was fun last night. We should do it again. Of course, if you can't hang, Haden, that's cool." Jenny laughed as I yawned.

"Whatever, I can totally hang," I chuckled.

"What'd we miss?" Gabe asked as he and Talon appeared out of nowhere. Right as Jenny was about to go into explaining mode, we heard a shrill scream. It sounded like Alexandra's voice. We all instinctively turned toward the sound.

Both Jenny and I froze. "What in the heck was that?" Jenny whispered. I shrugged my shoulders and we all continued to listen.

"Aramis, come now, hurry!" Alexandra called with all her might.

My mother-in-law's high-pitched scream spilled out of her with such intensity that every head snapped toward her direction. Talon, Gabriel, and Melly took off in a sprint, consequently leaving the two pregnant girls to waddle in their dust.

"Wow, so nice of them to leave us behind," Jenny huffed.

Not paying attention, I looked over at Jenny and shook my head. Quickly I looked up right before I would have run into Kasey. The look on his face screamed awful.

"Oh God, what is it?" I questioned, feeling my stomach turn as I watched his facial expression.

"It's not good, Haden. Maybe you two should stay here until we've assessed everything."

"Are you kidding me?" Jenny huffed. "No way, I am *not* missing out on the excitement just because I'm big and fat. Now scootch, Blondie." Jenny lightly pushed Kasey out of her way. I shot him a look of concern but kept walking forward.

"I take it you aren't going to stay behind either?" He already knew my answer, but I smiled and shook my head no anyway.

Little did I know that in less than twenty feet from me there would be another roadblock. This one Jenny didn't shove lightly. "You have *got* to be kidding me. Kiernan, move."

"Nope, not gonna. Yer gonna turn back around and go eat some breakfast."

"Oh *really*, and I assume that you think you're gonna make me. I think not. Now get outta my way before I hurt you." It was obvious that it was something pretty bad when Kiernan didn't budge. "I said move, Linky, *NOW*. Don't test me. I am pregnant and swollen and I will toss your short butt out of my way if you don't *move*."

When Kiernan didn't budge, Jenny pushed him until he caved, giving into her and moving out of her way. "Fine," he griped, "but don't say I didn't try to stop you."

Jenny grabbed my hand and started pulling me down the hall before she stopped and looked at Kasey, ignoring Kiernan to her left. "Would you please tell me where the drama is located exactly?"

Kasey looked at Jenny and then back at me and shook his head in defeat as he walked in front of us and led us to where the scream had come from. We stopped about ten feet from the front door where everyone was standing in a huddle. As soon as Melly saw me, she nudged Brad who cleared his throat.

"Geez, who died?" Jenny's annoyed words rang out in the silence but were quickly broken by Aramis.

"No one... not yet, anyway. Gabriel, you and Brad take her to the infirmary immediately. Gabriel, you know what to do," Aramis said, his eyes probing Gabe's. When my brother nodded, Aramis continued. "There's plenty in the cabinet until we return. Talon, you come with me. Everyone else... pray. We'll be back as soon as we can." Aramis turned and took his wife's face in his hands, kissing it softly before he turned away from her, disappearing out the door.

My own confusion was fueled as soon as I saw Gabe stand up and the little crowd separate to let him through. He was wearing a bright yellow plastic coat with white plastic gloves that went clear up his arm. I could see that he was holding something large. He flew by me so fast that I barely caught sight of him. Brad was on his tail, following closely behind just as Aramis had instructed. We all turned quickly and watched as he ran down the hall. When he turned the first corner, I gasped as I caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a woman in his arms. She was drenched in blood and wrapped in a blanket that I recognized from the Kenton's collection.

"Who is that?" Jenny questioned, looking around for someone to answer her. "Do we know her?"

Mrs. Kenton wiped her eyes and turned, walking away without uttering a word. Melly looked at Alexandra and then at Jenny. "Brad and I have no idea who she is. She's barely alive though, I know that much." Melly's usually perky face was as straight as a board.

"I need to see her," I said, searching Kasey's eyes.

"I don't think that's a good idea." His response was what I expected, but I didn't let it stop me. I looked at Marcus who was looking at Roger. "Well," I said, turning my stare toward Roger's unusually solemn face.

"Haden, we all know that nothing we say is going to stop you. She was not a real pretty sight though, honey. With you being pregnant we think it's best if you don't have that kind of visual stuck in your head. We all just want to protect you, that's all." Roger's sweet response didn't convince me to stay away.

"How bad was she, *really*?" I asked, waiting patiently.

"Bad . . . very bad." Marcus deep voice shook my soul.

"I'll go with you," Jenny piped in, all perky as if she had just agreed to get our nails painted.

It was decided. I followed the scent of blood through the maze of halls until I could smell it no more.

"The infirmary is downstairs," Kasey said, watching me stare at the wall. "We'll take the elevator and then I'll lead you through the secret passageway."

I felt like a child. It didn't seem like there was anything I could do to avoid being kept in the dark. "We have to follow a secret passageway and *you* know where that is?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yes, I do. I have travelled it many times." His answer was soft, slow, and short, lacking detail. I didn't mind for now, but this definitely wasn't over.

He led us quietly through the elevator doors until we came to a set of stairs that led us down even further. He looked at me and I smiled so that he would think I was okay. The truth was that I felt very weird inside. I could feel my soul being pulled to where they had taken the girl, but I was clueless as to why.

At the bottom of the stairs Kasey held open another door. I walked through and inhaled deeply, feeling like I was suddenly in the filming of some sort of underground movie. We were now in a tunnel made of dirt and large rocks. This was all so unbelievable. Was there any end to the weirdness? I knew better than to ask that question. No, there wasn't. I followed behind Kasey, thankful he was showing us the way as I tried to take it all in. Lit torches lined the tunnels, giving a soft glow to our path.

"Where are we?" I asked, mesmerized, unable to control my mouth any longer.

"Remember the book you borrowed from Marcus about all the homes in England that hid underground tunnels beneath them? Kenton Manor is one of those homes, Haden. We're in one of those tunnels headed toward the infirmary," Kasey answered, turning to look at me as he spoke. "The girl is very ill, Haden. It's why they had to bring her down here," He grabbed my hand. "You have nothing to fear. This is one of the safest places you can be. I promise." Trying to silence my loud head as best I could, I nodded at Kasey, saying nothing. It was a lot to take in.

"This is something I never thought I would ever see," Melly said in awe. "Arkos would kill to have access to the underground world that Aramis and our father created."

Kasey laughed and then stopped, quickly. "Is that what Arkos told you? That your father and Aramis built these?" Melly nodded yes and Kasey chuckled again, confusing us both with his oddly placed laughter. "Arkos is not nearly as smart as he would like to think, Melly. Aramis and Landon didn't build these tunnels. Quite the contrary; these are much older than both Aramis and Landon put together. Arkos doesn't even know they exist. He must never know. Underground tunnels like these were only speculation to most. I knew about them, but I wasn't contacted to help until it was too late." Kasey shook his head and I could see pain surfacing on his face. "Aramis has held himself responsible for your parents' death for years, yet that couldn't be further from the truth. He never could have known about these tunnels. They were a secret, known only to a few. Landon believed in the possibility of an underground world, which is why he began building his own tunnels south of here. Aramis didn't believe that they really existed and tossed them aside as fable. He has regretted not helping his friend search for them every day since your parents' death. It was only by mere coincidence that Aramis purchased a house with underground tunnels such as these. He had no idea for many years."

"This place is creepy and dirty if you ask me," Roger said, sounding like he wanted to take a shower. Everyone else ignored him. We were all in shock at how fast we went from Kenton Manor to some strange old underground tunnel system whose source of light was fire-lit torches.

"So how did they find these beauties?" Kiernan asked Kasey as he rubbed his hand on the rocky walls surrounding us.

"Me."

"You? What's that supposed to mean?" Kiernan asked.

"I showed Aramis." Kasey looked at me and then straight ahead again. "I helped build them. They were created to protect a very special breed."

"Kind of like Haden?" Jenny asked, walking closer to me.

"Kind of," Kasey took a deep breath before continuing. "When my kind first heard of the unsavory buzz Arkos was creating, a few of us decided to do some research ourselves. What we found disturbed us greatly. I befriended Aramis and offered my family's services, which he accepted graciously."

Kasey said no more. He just walked in silence, waiting for someone to ask him who he was, but no one ever did, not even Kiernan. It was obvious to me that he wasn't at all what I had once thought. I had been blinded by my grief. This man by my side had a whole story I knew nothing about. That would change as soon as I figured out what was going on with the girl. Until then, I would continue to walk in a haze of confusion when it came to Kasey's past.

"Not much further," Kasey said, squeezing my hand lightly, sending a warming sensation through my body. It wasn't much longer until we arrived at a metal door. "I need to warn you guys. You can't smell it now, but when I open this door the smell of blood will overwhelm you. If you need to drink, you will find a sitting room through the back door on your right. In there you will find everything you need." He turned his face toward mine and shut his eyes for a second. When he opened them he looked softly into mine. "It's not too late to go back, Haden. I will gladly take you."

I looked deep into his beautiful blue eyes and without saying a word aloud I said, *I can't. For me there is no going back. Please take me to her.* He nodded and then opened the door. He was right; the smell of blood was thick in the air, engulfing my senses. Jenny took a deep breath and sighed, making everyone look at her. Ever since about the eighth week of her pregnancy she told me that she had begun craving blood. At first she refused to drink it. After her first experience in my hidden room, she knew all too well that she didn't like its acquired flavor. What she learned sooner than later was that her baby did.

"I'm *good*, people... no need to stare. The baby is just a little thirsty, that's all. If I get desperate, I'll drain Kiernan," she whispered loudly.

"Kinda difficult, me bunny, since yer not a vampire and yer teeth ain't that sharp," he snickered.

I turned around and shot them both a look of annoyance, hoping they would get the picture so I didn't have to tell them to be quiet. When I turned back around we were in a huge, cold room lined with mirrored walls. Metal tables with IVs lined the back of the large room. To the far right of the room, it looked like a lab with glass tubes neatly placed on the counters everywhere. To our left were at least fifteen gurneys lined up against the long wall. Toward the back of the room was the one that held the bloody girl's body.

"This was the closest infirmary to us. I'm sorry. I know it must be an awful sight for you. Being the closest to the house, it had to be the biggest. This is where everyone was brought at first during the dark times," Kasey said as he guided me to the table where Gabe and Brad stood hovering over the body.

All I could see was long, straight raspberry red hair hanging down off of the table. Brad, who had been standing next to Gabriel and in front of the girl, turned around and walked to Melly, taking her in his arms. I let go of Kasey's hand and walked slowly over to where Gabe stood like a statue. What I saw was not at all what I had previously expected to see. What I once imagined to be a bloody, mangled person was instead something very different. There before me was a puffy person in a hospital gown.

"She's so swollen," I gasped. "Is she alive?"

"For now, but not for much longer if Aramis and Talon don't hurry the heck up," Gabriel said, annoyed.

"Where did they go?" I questioned, seeing the girl's bloody, torn clothing in a neat pile on the floor.

"They went to get the antidote, but if we don't administer it to her in less than an hour she *will* die," Kasey interjected. "She has been poisoned."

I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that this person I had grown to love over the past weeks had suddenly morphed into a totally new person, or had he. Had I instead made him out to be the way I wanted him to be? How did he know all of this? How had I missed it when it had been in front of my face the entire time?

Trying to steady my thoughts, I glanced over at Gabe, who was checking the woman's IV blood drip, which oddly enough wasn't dripping, and suddenly I felt like a proud mother. Gabe's usual silliness

had gone out the window the minute he had to act. I had been so blind. I looked up at my brother and wondered if he bore any resemblance to our father.

"Yes, I do," Gabe smirked. "He was one handsome man, and so am I." As his smile slowly spread across his face, I joined him, giving into my own smile.

I tore my eyes away from him and let them rest on the swollen, pale girl who looked like she was asleep. I went to touch her face and Kasey grabbed my hand, stopping me quickly.

"Don't touch her. The poison can enter through your skin," he said as he moved my hand into his. "This poison was created specifically to kill vampires. It inhibits the body's ability to absorb blood. The poisoned victim can drink, but their thirst is never quenched. The more they drink, the more their body fills. Eventually it comes out. That is how Alexandra found her. She was covered in her own blood and had been dumped on the doorstep."

Gabriel walked off and I looked at the IV filled with blood. "Then why the drip?"

"Once the antidote is administered, she will need fresh blood."

"And if she doesn't get it soon?" I asked, studying his features.

"She will die," Kasey said, pained. "You don't need to see this, Haden. Let me take you home. You can do nothing for her. She will be fine in Gabriel's care."

"No, I don't want to go home. I want to know what's going on, Kasey." I turned toward him. "How old are you?"

He smiled the soft smile that I had grown so accustomed to recently, and I almost forgot what I had just asked him. "How old do you think I am?" he teased, his smile getting even bigger.

"Um, you look like you're not much older than me, but something is telling me that I've been drowning in my crazy pregnancy hormones for too long. I believe that I've missed something very important about you."

"You do, do you? Why is that?"

I could see that he was trying to drag me on as long as I would let him. For some reason he was always amused with me. "Well, for starters... *all this*." I spun around as I waved my hand, pointing around the room. "No one my age would know about this."

"Are you sure about that?" he smiled again.

I walked away from the girl and quickly noticed that we were alone. "Where did everyone go?"

"They're all hanging out in the lounge. Wanna go meet them?"

"No, I do not want to go meet them. I want answers." "All right, ask away."

"How old are you? I want an honest answer."

"Mentally or physically?" he laughed, stopping when he saw I was not amused. Inhaling deeply, he said, "I knew the time would come when you'd ask this. Are you sure you want to know? It might change the way you see me."

"Of course I do. I asked you because I want to know the truth." My heart began racing as I waited for his response.

"I am over two hundred years old. Next question."

My jaw must have dropped because he laughed out loud. "Did you just say that you are *over* two hundred years old?" I asked, positive that I had heard him wrong.

"Yes," he smiled lovingly at me. "You asked an honest question and I gave you an honest answer."

"You said *over* two hundred years; exactly how much over two hundred, and how do you appear to be so young?" I was staring at him in complete shock.

"Really great hair products," he laughed again, ignoring my first question.

I knew by the look on his face that I was lucky he told me what he did, so I chose to let him ignore my question about his exact age. "I meant, how come you don't talk different from us if you're that old?"

"If... eh?" he chuckled again. "You don't believe me?"

"No, I do... I mean... I guess I do. Why would you lie? You'd gain nothing."

"Very true," he agreed.

"So why don't you talk different?" I repeated my question, hoping he'd answer me this time.

"Oh that. Well, when you have lived as long as I have you tend to need to fit in as the times change. It's important that you make it your businesses to learn the new culture changes. It's really not that difficult, and as you can see, even the smartest out there have no idea of one's real age. Even they can be fooled by the best. When you've been in existence as long as I have, you tend to be forced to become a master of the times, I guess." He softly touched my cheek and then let his hand drop to his side. "Does my age scare you? I could have told you I was twenty three, but that would have been a lie and I would never lie to you."

I had no time to say anything in response because right then the metal door slammed open and Aramis and Talon glided in. "We got it, Kasey."

Talon was at the girl's side in seconds, injecting some orange liquid directly into her heart. I suddenly felt dizzy and started to lose my balance. Aramis was closest to me now and caught me immediately. "Why is she here?" His question to Kasey was serious, yet respectful.

"She insisted, Aramis." Kasey's authoritative tone filled the room. For the first time I could hear his true age. How had I missed it? He hadn't been lying to me. "She needs to know everything for her own safety. I won't let anything happen to her. I give you my word."

"Hello, you two, I'm right here. I can hear you talking about me." My father-in-law kept his arm around me, making sure I was stable. "I'm okay, really. I just get a little queasy with needles for some reason lately."

A huge laugh filled the room and I turned to see Gabe, Brad, Melly, Marcus, Roger, Jenn *and* Kiernan coming out of the back room. "You're a prophetic child and you can't stand needles," Gabriel said, laughing hysterically. "You crack me up."

"Leave her alone, Gabe," Melly said, punching his arm.

"Watch it, little sis. You don't want none of this." He nodded his head up and down like he was some world wrestler while he laughed.

"Everyone, please be quiet," Aramis said as he held his hand back to silence everyone. "It has worked. She can hear us now. It will only be a moment."

Mere seconds after he said those very words, the red head's eyes flew open. She didn't move. Instead, she lay still, looking around her. When she saw Aramis she hissed at him. Talon walked to where the rest of us were standing to give Aramis plenty of space.

Gabriel, however, instinctively made his way through us over to her. "Coming through... coming through... on my way to visit a psycho chick." Aramis moved slightly to the right in order to let Gabriel get close to her. "So Red, what's your issue?" he asked as he approached her. She hissed again and spit in his face. Gabe calmly wiped it off and Melly laughed. When Gabe turned around to look at her, she had her head hidden in Brad's armpit trying to contain her laughter. "Laugh it up, Mels, but Red here is gonna apologize to Aramis for hissing at him or she's gonna regret it."

"Dream on," the angry redhead hissed through her teeth.

"Oh she speaks," Gabe said, amused. "You see sweetheart, if it weren't for this kindhearted man you would be only moments away from death instead of hissing and spitting. So you are going to be a good little girl and you are going to thank him... *right now*." There was seriousness in Gabriel's voice that had me frozen in my tracks. This was a side of him I had never seen, and it was one I didn't know if I ever wanted to see it again.

"I said *no*" she said before spitting on him again.

"Hmm . . . seems to me like we overhydrated her, Kasey. I guess I should go ahead and detach her IV. No need to waste all that precious blood on her when she clearly doesn't need it anymore."

"No," she screamed. Gabe removed the IV from her arm and she threw her body around in protest. In mere seconds her body had un-swollen and she resembled a normal human. She was extremely pretty in a frightening sort of way.

"Jenny girl, can you get me a warm bottle of blood please. I sure could use some right about now." It was very obvious that Gabriel was taunting the girl and he was enjoying it immensely. The rest of us kept our mouths shut and let him work on her.

Jenny waddled over to Gabriel and handed him the bottle, shivering as the girl hissed in her direction. "Maybe she's mad because she'd rather be dead than red on the head," Jenny said as she walked back over to Kiernan, who was now laughing with her. Jenny's remark clearly struck a nerve with the diabolical beauty.

"I would watch what you say, Blondie. I know where you live." The stranger's threatening words had everyone's ears perking up instantly.

Jenny didn't skip a beat. "Of course you do, everyone does . . . duh." She turned to Kiernan again and laughed, "She's just angry that she's pale and in an ugly hospital nighty on a cold table with a bunch of strangers staring at her."

Jenny's last remark sparked an intense anger in the woman and she began thrashing her body all over, trying to break free. I shot a look of anger at Jenny. *Jenn, seriously be quiet.*

"Well I would, Haden, if she didn't keep asking for it. She has a bad attitude."

Gabe shook the bottle of blood in front of the redhead's face. "Hello, anyone in there? I have a yummy bottle of blood which can be yours for a small price." She stopped thrashing herself around long enough to stare at the bottle. "Okay now that I have your attention, all you have to do for this bottle to be yours is to thank my dear friend for your life and tell me your name. Oh, and one more little thing. I need you to promise me that you will calm down."

She nodded at his request and he laughed. "Oh no, that's not gonna work. You're gonna have to do way better than that. I need for everyone in this room to hear the words come out of your mouth." She looked as if she was going to bite off her tongue, and then Gabriel opened the bottle and took a sip. Oh wow, this is good!"

"Fine," she hissed. "Th.. ank you."

"And, drum roll please. Red's real name is . . . " Gabriel held his hand by his ear and tilted his head toward hers.

"Kathryn," she said through her teeth.

"That wasn't so hard, now was it? I think you and I could be good friends," Gabriel laughed as he unlocked one of her arms and handed her the bottle, which was emptied in seconds.

I had been so engrossed in the show that I hadn't noticed Kasey was standing by the back wall. I looked at him to call him to me, and he shook his head no. *Why?* I asked him in my head. *Trust me*, he mouthed. It seemed I had no other choice.

"It's her," Kathryn said in a raspy voice drenched in shock. I turned back to face the angry woman. She was pointing at me. "It's you," she murmured.

The way she looked at me made me angry instantly. As soon as she had my attention, her facial expression changed from shocked and angry to amused. Mine did *not* reflect hers.

"Do I know you?" I asked, intrigued.

"No, but I know you," she said, laughing. "He spoke of you to me." She looked at Gabe and motioned for another bottle of blood. *Give her one*, I demanded in my head. Gabe did as I asked. As soon as she emptied that bottle, she turned her attention back to me. "I met your Taylor before he died." She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as she licked her lower lip. "He was so yummy, even better than the best I had ever had. His taste was sweeter than honey."

I closed my eyes and concentrated on my breathing. I could feel my heart accelerate as hundreds of thoughts ran through my head. My wolf screamed to be released to tear the piece of junk before me to pieces.

If only I hadn't been advised not to phase once I was showing, this girl would be toast. I had been informed that no one had ever phased that far into a pregnancy without causing some harm to the baby. My doctor was concerned about the baby's safety first, and lucky for Red so was I. Nothing was more important to me than my and Taylor's baby. I could hear the witch sneering while I continued to concentrate on my breathing. By now I had Kasey's hand on my left arm and Melly was holding my right one.

"Aw did I bother you, *Oh Prophetic One?*" she laughed sinisterly at me. "Don't be too sad; he only enjoyed me a little."

Her last words stirred up something in me that I previously didn't know existed. I shook free from Kasey and Melly and looked over at her. I said nothing. I just stared through her as my heart rate continued to rise. I could hear mumbling behind me but I didn't move. *You will shut your mouth **right now before I kill you!***

My body began trembling and I squinted my eyes, focusing on Kathryn's face. I could feel energy multiplying within me. Closing my eyes, I yelled inside my head, opening my eyes to glass shattering all over the room. Mirrored walls crashed down with a thunderous bang. I stared intently at Kathryn, my eyes narrowing into tiny slits. Voices rang out from all directions as I began to crouch, ready to attack. Suddenly the voices began to muffle. Feeling a warm hand on my arm, I turned instinctively toward it. Kasey's crystal blue eyes were analyzing mine. Suddenly, my legs felt like mush. The world around me was fading fast. My body collapsed into Kasey's arms right as darkness engulfed me.

17. Tongues of Men

"Well, if you ask me, she's freakishly large. She's like seven feet tall." I could hear the annoyance in Jenny's voice as I approached the living room where everyone was gathered for the family meeting Aramis had called.

"I think she's hot," Gabe laughed. "I totally dig redheads."

"You only like crazy chic because you have low standards," Jenny laughed. "Besides, it's totally obvious that her hair color isn't natural."

"I don't have low standards; I just appreciate all women, both large and small. I especially like ones with more meat on their bones. What's that saying, Talon? There's more to love?" Gabriel's laughter rang out in the hall.

"I agree, them big girls need lovin' too," Kiernan said joining in as he laughed with Gabriel.

"Uh," Jenny huffed shocked. "Are you talking about me, Kiernan?"

"Course not, love, yer tiny as a toothpick, even with that there belly of yers."

"Now I know you're lying." Jenny's voice elevated an entire octave and I knew that tears would soon follow if I didn't do something fast.

"Hey everyone," I said, attempting to take the attention off of Kiernan.

Kasey stood by Talon next to the windows, his hands in his pockets. I smiled sheepishly and looked away quickly. I was beyond confused after last night's episode. Losing my temper and blowing up everything breakable within a mile radius had my brain in a fog. My and Kasey's conversation from the night before was still fresh in my mind. When I came to after passing out, I was in my bed with Talon sitting next to me listening to his mp3 player.

"You okay?" Talon's voice was full of concern. "You gave us a pretty good scare back there."

"I'm fine; a little psycho apparently, but I'm good."

"And my niece?"

"She's fine, sleeping right now."

"Look on the bright side, Haden. We now know another one of your special powers." Talon smiled, trying to lighten the mood.

"Yes, a very impressive one at that," I said, angry with myself. "I lose my temper and shatter things. I'm gonna be a great mom. No glass bottles."

Talon laughed. I, however, didn't. I wasn't joking. I was mad.

"Kasey asked me to tell you that he's sorry." "Sorry for what?"

"He's beating himself up for bringing you down there. He didn't know that she would affect you the way she did."

"She's a . . ." I stopped myself from saying something I would regret. "She's an awful, nasty creature. I personally don't understand why we bothered to save her."

"Because all life is precious," Talon said as a matter of fact.

"Not if you're already half dead and nasty." My words were bitter to the taste.

"You know you don't mean that. Everyone is a certain way for a reason. Their life has molded them."

"Yep, and she was molded in the depths of hell."

"Maybe, but God can shed light in any dark place. Now get some rest. We have a family meeting early in the morning." Talon kissed my head and left me to my horrid thoughts of the new creature among us. She and I would talk again, next time alone, but first my baby needed me to sleep.

As I replayed last night's conversation with Talon in my head, I changed my path and turned, walking toward Kasey. *Can I talk to you—in private?* I didn't feel like attracting any more attention to myself so I asked him mentally. He nodded and followed me out of the room back into the hall. Everyone watched us but said nothing, thankfully. I was in no mood.

He stood next to the wall and leaned his head against it before sighing. "I was so wrong bringing you there. I'm sorry, Haden."

I licked my lips and contemplated my next words. "It's not your fault, really it isn't. You did nothing. It's not like it's your fault that she was venomous."

"You don't understand. I hold myself responsible because I brought you to her. I knew who she was and I thought maybe you would too. I had no idea that she would say those things to you."

When his words registered I looked at him, confused. "You know who she is?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, who is she?" I studied his face, waiting.

"I think I should wait and let Aramis tell you." I saw the pain resurface in his light blue eyes again and my heart hurt.

"No, I want *you* to tell me... please." I shook my head and looked up at the ceiling before looking back at his pained face.

"Kasey, she was with Taylor before he died. I need to know who she is. I'm begging you."

He closed his eyes for a second and then spoke softly right as he opened them again. "She's your sister."

I didn't know what to say. I knew I had heard him correctly, but it made no sense. I also knew that he wouldn't lie to me. "You're positive?"

"Very."

"Kasey, how do you know for sure?"

"I can't tell you everything even though I would love to. It would be too much to take in. I *can* tell you that my friends and I have kept an eye on Arkos for a *very long* time. When we saw that they were the ones who had taken her, I personally broke into Arkos' layer to rescue her. What I found was something I never expected. She had lost all memory of her previous life and wouldn't come with me. He had infiltrated her mind, replacing her real memories with new ones, fake ones. She tried to kill me and I left without her.

"But what about Melly? They had her too. Why didn't you take her at least?"

"Melly wasn't there, Haden. No one knew where she was for many years. It was Talon who found her only recently. Arkos had her in one of his other locations. At that time we were unaware of that particular location's existence. He has them hidden all over."

"So you all knew where my witch sister was and just left her there? That doesn't sound like something you would do, or Aramis for that matter."

"Haden, would you have forced her to be rescued? You dealt with her first hand. She's always been this way. We don't force anyone to do anything. It's not our place. We are Guardians. Already we were out of our jurisdiction, so to speak."

"What about Aramis? Alexandra? Couldn't they have done something before she turned into that. that evil *thing*?"

"What was there to do, Haden? She was venomous, like you said. You felt her verbal poison first hand. She was in love with Arkos and had absolutely no recollection of your family. I told Aramis of my findings, and we agreed you would be safer to leave her where she was."

"Alexandra let him just leave her there?"

"She didn't know."

The arithmetic in my head was going crazy. "So if Arkos made her love him, wouldn't that mean that he loved her in some way? And if he *did* love her then why would he have her dumped on our doorstep. None of it adds up."

"Arkos loves anything as long as it is beautiful and strong. They are his collectibles and he keeps them all close by. Kathryn was his prize beauty. He elevated her above all. The fact that she was brought to us like that was either a message or she angered him severely. Either scenario is possible. I am curious to hear Aramis's take on it. I have my own thoughts. It is also possible that her challenging demeanor finally pushed him over the edge. He truly did create a monster."

As Kasey spoke, I thought back to what she said about Taylor and my stomach started to cramp. "Do you think...?" I hunched over and grabbed my belly.

Kasey's hands were on my arms instantly. "What's wrong?"

I straightened back up and shook my head. "Nothing; my stomach is just a little queasy. Do you think she was lying about Taylor?"

Exhaling deeply he said, "No, I don't. I wish I did. That may be the reason she was thrown out. If Aramis warned her to leave him alone and she went to Taylor against Arkos' will, it's possible that's what angered him enough to almost kill her. She's a liar, that's a given, but I think it's totally possible that what she said is true. I'm sorry."

"I want to see her again."

Kasey's expression turned from sadness to amusement. "You are amazing."

"I'm not kidding. I want to talk to her—*alone*." My voice was full of anger.

"I don't think that's the best idea really. Maybe after you have the baby. Right now you're weaker than normal. Kathryn sensed that with your fall last night. She will use that against you. It's obvious that she will do what she can to hurt you, Haden. Today you should probably just rest. Her time will come. God will see to that."

I appreciated his concern, but I didn't have time for it nor did I care what God would or wouldn't do. I still wasn't too sure how I felt about God and all of His recent decisions involving my life. "No, Kasey, I want to see her today. After the family meeting I want you to bring me to her." He didn't say anything as I stared at him intently. "Please," I begged. "I'm stronger than she is, even pregnant."

Grabbing my hand he said sweetly, "I don't know what it is about you, but I just can't tell you no. I don't agree with you, but if you want to see her today then see her you will."

I smiled as he led me back to the others. It was unusually quiet and then I realized why. Aramis had beaten us there, apparently entering through another door. They were all waiting on us. I looked around the room and quickly noticed that Alexandra was missing.

"Hey guys, take a seat." My father-in-law's voice was more cold than normal. He reminded me of Talon, who was standing off by the wall alone. By the look on Talon's face, he was in the dark just like the others and me as to why the meeting had been called. I didn't want to sit, even though I knew I should. I was way too antsy, wishing I had gum to calm my nerves. I wanted this meeting to be over. I had a date with the hell goddess and it wasn't going to be pretty—for her.

The baby kicked and I laughed. She, like her mommy, was excited. Something was building within me. I felt Taylor in my soul today more than I had in a very long time. I had no explanation for it, but he was alive to me today. No matter what, I would do whatever it took not to lose that feeling.

Talon smiled at me and then walked to the back of the room. Making his way toward me with a chair in hand, I knew I had been defeated. I rolled my eyes and sat down. He winked and looked back at Aramis.

"All right guys, it looks like we've got our hands full, which is why I called this meeting. I know you've all been wondering who this person is that was left for dead on our doorstep. The good news is that we do indeed know who she is. The bad news is that it's not a good thing she was thrown at us the way she was. I believe it was a sign." Even though I'm sure everyone had tons of questions, no one said a thing. They all sat patiently, hanging on Aramis's every word. "Her name is Kathryn. She is Gabriel, Talon, Melly, and Haden's eldest sister."

Jenny gasped loudly and then covered her mouth with her hand, turning around to look at me. Being that Kasey had already told me, I sat unmoved. My mind was on the prize. Kathryn and I had a date.

Gabe was the next to jump in. "Okay, let me get this straight. *Kathryn*, as she calls herself," Gabe said, doing quotation marks in the air, "is our sister?"

Aramis nodded, "Yes, you are correct."

"Told you he would like *any* woman," Jenny whispered to Kiernan, laughing.

Gabe ignored her and went on, "Wow, whose side did she get her anger from? She's one crazy broad. Does she know who she is?"

"No son, she does not. Her memory was erased years ago," Aramis answered bluntly.

"What is her purpose?" Brad spoke up, sounding like a marine about to leave for war. "Why was she dropped on the doorstep like that? What does it mean exactly?"

"That's a good question, Brad. I'm afraid that no matter what the answer is, it isn't going to be a good one. From what our sources say, Kathryn was Arkos' lover—his favorite muse. She is his partner. at least she was. I haven't yet placed why he threw her at us like that. I have no doubt that it will be brought out into the light when the time is right."

"Could he want her to lead Haden to him?" Marcus asked, his deep voice resonating in my chest.

"As in a trap?" Aramis asked.

Marcus nodded yes. "That would make sense to me."

"Yes, Marcus, it very well could be his ultimate motive, which is why it is important that we do not give her any information when we speak to her today. It is also important that Haden understands she must not leave the Manor." Aramis looked at me kindly.

"Speak to her!" Melly said, angry. "After what she said to Haden, why would any of us want to talk to her?"

"She has not asked to speak to *us*, Melly. Instead it is Haden she wants to converse with." Aramis looked at me and smiled. "Of course, if you're not feeling up to it I will deny her request. Just say the word."

I stood up and looked around at everyone. They were all watching me. "Bring it on, but first it would probably be smart to remove anything breakable from the room she's in," I said, serious. Gabriel laughed along with Jenny. The others ignored their amusement. They knew I was serious.

"She's being escorted here right now. And Haden, just so you know, I don't believe that there is any reason to remove the few fragile items around us. There is nothing in here that cannot be replaced. I think Kathryn witnessing your power yesterday ministered to her, if you will. It appeared to have made her think, and that, dear one, is a good thing."

"Where's Alexandra," Jenny asked, breaking the silence.

"She has chosen not to join us. Due to our recent loss, this is too much for her to bear. She and Arabella are out shopping."

I popped my knuckles and stretched my neck while Aramis shut the drapes.

"This is gonna be fun," Gabe said, watching me.

"Yes it will," I agreed.

"Just don't do anything I wouldn't do, little sis," Gabriel winked and laughed.

"Gabe, don't egg her on . . . seriously," Melly jumped in. "She's not just chubby, she's pregnant. There's a baby in there." Melly shoved her hand over her mouth right as the words escaped it.

"Dude, you called her fat," Gabriel laughed, dancing around. "Way...*to...go*. And you thought I had a way with words. Nice one." Gabriel almost couldn't control his laughter at Melly's mishap.

She shook her head apologetically and I brushed it off with a smile. I knew what she meant. I also knew she hit the nail on the head as far as I was concerned. I *was* fat.

I looked up to see Brad standing directly in front of me. "Can I borrow you for a sec?" Brad asked, his face serious. I followed him to the back corner of the room. "You know that Taylor was my best friend, my brother, right?"

"Brad," I said cutting him off. "Not now." "Please, Haden, just hear me out."

I smiled, but just barely, and let him continue. "I loved him very much and I am angrier than you can imagine. I would love nothing more than to bring justice to what happened to him, but you and I both need to think about him and what he would have wanted before we act. I know one thing for sure. He would have never wanted you to be this angry. He wouldn't want you to chance hurting y'all's baby girl. Haden, Kathryn is a viper. Y'all may have shared blood in the beginning, but her blood has been replaced with acid. Her mere presence was toxic yesterday. I don't know everything, but I know that she wants you out of the picture. She knew exactly what she was telling you yesterday. So maybe she did see Taylor, but think about this. She knows who you are to him *for a reason*. He obviously spoke of you. Don't let her trash his name. Don't think for one second that he was tempted by that filth. *You* were his soul. Your moon was one only when together. Your birthmarks proved that. God designed you two as a puzzle. That girl is *nothing*. Don't let her get to you."

Brad finished talking and I bit my lower lip while I tried not to scream. I knew in my heart that what he said was the truth and yet I was still mad. How dare she come into my life and throw his name around like she did. Obviously she had no clue who she was up against.

The door opened and I turned to see two guards escorting Kathryn into the room. Her arms were behind her back, obviously restrained. Aramis wasn't one to be messed with either. I knew quite well that what she said struck a nerve in Taylor's father's heart just like it had mine. He was a caring man, but if you crossed him or his family that was another story.

Oddly enough, Kathryn didn't so much as glance in my direction. Not at first anyway. My eyes bored into her as she glided into the room looking as if she owned the world. I wondered just how in love with herself someone had to be to walk into a room that way.

"She's a piece of work," I whispered through my teeth.

"Haden, be strong," Brad said, giving my shoulder a quick squeeze. "You were Taylor's world. I meant what I said; she is nothing." Brad's words echoed in my mind as he walked off toward Melly, who was extremely bouncy standing behind one of the couches. Aramis extended his hand, motioning to the guards to bring Kathryn to a chair he had positioned directly in front of the fireplace where a quiet fire crackled, giving off a false sense of serenity. On either side of Kathryn there stood the two abnormally large guards.

Aramis walked slowly, stopping only a few feet to the side of her. "If I could please have everyone's attention, Kathryn has asked to join us today. She has informed me that there are a few things she would like to say. I would appreciate it if you would give her a chance to speak," Aramis said calmly before walking off. He motioned to the guards to give her some space and they followed Aramis to the side of the room where Talon stood quietly messing with his phone. I couldn't tell whether he was texting someone or playing a game. Talon must have felt my stare. He looked up and winked at me, and for a brief moment I felt a wave of peace wash over me.

As much as I didn't want to, I forced my eyes to make their way to Kathryn's beautifully evil face. The sight of her long, fiery locks had my heart rate speeding up instantly. Within seconds Brad's eyes were on me. I knew he could hear my heart rate accelerate, but I didn't care. I had let him speak his peace. Now it was *her* turn. Then it would be *mine*.

Kathryn cleared her throat and began. "Thank you Aramis for giving me this opportunity to speak. I know I don't deserve it." I listened to her words but they didn't fit with her voice. With each word that left her mouth she sounded like she was swallowing acid. Maybe this would be more amusing than I had first thought. Kathryn looked around the room at everyone except me. "I asked Aramis to bring me to you all so that I could thank you for saving my life yesterday. I also wanted to..." She stopped for a second and then started over. "I wanted to..."

"I told you she was weird. She can't even speak," Jenny said, whispering her words to Kiernan. She obviously wasn't aware of the acute hearing everyone in the room had except she and Kiernan. *Jenny, she can hear you.* I said in my head. She shrugged her shoulders and stopped talking. I looked back over to where the she-devil sat to see her staring harshly at Jenny while clamping her jaw, her fists clenched.

Now that's no way to look at someone when you're pretending to be nice. Kathryn's head snapped in my direction, tilting it slightly as she tried to understand what had just happened. I didn't break my stare as she moved her glare back and forth from Jenny to me, and back to Jenny again. From the back of the room I began walking slowly toward the back of the couch directly in front of her where no one sat. I stopped behind it and stared back at her. *Yes, you can hear me. They all can if I want them to... ah, but I don't.* I grinned devilishly at her. *Now why don't you finish what you were telling everyone so we can get on with this.*

She stared intently at me and then forced herself to look away. "I mean no harm."

"Why are you here?" I asked aloud.

"Because he wants me here."

"He who?" I questioned, annoyed with her vagueness. Kathryn looked back at me and then turned her eyes to Aramis.

Aramis nodded and then asked her the question we all wanted to ask. "Why would Arkos try to kill you?"

"He didn't," she insisted. "He's just punishing me. I angered him by playing with his new toy."

His new toy? I asked her silently, feeling my blood pressure rise. In response to my question a slight smile rose on her feline face, yet she did not look at me.

Kasey was next to me suddenly and she jumped at the sight of him. "You?!"

"So we meet again." Kasey's words were steady and calculated. He looked at Aramis and nodded before he took over the talking. "I am going to ask you a question and I implore you to answer it honestly."

Kathryn's devilish smile turned erotic as she looked Kasey over. When she noticed how close he was to me she cringed. "Don't tell me that she has you in her web too? You are much too perfect to be with someone like *that*." She practically spit as she spoke her last words.

Ignoring her, Kasey asked his first question. "What could you have done that was so severe it caused Arkos to throw you away like you were trash?"

His words angered her instantly. "He did not *throw* me away. He will take me back once I atone for my sins; that is unless of course I find myself a new master." She licked her lips and smiled crookedly at Kasey. I put my hand in his and stared her down. He kissed it and she hissed at me.

"I suggest that you keep your temper under control," Kasey said, serious, his age shining like a beacon in the night. "You being allowed to speak is a privilege. Don't forget that."

Aw, what's the matter, Kathy? You poor thing; are you not used to being kicked to the curb? Hmm, after your recent issue with Arkos getting bored with you and now Kasey showing his repulsion toward you, it seems to me that you might just want to go ahead and get used to it. I smiled at her as I rubbed my other hand on Kasey's arm.

"Shut her up." Kathryn's words were as sharp as a knife.

What's the matter? Can't stand the heat? Then you shouldn't have come in MY kitchen!

"I'm not kidding, shut her up—now!" her voice echoed in the room.

Jenny started laughing. "Haden's telling her where to stick it with her mind, I bet."

Kathryn's eyes shot lasers through Jenny's head. Her arms began moving in swift movements as she tried to break free from her restraints so she could get at Jenny. *Don't even think about it! So help me, you just think this is miserable now. You will regret being alive or dead or whatever you are if you go anywhere near her. Look around you and think before you do something stupid. Aramis knew you would be able to escape those.* I glanced down at her arms. *He wants you to give us a reason to kill you. If I were you, I would choose my next words **very** carefully.*

Kathryn's eyes met mine harshly and she stopped trying to sever the ropes binding her wrists together. "I will . . . thank you," she answered me before looking at Kasey. "I am ready to give you the answer to your question." Kasey nodded at her and she continued. "I smelled his new toy immediately. Everyone had been warned to leave it alone even before it had arrived. Arkos never before included me in his warnings. This was the first time. I tried to listen to his orders, but every time I would walk by *that room.*" Kathryn closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, letting her memory consume her. Watching her, my fists clenched tightly as she moaned. "The smell that radiated from inside his room was unlike any other. It took over my senses, controlling me with every breath I took. Finally I could stand it no longer." She took another deep breath in and turned her eyes on me. "I remember it well. Because of who I am, it didn't take much to convince the guard to let me in."

There she went again. There was no end to this piece of trash thinking that the whole world revolved around her. I bit my lip and looked down at the floor, breaking our stare. She lightly chuckled when she realized that she was indeed bothering me. No matter how hard I tried to hide it, I was failing miserably. Hearing her talk about Taylor like this had my stomach in knots.

"His smell instantly consumed me as the door opened. Its sweetness wrapped around my lips like heaven. Poor thing was on his knees with his hands against the wall, weak and in need of what only I could give him."

The more she spoke, the more my stomach turned. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You're lying," I challenged her as I raised my eyes back up from the floor to meet hers. The smug look in them told me that I was wrong. She wasn't lying.

"Oh am I? I see. You don't believe me. Let's see if *this* convinces you. After I tasted his blood, his weak body was at my command. He either had to drink from me to survive or die. At first all he did was moan your nauseating name. He was so weak, he could no longer move. *So,*" she said sounding bored. "I moved back in and drank a little more, almost draining him completely. He was so sweet, I didn't want to stop. I moved my lips down his neck and across the soft skin of his shoulder, making my way around his body until the crescent moon on his shoulder my attention. Its light glow from the reflection of the water's lights had me intrigued. I moved closer to get a better look. When my lips brushed against the half-moon it burned me. I had never felt a rush like it."

Now it's your turn to shut up. I demanded.

"Oh, but I'm not done."

Yes you are! Be quiet... NOW! I could feel the heat rising in my body and this time I had no urge to stop it.

"Don't you want to know how it ended?" Kathryn's eyes bore into mine while she laughed at the sound of my heart accelerating. My body began to tremble uncontrollably. My wolf was screaming in me.

"That's enough, Kathryn," Kasey demanded.

"I'm almost done. The ending is the best part. I got to return the favor to your precious Taylor," she said, hurrying to get out what she wanted to say. "He could no longer resist me. He made his way to me and drank, filling himself with my life. His moaning was so loud that the guards heard. That's when Arkos was notified."

Shut up, you liar, before I kill you! This time I let everyone hear my thoughts.

"Bring it on, I don't care. I had what you will never have and it was *good*."

I tried to stop the last stretch of anger as my body shook almost uncontrollably. Suddenly everyone was around me. *I'm warning you one last time.* I threatened.

"Haden, honey, come with me. Let's get out of here," Roger's voice was muffled by my anger. More voices spoke to me but I heard none clearly.

I didn't remove my eyes from Kathryn when she spoke again. "I'll tell you one last little thing. Your name was no longer on his tantalizing lips . . . mine was."

I closed my eyes and yelled at the top of my lungs. I could hear Jenny screaming as I felt intense heat surround me. I opened my eyes and stared at Kathryn as the fire raged behind her. Feeling the growing heat, she turned around toward the flames in the fireplace which were now spreading rapidly up the wall. I hopped over the couch right as the flames began spiraling all around, looking as if a dragon had breathed his anger out in one unhappy breath. Kathryn began working her fingers around the rope holding her hostage when I punched her, sending her and the chair flying toward the fire. Lucky for her, Gabe ran and caught her one handed only inches from where the flames raged. I continued to walk toward her, never removing my eyes from her evil face, when someone grabbed me, restraining me from moving forward.

"I've got Haden. Get Kathryn out of here now." I recognized Brad's voice immediately. He turned me in toward his chest. "It's okay. I'm here. It's *all* gonna be okay. I promise."

The minute Brad's strong arms were around me, I began breathing rapidly, almost hyperventilating. He turned me to where I was facing him and I hid my face in his chest where I let my tears fall like silent rain. With every drop, they attempted to put out the fire in my heart, just as my family was now putting out the real fire my anger had just fueled. I felt a hand on my back and turned to see Melly crying behind me. I hugged her and burst into tears.

"It'll all be okay. We're in this together. We won't let you weather this by yourself." Melly's sweet words didn't comfort me the way I had hoped, but I found peace in her arms where I stayed.

"What's wrong with me?" I whispered.

"You're a cool mo-d," Gabriel said amused.

"Huh? What does that even mean, Gabe," Melly asked, turning to look at him.

"You know, she's a bad mama jama." He was smiling, bobbing his head.

The smell of smoke was making me sick, when out of nowhere Roger grabbed my hand, snickering. "Personally, I think that's all Medusa deserved. Did you see her face? Priceless."

I couldn't believe that I had just lit the room on fire and everyone was acting like they had free tickets to the circus.

"So how about we plan a baby shower?" Roger asked everyone.

Jenny was on his bandwagon in no time. "I second that."

Slowly I moved away from my sister and wiped my eyes. "Did you just ask about a baby shower?" I asked in shock. *I just almost lit my sister on fire and you guys are thinking about a party.*

"It really wasn't that bad." The sound of Marcus's voice made me smile.

"You heard me? Geez I need to work on being quiet," I said, annoyed with my recent lack of self-control.

Marcus put his arm around me and smiled. "God gave you the gifts you have, Haden. Do not ever forget that. He gave them to you to help you do His work. He will remove them when you no longer need them. Do not anger yourself. You are still learning." Marcus smiled and walked off after patting Roger on his back. "Roger will take care of you. Brad and I have to be going."

I didn't know where they were off to, but I knew that he was right. Roger would be right by my side attempting to create an imaginary place where my mind could hide from reality. Honestly, I was ready to go there with him. Truth be told, I wanted to be anywhere but here.

18. Letting Go

It had been a few days since I almost caught Kenton Manor on fire, and thankfully no one had said a word about it. I continued to brush my straight brown hair. That simple activity had taken on a whole new meaning since I got pregnant. My long, straight locks were more beautiful and stronger than

ever. With each stroke, I wished Taylor were here with me watching my body change. Quickly I pushed his face out of my head. It wasn't an option to focus on what I didn't have. Instead I pictured Kasey's sweet face and smiled as I tried to swallow the lump the previous vision of Taylor's perfect face had left me with. Opening the bathroom drawer, I placed the black brush back where it went when I heard what I thought was the rustling of paper. Walking out of the bathroom I looked toward the door. Sure enough, I was right. Someone had slid a note under my door. My family and friends never ceased to amaze me. They were all like big kids. Picking up the plain white sheet of paper, my eyes recognized Melly's handwriting immediately. Of course, it didn't hurt that she had a thing for hot pink ink.

Family Meeting outside in five minutes.

>M<

I was more than used to spur of the moment family meetings. It was the outside part that stumped me. Something about this didn't sit right with me. I tossed the note in the trash and headed out the door. When I got outside everyone was throwing a football around. Jenny ran over to me looking like a pregnant cheerleader. I was so happy to see her color coming back to her face.

"So do you know what's going on?" I asked, hoping she had some information.

"Yep, but I can't tell."

"What? Are you serious? Since when do you not tell me something?" I asked, annoyed.

"Fine," she huffed. "If you insist." Her scowl was placed with a devilish grin. "We're here for your training."

The minute I heard her words, all I could think was that I should have known it was too good to be true.

"With your new found powers, Aramis thinks it's important that we help you learn how to control them."

I shook my head and rolled my eyes.

"Or maybe it's just that he doesn't want you destroying his house," she laughed.

I had no chance to respond to her. She was already dragging me across the back lawn toward the others. Jenny weaved happily in and out of bright orange colored cones.

"What are these for?" I asked, accidentally kicking one.

"Everyone else's training," she smirked happily. She was enjoying this way too much.

In the distance I could see a tiny fire glowing in the center of a fire pit. "You have *got* to be kidding me. I'll catch the whole place on fire," I huffed.

"No you won't, Haden. Aramis watered majorly before Melly went to get you," she chuckled. "It's impossible, trust me."

I was so glad Jenny was amused by the misery of my life. Shaking her gleefulness off of me, I continued to let her drag me toward the others until we reached Kasey, where she let my hand go.

"You ready to light some stuff on fire?" he teased.

"You have no idea," I said sarcastically.

Right as my father-in-law approached us, Kasey pulled up a lawn chair so I could sit down. Aramis put his hand gently on my belly and smiled warmly. "How is my granddaughter today?"

"She's good." My words were boring and empty. He knew it too, but said nothing. Both he and my mother-in-law were really incredible about giving me space when I needed it. They were going to be terrific grandparents. This baby definitely had that going for her. It's a shame her mom has so many issues.

"Earth to Haden," Melly's voice called out to me. Coming out of my world, I pushed out of the chair and walked to where she stood by the pit. She laughed and motioned toward the fire. "As I'm sure you've noticed, there is a fire pit behind us, and as we have all seen you can light things on fire."

"Not light, just fuel."

"That we know of," Melly winked. "If it's okay with you, we're gonna practice lighting the fire pit with your mind." I could see the excitement building behind her eyes. "K, so I have volunteered to be the one to get you mad."

"Oh no, that's not gonna work," Jenny jumped in. "Clearly if anyone should have that job, it should be me. I've had years of practice of getting her mad." Everyone laughed, including me. She was right. If anyone knew how to push my buttons, it was definitely Jenny.

"Works for me," Melly agreed happily as she ran toward the fire pit and picked up a fire extinguisher from the ground. "On the count of three, Jenny. One... two... three."

Jenny sighed and looked at me in the face. "Haden, do you remember when we were in third grade and you liked John Hamilton?"

I nodded yes.

"Do you remember how I told you that he kissed me on the cheek and it made you mad?"

I nodded again.

"Well, I lied. I kissed him."

Everyone waited and nothing. I looked over to the fire pit where Melly stood looking armed and dangerous and then back at Jenny right as laughter escaped my lips.

"Okay... moving on," Jenny sighed. "I know..." Jenn stopped looking at me and turned her attention to the others sitting on the ground. "I'm gonna tell you all a secret Haden would never want out." She looked back at me and smirked, sure that whatever it was she was about to say would make me mad enough to create a fire. I chuckled again and she shot me a look of disgust. *Sorry* I mouthed. "Anywho . . . here's something she would never want you to know. Haden snores in her sleep . . . like a boar." Everyone's eyes got big and they all looked at me.

"No I don't."

"Denial, Haden . . . denial, pure and simple."

I laughed again. "You are nuts, Jenny. You know I don't snore."

Looking defeated, Jenny said, "Yeah, but I know you hate it when people lie about you so I thought that would make you mad for sure. Darn it. It's gotta be because I'm pregnant. It's like I can't make you mad. Weird."

"You can't make me mad either," Kiernan called out from the back of the group.

"Don't test me, Linky."

Before Jenny and Kiernan could become the show, Brad stood up and walked over to me. "Can I try?"

"Sure," I said, wondering why everyone was so eager to get me mad. As far as I was concerned, fueling fires wasn't such a bad thing unless you were in a public place. Surely I would be able to learn how to control it soon enough. After all, I just learned I could do it. It seemed to me that everyone was worried about nothing. Nevertheless, I decided to go along with them.

Brad walked over to me and whispered in my ear. "I love you like you were my sister. Don't forget that. I'm only doing this to help you." The face of his little sister that died not so long ago flashed in my head and I found myself wanting to cry. Brad walked a few feet away from me and stopped. "Haden, as I speak to you and your anger grows within you, I want you to try to fuel the little fire over there in that pit Aramis brought out here. Don't aim it anywhere but there, okay?" I agreed and he continued talking.

At first Brad's words had the complete opposite effect as to what they were all going for, which I knew they would. Instead of being angry, I found myself relaxing, wanting to yawn. It wasn't until he mentioned Taylor's name that my ears perked up.

"I want you to picture Taylor's face in front of you." Brad saw the look of pain on my face and walked over to me. "I know this is going to be really hard," he whispered, "but we need to do this. You need to be able to control these powers." Knowing he was right, I wiped the tear that escaped from my eye off my face and took a deep breath.

"I'm ready."

"Close your eyes, Haden. Can you see his face in front of you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now I want you to picture him tied to a chair, his hands bound tightly behind him" Brad's words were like acid in my ears. "Can you see his face?"

I nodded yes as more tears started to fall.

"Look at his face, Haden, let how beaten it is sink in." Brad stopped for a moment as I tortured myself. "Now I want you to hear Gavin laughing at you both. Look up and focus on the self-centered, arrogant look on his face. Can you see it?"

"Yes," I choked, feeling my anger rise within me.

"Now I want you to look back at Taylor's beaten face and his lifeless body, limp."

I did just as he said and my body began to shake almost uncontrollably.

"Now slowly open your eyes and look at that fire, Haden. Focus on it."

Brad didn't have to tell me twice. Those horrid visions were fresh in my mind. I turned my body toward the fire and pictured Gavin's smug face as I stared deep into the flames, keeping my eyes glued on them. I could feel my anger flowing out of me when I heard Jenny gasp.

"She's doing it."

I continued to stare intently at the fire and throw my anger toward it. With each toss of my personal hell into the fire, the flames began shooting up toward the sky. Clapping erupted behind me, and the next thing I knew Melly was putting it out as Brad was walking over to me. Unlike everyone else, he wasn't amused. He looked hurt.

"I'm so sorry I had to do that to you. It killed me to watch your face," he said, taking me into his arms once again.

"It's okay," I cried, trying to force the visions out of my head and stop my body from shaking. "You had no choice." I heard him sniffle before he released me from his arms.

The rest of the day crept over me with the slow, never-ending pace of a turtle. Even though Brad didn't mean to cause me pain, he had. Those terrible visions weren't ones I could just erase. They would take time. Hopefully no one would be trying to anger me again anytime soon since I showed that I had *some* control over it.

Finally night came and it was time for bed. Sadly, sleep escaped me until finally my tears had run out, forcing my numb brain to be quiet and lull itself into a restless slumber.

Shh, don't be frightened, the soft voice said.

"Who are you?" I asked, frozen and scared at the voice I was hearing in my head. I wouldn't believe it.

"Love, it's me."

The voice wanted me to think that it was my husband, but I knew it couldn't be. That was impossible. I wrapped my arms around my body, trying to stop the chills threatening to overtake me.

"Haden, you're shaking. I should have thought how hard this would be on you before coming to you tonight, but I couldn't wait any longer. I had to see you."

In seconds his arms were around me. I tried to see but all was black. I refused to breathe in through my nose. I couldn't let myself believe that this dream was reality. I shut my eyes and tried to wake up. The voice startled me when it asked me if I wanted him to leave. I knew I was dreaming and I knew that realistically it couldn't be Taylor, but the thought of making him leave wasn't an option. I couldn't let go. I would rather stay asleep forever.

"No! Please don't," I cried, inhaling deeply. His familiar smell consumed me instantly. It had been so long since I had been in his arms. I instinctively hugged him tighter than ever and he winced. *"I'm so sorry,"* I said, frightened that I had hurt him.

"Don't be, I'm fine." He took my face in his hands and I continued to cry. *"I don't have much time to be with you. I would stay in your dreams with you all night if I could. I needed to tell you that I am alive. I'm okay. I will be with you as soon as I can."* He lightly pressed his lips on mine and I shivered. *"I have to go, Haden. They will be back soon. I love you. I'll be counting the minutes."*

I woke up in a puddle of tears with the light of the moon glistening in through the window of my room. I hit my pillow and sobbed. *I'm such a fool! How could I do that to myself? It wasn't real. It wasn't freakin' real! It couldn't have been real!* I was screaming in my head. It wasn't real, but I wanted it back.

A quiet knock at my door startled me. "Come in," I whispered as I tried to stop any more tears from falling.

I could smell Kasey as he walked in. "I heard you screaming. Are you okay?"

I motioned for him to come to me as I wiped my eyes. He sat down slowly on my bed and I leaned into him, grabbing the back of his head and pulling him toward me. "Kiss me," I demanded.

He looked confused and cocked his head to the side. "Are you sure you're all right? You're not making any sense."

I didn't have time for his questions. I needed him to hold me. I needed him to love me. I needed him to drown my dream. I pulled him back to me and kissed him. He didn't resist at first and then he pulled away. By the look in his wise eyes I could tell he knew what I was doing. He tilted his head to the side and then hugged me. Within seconds his resistance was fading. I sighed as I felt his warm lips on my neck, moving their way down. He gently moved my nightgown slightly off my shoulder and continued his explorations.

I fought back tears and laced my fingers through his dirty blonde hair, inviting him to continue. When I saw the spark, I flinched.

"What was that?" I asked, looking around.

The look on Kasey's face told me that he knew exactly what it was. "That was your birthmark. It shocked me when I touched it."

I didn't know what to say. I sat there silent and confused. "Um, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he laughed. "You always shock me." He pecked my cheek. "I love you like the moon loves the sun, Haden. You can shock me with your light for all eternity."

Kasey had done it again. I was smiling. "Thank you; I needed that," I said, appreciative.

"You needed to shock me?" he questioned, laughing.

"No, of course not-- I needed to smile."

"Oh, well that's my pleasure." He took my hand and kissed it. "Want some company tonight? I could pretend to sleep in the chair."

"No, thank you. I think I'm okay now."

He could see that I was being honest. What he didn't know was that I was praying that I would have that same dream again, only this time I didn't want it to ever end. After he shut the door, I closed my eyes and did something I hadn't done in months. I talked to my husband in my head. *I don't know where these words are going. They are set out to reach the other half of my moon.* I closed my eyes tight and pretended to be back in his arms. *I have missed you so much, Taylor. I can't seem to make myself believe that you really came to me tonight even though I want to. For now, I will pretend that you can hear me.* I paused and then went on. *I met someone. You would like him. He's been by my side since I lost you. He loves me... and I love him. Taylor, I think he's going to ask me to marry him... Our baby needs a father. I am so lonely without you. I can't do this anymore.* I thought I heard crying but I continued anyway. My mind had played enough tricks on me for one night, *I can't keep telling myself you're going to come back for me. I keep feeding myself these painful lies when I know the truth. I know you're gone and not coming home. If he asks me to marry him, I am going to say yes, for our daughter. I will never love him the way I love you. He will never be my Taylor—never.*

I heard the crying again, only louder this time, and I grabbed my mp3 player, hoping to drown the imaginary sounds out. There was no need to torture myself anymore. I had to move on with my life. I had to let go—this time for real.

I woke up the next morning and slid off the side of my bed. Rubbing my protruding belly, I smiled. Today was a new day. I grabbed my cell phone and called Roger.

"You've reached Roger, talk to me."

I laughed. "Nice way to answer the phone, Roger."

"You liked it? It's my greeting for the day," he chuckled.

"What's up hot stuff?"

"I'm calling you about the baby," I said while I fixed my bed.

"Yay, I love baby talk! Shoot."

"We're ready for that party you keep talking about."

"That's fantabulous! Let me get Jenny on the phone and I'll get right on it. You won't be sorry, Haden. This will be just what you need."

"I'm counting on that," I said honestly.

"Oh yeah, you're gonna love it. I've already got most of it planned. I was just waiting for the go ahead. "

"Well my party planning friend, you just got it."

"Awesome; I'd say I'd see you at breakfast but I just got a call from Melly. She said it was important," Roger said sadly. "You *are* going to eat breakfast, right?"

"Well they sure aren't letting me hunt and I'm starving, so yeah you can count on me."

Roger told me about the spread Nanny Mena had prepared and I jumped off the phone to take a shower so I could feed my baby and me. When I walked into the breakfast room it was almost empty. With Christmas only a week away, you never would have known it by the looks of Kenton Manor. I didn't know if they hadn't decorated out of respect for Alexandra or for me. Either way I was happy. Thanksgiving had come and gone, leaving no traces. A simple spread and lots of talk about what we had to be thankful about was almost more than I could take. Now with Christmas so close, it was almost unbelievable. For the first time in my life, it didn't feel like it was as close as it was. I loved Christmas, but this year I wasn't in any mood to be surrounded by pretty decorations. I'm sure my mother-in-law felt the same way. Nothing would ever compare to last year's Christmas. This year Taylor wouldn't surprise me in the forest. This year was different, and I more than anyone had to accept that. If it were up to me, I would just skip it this year.

My parents had wanted to come spend the holidays with us, but I said no. Dad was finishing up a couple deals and promised they would fly in at the beginning of February, a couple weeks before the baby was due on the sixteenth. Jenny's parents sadly didn't know about her "condition," as she called it. Kiernan and I had driven her crazy telling her that she needed to tell her parents. She didn't agree and avoided that conversation like the plague. I couldn't say I blamed her. There were a lot of subjects I tried to avoid—right now Christmas was one of them. I loved Jesus, but I wasn't too sure if the feelings were mutual. Every time I looked at my Bible, feelings of hurt and anger washed over me. It had built up a nice layer of dust on my bedside table here lately.

"You'd better get in here before there aren't any more sausages," Gabriel teased.

"Oh whatever, oafy boy. I left her a few," Jenn said, sticking her tongue out at Gabe before she shoved a huge bite of pancake in her mouth. "Come sit," Jenny said, patting the chair next to her. "The *big* boys all had some really important errand to run." Jenny smirked at Gabriel.

"Was that a dig at me, little lady? I'm quite impressed. I've taught you well." Gabriel gave Jenny a high five. "You should know though that I am meeting them. I just didn't want to leave you all alone since big bad Kiernan wasn't here." They both laughed.

"Such a gentlemen you are." She smiled at him and he winked, proud of himself.

"So where *is* Kiernan?" I asked before guzzling a huge glass of Grizzly.

"Tanning."

Gabriel laughed and I almost choked. "That is one funny little dude," Gabe said, amused.

"Tanning, as in fake-n-baking, sun tanning?" I asked Jenny, making sure my mind wasn't playing tricks on me again.

"Yep, the one and only."

"Oh, wow. Does he really think that will work on him?" I tried not to laugh but was very unsuccessful.

"Um, yep, believe it or not he does," Jenny laughed, joining me.

"Jenn, did you bother to tell him that it probably wouldn't work with his skin type?"

"Nope, sure didn't. Actually, I'm the one who suggested it." She continued to giggle.

"You what?"

"I told him that I thought he would be cute with a tan." She laughed before shoveling more food in her mouth.

"Jenn, that's awful. You know he's gonna burn."

"Maybe, but that's all he deserves for calling me fat."

Gabriel laughed and told us he would see us later.

"I can't believe you," I reprimanded my nutty friend. "You know he's madly in love with you and would do anything for you."

"Yes, I do," she laughed loudly. "That's precisely what made this so perfect. Now maybe he'll see what it feels like to be distorted physically."

"Oh my gosh, you're insane." I shook my head and ate my last sausage.

The sound of a loud crash had Jenny and me on our feet in seconds. I looked up to see Nanny Mena's face staring at us with her head peeking through the kitchen door.

"Did you girls make that noise?" she asked, looking at us, worried.

We both shook our heads, frozen in fear. I could feel myself starting to shake again when Jenny turned to me.

"You have *got* to stop doing that shaking thing. You're freaking me out."

"Stay here," I demanded. I put my finger to my mouth and motioned to Nanny Mena to be quiet. Before I made it to the door, there was another crash and of course Jenny was right behind me.

I sent up a prayer and threw the door to the hall open. I closed my eyes and inhaled. Her scent was so strong I wanted to throw up. I followed the overwhelming smell of burnt wood and roses down the hall, taking a right and then a left, stopping in front of Aramis's office. I could hear her rummaging around inside. I opened the door quietly. Kathryn stood in his office surrounded by broken glass.

"Having a temper tantrum are we?" I mocked devilishly.

She turned fast and crouched down in front of me, ready to attack. "I'll kill you whether you're pregnant or not," she threatened.

"Oh I don't doubt that you'll try, but I do know that you won't succeed."

She looked at my shaking hands and stood up. "Leave me alone," she hissed.

"That would be my pleasure, but you see, you're in my father-in-law's office tearing it apart for no reason, and that means that I *can't* leave you alone."

"I was just leaving." Kathryn said, annoyed.

"First, tell me what you were doing in here breaking everything you could find," I insisted.

"I don't have to tell you *anything*," she bit back.

"If you want her to let you leave you do," Jenny retorted from the doorway.

"You need to shut your friend up, Haden, or I will kill her and enjoy it," Kathryn said, turning her stare to Jenny.

Jenn, please refrain from antagonizing her. In case you haven't noticed I'm huge and pregnant. I really don't need to fight her at this very second.

Jenny said nothing else. "Kathryn, you are not leaving this room until you tell me why you are in here," I demanded. "I've got all day."

"I'm here for the key."

"What key?"

"Ask your precious Kasey. I'm not saying any more. I gave you your answer. It's obviously not here. I will find it and then he'll take me back" Kathryn walked past me, avoiding my stare. I could hear her sniff Jenny as she walked by her. "We'll meet again, Blondie."

Jenn, say nothing!

I walked toward Jenny, grabbing her hand, and we followed behind Kathryn who turned around to look at us. *I'm just making sure you're really leaving.* After hearing me, she continued on her way and we watched her walk out the front door into the icy weather.

"She has severe issues," Jenny said, repulsed. "What key was she looking for?"

"Beats me, but whatever it was--it was something Arkos wants," I said as I moved my hair behind my ears.

I turned away from the door and then the doorbell rang. Jenny looked at me, confused. "She wouldn't ring the doorbell, would she?"

I laughed. "Um, no, probably not."

I opened the door to see a huge bouquet of dark red roses in a crystal vase. As I signed for them, Jenny grabbed the card and read it aloud.

Haden,

Hope you have a beautiful day.

Keep your dinner plans open. I'll pick you up at 5.

I love you,

Kasey

"Oh my gosh, this guy is awesome. He's no Taylor, but geez he's great." Jenny caught herself after the words were already out. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"Don't worry about it," I smiled, forcing the building tears to stay in my eyes.

If she had only known about my dream she would have surely kept that thought to herself, but she was right. Kasey *was* great. Everyone knew it. If only I wasn't so broken and had something to offer him other than self-pity. If only my heart wasn't taken. I would give it all to him because he deserved nothing less. The truth, though, was that I couldn't give him much. It already belonged to someone and it would until I died.

"Hello," Jenny said, waving her hand in front of my face.

"Welcome back."

"Sorry about that. I was just thinking. It happens," I chuckled.

"I could see that," she smiled. "Hey you have a while until Mr. Great is here. How about we watch some bad infomercials together?"

Jenn knew that they were unlikely to stir up any emotion in me other than humor. I told her that would be awesome even though I really wanted to be alone. I knew that she didn't, so I agreed.

When it got close to five p.m., I went to my room and attempted to pick out an outfit that hid just how huge my butt had become over the past months. I settled on a pretty black dress that was form fitting but not clingy. Kasey hadn't said whether I should dress up or not, but I sensed that it would be a special night. I went to sit in the chair to slip my black flats on when I noticed a card sitting on it with my name written on the front. It was in Kasey's handwriting.

Hello gorgeous,

I knew that Jenny would probably read the card with the flowers so I decided to write the details of tonight in here—just for your eyes. Knowing you could use a break, I made reservations for us at a nice restaurant. I was thinking that you could use a night out of the house. I know you've had it pretty rough lately and I wanted to treat you to a special evening. I'm looking forward to it.

All my love,

Kasey

I set the card down and cried silently. This was it. He was going to ask me to marry him tonight. I could feel it. How could I say yes? How could I *not* say yes? My little no-name baby kicked me and I wondered what she would say. Of course I knew what she would want... her daddy... the same as me. Poor thing didn't even have a name yet. I had refused to think about it. Taylor and I were supposed to name her together, and so far I had refused to name her without him. I knew I would have to eventually, but thankfully I still had time. For now she would stay nameless. I looked at the clock. It was time. Inhaling deeply, I told Taylor goodbye yet again and opened my door, where Kasey stood looking pristine in a very expensive suit coat and white dress shirt.

"You look so beautiful, Haden," he said, smiling kindly at me.

"You do too," I smiled back, nervous.

"I know you're not into dressing up often, but I figured that every girl loves a nice night out every now and then. By the looks of you tonight I'm going to have to make sure you don't get stolen away from me."

"Oh yes, because big pregnant women are on every man's menu," I laughed as I put my hand on his arm.

"If it's *you* that's pregnant then yes, you will be on every man's menu." Kasey stopped for a brief second, looked at me and smiled again, shaking his head. "I will never know why God chose to smile down on me in such a way, but I am so thankful for every minute I get to spend with you."

"I beg to differ. I'm the lucky one. You saved *me*, remember."

"Oh, Haden, it was my heart that had forgotten how to beat until you. I'm the lucky one."

We were both silent for the most part until we reached the restaurant. It was so elegant. Its low lighting gave a sense of serenity and peace that I embraced. Kasey had reserved an entire room to ensure our privacy. I assumed it was more to hide his fame from me. Melly had already told me what kind of attention he received when he was out. I wasn't the only one attracted to his perfection. I was okay with that. I had never been a girl looking for attention, and nothing had changed in that department.

"There are so many things I want to say to you; so many things I want to ask you," Kasey said, grabbing my hand.

"I'm all ears." I tried to steady my heart rate as he spoke.

"You never had a service for Taylor. May I ask why?" The tenderness in his voice had me wanting to cry instantly. I wasn't expecting that kind of question.

"Well, his body was never found and I guess in a way I didn't want it to be final. I don't think I will ever want it to be final—not in that way anyway. I would rather pretend that he's living happily on some remote island than think he's dead. I know that's childish, but it hurts a whole lot less than the alternative." I looked down, hoping he wouldn't see the tears that had built up in my eyes.

"I understand." He paused and then continued. "I loved someone once, a very long time ago, and she too was taken from me before her time. I will never *not* love her."

I looked up in shock, "Really?"

"Oh yes."

"Tell me about her."

"There wasn't much to tell really. She was a lot like you, hard headed, beautiful, and full of love. She was human and she lost her life because she loved me."

I wanted to jump across the table and hug him. The pain in his eyes mirrored mine. I knew it all too well.

"That's why I stayed with you when you lost Taylor. I knew how deep those wounds were, still are. For years I have regretted not telling her how I felt."

His words shot through me with a forceful blow. "You mean she didn't know that you loved her?" I questioned, sad.

"She knew I cared for her, but she couldn't know how much. It was impossible because of who I am. I was trying to protect her and yet she still died because of me." Tears glazed Kasey's eyes once more and my heart ached so deeply for him. "I never thought I would love again, and then I stayed with you in the cabin." He took my hand in his and continued. "You will never forget him, Haden. Your love for him will never cease. I know that and I will respect Taylor always." Kasey kissed my hand and his crystal blue eyes shined directly into mine. "I would be honored if you'd let me father his child in his place." Slowly he got out of his chair and knelt beside me. Taking my hand where my wedding ring to

Taylor still lay patiently awaiting his promised return, Kasey kissed the ring. Tears flooded my eyes yet again, this time gracing my cheeks with their presence.

"I love how you love him, Haden. I know that's a part of you and I love you. I would never ask to take his place in your heart or on your hand. I *would* ask, however, if you would consider allowing me to share your heart with him." He let go of that hand and replaced it in his with my right one before pulling a box out of his pocket and opening it.

"Haden Leleux Kenton, I would be honored if you would allow me to spend the rest of your life on this earth with you. I offer this ring to you as a sign of my never ending love and affection for you. It's not as large as the one on your other hand on purpose. I am not trying to outdo or replace that special ring, nor what it represents. I can never compete with Taylor and I would never want to. I merely want you to have a reminder that my heart belongs to you for now and forever. Will you marry me, Haden?" Kasey took the elegant, emerald-shaped diamond ring out of the box and waited patiently for me to answer him before placing it on the ring finger of my right hand.

"Yes," I murmured through tears. "Yes."

19. Devilish Decadence

Christmas was gone in the blink of an eye. The usual warmth all but vanished amidst the crisp winter air. Presents were exchanged and laughter thrown about to and fro, but even still it seemed as any other day. I tried to be a good sport, thanking everyone for their kind gifts. Even with all the smiles I forced, everyone knew that Christmas without Taylor wasn't Christmas at all. Growing up, my parents had always stressed that Christmas was the day we celebrated the birth of our Savior, Jesus. It wasn't about toys or bicycles or how many more presents we got than our friends. Our Christmases were always modest, only a few presents exchanged. I *always* knew the real meaning of the holiday, but if there was ever a year that I realized material things were just that—material, it was this one. No presents could fill the empty space my husband left in my heart. Christmas of the past was gone, never to return.

With a quick phone call to my parents, my Christmas duties were done and I was able to rest easy for the most part. Kasey, being the gentleman that he was, acted as if it was no big deal that Christmas was low key, but I knew better. He revered God above all else. Yet he respected me in a way that I was sure I didn't deserve. For the most part, silence filled the halls this year instead of the joyous Christmas carols of the past. Once in a while you could hear the soft, melodious sounds of Melly's beautiful voice drifting through the air as she sang *Oh Holy Night*. She wasn't the only one the Christmas carol bug had bit. One night I walked in on Kasey humming *Jingle Bells* while he played pool. When I opened the door, he smiled and continued humming, only softer, as he finished his game. As much as I wanted to avoid the painful holiday all together, it was comforting to hear the songs I so loved... *once upon a time*.

The only real Christmas surprise we had was a special package Kiernan had flown in for Jenny with the help of her parents. Haylee, Jenny's Boston terrier, arrived in a cute Mrs. Claus outfit Christmas morning. Jenny's screams of excitement had everyone's spirits up, including mine. I would be lying to say I hadn't missed that little bouncy dog. With Barney and Haylee around now to keep Arabella company, the air throughout the Manor seemed lighter and we all appreciated that.

With Christmas over, I could now get back on track with my life. I needed as few painful reminders of my husband as possible while I was healing. Everything of Taylor would now be placed in a very special box that I would store deep within my heart. I would only visit that box when the time was right . . . when it didn't hurt so badly. Until then it would have to stay tucked away safely where no one could find it, not even me.

Thankfully, I hadn't had another Taylor dream in weeks. As much as I relished in the tiniest glimpse of him amidst my sleep at first, it was becoming too much. My heart couldn't take the constant pain anymore, the dark room . . . his hidden face . . . the sound of his pained voice. It was all too much. With each dream, I would awake aching for him and withdraw from everyone around me. During that time when all was quiet in my head, every now and then I thought I heard him telling me that he loved me. The torture seemed to be endless until finally one day I silently yelled stop in my head. As luck would have it I never heard the voice again, and I was thankful for that. I wiped my last tear the final night I thought I heard Taylor's voice in my restless head. In an instant it was as if I had cried all the tears there were to cry. Finally, after months of my wet eyes being flooded with pain, they were dry.

Things around Kenton Manor were quiet and peaceful for the most part. Aramis wasn't extremely happy about Kathryn leaving, yet never said another word about her after she left. No one brought up how she tore his office to shreds even though it laid on our minds heavily. Jenny and I were both learning quickly that sometimes it was better to keep your mouth shut. Whatever key she was looking for in his office that day wasn't there, and that's all I cared about. If Aramis wanted us to know what it was, he would have told us. If it was important, I had no doubt that he would tell us *what* we needed to know *when* we needed to know it. As for Kathryn, she was a witch and I never wanted to see her evil face again.

I looked down at the pretty diamond ring that sat quietly on the ring finger of my right hand and sighed. *I don't deserve him, God.* I knew quite well that I was beyond blessed to have Kasey in my life and yet I still felt as if a dark cloud was looming over me. Something didn't feel right. I couldn't pinpoint it, but I didn't like it one bit. I walked outside into the cold December night air and inhaled deeply, feeling the crisp air fill my lungs. Everything smelled right, but I wasn't about to let my guard down. If there was anything I had learned this past year it was to trust my instincts. Not knowing where I was headed exactly, I looked into the forest where many sets of eyes were watching me. Warrior wolves happily filled the forest surrounding Kenton Manor, waiting to protect me if the need should arise. I smiled at them and continued to walk slowly while I debated on where I would go.

"Want some company?" Talon asked, appearing next to me out of nowhere.

"If it's you, of course I do," I smiled and then laid my head on his shoulder as we both stared up at the night sky.

"We found Sebastian," he said, putting his hands in his pockets while looking up at the stars.

"Really, where?" I asked, surprised.

"He was at a bar in Ireland."

"As in a drinking bar; doing what?"

"From what I was told, drinking," he smiled.

"Vampires drink alcohol?" I questioned, confused.

"If they want to they can. It doesn't affect them the way it would a human, but some find comfort in it I suppose. We were all human once."

"Yeah I guess you're right. Wasn't he going to become a priest?"

Talon nodded and kept looking at the sky. "Hey, do you see that star?" He pointed up to the left of where we stood.

"Yes."

"See how *that* star is in the middle of all the other ones? It shines twice as bright and yet it sits happily amidst the other mediocre stars as if it doesn't know it's brighter."

I nodded yes again.

"That star reminds me of you. When you were little and I missed you, I would look up at it and pray for you."

I leaned in closer to my brother and put my arm around his waist, taking a deep breath so I could inhale him into my soul. I loved him more than words could say. Talon put his left arm around my shoulder and his right hand on my belly.

"You're both going to be fine," he said softly, looking over at me.

"I know," I agreed. "We have you."

He kissed the top of my head and removed his hand from my belly. "Yes, you do."

The closer we got to the forest, the more I realized that I really had no urge to be outside anymore. It was dark and my wolf was on hiatus until the baby's birth. I also wasn't allowed to hunt anymore, which made my little night venture outside rather pointless. According to just about everyone, it was way too dangerous.

I stopped walking and turned to face Talon. "I love you."

Smiling, he cocked his head at me. "I love you too." It sounded more like a question. "Are you okay?"

I sighed and then smiled as I looked up into the sky at the star my brother had just shown me. "I'm great." I looked back at his perfect face and in that moment I could see our mother looking back at me in his eyes. "I just really love you, that's all."

I laced my arm through his and we walked silently back toward the house until he spoke. "I love you too, so much," he said softly, putting his hand on mine that rested on his arm.

Both of us kept our steps steady and slow. Neither one of us were in a hurry. Life had a tendency to fly by in a blink of an eye. Moments you wished that you would have relished, gone in an instant. It was my new goal to cherish every moment I had with those I loved. I didn't know how long they would last or if I'd ever be gifted with more time with them. As we walked I came to a realization; I couldn't totally remove Taylor from my life. That would be wrong and unfair to our daughter. I couldn't let her suffer because I was hurt and empty. No, tonight I would change that. She would hear her daddy in his music.

Talon walked me up to my room and left quietly after kissing my cheek. I tossed my coat on the floor and kicked off my shoes. I didn't feel like being neat and orderly like I normally was. I felt like being blah . . . big, fat and blah. I waddled into the bathroom and remembered how not so long ago a little bag with pastel yellow earrings awaited me there. I looked down at the tub filling with water and tried to remember what it looked like when my husband had prepared it for me, adorned with tons of lit candles on the night of our engagement. No matter how hard I tried to visualize that night, I couldn't fully. It was hazy and inconsistent. I opened the drawer next to the sink and pulled out Taylor's CD he had made me. I placed it in the CD player and exhaled, nervous about the emotions it might bring about. I knew it would be torture to hear it, but the baby needed to know her daddy. I could just deal.

I slowly lowered myself into the warm water and felt the baby kick inside with pleasure. She had become quite used to her mommy's bath ritual. It seemed here lately that I couldn't go to sleep without one. As the violin played softly, the baby danced happily. My muscles began to relax and I closed my eyes, imagining Taylor's face. This time I said nothing. I didn't bother to call his name or beg him to come to me. I just enjoyed the memory of his eyes. They were still, to this day, the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. Kasey's crystal blue eyes were sure to take anyone's breath away, but they would never work the magic over my soul that Taylor's green eyes did. I remembered how light they were the day we married. He had been on a hunt that morning. I tried to imagine his eyes on the days he hadn't fed. Unlike mine, which could change from green to a bluish color, Taylor's changed shades of green depending on how fed he was. Aramis once told me that what one's eyes did was connected to their genetics. Everyone was different. Where one person's eyes stayed the same no matter their thirst, another's could vary in color and intensity. This was Taylor. When he was thirsty, his eyes reminded me of massive forest trees in the warm days of summer, beautiful and full of wisdom. For the first time in a very long time, I was at peace.

Having accidentally drifted off to sleep, the sound of voices startled me awake. I quickly got up and dried off, pulling my robe around me. The light of the moon shined brightly in my room as I walked to the window and peeked out. I could see Aramis and Talon speaking to another man, one I didn't recognize. I cracked my window open and listened.

"Thank you for coming," my father-in-law said to the stranger.

"I was happy to receive the invitation, Aramis. Thank you. You have a very nice home," the man said, looking it over.

"Thank you. Please make yourself comfortable during your stay. We do ask that you keep any noise to a minimum at night. We have humans staying with us and that is when they sleep."

"Of course," the stranger said, his voice reminding me of Marcus's but different. It was deep but gruff, unlike Marcus's smooth like chocolate tone.

"Sebastian, I know that coming back was not on the top of your list, but we all thank you for agreeing to pay us a visit." Aramis spoke as if he were talking to an old friend.

"It's no problem really, but I must remind you that I will not get involved, so I am unsure of how much help I will be able to offer," Sebastian said calmly.

My father-in-law placed his hand on Sebastian's shoulder briefly. "My friend, it is enough that you are here."

I had heard plenty for one night. I needed sleep. I didn't know how they did it, but they had brought Gavin's brother back to his homeland. As I closed my window, Talon looked up at me and smiled. I grinned back before crawling in bed under the warmth of my covers . . . just me, my baby girl, and the memories of her daddy.

I slept like a baby that night until late the next morning, even missing breakfast. When I finally came out of my room after lunch, Kiernan almost bumped into me.

"*Whoa Nelly*, sorry about that, Haden me girl," Kiernan said looking all over like a crazed lunatic, his face bright red.

I suppressed the urge to laugh. He looked like a tomato. "What are you looking for?" I asked, following his roaming eyes around the hall.

"Aye, don't tell me bunny, but I set Pooky down fer a second and she ran off at the speed of light. Now I can't find 'er. Boy will Jenny have me backside for this."

"Want some help?" I asked, feeling sorry for him.

"No, well maybe. Jenny's in the kitchen fixin' herself a midday snack or sandwich or somethin'. If she asks you where we are, just tell 'er that you saw me chasing Haylee. Yeah, that'll work."

Before I could answer him, he was gone. I laughed and turned, heading toward the kitchen. Sure enough, Jenny was making sandwiches just as Kiernan had said. Melly was sitting at the table flipping through a magazine.

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Melly's bubbly tone made me smile instantly. "Have you heard the news?"

"What news?" I asked, assuming that I knew what Melly was referring to but not ready to out the news if Aramis hadn't wanted to announce it yet. Grabbing a glass, I filled it with water and put a lemon wedge in it before sitting down next to Melly.

"Talon found Sebastian," Melly said, proud. "That boy can find anyone."

"He can find me any day he wants," Jenny teased as she set down a sandwich in front of me. Sitting down next to Melly and me, Jenny poured some chips out onto our plates.

I bowed my head and waited for Jenny to do the same before I thanked God for our food. "Yep, I knew he was here," I said, taking a huge bite of my tuna sandwich.

Melly looked quizzically at me. "How could you know? You've been asleep all day."

"That's easy; Haden's a sneak. She's a detective in her downtime," Jenny laughed. "When we were little she knew the dirt on everyone."

I shook my head at my round, blonde friend and said, "No, Jenn, you're mistaken. That wasn't me. It was *you* that knew the dirt on everyone."

She tilted her head to the side and then laughed. "You're right; that *was* me. So the real question is have you *seen* him?"

"Kind of, but not really; why?"

"Because Jenny has yet another crush," Melly laughed.

"That is so not true. You know my heart belongs to Talon," she said, gazing off and then laughing again. "Sebastian is totally hot though! He has black hair and the bluest of blue eyes. I almost passed out when he looked at me." Jenn was now fanning herself.

"I personally think that you should just put an end to Kiernan's misery and marry him already." Jenny's face turned sour immediately with Melly's suggestion.

"You have *got* to be kidding me. I mean, yeah, Kiernan's getting cuter as he gets older, thank God for that, but seriously, no way."

"I think he's cute," Melly said, stealing one of Jenny's chips.

"Then dump Brad and *you* marry him, pinky," Jenny said as she pulled the chip out of Melly's hand.

I handed Melly one of mine and shook my head. "One day you'll have to admit you love him, Jenn."

"Who says? No way would I marry Linky. I bet right now he's lost Haylee. I bet he's running all over the halls looking for her at this very minute."

I almost choked.

"You know I'm right, Haden. He's so dumb. Haylee's right here with me, asleep under the table. I used her silent whistle to call her and she came running. If he can't handle Haylee, he could never handle me," she said, moving her plate closer to her and away from Melly who was pretending to steal another chip.

"I beg to differ," I spat. "If you'd just cut him some slack maybe you'd see how blessed you are to have him love you the way he does." Regret washed over me immediately as my words escaped my unfiltered mouth.

Jenny looked at me, shocked. "Who broke into your cookie jar and stole all your cookies today, geesh?"

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head, getting up. I threw the rest of my sandwich away and walked off.

"Hey, what's that on your hand?" Jenny called out after me.

Melly was by my side in seconds. "Are you all right?"

"Yep," I said, continuing to walk and not looking at her.

Jenny was only steps behind. "Hey wait up. It's bad manners to be rude to your best friend and then leave her big, swollen, pregnant butt in your dust. Besides, I want to see what's on your finger!"

I ignored her and kept walking. For her benefit, however, I did slow my pace down some.

As soon as Jenny caught up she grabbed my hand. "Holy cow, what in the heck is *that*?" She held it up to her face, analyzing it. "Is it what I think it is?"

I stopped walking and turned to face them both. Their eyes were boring into me. "Yes, it is."

"But it's on the wrong hand," Jenny said, confused.

"No it's not; the other one's glued on until I die," I said coldly.

"When did this happen, Haden?" Melly asked, looking deep into my eyes. "Is that why you're having a rough day?"

I looked down at the ring and sighed. "He asked me before Christmas. I just wasn't ready to announce it to everyone. It's no big deal."

"It's no big deal?" Jenny griped. "Oh goodness, Haden; seriously, it's a *huge* deal. So is the fact that you've gone weeks without telling your best friend and your sister that you're getting married again. I can't believe you managed to hide that ring from me. This is *huge*, Haden! Does Roger know?" Jenny said, staring at me.

"Of course not. I would have told you guys first. I just didn't want this blown out of proportion." Hearing the words come of my mouth, I sounded like I didn't care that Kasey and I were engaged to be married. Truth be told, I *was* happy. I was thankful and blessed that he loved me the way he did. I loved him too. There was no denying that. There was also no denying the fact that I had been blessed to know a very different kind of love... one that lit my soul on fire with its very breath. It was *that* kind of love I longed for.

Jenny dropped my hand and hugged me. "I'm sorry for being hormonally pregnant. Truce?"

I hugged my best friend back and smiled, surprised that no tears came to my eyes. Maybe they *were* really gone from my eyes for forever.

"I hear Sebastian's staying with us," Melly said, trying to make small talk.

"He is. I heard Aramis talking to him last night." My words were cold and meaningless. I was still tired and cranky. I wanted to hunt and my wolf wanted to run. I felt like a caged animal. I *was* a caged animal. I shook my head at my own thoughts. If either Melly or Jenny heard my brain, thankfully neither one of them said anything.

When we got close to the front door, Marcus was standing there holding a pretty red heart box with Jenny's name on it. *To: Princess Jennifer*

"Oh looky there; you have an admirer, Jenn," Melly said, trying to read the card. "Who's it from?"

"See, I told you that you were lucky to have Kiernan," I added.

"It's not from Kiernan," Jenny said, looking all over the box.

"Miss Jennifer has an admirer," Marcus winked.

"Well, whoever it is obviously knows how much I love chocolate," she said, tearing the wrapping off like she hadn't eaten in weeks.

"They have blood in them," Melly said, sniffing the air. "Even better," Jenny agreed.

Melly and I looked at each other right as Jenny shoved one into her mouth.

"Spit it out!" we both yelled, but we were too late.

Jenny looked at us like we were crazy as she licked her fingers. She went to grab another one and her facial expression changed drastically. Her breathing became labored and I yelled at Marcus in my head. *Get help!* Jenny was grabbing her throat. She couldn't breathe.

Marcus opened the front door and left to get help, practically flying as he ran.

Gabriel came down the hall, his pace picking up speed when he saw my facial expression as I motioned to him to hurry. "What happened to shorty?"

"These," Melly said, handing him the box of chocolates.

Jenny's eyes were as big as Haylee's. She reached her free hand out to me. I wanted to scream. Her face was turning blue and then she passed out, collapsing to the floor. Gabe picked her up like a rag doll and ran full force down the hall, making a sharp left toward the infirmary with Melly and I following him closely.

"Help Marcus find Aramis and Talon immediately," Gabe said, not slowing his pace. "She doesn't have much time." His words were serious.

I felt light headed and stopped momentarily, grabbing the wall. Melly stopped too, looking me over. "I'm okay; get help for Jenny."

Melly phased and perked her ears up before running off in the opposite direction. In seconds Kasey was at my side.

"I ran into Melly's wolf in the foyer. Are you okay," he asked, giving me the once over.

"Yes, but Jenny," I cried, heaving sobs. "She's gonna die! I . . . can't . . . lose her too!"

"You're not going to have to. Do you want me to go with you?" Kasey asked, knowing where Gabe took her.

"Yes, please! She needs me!"

"Will you let me carry you?" he asked, studying my face. I nodded and he cupped me in his arms. "Close your eyes, Haden, and *do not* open them until I tell you. You're too sensitive to motion right now. This could make you sick."

I did as he asked and he started running. In seconds I couldn't feel anything. It was almost as if we were flying. I couldn't even hear his feet on the floor, he was running so fast. I held on tight to his neck and prayed that God spare my friend and her baby.

Please God! I'm so sorry for doubting you! Please don't take Jenny from me too! I need her!

"He won't; I'll see to it." Kasey's promise meant business.

When we arrived outside of the infirmary he set me down gently and looked directly into my eyes again. "Haden, what you saw behind these doors last time will be nothing compared to what you're about to see. Are you positive you want to go in?"

I nodded yes, and he opened the door. Gabriel was hovered over Jenny, dripping blood in her mouth. "We're losing her! Where is Aramis?"

"I don't know," Melly said from behind me. "No one's home!"

Kasey kissed my hand and walked over to Jenny. "We need to get the baby out, *now*, before the poison reaches him. Melly, hand me a scalpel." No one asked Kasey if he had ever done this before. We all knew the chances were good, and even if he hadn't we had no choice but to trust him. Jenny's life depended on it. "Melly, I'm going to get this little boy out of there right now. When I hand him to you, take him and wrap him in a blanket. There are some in the cabinet over there," he said, pointing his head to the right side of the room, never removing his eyes from Jenny's belly where he was making his incision. Kasey worked feverishly, and in seconds he handed Melly a blue baby boy. I stood behind them, crying silently as I prayed. "It's worse than I thought," Kasey said when he was done sewing her up. "The poison spread faster than I had anticipated. She's dying."

"Save her, Kasey! Please save her," I cried, tears once again falling like angry rain from my shocked eyes.

"There's only one way," he said, looking at me with sorrow-filled eyes, his body covered in her blood.

"Do it! I don't care what it is. You just can't let her leave me too."

Kasey nodded at me and then looked at Gabe.

"What if I don't have enough venom in my system?" Gabe's voice was frightened.

"You have to," Kasey insisted. Both Gabriel and Kasey looked lost in thought for a moment. "Haden, this is going to be painful for her. It will not be pretty to watch. I want you to know this. If the poison is already in her heart it may be too late," Kasey said, trying to prepare me for the worst.

"Then hurry, Kasey, *please*," I begged.

He looked at Gabriel once more and moved out of the way. As Gabe took his place, he leaned over Jenny's limp, body and dug his teeth into her chest, forcing his own venom into her veins in an attempt to get to her heart before the poison did. When he stood up, he wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt and sat beside her.

"Now we wait," Kasey said before heading toward the silent baby. I had no idea why Kasey didn't change Jenny himself. I could only imagine that it had something to do with not wanting to traumatize me any more than I already had been.

"How long until it's finished?" I asked impatiently. Jenny looked just as bad as she had before he bit her.

"Only minutes," Gabriel said, now standing by Jenny, holding her hand.

"And the baby?" I asked, attempting to look in his direction. I was terrified of what I would see, yet I looked anyway.

Kasey rushed over to the IV set up where Melly stood holding the baby. He quickly filled it with blood before attaching it to the baby. Once the drip was set up, it was only seconds before his little eyes opened.

"The poison had cut off Jenny's blood supply to him. We got him out just in time," Kasey smiled, answering me.

"What just happened?" I asked, scared. "What was in those chocolates?"

Kasey shook his head as he continued to check the baby's vital signs. "They were poisoned with a rare serum that was used years ago to wipe out his kind—to rid the world of half breeds. It was given to pregnant moms through candy. It killed both mom and baby in minutes." He was still shaking his head as he spoke. "Unbelievable. It's as if history's repeating itself."

Next, two things happened simultaneously. The door slammed open and in ran Aramis and Talon right as Jenny's body started convulsing. Aramis ran past me straight to Jenny.

"Marcus told Talon what happened and I got here as soon as I could." Aramis locked Jenny's arms and legs down, attaching them to the table. "Did you infect her, Gabriel?"

"Yes," he said, struggling with his words.

"He had no alternative. It was almost too late, Aramis." Kasey's words were sad.

"You did what you had to, Gabriel. I would have done the same. You saved her. Do not forget that, son." Aramis kind words rang true.

I had to agree. "He's right, Gabe. You saved that little baby's mommy and my best friend," I said through a steady stream of tears as Jenny's body continued to twitch. "How long will she be doing that?" Watching her was scaring me.

"Not much longer," my father-in-law said, his eyes on Jenny. "Gabriel's venom is making its way through her body right now." Aramis was hooking her up to an IV as he spoke to me. "I am going to give her something that will enable her to sleep for a few hours while the transformation completes itself."

"Will the transformation hurt her?" I asked, fearing his answer.

"Yes, I'm afraid it will."

"Can I see the baby?" I asked Kasey, who was still wrapping the baby securely in a blanket.

"Yes, of course. I'm sure he would like that. He will need some formula within the hour, but he's okay right now."

I walked over to where Jenny's new baby lay and my little baby began kicking like crazy. "I think she senses him," I laughed.

"Wouldn't shock me in the least bit," Aramis smiled, finishing up with Jenny's IV drip.

I picked her tiny baby boy up and cradled him in my arms and then my own baby relaxed, calm again. He was the most beautiful little thing I had ever seen. He had Jenny's cute little nose and blonde fuzz on his perfectly rounded head.

"Hello, little one," I whispered, kissing his soft face. "Welcome to the world."

I loosened the blanket slightly to look at his tiny doll-like body. As I inspected his little limbs, I counted ten fingers and ten toes. I continued to explore this perfect creature when something caught my eye. There on the back of his little shoulder was a small birthmark-- a perfectly round ring. I kissed it and prayed that it was nothing as I closed the blanket back around him. "You're perfect little one . . . just perfect."

20. Rebirth

A few hours of waiting turned into a night filled with eerie anticipation. I refused to leave my friend's limp body even though everyone tried to convince me that I needed rest. There would be time for that later. Plus, I knew I wouldn't sleep any better away from her than I would if I were to stay by her

side, which is exactly what I did. Talon brought a couch to the infirmary for me and placed it next to Jenny's bed, where I sat holding Jenn's sweet baby boy. I didn't want to let him go.

Kiernan spent most of his night standing next to Jenny, constantly fidgeting as he watched the love of his life lie lifeless in front of him. When he wasn't there, he was pacing back and forth at the end of Jenny's bed. Early in the morning I got up to get some water and Kiernan walked over to me, putting his hands out.

"Can I?" His eyes were swollen and red from the tears he had cried.

"Of course," I whispered as I gently placed Jenn's baby boy in his arms. I left, walking over to the fridge where I grabbed a bottle of blood. I was parched. I guzzled it in seconds and then turned around. What I saw choked me up immediately. Kiernan was softly cradling the tiny baby wrapped in a light blue blanket. He was swaying back and forth, singing to him softly. As I fought tears, I stood frozen in a world of pain. I watched Kiernan love on that precious baby, and the reality that I would never see Taylor do that with ours hit me like a train head on. Tears fell rapidly from my eyes; so much for never crying again. There was nothing I could do to stop them, so I stood crying as quietly as I could as my heart broke into a million tiny pieces all over again.

I dried my tears quickly. I was in no mood to cause a scene. It wasn't long before the room was filled with most of the gang. Even Nanny Mena had shown up, bringing tons of food trays. The only ones missing were Aramis, who I assumed stayed behind with Sebastian, and Arabella.

I had been informed that "the change," as they called it, affected everyone differently. Their guesses were as good as mine when it came to how Jenny would react. Some, they said, were instantly bitter when they awoke. Others refused to speak for days, the newness of their world overwhelming them to the point of forcing them into a shock-like state until the venom mixed thoroughly inside of their bodies. I couldn't imagine that being Jenny. If she was silent for more than five minutes something was seriously wrong. This whole "change" thing had me nervous. I had never seen anyone go through anything like this. I felt so helpless. There was literally nothing I could do for my friend—absolutely nothing.

I heard the baby make a cooing sound and in seconds Alexandra, Nanny Mena, and Melly were hovering over him and Kiernan making their own baby sounds. I laughed and then Jenny's eyes flew open as wide as they were when she was first poisoned. She clenched her restrained fists and started looking around the room.

I jumped up as fast as I could and walked over to her. "Jenn, it's okay. I'm here."

She turned her head toward me, her face drenched in anger. "Where... is my baby?"

"Kiernan's holding him. He's fine, Jenn. You're fine." I looked around, hoping Kasey had some answers as to why Jenny was acting so strangely. As if he heard me, he was by my side in seconds.

"Hi Jenny," Kasey said, smiling warmly at her. She didn't reciprocate.

"Where am I?" she asked, her voice low and scary sounding.

"Don't be afraid. You're with friends. You were poisoned. We saved your baby but you were almost another story."

She tried to move her arms and hissed through her teeth, "If I'm fine than why am I tied down?"

Kasey looked at me and smiled, trying to reassure me that she would be okay, but looking at her face I wasn't so sure. "Jenn, we had to restrain you for your own good. What I'm about to tell you won't be easy. You see, in order to stop you from dying Gabriel had to *change* you." Kasey's words were slow; his inflection on the word change sent chills down my spine and I wondered what my friend was thinking.

As if it all started clicking in her mind, Jenn's eyes flooded with understanding and her voice calmed some. "Are you telling me that I'm a vampire?"

"Yes," Kasey answered begrudgingly. "I'm sorry, it was the only way."

"I begged him to," I said, jumping in. "You were going to die." My tears began again.

A smile spread across Jenny's beautiful face. "Can someone *please* remove these stupid restraints? I am *not* crazy. I would really like to see my baby boy."

I looked at Kasey who smiled playfully. "Haden, what do you think?"

Jenn looked at me with her typical Boston terrier look that clearly said, "*umm hello.*"

I laughed. "She's fine. You can set her free."

When Kasey was done, Jenny gracefully got up and jumped off the table in one fluid movement. Kiernan walked over to her holding the baby and her face went blank again, losing all expression. Gabriel moved closer, along with Kasey. It was no news to anyone that most new vampires could be a little unstable to say the least.

She's fine guys. You're going to do more harm than good if you upset her, I warned. They both stepped back a little. Gabriel tilted his head, looking at me. He didn't trust her. *She'll be fine, Gabe. If she loses control, you're fast,* I reassured him.

Kiernan wasn't scared at all. He moved closer to Jenn and held that baby as if it were his own. He kissed his little face and smiled at Jenny. "You did it, luv. He's a beauty."

No one else could tell, but it was pretty obvious to me that Jenn was scared of herself. She didn't ask to hold him. She just smiled at Kiernan and then looked at her baby. "He smells so good."

Gabriel stiffened. *She's fine, Gabe.*

"Jenn, you should drink," I told her. "You'll feel so much better. I know your throat's burning." She looked at me and nodded.

Melly had her hand out toward Jenny with a glass of blood. "It's fresh," she smiled.

Jenny tilted her head up and guzzled it. Melly handed her another glassful, which was gone as soon as it was received. Four glasses later and Jenny's facial expression returned to normal. I couldn't get over how perfect her dainty face was. She was always beautiful, but today there was an unusual glow about her.

"That was so much better than when I first tried it," she laughed, looking at me.

Everyone else looked directly at me, confused. I just shrugged and laughed as I remembered the time she asked to taste my glass of blood back in Montana. Watching her try to brush the metallic taste of blood out of her mouth, as she put it, was priceless.

"I want to hold him," she said softly, smiling at Kiernan.

"Of course, luv. He looks like his mama," Kiernan said as he handed him to her.

She held him close and inhaled deeply. "I have never smelled anything so perfect in all my life."

"Not even me?" Kiernan teased.

Jenn looked up at Kiernan and chuckled. He was standing next to her and she moved her head next to him and inhaled deeply again. "No, but you smell pretty darn good."

Kiernan's face lit up like fireworks in the dark night sky.

"Seriously?"

"You have no idea," she laughed.

The flirtatious tone of her voice caught me off guard. A new side of Jenny I had yet to meet until now was emerging. My friend had changed once again.

"Humans will all smell good to you," Kasey interjected. "Some better than others."

"Not as good as me though," Kiernan teased, relishing the moment.

Jenny looked at Kasey seriously and asked him the question we all were waiting for. "I've watched the movies, but I need to know what I'm dealing with. Right now I don't want to feed on anyone in here, but if Kiernan tests me I want to know what I'm in for."

Brad laughed. "You won't eat Kiernan. You will have more control than you imagine. For me, not all humans smell the same. Just like Kasey said, some smelled way more tempting than others at first. I had to make sure I was well fed the first few months. After that it was all good—no worries."

"I won't want to suck every human around me dry?"

"Jenn," I said laughing, shocked.

"What? I'm having to fight bitin' into Kiernan right now. He seriously smells tasty," she laughed.

I looked at Kiernan, who was thrilled with the new Jenny. "Luv, I'm here and ready when you are," he said, winking.

She bore her eyes in on his face and said, "I'll remember you said that."

"Hey, you're starting to gross me out," I said, trying to shut her up. "You are *not* allowed to eat Kiernan no matter what he says, okay?"

"Fine," she huffed and then kissed her baby's head.

"To answer your question, Jenny, no, you will not want to feed on every human you are around," Kasey interjected. "You will have preferences. It will depend on what they feed on and their general make-up and cleanliness. That will determine how drawn you are to them," Kasey interjected.

"With me," Melly said, "Brad drove me crazy every time I was around him. He smelled more mouthwatering than anything I had ever smelled. Turns out it was because he was supposed to be my husband." Melly smirked at Jenny, testing her.

Jenny looked at Kiernan, closed her eyes, and inhaled again. "If he smells this good all the time, I might be willing to consider anything," she teased.

"Well I'll be! This is the best day of me life." Kiernan started dancing around.

"No dancing, Kiernan. You'll ruin my buzz," Jenny said, smiling.

I was in pure shock.

"I have one more question," Jenny asked, stopping everyone short.

"Sure," I said first, beating everyone to it.

"Um, why are we hanging out in this dungeon? Can we please go home? I'm in serious need of a shower."

"Of course, dear," Alexandra said, putting her arm around Jenny. "Nanny, would you please draw Jenny a nice hot bubble bath when we get back?"

"Vampires take bubble baths?" Jenny asked, confused.

"Why yes, of course, at least the clean ones do," my mother-in-law laughed.

The new Jenny was one we would all have to take time to get to know. It was quickly obvious that she hadn't changed as much as we first thought. On the way back to the house she had us all in stitches with her new and improved sense of humor. If anyone would have asked me, I would have been quick to say that it wasn't just one thing that changed her. Instead, I would have said that it was the fact that for the first time in Jenny's life she was in love. She was head over heels in love with a tiny bundle in a soft blue blanket. All was well in her world right now, and it would be until she decided to think back to the chocolates. I could only pray we had a little time until that happened. If vampirism made one's emotions even more acute, as I had been told, Jenny's anger wasn't going to be pretty. Being human and

angry she was scary. I couldn't imagine her unhappy and powerful. I pitied whoever poisoned her and hoped for them that she would never find out their identity.

Dinner time arrived before I knew it. After the past twenty-four hours I was ravenous. Watching Jenny suffer like that hardly had me wanting to eat. Talon met me at my door wearing a light blue t-shirt, jeans and flip flops.

I laughed, not at his casual clothes, but instead because I was caught off guard by his flip flops. "Um, you *are* aware that it's winter, right?"

"Yes. I was hot." He smiled at me lovingly. "Are you ready to meet our new guest?"

I had totally forgotten. "No, not really," I answered honestly. "I don't want to be around anyone that has anything to do with Gavin." Just the thought of him turned my stomach.

"You can't blame Sebastian for Gavin's wrong doings, Haden," Talon advised.

"Yes, I can," I teased, sticking my tongue out at him.

"Where's Kasey?" I asked, looking down the hall.

"He's with Sebastian and Aramis. He asked me if I would escort you to dinner for him tonight, which I, of course, gladly accepted. Are you ready?"

"I thought I was," I said, looking down at my long sleeve black shirt and jeans. "Maybe I should change and put on a nice tank top and some flip flops so we can match." My laughter filled the room.

"Whatever makes you happy," he grinned, clearly finding me humorous.

"I'm just kidding. I'd look like a blimp. Let's go."

The dining room was filled with laughter when we arrived. Jenny and Kiernan were sitting close to each other while Melly cradled Jenny's baby on the other side of Jenn. When Jenny saw me she whispered something to Kiernan and got up to come meet me.

"Hey! You look great," I said, looking her over. As she stood before me I found myself trying hard to swallow the envy that was rising in my throat. "I can't even tell you were ever pregnant."

"I know! Isn't it amazing! If I would have known it would have been this cool I would have begged to be changed a long time ago," she teased. "I'm just kidding. Even though it tastes better, I still think drinking blood is gross," she whispered, laughing.

"At least you know that it's not all it's cracked up to be, right?" I said, thankful.

Her face looked sad for a second before she answered me. "Yes, I do. I know there are many things I will miss about being human, but I will make the best I can out of this situation. I'm just happy that I get to raise Joshua."

"Aw, Jenn, I love his name!"

"Yeah, me too. It was Kiernan's idea," she admitted. He said, "Aye, me luv, he may be a wee little thing now but he's gonna do big things one day, I'd bet my bum on it. That there boy needs a good strong name. Ya know, me bunny . . . it was Joshua who led the people out of wherever," she said, laughing at her imitation of Kiernan's accent. "Okay, well maybe he knew what people he led out of where, but you get the point." She continued to laugh and then took a long, steady breath. "He's still a weirdo, don't get me wrong, but he's starting to grow on me," Jenn said as her gaze rested lovingly on Kiernan while he took the baby back from Melly. "Joshua loves him," she added happily.

Before I could tell her how thrilled I was for her, Nanny Mena poked her head through the door and announced that Mr. and Mrs. Kenton would soon join us along with our guest.

"This should be fun," Jenny said sarcastically.

I looked around for Kasey, but there was no sign of him anywhere.

"I can't wait to hear what Sebastian has to say." Jenny sounded as if she were ready for a show to begin.

I was surely hoping that wouldn't be the case. Something in me wanted so badly to waddle back upstairs and read, skipping the entire night. Once Nanny Mena got everyone seated, the chatter picked up pace. I wasn't very sociable so I just kept to myself while they talked. I felt someone staring at me and looked up to see Talon looking at me with a curious look on his face.

I'm okay, just tired.

He didn't look convinced, but I didn't care. I was tired and I was depressed even though I didn't know why. I wanted this night to be over so I could go to bed. As I played with my wedding ring I heard the door open and in walked the Kentons hand in hand, beautiful as always. Behind them I saw Kasey standing next to Sebastian. Kasey caught my eyes immediately and smiled as he led Sebastian through the large room toward his place at the table.

I was immediately aware of Sebastian's presence in the room. I could feel strength radiate off of him. Jenny was right--the contrast between his black hair and blue eyes was daunting at first. He made eye contact with no one until he sat, and then he looked at me and smiled. I smiled back before looking down at my hands in my lap. Suddenly the little hairs on the back of my neck stood up. *Oh goodness*, I reprimanded myself. *He's no one*, I thought to myself quietly. He didn't look at all like his brother, but he definitely had the same *Nightmare* qualifications within him. It was hard not to stare. I looked over at Jenny, who was doing just that until Kiernan handed her baby Joshua, surely on purpose. When I laughed at Kiernan, everyone looked at me. I cleared my throat and made an apologetic face as Aramis stood at the head of the table and raised his glass.

"I would like to make a toast to an old friend of mine. Sebastian has gone out of his way to return home at our request so that we may pick his brain some." Sebastian smiled as Aramis spoke. "Here's to Sebastian. Thank you for joining us this evening."

We all drank to our guest and Aramis began introducing everyone. When it was my turn to drink, Sebastian stood and faced me. "It is an honor," he said, bowing before me, and then sat back down.

Not knowing how to handle his weird show of reverence toward me, I forced a smile politely. "Thank you; may I ask why meeting me is an honor?" I said, a little taken aback. It has been a long time since I had felt anything other than normal—definitely a plus of being a hermit.

The room grew quiet lightning fast. Sebastian looked at me, his eyes inquisitive. "Of course you can. Can it be that you don't know how famous you are all over the world, Haden?"

I only thought his previous comment caught me off guard. Famous all over the world? Was he for real? As silly as it sounded, even with all of the prophetic talk I hadn't really given it much thought. "I wasn't aware of any fame, no," I answered honestly.

He laughed. "Well then let me be the first to inform you of your fame. Your name is only on the lips of *every* vampire throughout the empire. I am honored to meet you in person."

"Humble Haden," Gabriel laughed as he accessed the vast amounts of food spread all over the table.

My father-in-law lightly tapped his fork to his glass to get our attention so that he could say grace as he eyed Gabe. When he was done, Nanny began serving those of us who ate food. The others sat quietly, sipping their drinks. I caught myself as I was about to ask Jenny why she wasn't eating. From the look on her face, I wasn't the only one who had forgotten she didn't eat human food any longer. She looked miserable.

Does it smell the same? I asked her in my mind.

She shook her head no and continued to stare at Joshua.

I'm sorry.

She shrugged her shoulders but never looked at me. I could feel the pain radiating off of her. This was only the beginning of her mourning her past life. I focused my eyes on Kiernan's face so I could tell him that Jenny was having a rough moment accepting the new her, but he didn't need me. He was so in tuned to her that he saw it himself before I had a chance to mentally tell him anything. He grabbed her glass of blood and took a huge gulp.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" she asked, coming out of her bubble.

"Nothin', just drinkin' some tasty, tasty blood," Kiernan said, licking his lips. I snickered as I watched him try to pretend that he liked it. He took another big sip. "Want some?" he asked joyfully.

Jenny couldn't help but laugh. "You're crazy, Kiernan, you know that?" she said, laughing.

"Yep, but ya love me," he gloated.

"Whatever, nerd."

I didn't know how he did it, but he pulled her out of her momentary funk. She was smiling again as she caressed her baby's head. I just hoped that Kiernan had a lot more of that, wherever it came from. It looked like she might need it.

I took a bite of lobster and relished in its sweet flavor when yet again I felt someone staring at me. Kasey was concentrating on Aramis's conversation, so I looked over to see Sebastian smiling as he watched me eat. I smiled back, embarrassed.

"You almost make me want to try it, and I never really enjoyed lobster when I was human--not that we could afford it often," he said, jovial. "My brother and I grew up quite poor."

"I love it," I chuckled, ignoring his last comment. I didn't really care about his and Gavin's childhood.

"Oh yes, I agree," Kasey added playfully. "Haden has made me rethink trying to eat human food again many times."

"I can definitely see why," Sebastian breathed as he took a slow sip out of his glass.

"Well I think it smells like poop," Jenny said as a matter of fact.

"Jenny," I reprimanded her, shocked at her mouth again.

"Well I do. It smells weird." She said as she pulled her glass away from Kiernan, who was still trying to force himself to drink it.

"You know what I have to say to that?" Gabriel asked.

"I'd love to," she said sarcastically through a smile.

"More for me, shorty," he laughed while shoving a huge bite of steak in his mouth. Brad put his arm around his wife while she ate happily and looked at Jenny. "You'll get used to it, Jenn. Just give it a few weeks and then it won't bother you," Melly said lovingly.

"I sure hope so cuz it stinks." Jenn's beautiful face was a shade of sad I had never seen.

Sebastian finished his drink and set it down. "That was delicious, thank you."

Nanny Mena refilled his glass and Brad asked Sebastian the question I had been debating on asking. "So how long are you planning on staying with us?"

"Well, that all depends really. Aramis has been kind enough to offer me to stay as long as I choose. I was asked to come here to help, and my plans are to stay and do whatever I can to assist my friends. I owe them that much." Sebastian smiled at Aramis and Alexandra.

"Was it true that you were going to become a priest?" Jenny asked as she burped Joshua gently on her shoulder, looking like a blonde princess. She was unbelievable tonight. I kept my mouth shut and just kept eating. I was still dreaming of going to bed and escaping it all.

Sebastian didn't look nearly as taken aback as I was with Jenny's rude question. "Yes, Jenny, once upon a time I did." His answer was short and to the point.

"Why didn't you become one?" Jenn asked, pushing the envelope.

This time everyone's eyes were on Sebastian, awaiting his response. Roger looked at Marcus and back at Sebastian with his mouth wide open.

"Dear friend, you don't have to answer that if it's too painful," Aramis said kindly.

"I don't mind, Aramis. Jenny, it was a time I do not like to revisit often. God was my life back then and I had chosen to give all of myself to Him. That is until what hope I had of having a somewhat normal future was ripped from me in the night by Arkos. I was lucky enough to have two kind men take me in and care for me, but no matter how hard they tried there was nothing that could be done to stop the monster growing within me. It was stronger than I was. My future was inevitable. There was no chance that I would ever be accepted into the priesthood. Because of the knowledge I received that very night when Arkos visited my brother and me, I chose to leave it all behind. I did just that, never looking back. I left everything I had known and moved away, never returning until now."

The room was silent. So the tales were true. Even Jenny kept her mouth shut. No one really knew what to say. I couldn't imagine the pain he must have felt, wanting to give His life to God and then someone turning him into a monster. It definitely showed me that no one's life was pain free.

"Thank you again, Sebastian," Aramis said, breaking the silence. "We know how hard this must be for you to be here again." The pain in Aramis's eyes held as Sebastian continued.

"It was time, Aramis. I have been meaning to pay my brother a visit for a very long time indeed. I thank you for providing this opportunity for me."

"If I may say so," I interjected, "you look nothing like him."

He smiled at me. "Thank you, Haden. Gavin and I are nothing alike. We never have been and we *never* will be."

The way he said "never" sent chills down my spine. There was no doubt that Gavin was about to meet his match. His time had come.

21. Thief in the Night (Taylor)

Letting her go wasn't an option no matter what she said. It was clear to me that Haden wasn't letting herself believe that I was alive, and who was I to blame her. She had already been through so much. I never should have allowed myself to walk into that trap. I held my head in my hands as I heard her words ring through my head for the millionth time.

"I met someone. You would like him. He's been by my side since I lost you. He loves me... and I love him. Taylor, I think he's going to ask me to marry him... Our baby needs a father. I am so lonely without you. I can't do this anymore."

I knew that my vanishing had been hard on her, but *this*? Who was this person trying to take my place? I didn't like it at all.

Something had to be done... now. Over my dead body would someone walk in and steal my wife and daughter without a fight.

The past few months had been rough. I refused any nourishment for as long as I could withstand, until one day I woke up attached to an IV drip forcing blood into my weak body. Standing next to me was a man wearing a black masquerade mask with an ornate pewter cross around his neck. I watched as this stranger administered something into my IV and then left as silently as he came. This was the first of many visits from my new friend. I learned very fast to appreciate these special visits. He came to me every day. Quickly I realized that he was giving me something to fight the sedatives I was being forced to take. Through all his visits he uttered only three words to me—three very important words, "Tell no one." I didn't know who this masked stranger was, nor did I care. It was because of him that I could hear my wife so clearly. It was because of him I would escape.

Living in a world of confinement hadn't been bad as long as they were drugging me, but as my clarity slowly returned I found it harder and harder to pretend that I wasn't growing stronger by the minute. My friend often brought me extra food and nourishment, yet I had to remain to others as if I were frail and malnourished. The task wasn't easy, but my wife needed me. My baby needed me.

I knew that I had to escape as soon as possible, now more than ever. Someone was close to my wife. They were by her side trying to take my place while I sat here imprisoned in an underwater world of evil. She needed me now more than ever. Our baby would be born soon and I was determined to be there. I would do whatever it took not to let her down this time. I walked over to the glass wall where I often watched the sharks swim carelessly, passing all the other less daunting fish with grace and beauty. Since my eyesight returned, this had been the only comfort I had known. Those enormous creatures of the deep were so used to being the top of the food chain that you could clearly see their distaste for any of the smaller, insignificant fish swimming by—that is until one would get hungry. It had been my goal recently to see to it that none of the big fish of the deep where I was held captive . . . *ever* had a hunger for me.

Thoughts of the malefic redhead that oftentimes visited me after Arkos left disturbed me still. She had clever ways of tormenting my dire thirst with temptations of drinking her blood. Drinking human blood was something I had never done and never would. Her incessant attempts to convince me that if I were to drink of it I would be strengthened became the worst temptation of all. Pictures of Haden would flash through my mind continuously, tempting me with her offer. To be stronger, I wanted; to become an animal, I didn't. Her anger flared with each of my refusals, yet I was relentless with my answer.

Her attempts were finally put out one day as my strength continued to fade. One unsuspecting night when she snuck in my room, things changed. Visiting me nightly wasn't unusual for her, but this time something was different. The look on her evil face was one of pure spite. Determination spread across her face as she came at me, throwing me to the bed. I was too weak to fight. She began to take my shirt off and use my body as she pleased while I struggled helplessly. I shut my pained eyes and begged to die. The last memory I own of her was someone ripping her body off me angrily and tossing her aside as if she were a bag of trash. *Get away from him*, the angry male voice said. *I should tell Arkos*,

but instead I have something better in mind. The voices trailed away and I awoke to the masked stranger injecting a syringe into my IV drip. Thankfully the redhead's visits came to a halt after that dark night.

Footsteps quickly brought me back to the here and now. I hurriedly sat on the couch, staring down at my hands as I had been accustomed to when I was unable to see. The door opened and Arkos entered my guest quarters.

"Hello, my friend, I see you still don't have much of an appetite," he said as he glanced at the tray full of untouched food on the coffee table in front of me.

Today my masked friend had brought more than enough steak for one man, leaving no room for the chicken scratch that sat patiently awaiting me on the tray.

"No," I mumbled.

"Well that's sad. You need your strength, Taylor. I have much planned for you. That is why I'm here today. I have come to make you an offer, one I don't think you'll be able to refuse." Arkos sat across from me and crossed one leg over the other before he continued. "After much consideration, I have decided that I want you to join my family soon. I haven't enjoyed watching your growing sadness and I want to help you."

"Help me," I muttered, lifting my eyes only to look at the wall above his head.

"Yes, of course. I believe you would make a fine addition to our family. I could see you doing great things once you are reborn into the night. Even now your strength is impressive, but then— well, *then* you would be something to fear. Even Gavin, my greatest Nightmare to date, would have met his match in you, I believe. You, my young friend, are a Nightmare waiting to erupt."

You have no idea, I thought in my head, thankful he couldn't hear me.

"And if I say no?" I asked, looking down again.

"Oh I don't believe you will. You have no reason to. There's nothing left of your old life for you should you return. You will be appreciated *far* more here than in your own house," he said, smug.

I clenched my teeth and took a deep breath. "May I ask what you mean by that?"

"My friend, you have been replaced. Your services are no longer needed in your own home. A young man has meandered into your Haden's life and, how do you American's say it, ah, yes, he has swept her off her feet, so to speak. My sources tell me they are engaged. She was stolen from you like a thief in the night."

I prayed to God to help me steady my breathing. *Was Arkos right? Had he proposed like Haden told me he would?* I put my head in my hand and rubbed my forehead, not uttering a word.

"Young friend, you have stretched out beyond your measure; join me and suffer no more." Arkos's words were genuine. I had learned that about him over his many visits. His words were never empty.

"I need to think about your offer before I accept," I said, moving my eyes up to his forehead.

"Of course... of course, take all the time you need." Arkos got up and turned to leave. When he got to the door he stopped and turned around. "I'll look forward to your answer." And then he was gone.

When the door shut, I got up and started pacing, praying that my masked friend would pay me a second visit today. If so, I would break the silence and ask for his help. He obviously didn't like them holding me captive any more than I did.

It seemed like hours before my door opened slowly and in walked my ally, shutting the door quietly behind him. He put his finger to his mouth and walked toward me. I sat patiently on the couch, watching him closely. He sat across from me where Arkos had sat only hours earlier.

As I waited for him to speak, I studied his pendant. It was a large pewter cross unlike any I had ever seen. I couldn't understand how he was able to walk through Arkos's lair and no one flinched. It was obvious, however, that he wasn't the bottom of the food chain here. His mere presence gave off an air of authority and strength—one similar to Arkos, yet different. This one carried himself with an arrogant certainty that I had only witnessed in one person, yet I dare not think his name. My new friend's soul raged like fire within him. *That* he and I had in common.

"We haven't much time," he said quietly. "We must move faster than I had originally thought. Arkos is making plans right now to change you." He moved his long hair away from his face. "Your little visit with him today proved interesting, yes?" he questioned.

"Very," I said, biding my time before I asked him about my wife.

"The time has not yet been set. He will give you a few days to make your decision before he makes it for you. You are strong, I see?" His question was expressionless.

"Yes, thank you," I said, appreciative.

He nodded and continued. "She is set to marry him, but I will have you out of here before then."

His words caught me off guard. "Do you know my wife?"

"We've met," he said carefully. "I was assigned to keep watch on her."

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful," I told the masked man in front of me, "but why are you helping me?"

"I have my reasons."

I nodded at him and said no more.

He looked at his watch and then back at me, "There have been new developments, and accompanying them, new dangers. I feel it best that you are with your wife as soon as possible. She does not know the evil that surrounds her."

I looked at him, mesmerized. Just how well did he know my Haden? That was a question I would refrain from asking. I didn't care why he was helping me. I was just beyond grateful that he was.

"I will come to you again when I have all the details of your escape. It could be at any moment, so be ready." And just like that, he was gone.

I shut my eyes and pictured my beautiful wife's face. *I'm coming home to you, Haden. I'm coming.*

22. Dance of the Dragon

I watched as Jenny lovingly rocked baby Joshy while Roger rambled on about all the plans he had made for "The Bomb Diggity Baby Party," as he called it.

"This is going to be the party of the year," he exclaimed.

"I'm just glad I'm not big and fat anymore," Jenny said nonchalantly before looking at me apologetically. "I'm sorry, Haden."

I said nothing. I just shrugged my shoulders and rubbed my huge belly.

"Look on the bright side, Haden. You won't be pregnant much longer. That little girl will be here before you know it, and then you can do Pilates with me," Jenny offered, smiling.

"She sure will," Roger added. *"Of course, she can't come out until her stubborn mommy picks a name for her."*

"I will," I sighed. "I just don't know what it is yet."

"Okay, so while Roger flips through those magazines let's throw around some baby names," Jenny suggested happily.

This was the exact thing I had been dreading, and no one realized it. I didn't want to talk baby names with them, or anyone for that matter. This was something Taylor and I were supposed to do together. I just wasn't ready to do it on my own. "Nah, I'm not really feelin' it," I said, sticking a piece of beef jerky in my mouth.

"I will *not* let you be a party pooper when it comes to your own baby," Jenny said. "We're getting Josh's future wife a name right now. My son can't marry a no-name— even if her mommy *is* famous," Jenny laughed.

"Aw, what a cute visual! I bet they *will* get married and I'll get to design it all." Roger said, staring off into the air dreaming.

Ignoring how I felt, they began their baby name fiesta without me. I just sat there listening while I scarfed down more of my beef jerky, exhaling deeply.

"How about Elise?" Melly suggested. "I just love that name."

"Oh, I do too," Roger added, "but by the look on Haden's face I don't think that one's gonna stick." Roger continued to flip through the magazines and take notes while his mind wandered through his mental baby name book. "Okay, what about Sapphire? I think that's a perfect name for a princess."

I nodded as I tossed another piece of beef jerky in my mouth. "It's okay, I guess."

"*Okay you guess?* Hmm, well that's definitely not good enough," Roger said, looking determined to bring me out of my baby name funk. I had news for him. There was nothing that could bring me out. I was hunkered down.

"I still like Melanie for my niece's name," Melly said, winking at me.

I smiled and rubbed my stomach. "I don't know. I think I'll know it when I hear it. Problem is, I just haven't heard it yet."

"I've got it," Gabriel said, coming through the door. "Her name is Gabriella. There, now that's settled," he laughed.

"Yeah um not," Melly said, rolling her eyes and smiling at him.

Gabriel walked over to her grinning. "Oh Mels, you know that's the only name for a princess. She needs to be named after her *cool* uncle," he smirked.

"Yeah, say that to Talon's face," Melly teased.

"Oh please, he knows I'm cooler than him. There's no contesting it." Gabriel sat next to me, leaning back in his chair and flashing his playful smile.

"Gabriella it is," I said, nodding seriously at him.

"For real?" The look on his face was priceless.

"Nope," I snickered. Roger and Melly both burst out laughing while Jenny shook her head, amused that he had fallen for it.

"Aw, now that was just wrong to tease your big brother like that. Clever but wrong." Gabe rubbed his hand on the top of my head and I moved away before my head looked like a bird's nest.

"Hey, no messing up my hair. It's the only thing I can keep looking decent right now," I said, trying to fix it without a mirror.

"I think you always look perfect," Kasey's voice carried from the hall before he walked in the room with Sebastian at his side.

"I agree. She is a jewel." Sebastian bowed his head a little as he looked at me as if I was royalty.

Without meaning to, I could feel my cheeks blush. I was anything but beautiful right now and I knew it. My swollen belly made it nearly impossible to see my feet, which had me feeling like a beluga

whale. Still blushing, I looked up to see Kasey smiling lovingly at me, and for a brief moment my heart swelled. I hadn't seen so much love since . . . well, in a very long time.

Out of the corner of my eyes I caught Jenny staring at Sebastian. It seemed everyone else had made up their mind about Gavin's long lost brother but me. For some reason, I was still unsure about him. I didn't quite know what to make of Sebastian. He seemed nice enough, I guess, but there was one thing that bothered me intensely. Every time he had been in the same room as the baby and me, the strangest thing happened. She would move her entire body as far away from him as she could. At first I thought it was just a coincidence, but she had just done it again. If anyone were to look at my stomach right now, they could assume I was carrying a large egg instead of a baby.

Kasey caught me staring at my stomach. "Is everything okay?"

I quickly tried to put his mind at ease. "Yes, she's great." I looked away from him to see Gabriel, Melly and Roger all staring at me. They had obviously read my facial expression and knew that I was hiding something. I smiled at them all, hoping they wouldn't press the issue. "She's fine, I promise. It's her mommy who's tired. I should probably retire for the night."

Gabe was up instantly, helping me out of my seat. I smiled at him and laid my head on his muscular arm briefly. "Thank you."

"Anytime, shorty."

I told everyone goodnight except Sebastian. I could feel the intensity of his stare on me as I turned away.

"Goodnight, Haden." Sebastian's words were full of something unrecognizable. Quickly I turned and smiled, telling him goodnight as well. The more I walked, the more the baby began to relax, making my entire belly her home once again instead of just one side. It didn't take me too long to come to the realization that I was probably looking too deep into it. Sebastian wasn't Gavin and I needed to remember that no matter how hard it was. I wasn't being fair to him by judging him based on how much disdain I held toward his brother. After all, he didn't seem to like him much either. The more I thought, the more I realized that Sebastian had a good reason to be a little odd. If I would have gone through what he did when he was changed, I could only assume that it would have affected me greatly as well.

In seconds Kasey was by my side, holding his arm out so I could lace mine through his. Once we were completely out of everyone's sight he stopped short. "Are you *sure* you're okay?"

"Yes," I laughed nervously, hoping he hadn't heard the silly ramblings in my over-imaginative head. "I would tell you if I wasn't."

"I sure hope so. I can't bear seeing you hurt."

"I know." I got up on my tiptoes and pecked his cheek softly. His smile comforted me immediately, bringing me back to our first few days together in the cabin. We walked in silence as I thought back. "Thank you," I whispered as we got to my door.

"You're welcome, beautiful, but may I ask what you are thanking me for?" he chuckled.

I opened the door and walked to the loveseat where I sat down trying not to cry. "For always being there for me."

"He took my hand and kissed it. It has been my pleasure. I would do anything for you, Haden. Like I expressed to you when I asked for your hand in marriage, you stole my heart a very long time ago. It is yours and it always will be."

I leaned my head on his arm and cried softly while visions of Taylor began flashing through my mind. "No," I whimpered, "not again."

Turning to face me, Kasey looked me in the eye. "Please tell me what is bothering you. It's the only way I can help."

"It's Taylor," I choked through tears. "I keep seeing his face in my head when I close my eyes. I can't make it stop."

"You want to make it stop?" Kasey asked softly.

"Yes," I breathed. "I don't want to hurt like this anymore. He is *not* coming back. I'm just torturing myself with all the pictures of him in my head." By now my tears had picked up speed. The dry spell I was so hoping to embrace hadn't lasted long. Honestly I was getting pretty good at crying.

Kasey didn't say anything else at first. Instead he pulled me into his arms and held me as I cried. "I'm afraid that this is a part of the healing, Haden. I know it hurts but you can't ignore it."

"I don't want it... *anymore*" I cried. "It's hurts too bad."

Kissing my head, Kasey leaned back on the tiny loveseat where I leaned back with him. Resting my head on him, I shut my eyes and eventually fell asleep, allowing my mind to be opened to even more painful visions of Taylor. Unsettling pictures of him broken and bloody plagued my sleep once again, one after the other until finally they stopped. Sleep continued to overtake me when quietly a new dream seeped its way into my brain, unlocking even more pain as it broke my heart in two. I was back at the cabin, alone in my and Taylor's bed. My sleep had been restless. Feeling someone watching me, I opened my eyes slowly. There across the room was Taylor's silhouette, lit only by the moonlight. This Taylor was perfect. His color had returned and there was no spot of blood anywhere on him. He was watching me and smiling softly. I sat up startled, blinking my eyes rapidly. I knew I had to be seeing things.

Taylor slowly opened his mouth to speak and I froze in place, holding my breath. "I'm sorry I disturbed you, love. I was just watching you sleep," he said, his words soft like midnight rain. He didn't move an inch as he spoke, and neither did I. I was positive that I was dreaming and that it wasn't *really* him sitting there, yet part of me wanted to run over to him and have him take me into his arms. For some reason, I couldn't let myself. Instead I sat still, pretending as if he weren't there at all. I lay back down and turned away from the vision, closing my eyes and welcoming my tears once again. When I looked back up, he was gone.

The next thing I knew it was morning. The sun's rays shined brightly in my room giving the false impression of spring. As I stretched my arms out at my side, I tried to remember how I had gone from the loveseat to my bed. Kasey had obviously been responsible for placing me where I needed to go.

There were no words to describe the goodness that flowed through that man's veins. Never once had he been anything but a gentleman with me. Why God thought I deserved such a man in my life after having one as perfect as Taylor, I would never know. Some never even find one person worthy of their love, and I had been blessed with two.

Today was a new day and yet I was housing the same broken heart, a heart plagued with sadness. I was apparently doomed. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I wobbled over to the closet where I picked out my clothes for the day. Tonight was the baby shower/dance Roger had been working so hard for. I had to get it together for him. He didn't deserve to see me walking around depressed when he had spent so much energy and time trying to make me happy.

Once I was remotely presentable, I wandered around the manor until I found Jenny and Kiernan. Not wanting to mope, I spent the day hanging out with them and playing with Arabella and Haylee. Before I knew it the time had come to get ready for the dance. Walking back to my room so I could get ready for the party, I noticed a beautifully wrapped package waiting for me outside of my door. The note was in Roger's handwriting. *For my princesses.* I picked up the gift and walked in my room where I plopped down on the bed, rubbing my head in an attempt to ease the stresses that it harbored. I slowly opened the pretty box and found a beautiful pink shirt with my baby girl's ultrasound picture on it. I couldn't help but smile. She was so beautiful, so perfect . . . just like her daddy. I wiped the tears from my face and proceeded to transform into someone who was going to pretend to enjoy the party that was somewhat in her honor.

I texted Kasey to tell him I was ready, and he was at my door in minutes holding a big bouquet of pink roses. My eyes filled with tears. "Thank you," I said, trying to push my words past the tears. As my eyes rested on the beautiful bouquet of flowers, my mind took me back to my dream. My voice caught in my throat as Taylor's emerald green eyes flashed in front of me, overwhelming my thoughts; the way they held my stare in my sleep last night had me starting to question my sanity once again. It had been so real, just like when he used to come to me in my sleep. My thoughts of my husband had yet again consumed my aching head. Quickly I looked down, hoping Kasey wouldn't see the intense pain washing over my face. Thankfully he said nothing as I prayed he didn't try to comfort me. The last thing I wanted to do was talk about my misery that hovered over my dreary soul like a thick black cloud.

"Are you two ready?" Kasey asked, smiling brightly at me while rubbing my belly softly.

"As ready as we'll ever be," I laughed, quietly pushing my tears back where they were belonged.

"Well then, let's not keep your friends waiting any longer. Shall we?" he said, offering me his hand.

If Kasey was anything, he was charming. Those crystal blue eyes of his shed light in my darkness instantly as always. Putting my hand in his, warmth spread through my body once again.

We didn't have far to go for this party. Due to my current "condition," my in-laws thought it would be better to keep me close to home. Roger had absolutely no problem transforming one of their ballrooms into a room fit for a party. I was extremely grateful that I didn't have too far to walk, as I was starting to feel like an oversized duck.

Kasey led me through the pastel pink and blue balloons toward my fate for the evening. I plastered a smile on my face and took a deep breath, letting the oxygen fill my lungs. Kasey looked down

at me and smiled. Looking up at him, the weirdest thing happened. Taylor's face replaced his in my mind. I imagined Taylor squeezing my hand the way he always did to reassure me that he was by my side. Right as those darn tears started to make an appearance again, I realized that I had been off in my head, staring right through Kasey who was now looking at me, worried. Swallowing the unwanted tears down as fast as I could, I smiled largely at Kasey, straightening my posture as I led him to where Roger, Melly, Brad, and Talon stood.

"Hey guys," I exclaimed.

"Well hello, beautiful," Roger said, looking me over. "Don't you two look pretty in pink!"

"Aw, thank you! I love what you did with the room Rog. It looks great!"

Talon, Brad, Melly and Kasey were all looking at me like I was speaking a foreign language.

"I'm so glad you like it. At least *one* of the ladies of the hour is on time. Now that Jenny's a vamp diva she's running a little late," he laughed. "Boy our world has its hands full with that one."

"If you men don't mind, I'm gonna steal my sister for a sec," Melly said, looking like a pink flower. A few nods later and Melly was pulling me away from them. "What's wrong with you?" she asked quickly. "And don't lie to me."

"Other than the obvious, that I weigh like two hundred pounds and can't walk straight?" I snickered, trying to throw her off my scent.

"Don't go there. I know you better than that, Haden. Spit it out."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I spattered.

"Um, *okay*, how about... I love what you did with the room, Rog. It looks *great!*" She stared intently into my eyes. "What gives?"

"I really have no idea what you're trying to get at." I looked away from her and started to move my head to the music, hoping she'd drop it. I was in no mood. All I wanted was to be left alone. If I had to force happiness, then so be it. Who were they to judge?

"Haden, you know you're pregnant, right? It's not really a great time to take up drinking."

I laughed and looked back at my sweet sister. "I was just trying to be happy for everyone. I take it that I went a little overboard?"

"Um, yeah you could say that," she chuckled. "By all means you have my permission to fake your happiness, but next time could you please give me the heads up first? I worry about you, ya know." Melly turned to look at Brad, who had been watching us closely, and smiled. "I'm not the only one either. Everyone's worried about you."

"I'm fine, I promise." The minute the words were out of my mouth I regretted them. They were all lies. "I'm not fine. I'm miserable but I'll be fine soon," I said, hoping she wouldn't say something that would make me cry. I had been doing really well for the past five minutes.

"That makes more sense," she exhaled, pleased with my honesty. "Well, who am I to ruin a pregnant woman's buzz? Let's get a drink."

"Decaf coffee, here I come," I snickered. "Make it a double."

Once we were at the buffet table Melly went to grab the coffee pot. Right as she did, someone's hand reached in between us, beating her to it.

"May I?" the deep voice asked. I turned to see Sebastian standing right behind us.

"Why of course," Melly said, smiling at me wide eyed.

Sebastian returned the smile while he poured my coffee. Melly's phone began ringing so she politely excused herself to answer it while I fixed my coffee. When I was done I smiled, thanking him for the coffee, and began walking toward the huge pink chair adorned with pink and white balloons Roger had set aside for me. Slowly I walked and sipped my hot coffee while Sebastian followed.

"May I sit with you, Haden?"

"Sure," I said, sitting down. Looking down at my belly, I quickly noticed that this time my baby didn't move away from him. I smiled and took another sip.

"It really is a pleasure to meet you." Sebastian's words sounded like crashing waves as opposed to his brother's smooth voice.

"Likewise," I said politely. "It's nice to put a name to the face."

"I am sorry for the trouble my brother has caused you and your family. He has always been run by his emotions."

I took another sip of my coffee, feeling it warm my throat, when I looked into his eyes. It was almost as if a bolt of lightning was thrown at me. Frozen, I held his stare. It felt like I was being pulled into an ocean of secrets, a very dark, very unsettled ocean. Never removing his eyes from mine I entered into a trance of sorts until he broke the silence. "May I pick your brain for a bit?"

"Pick away," I said, being jerked back into the moment, embarrassed at my previous staring issue.

"Is it true what they say about your powers?"

Startled by his question, I looked up quickly. "What powers are you referring to exactly?"

"I do not mean to pry. It's just that if I am to help your father understand Gavin's motives, I will need to know everything. It is no secret that he finds you enticing. It's no secret that *many* do. What I need to know is *just* how enticing my brother finds you. Of course, if you are not comfortable talking with me about any of it, I understand, but I must tell you that it is the only way I can be of service to your family."

Sebastian's eyes appeared to be soft and full of love, yet at the same time it was as if they were on fire. They reminded me of the blue part of a flame. Something deep within my soul was very unsettled sitting next to him, his eyes having caught my attention once again. I remembered the days when friends of mine used to run their fingers through the blue flames of fire, excited about the fact they hadn't been burned. Every once in a while one of them would get too close and the yellow flame would jump, burning them and singeing their skin. The false sense of safety that the blue flame gave off was always just that, *false*. I had no idea what was going on, but I definitely knew something was off.

When Sebastian was done speaking, the baby moved all the way away from him once again and I prayed he wouldn't notice. I took another slow sip of my coffee and hung my head down, debating on what to say. *He is not Gavin, Haden. He is a man of God.* I repeated these facts to myself over and over again, praying I would believe them.

While I was trying to convince myself that I had nothing to worry about, Sebastian spoke up. "How about this—how about we get to know each other a little better before you answer? May I have this dance?" he asked, standing with his hand out toward me.

Memories of my first dance with Gavin rushed at me as I contemplated my answer. Charm definitely ran in their family and I was weak right now. It had been tough to refuse Gavin on a good day. At the mention of his name in my mind, I could somehow feel him with me. I turned my head and my eyes swept around the room quickly. He was nowhere to be seen. Once again, my mind had been playing tricks on me. Either that, or Gavin was right, we *were* connected. I stood up, all the while remembering the night of the dance with Gavin, and forced a small smile in Sebastian's direction. I could do this. I had done it before with his brother and I had survived, only Sebastian reeked of something unfamiliar. Something just didn't feel right.

Even with my opinion on him undecided just yet, there was something pulling me toward him. It was similar to the pull both Gavin and Kasey had on me when I was next to them. Each pull was different, but they all shared one thing in common, the ability to draw me in. Even as humans, I imagined Gavin and Sebastian were hardly ever refused anything. I said yes, and followed him to the dance area. The thought of dancing as big as I was, was anything but pleasant. No matter how ugly I felt, I was intrigued by the stranger before me. I caught Kasey watching me from the sidelines and I smiled. When I looked away I met Talon's eyes. This time I wasn't met with a smile, but instead concern. I winked, assuring him that I was being careful, and I turned toward the tall, dark and handsome Sebastian who held one of my hands in his while he put his other where my waist used to be.

"So why don't you go first, Haden? You can ask me anything," he said as we began moving with the music.

I was happy with his suggestion. Of course, I wasn't quite sure of what to ask, but I jumped in anyway. "Why did you want to become a priest?"

"Good one," he smiled kindly. "I wanted to become a priest because once upon a time I loved God more than anything,"

"And you don't now?" I asked, curious.

"Not in the way I did then, no. God turned his back on me a *long* time ago. I learned to depend on myself, not God."

Shocked at his honesty, I tilted my head to the side and looked at him, "I can understand that. I've definitely felt the same way, so you sure won't hear me judging you. Kasey is who opened my eyes to how much God loves us. He's pretty relentless actually. When I was at my worst he kept telling me that God never turns his back on us. Instead, it is us who turn our back on Him."

Sebastian's laughter filled the room as he spun me around gently. "I admire your faith, Haden. I wish I could say I had it as well, but I don't. *Psalm 24:20... For there shall be no reward to the evil man; the candle of the wicked shall be put out.* Are you familiar with that verse?"

"No, I've never heard that before."

"My kind is evil. God turned his back on me without even giving me a chance. I was cursed."

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, Sebastian, but I don't agree with you. Not all of our kind is evil."

"Ah, Haden, there you go again. I can see why you are loved by many. Your light is as bright as the Ice Moon itself, with only one difference that I can note--you are here and it has gone. You, like the Ice Moon, are capable of brightening the darkest of nights. I bet you see light in everything."

I laughed, "No, not so much."

"Well, I can already see why my brother has found you to be different from others. You are quite unusual."

"Thank you, I think." I laughed as he spun me again. "Okay, now it's your turn to ask me a question."

"Thank you. I would like that very much." The music slowed and we began to sway. "Is it really true that you have powers? This, in my opinion, is what Gavin is after."

I already knew he would ask this question again, so I had programmed myself to answer him as simply as possible. "If you think it will help you to better understand Gavin and possibly Arkos, then I will answer you with a simple yes. I do have what some refer to as powers."

"Interesting, may I ask what they are?"

"Of course, but I don't know them all yet or the extent of the ones I have previously discovered. I know that I can break glass and make fires rage with my mind."

He stopped dancing for a brief second and looked at me before beginning again. "Now that is impressive indeed. You *must* be the chosen one. It would seem you have the Almighty's handprint on you."

"Sebastian, can you help us?" I asked, begging with my eyes. "I have already lost my husband. I don't want to lose anyone else I love. Gavin needs to be stopped."

"I'm afraid there isn't much I can do. I promised myself I would not get involved. I will have to think about this further before making up my mind. It is much more complicated than I had originally

thought. Your powers bring it up a whole new level, Haden. It now is no secret to me as to why Arkos and my brother are after you. They want your powers."

Right then my phone received a new text. *Meet me out back. I must speak with you, right now. Please. -Gavin-*

I stopped dancing immediately. Gavin was here? Waiting outside for me? It couldn't be. So I *had* sensed him. Part of me said I should tell everyone so he could get what he deserved, but there was another part of me, the part I followed, that said to excuse myself politely and pretend I was going to the restroom. That is exactly what I did. When I was out of the room and made sure no one was following me, I hurried to where my personal Nightmare waited.

I opened the back door and inhaled, smelling him immediately. He smelled even better than I had remembered. I heard a whistle back by the trees and I wobbled as fast as I could go. I knew it wouldn't be long before someone came looking for me.

There he was leaning against a tree looking as beautiful as ever. Memories of our past flooded back to me with the force of a waterfall on a summer day. I shook the memories out of my head and tried to focus. I didn't need his powers fogging my brain tonight.

"You have some nerve. Why are you here?" I asked, impatient. "I don't have all night."

"You look... delightful, even in your state."

"For one, I am not in a *"state"* and secondly, flattery will get you nowhere," I said, mad.

He smiled and nodded, "Of course it won't, not with you. Not that you'll believe me, but I was being serious. You do look beautiful."

"So is that why you're here, Gavin, to tell me that I'm beautiful?" My words were razorblade sharp.

"No, that is not why I'm here." He moved away from the tree and stood in front of me, close enough for me to feel his cold breath on my face. I froze in place as he began. "You are in trouble," he exhaled.

"What? You have got to be kidding me! *You're* telling me that I'm in trouble? Of course I am. I'm out here talking to my enemy," I hissed.

"I am not your enemy, Haden... not anymore," he said softly. "I am here to help you."

"Help me? Gavin, what are you trying to pull? *You*, help me? Since when have you ever cared about helping me? If you wanted to help me, then maybe you shouldn't have gotten my friend pregnant and killed my husband," I yelled, feeling my blood pressure rise.

"Haden, please . . . keep your voice down. I need to tell you this. You are in danger. I know my brother is here."

"Oh, well aren't you Mr. Know It All," I said, venom spewing from my mouth.

"Please, you have every right to be mad at me, but please just let me speak."

Taking deep breaths in and out, I nodded. "Go on, I'm listening. You better make it quick."

"Sebastian isn't who you think he is. He is here for *one* reason only and it isn't me. He's here because of you." Gavin stood silently, staring at me as he waited for my reaction.

"Is that all?" I asked, emotionless.

"Haden, I am not one to waste my time. He is *not* here to help your father-in-law. He is here for you. Once you have that baby, he will take what he came for."

Before I could ask him to explain further, the sound of Jenny's voice rang through the cold night air.

"I must go. Please think about what I said." Gavin bowed slightly in front of me and then vanished.

"Hey you crazy pregnant woman! What in the heck are you doing out here all alone? Are you insane?" Jenny stopped and sniffed the air. "What is that delectable smell?" She sniffed me and then shook her head. "You smell good, but it's not you."

I turned toward the house and started walking. I couldn't believe she didn't remember Gavin's smell. It was just as distinct as Taylor's. Either way, I wasn't about to bring her horrid past back up. If she forgot what Gavin smelled like, more power to her.

"I take it you're not going to tell me what that tasty smell is or why you were out here all alone."

"Nope, I'm not," I said, looking straight ahead.

"Okay, I'll take that for now, but *only* because there's no time. Everyone's waiting for you to come out of the bathroom so we can cut the cake. I told them that sometimes women get the runs while pregnant."

"Jenn... ew," I griped. "You didn't!"

"What? It's all you deserved for ditching our party and not telling me," she said, laughing. "Of course I didn't tell them that, silly. The next time you run out on our party I just might though. Don't test me."

Walking back into the room filled with happy go lucky people, I prayed that the torture would end faster than I feared. I rode out the remainder of the party as best I could, wearing a smile that hopefully hid the thoughts of my impromptu meeting with Gavin on the grounds. Every now and then I would look over at Sebastian. Once he was talking intently with Aramis and the other time he and Gabe appeared to be in deep conversation. Each time I questioned my sanity for even considering Gavin's words as truth.

Right before the night was over, Sebastian turned and looked at me. He smiled ever so slightly and then looked back at my father-in-law. No matter what the truth was, Gavin's words would haunt me

for days to come. *Once you have that baby, he will take what he came for.* Truth or no truth-- I would see to it that *that* would never happen.

23. Illusions

"Hello, anyone in there?" The sound of Jenny's fingers snapping in front of my face unfroze my numb mind and brought me back to the here and now like a cold glass of water.

"Okay, so which one do you like? I think that one makes you look thinner from behind, and what pregnant woman doesn't want that right?"

I looked at the wedding dress she held up and sighed. "I'm a whale."

Jenny laughed. "No you're not; you're a big, beautiful mum."

"See, you just said I'm big. Seriously, Jenn, look at that dress. It could fit Shamu."

"Maybe Shamu's baby, but definitely not Shamu." Jenny snickered.

I threw my purse at her, missing her by a mile. "Now I can't throw? Geez, what's next, I won't be able to speak?"

"Nah, you already lost that. You haven't been able to speak in a *very* long time."

I liked the new Jenny. In a few ways, she reminded me of the old Jenny before she was taken. This one was just as funny and full of spunk, only with more sophistication than her previous self. This Jenny was tougher, like gold-plated iron.

Jenn's phone went off and she answered it while she held her index finger up. "It's Kiernan," she mouthed.

I smiled politely and took the huge, eggshell colored mumu out of Jenny's hand to look it over.

"Hey Kier, what's up? How's monkey butt? Aw, give him kisses for me and tell him I'll be home as soon as Auntie Haden picks a wedding dress." She hung up her phone and sighed. "I love that kid."

"How could anyone not love *monkey butt*?" I teased.

"Hey, don't be messin' with my nickname. He's my sweet wittle monkey butt," she said, laughing. "Now, back to you; if you don't get with it and pick a dress, I'm gonna call in for backup. You know Roger will be here in seconds. All I have to do is call." She held up her phone, threatening me.

"No," I said, pouting. "No Roger. There's nothing he can do for me."

Jenny didn't speak for a second. She stood still as she processed what I had just said. She looked at me and then sat down right beside me. "How did I not see it? Oh gosh Haden. I'm so sorry. I've been so obsessed in my own life that I wasn't paying attention to what you *weren't* saying. I totally see it now." Jenn grabbed the wedding dress and hung it back on the rack. She put her hand out to help me up. "Let's get out of here. We still have plenty of time for this. Let's go talk."

I did as she asked and followed her to Talon's Bugatti. "I love your brother. Did I ever tell you that?"

"Only about a million times," I said, trying to smile.

I watched as Jenn picked up her phone and dialed. "Hey, Mel, I know you and Brad are out, and I was wondering if Haden and I could possibly use your apartment for a little girl time. Yep, I still have the key. Cool, thanks." Jenny hung the phone up and patted my leg. "We're gonna go hang out at Brad and Melly's pad so we can talk without interruptions. You know how some of the boys are when it comes to girl talk . . . It's better we avoid the house until you're feeling better. They just can't help themselves but butt in," she laughed as she watched our personal security guards get in their car to follow us where we were headed. It's not like we were ever *really* alone anyway.

Melly and Brad's apartment smelled of warm cinnamon and apples. She must have been baking again. I inhaled deeply, enjoying the comforting scent. Even though there was more than enough room at the Kentons, Melly and Brad wanted a place of their own, and who could blame them . . . definitely not me. My eyes danced across their walls, resting on a picture Taylor had taken on their wedding night, and I sighed. He was everywhere.

Looking away quickly, I sat on their plush couch alongside Jenny, who boisterously turned to face me. Suddenly I felt like a sixteen-year-old kid who didn't feel like spilling her guts to her parents. I knew Jenny too well to think she was going to let me out of here without divulging at least enough information to keep her from having to guess.

"So, it's pretty bad, *huh?*" The look of pain on Jenny's perky face caught me off guard.

"Yes," I admitted begrudgingly.

"Do you love him?"

"Yes I do, just not like I want to." Admitting that was just as painful as feeling it.

"Does he know that?"

"Yes, he does. He doesn't care." I hung my head down and played with my wedding ring from Taylor.

"You know, you don't have to marry him, Haden. No one will judge you. Your heart was taken a long time ago. It's no news to anyone."

I smiled at Jenny and went back to playing with my ring. "I have a baby to worry about. She needs a daddy. Taylor would want that for her."

"Oh, I don't know; I think there would be plenty of guys willing to be a fill-in daddy without you having to marry them. Gabe acts like he already bought stock in her." Jenny laughed again. I didn't bother joining in. None of this was funny to me.

"That's not what she needs, Jenn. She will need a daddy, not uncles *pretending* to be her daddy," I said, sad.

"You could always borrow Kiernan," she teased.

"Nah, he's not my type."

"Mine neither," Jenny laughed loudly.

"I'm not so sure about that, Jenn."

She just smiled and ignored my last comment. "So what do we do?"

"I wish I knew, but I have no clue."

"Haden, what does it feel like to love someone like that?"

"Like what?" I asked, confused.

"The way you love Taylor. What does it feel like?"

I looked at the teardrop diamond in my ring and said, "It depends; it can feel like the invigorating smell of peppermint on a cold day, sparking every sense in your body. That kind of love can be as welcoming as the first snow of winter or as comforting as a long bubble bath on a cold dreary day. It can be the warmest, most perfect feeling ever, or it can be hell. It can feel like a freshly sharpened, acid laced dagger someone has shoved into the depths of your heart.

"And that's where you are right now, the dagger?"

"Yes, I feel like someone keeps stabbing me repeatedly."

"That's terrible." Jenn stood up and started walking around the room. "There has to be something we can do to make those awful feelings go away."

I shook my head no, and looked down at my protruding belly. "There isn't, trust me."

"There *has* to be," she said, continuing her pacing.

"No, there doesn't *have* to be! Don't you get it? He's dead," I yelled. Jenny stopped pacing and looked at me, shocked. Guilt instantly washed over me. "I'm so sorry," I apologized through tears.

She rushed over to where I was sitting and hugged me while I cried. "No, I'm the one who's sorry," she said, crying with me. "You didn't need my prying. I was just trying to help."

"I know," I choked out. "I miss him, Jenn! It hurts so much. I feel like I can't breathe sometimes." I pulled away and sobbed in my hands. "I don't know what to do anymore. I keep telling myself that it'll get better, that the pain will go away, but it never does."

"Haden, Taylor loved you more than his own life. He would hate to see you like this." It was pretty obvious that Jenny felt helpless. I saw her grab her phone and text someone.

"Who are you texting?" I asked, still crying.

"Talon."

"Jenn, why?"

"I think he will be better at this than I am. I always say the wrong thing and I don't want to hurt you anymore." Her face was sad.

"Fine... whatever."

In minutes I had stopped crying and the door opened. Talon walked in and smiled at Jenny, who would have blushed if she hadn't felt so awful for me.

"Does everyone have a key to their apartment?" I asked.

"I think so," Jenny said, as a matter of fact.

"Well I don't," I said.

"You should definitely get one then. It's not like they're ever here anyway. They're always at Kenton Manor."

My brother and his heart of gold sat down next to me and grabbed my hand, saying nothing for the longest time. "You don't have to go through with it," he said softly.

"I told her the exact same thing," Jenny said, proud of herself.

Talon ignored her and continued. "I know Kasey better than most, Haden. He wants you to be happy. If it's not with him, he won't hold it against you. He knows how you feel about Taylor. I know that you love the memory of Taylor more than you love Kasey, and that's okay." I looked at Talon, surprised. "That's the truth isn't it," he said more as a statement than as a question.

I nodded and began to weep again. "Yes."

"It's *okay*, Haden. You need to stop beating yourself up about it. Talk to Kasey; he will understand."

"I *can't* hurt him, and don't you see... marrying him is what I need to do. I *do* love him, just not the same way I love Taylor." I shook my head, hoping my garbled words were making some sense. "I want my baby to have a father, Talon. I *need* her to have a father," I cried.

"She already *has* a father and he is dead. She doesn't need a replacement and neither do you. That baby girl will have plenty of male role models to help guide her. She doesn't need another daddy. No one could fill her father's shoes with either of you. Honestly, Haden, it's unfair that you would expect anyone to."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *It would be unfair?* Was he right? Is that what I was doing? I put my head back in my hands and cried harder. Talon put his arm around me and let me cry it all out.

When my tears slowed, I asked Talon if he knew where Kasey was. I needed to talk to him. Jenny and I rode in Talon's car she had borrowed earlier and we followed him, stopping at a bar. When we stopped, I asked Talon what Kasey would be doing at a bar. Apparently Gavin had been spotted in the area and Kasey knew the owners. He was asking some questions of their customers. When Talon came out with Kasey following him, the look on Kasey's face hurt me to the core. Worry was plastered all over it.

He kissed me softly. "Haden, are you all right? You're as pale as a ghost."

I assured him that I was indeed fine. He put his jacket around my shoulders as it started to snow.

"I'm not cold," I said quietly.

"I'm not either, but just looking at you is making me cold. You're shivering." He waved goodbye to Jenn and Talon and he and I walked to his car. When we got in he immediately turned the heater on and I laughed.

"What's so funny?" he asked, finding me amusing.

"You're just cute . . . for an old vampire."

"So, you think I'm cute, eh?"

"Oh gosh, yes," I blushed. He was not making what I was going to tell him easy. There he was, doing it again, putting band-aids all over my broken heart. I didn't want band-aids. I wanted to hurt. I deserved to.

"So sweet one, what would you like to talk to me about?" he asked.

Here it was, the moment I had been waiting for, and I couldn't do it. I looked deep into his beautiful baby blue eyes and froze. He put his hand on my face and I began to cry again. He smelled so good, warm and sweet and heavenly.

"Please tell me what's bothering you, Haden. Let me help you. You are hurting so badly and yet you let no one in. It's as if you think you're a burden. I don't think you realize *just* how much people love you... how much / love you."

That was it. I had to tell him. "Kasey, I never expected to love you, but I do. God knows I do—so much."

"That doesn't sound like a problem to me," he joked.

"It's not; what is, however, is that I can't marry you right now." I watched his face for signs that he was hurt but saw nothing of the sort.

"Okay, then we'll wait. I will love you just the same. It's not a deal breaker."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He wasn't hurt at all. He was being supportive as usual. "You're not mad at me?"

"Not one bit." He kissed my hand and smiled lovingly at me.

I was in shock. "I'm not saying that we'll never get married. I'm just not ready right now. I feel like a whale and I have some things I need to work through," I said honestly.

"As you wish; we can have a long engagement. I'm not going anywhere," he laughed.

I was so happy to hear him say that, that I threw myself into his arms and kissed his cheek softly. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." He laughed at my enthusiasm and then drove me home.

When we arrived we were greeted by Alexandra. "They're all outside already, waiting for you two." She was smiling, but I could tell that she, like me, was forcing it.

Kasey took my hand and led me to where my family and friends all sat outside, gathered around a blazing fire.

*And they trust **me** here?* I thought to myself loud enough for Kasey to hear. He chuckled and I laughed with him.

There were two open seats. Alexandra hadn't wanted to be included in much since Taylor left. Honestly I was wishing I could go hide inside with her instead of having to be a part of this mess. I exhaled deeply without thinking and all eyes were on me. I rolled my eyes and assured everyone that I wasn't in labor.

Sebastian laughed. "The frailty of life is quite mesmerizing."

Aramis nodded. "Yes it is, as well as precious, which is why we have asked you here, my friend. I have called everyone out here tonight because we are family. We work together. One of our own has been taken from us. We must see to it that never happens again." He looked at Sebastian.

"I must say that I am quite impressed with the way you all interact with each other. I had never seen such a way of life until I arrived. It is quite incredible. I have enjoyed watching your family's interactions thoroughly."

"Are you in or are you out?" Gabriel said sternly.

Sebastian laughed. "That too I admire. Your young ones are strong and ready to battle." He looked directly into Gabriel's eyes. "Do you have any idea what you are up against?"

"It doesn't matter." Gabe sat up straight, his ears perked, ready to phase. He sensed danger. *Gabe, don't. If he is dangerous, you can't let him see that you know.* As soon as my words were out of my

head, Gabe softened his posture. "Again I will tell you that it doesn't matter. It is Gavin who doesn't know what *he* is up against."

Sebastian's laughter had a sinister tone to it. "You are right about that. Gavin knows not what lies in the darkness of the woods. You *do*, though. It is you all who know exactly what he is up against."

"I second my brother. Will you help us?" Melly asked, perching on the edge of her chair like a bird.

He looked at her and bowed his head before my father-in-law began speaking. "Sebastian, we wouldn't ask this of you, but you know the recent findings. There have been more teen deaths. It is no doubt that Gavin is building his army. We would really appreciate your help." Aramis's words were warm in the cold night.

Sebastian crossed his leg over the other and scanned us all. "My friend, I have done much thinking. After speaking with Haden the other night, I was able to see exactly what my brother wants. what he is fighting for. Haden made me see how much you all need me. As much as I don't want to get involved, I will not turn my back on you, not after what you and your wife did for me so many years ago."

Aramis clapped his hands together, pleased. "That is the best news I have heard all day."

Sebastian turned his head slowly to where I was sitting and then lifted his eyes to mine while still speaking to Aramis. "I will, however, need to know *everything* in order to help."

Gavin's words flooded back at me. "*Sebastian isn't who you think he is. He is after you!*"

I could feel my heart rate picking up, and of course everyone heard it and turned to look at me. I shrugged my shoulders and smiled. "I'm just excited. It's about time Gavin gets what he deserves." My feeble attempt to hide my true thoughts had somehow worked except with Kasey, who was staring at me.

Sebastian laughed. "Yes it is. It has been long enough. He has had his fun—no more."

Aramis excused those who wanted to stretch their legs and run in the forest. I sat there, fat and patient, biding my time until it was my turn. *Soon*, I told myself.

"Did you say something?" Sebastian asked, looking at me with his eyebrows down.

"Nope, just enjoying the night air," I smiled and looked up into the night sky. I would definitely have to do a better job of guarding my thoughts. I didn't need him knowing about *that* gift of mine.

When I looked back down, Talon was now staring at me. *You too?* I asked. He nodded yes, and stood up with Gabe next to him, who was staring holes into Sebastian. Melly and Brad were looking deeply into each other's eyes, no doubt communicating privately amongst themselves. It was obvious that they didn't need Gavin for their antennas to go up. *Gabe, enough*. I said mentally. His eyes were like lasers pointed at Sebastian. He looked at me and then back at Sebastian before phasing and running off. Melly followed suit and Brad ran alongside her as she followed Gabriel. Talon stood quietly watching Sebastian's amused face as he stared at the wolves running into the forest.

"Well, *that* was impressive," Sebastian breathed. "I knew your family was special Aramis, but I had no idea."

"Oh yes, they are quite special—the first of their kind."

"*Really?* That's very interesting indeed. Does Gavin know this?" Sebastian's interest was unnerving.

Aramis, please don't tell him that he does. Something's not right. I can feel it.

My father-in-law looked at me, confused, and then at Talon who nodded in agreement. Sebastian was now looking at me. I smiled and rubbed my belly.

"I'm not sure whether he does or not," Aramis said. "We haven't had contact with him in months. We've had our feelers out but nothing has come back. The last we heard of him was when he visited Haden quite some time back."

"I understand." Sebastian looked at Aramis. "How many werewolves are there, if you don't mind me asking? I didn't even know they were capable of phasing anymore."

I looked over at Talon, who was now sitting still as a board listening intently.

Tell him that it's just us Aramis, please. Lie.

Aramis shook his head a little in disbelief. "Well, the ones I know are right here in my house. They're not werewolves, Sebastian. They are Warrior Wolves."

Sebastian gasped. "Can't be. Warrior Wolves have been extinct for years."

"Yes, but with the impending war they were called into service again." I cringed with Aramis's words.

"So there must be more than your family," Sebastian said, looking out in the distance.

"Yes, I believe so." Aramis said, knowing he had stepped over a line without ever realizing one had been drawn until just now.

"Remarkable. This is intriguing news for sure. I have much to ponder this evening." Sebastian got up and excused himself. "May I ask a favor, my dear friend?"

Aramis nodded yes, "But of course."

"Would it be possible to speak to one of the Warrior Wolves one on one?"

"Oh I don't know; the few I have met are quite temperamental. They are young and are new to the life." Aramis smiled softly, maintaining his composure even though I knew he was more confused than anyone. To him, Sebastian was an old friend.

"Why yes, there have been none recorded that took to phasing the first year with ease. I do remember that," Sebastian said, pleased. "Well, I had better be off. I had previous plans that I mustn't

cancel. Thank you all for your company. I look forward to working with you. I have high hopes that the world is changing." He smiled and left.

Aramis held his index finger up to his lips and then his ear.

"Shh."

Talon's eyes were narrowed on Sebastian as he watched him leave. "He's gone."

"Are you sure, Talon?" Aramis never turned around. Instead he waited for Talon to say yes. "Will one of you please tell me what just happened?"

It's all yours. I told Talon.

"Something's not right, Father. This guy is trouble." Talon's eyes were still covering the entire area by the house where Sebastian had just vanished from our sight.

Aramis shook his head in disbelief. "I know it's hard to trust right now, but Sebastian is a good man. Don't you think you two could be overreacting just a little?"

"No sir," I said. "I don't believe we are."

"He has never feigned his kindness with me, ever," Aramis said as he tried to grasp what my brother and I were saying.

For a brief moment I thought about telling them about my meeting with Gavin and what he said, but when I thought better about it I decided to keep my mouth shut, at least for now.

Talon stood up. "The man we just saw was an illusion," he whispered. "The friend you speak of does not dwell within the man that was just in our presence. *That man* is dead."

Gavin's words rang in my head like a church bell every time I heard Sebastian's name. The talk around the house was filled with speculation and debate. Aramis said he would not believe that this old friend seemed reserved for any other reason than to protect himself. Oddly enough, it was as if Sebastian sensed the controversial air in the house. Only days later he asked Aramis to accompany him on an out of town trip. He was to help him locate an old friend who had once been under the rule of Arkos—one of the few to escape and live, or so he said.

I wasn't complaining about Sebastian's absence. As much as I wanted to hate Gavin and not believe one word he said, there was something in me that knew he had spoken the truth. His eyes at our last meeting were too pained to be dishonest.

I plopped down on my bed and opened my Bible, something I hadn't done in quite some time. Not having much time to read, I flipped it open to Proverbs in hopes that my little chapter of Bible fortune cookie readings, as I liked to think of it, would give me a boost. My eyes immediately fell on Proverbs 16:22.

Understanding is a wellspring of life unto him that hath it: but the instruction of fools is folly.

I sat quietly and looked at my wedding ring. If understanding was the wellspring of life, then I was all dried up. I knew nothing anymore. Sighing, I continued to skim, letting my eyes rest on Proverbs 18:10 this time.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.

If only the Lord would be my strong tower. It had been so long since I had even considered talking to Him. I hung my head low and sighed. I doubted seriously that He would want to hear from me now, yet I needed something. I was a vast hole of space. Nothing was filling the emptiness within my soul. I began to flip more fervently through the Bible looking for *any* sign that I wasn't as lost as I felt. I stopped quickly on Matthew 18, verses 11-13.

For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.

Tears were now quietly falling down my cheeks, washing away my pain drop by drop. I had always loved Jesus. As a young child I would speak to him out loud many a night, frightening my mother at first until she realized who I was talking to. Life was nowhere near as simple as it had been in those carefree days of my childhood, my talks with God less and less. Those long lost days were filled with laughter, sunshine, and Taylor by my side.

I rubbed my belly and watched my baby girl struggle to swim around with ease as she used to. Her home was getting cramped fast. We were both ready for her to be in my arms. I wondered if that's what Jesus was saying in that chapter of Matthew. I had been lost but I wanted to be found. I wanted nothing more than to be born again and have him cradle me in His arms, sheltering me from the storms of the world, just like what I would do with my baby. It had been months since my mouth had uttered so much as one prayer, yet now I hungered to talk to my Father in heaven. I struggled and huffed, but got down on my knees at the side of the bed, put my hands together and closed my eyes as I cried. *Lord God, I don't really know what to say. It seems I have forgotten how to pray.* A vision of Taylor jumped into my head instantly and the tears rushed out of me full force. *Lord, I need my husband. I know I haven't been the chosen one you had hoped I would be, and I'm sorry. Father, if there is any way to bring my husband back to me, **please** I am begging you, **hear my cry** and bring him home. If he is really dead then please take away this pain and suffering. I am dying inside. I need to be a good mom to my baby, but I have nothing to give her. **Please God, don't forsake me. I am sorry.** Come rescue me just like you did that one sheep. I am lost and don't know my way home.*

A knock at the door stopped my prayers short. I struggled to get up and hurriedly wiped the tears from my face. When my face was mostly dried off, I waddled to the door and opened it to see Talon's beautiful smile. I motioned for him to come in but said nothing.

He sat on the loveseat and patted the cushion next to him. "Okay..."

I turned to face him and said, "Okay," back.

"So let me have it. I heard you crying, Haden. You can't hide your pain from me."

I sighed and looked down. "I don't have anything to say."

"For some reason I don't believe that is the case. Anyone in your shoes would have plenty to say." Talon turned to face me and looked out the window where the dead looking winter trees stood quietly. "You see those trees?"

"Yep," I answered softly.

"They may appear dead, but there is life waiting to grow within them. This is their season of death, but soon life will sprout in them, producing such vivid colors that it will seem impossible to think they were ever in this kind of state."

I nodded and sighed again. "What does that have to do with me?"

"That's simple. You feel like those trees right now, but it is just a season for you too. Soon you will be the one sprouting life, and the colors you will emit will mesmerize all those around you."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Me, mesmerize, hardly."

"Trust me, you will. Your winter is almost over and then you will see. As for now, you need to eat, so why don't you let your big brother fuss over you a little. I'd like to make you lunch," he said, winking.

"And why is it that you're single," I asked, noticing once again just how wonderful he was. "You're way too perfect not to have girls falling all over you, Talon."

"Dating is a waste of time in my opinion. When I meet my wife, I will know. Enough about me; let's get you and my niece some lunch."

I let him help me and my big rear end off the loveseat and followed him into the kitchen where Jenny, Kiernan, and Gabe were talking with Melly and Brad. Jenn was swaying with her little prince in her arms while the rest sat around the large round table. I stopped in the entry way with Talon by my side so as not to interrupt their seemingly intense discussion.

"I *still* can't believe that Aramis went with him," Melly said, shaking her head. "How could he not sense how sheisty Sebastian was?"

"Mels, you know Aramis's position. He needs to be on Sebastian's good side regardless. I don't think Aramis is as naive as some of you think he is." Brad's deep voice was as calming to my soul as usual.

"Well, I for one would follow that guy just about anywhere," Jenny laughed. "Did you guys not notice how hypnotizing his eyes were?"

"I did; they were oh so sexy," Gabriel said with a lisp.

"Oh be quiet; you just wish you looked like him," Jenn retorted playfully.

"And why, Jenny, would I want to look like him when I look like this?" Gabe flexed his biceps and winked. I had to stifle a laugh.

"I think he's got him a thing for me girl, Haden," Kiernan interjected. "I didn't like the way he looked at her, not one bit." Shaking his head, he continued. "Something's not right about him for sure, but Aramis ain't no dummy neither. I'm gonna have to agree with me buddy Brad on that one."

"He won't get anywhere near Haden if he even comes back. I'll see to that," Gabe said angrily. "I'll rip his head off if he tries to touch her."

It was then Talon decided that they would never take a break in their heated discussion, so he grabbed my hand and led me into the room. Gabe got up immediately and gave me his seat. I smiled and sat, thankful I wasn't going to have to stand. My feet looked like puffy pillows.

"Thanks for the concern guys, but I can take care of myself," I said, straining to situate myself on the chair.

"Yeah, I can see that," Gabe chuckled.

"Hey, don't mess with me. I'll take you on any day. I don't care how big you are... or I am for that matter," I laughed.

"I'd like to see you try, little mama. Come on; why don't you get up and show me what you're made of," he teased.

Even though I knew he was being his usual playful self, I felt my body start to shake. My heart rate began to rise and I had to concentrate on not phasing. My wolf was screaming to get out. I had never felt so out of control.

"Enough, Gabriel," Talon said sternly. "Now is not the time. She's got quite enough on her plate right now without you adding any."

No one said anything, but I could feel their eyes on me. I got up and walked out of the kitchen, angry at my unexplained shaking. Melly followed me, grabbing my hand when she caught up.

"Hey, this is almost over. That princess will be out and you can run for hours if you like. Aunty Melly will gladly babysit," she smiled.

"Melly, I *need* to phase. It's as if my wolf's screaming to get out. I need to run! I need to hunt! I need to feel the forest floor beneath my bare feet," I said, practically hyperventilating. "I can't do this anymore! I'm losing it. I feel like a caged animal."

"Hey now," she said, rubbing my arm. "This too shall pass. Soon, Haden . . . soon. I'll tell you what . . . when that pretty baby's out we'll have her grandmother watch her and you and I will run together. I found some sort of a cave not too far away and I bet you'd love it. It reminded me of you. It was so peaceful."

I looked at her, excited for the first time in weeks. "Will you take me there?" I asked, anxious.

"Sure, as soon as she's born and you feel up to it. I'd love to."

"Not then . . . now."

My words caught Melly off guard. "I don't know if that's such a good idea right now. It's a little distance from here and you're really close to having that baby. Why don't we wait until our wolves can run together?"

"No, I'd like to go now," I said, pleading. "I'll go grab a sandwich and I'll be good to go." I didn't wait for an answer. I went into the kitchen and grabbed one of Nanny Mena's prepared sandwiches out of the fridge while I told Talon that Melly and I were going on a walk. He smiled, but as I turned around I saw Melly shrugging her shoulders as she looked at him. When our eyes met she lowered them and smiled sheepishly.

"Okay then, let's get going," Melly said happily.

Our walk was nice enough to start with, that is until I got really tired. Carrying all the extra weight I was had an impact on my small frame. It seemed my lungs were having a hard time keeping up too. Melly asked repeatedly if I wanted to turn around and go back, quickly reminding me that she didn't want to take me there until I wasn't pregnant anymore. I just ignored her and kept walking. I needed to see that cave. I didn't know why, but I knew I *had* to. I just kept on going, placing one foot in front of the other, stopping only to take little breaks every now and then. When we finally came to it, I noticed its simple beauty instantly. I also noticed that it appeared to be man-made.

"Wow, it's beautiful," I said, relishing the area. I didn't waste any time and walked into the cave. It looked like someone had dug straight into a hill. Its rounded roof gave it a magical feeling. I immediately fell in love with its Hobbit-like home appearance. I couldn't wait to come back to see its beauty this spring. I was sure its top would be covered in plush, green grass.

"How did you find this?" I asked, curious.

"Brad and I were out taking a walk one night and stumbled upon it. We had a look around and I knew that I would have to bring you here one day."

I was so glad she did. It took some major work, but after about ten minutes of arguing about my wellbeing I finally convinced my dear sister to leave me there alone, at least for a while. I needed the solitude. She was not keen whatsoever on my idea, but I was sure she recognized the intense need I had to be alone. I asked her to come back and get me within the hour. Begrudgingly, she handed me her i-pod and left.

"I won't be far away. If you need me, just call and I'll come running." Her last promise held strong in my heart, reminding me of my earlier talk with God.

Once she was gone, I walked back into the cave and sat down with my back against the wall. It was unbelievably peaceful here, a warm contrast to the cold, uncertain emotions that had overtaken the Manor. Being half wolf and half vampire had its benefits. For one, I didn't have to worry about the cold like humans, even though one would never know that seeing how my family fussed over me since getting pregnant. I inhaled deeply, enjoying the cold, earthy smell and leaned my head back and closing my eyes.

"May I come in?"

I looked toward the entrance to see Gavin standing patiently, awaiting my response. His long hair rested gently on his broad shoulders, framing his dark, pain-filled eyes. The longer I looked, the more it seemed they were glistening with tears. Gavin's long coat hung to the ground, reminding me of the dark cloud looming above my soul. My heart ached at the sight of him.

"Sure, why not," I whispered cautiously.

He sat down beside me and leaned his head back. The shock of seeing him in such a way had my body frozen, not in fear but instead in sadness. I waited for him to speak, but it seemed as if no words would ever escape his mouth. I leaned my head back again and prayed silently for guidance. Here I was, sitting with my husband's murderer, and yet all I felt for him was love, intense love. A strange sense of need washed over me as I inhaled his stormy sweet scent. I wanted nothing more than to reach over and hold him. I wanted to take away his pain even though he was the cause of mine. There could be only one explanation. I *was* connected to him.

"Haden, I am leaving."

I turned my head to look at him, and what I saw shattered my already broken heart. He was completely broken in spirit. The Gavin before me was like a lost child crying out for his mother.

"What has happened, Gavin?" I didn't know what else to say. I just sat there, frozen and in shock.

"It's time I go. This will be the last you will see of me. I had to see you before I left. There are many things I want to say to you." He turned slowly toward me. His Nightmarish abilities to entrance one such as myself were even more intensified while he was vulnerable. He wanted my sole attention, and that he had.

"I'm listening, Gavin," I said as lovingly as I could.

"Haden." He said my name and then stopped for a brief moment as if saying it were like someone sticking a dagger through his heart. "Do you remember when we met?"

"Like it was yesterday," I said. "I had never encountered anyone like you before."

"Nor I you. That day I made up my mind that you would be mine. This is no news to you, I know. What is news to you is that somewhere, somehow along the way you entranced my soul, capturing my heart." His words had me frozen even more than before. "I am not here to ask for my heart back. It is yours for the keeping. I am only here to apologize for making your life more difficult than necessary and to tell you that as my promise to you, the keeper of my heart, I will do what is in my ability to reverse the damage I have done."

I had no clue what he was talking about. All I could do was cry silently as I listened to him bare his soul to me.

"For years I lived my life only for me. After meeting Arkos and changing into the creature I am today, I became even more of a monster. That is, until I met you." Gavin sighed and then spoke again. "Haden, when one drinks from my kind, they are connected for all eternity. I knew this when I had you drink from me. Blood is the life source, and mine is different from yours. It is of a different makeup.

When you drank from me, you took some of my life into you. This is one of the reasons why you are drawn to me the way you are. Because of what I am, I have the ability to draw you in. All of my kind can do this, but I wanted more than that. I wanted us to be one." I adjusted my body as best I could and leaned to where I was now facing Gavin. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Sitting before me, he was telling me his secrets. I watched his beautiful features as they moved while he continued. "What I didn't know was how it would affect *me*. Never has a Nightmare been attached to their prey. Somehow I became attached to you, and suddenly I was feeling things I hadn't since I was a child. I became hungrier to be around you. I began watching you closely. When you hurt, something strange started happening to me. I began to hurt alongside you. When you experienced pleasure, I did as well. This caused quite a battle within me until I realized that it was more than a mere feeding connection." Gavin leaned his head back against the rocky wall again and sighed. "I had fallen in love with you."

My eyes must have been as big as silver dollars. "Me?" I asked, confused. "You fell in love with me?"

He turned his head and looked directly into my eyes. "Yes, *you*, and more than you know. You act like that's hard to believe. I would die for you, Haden."

My breath caught in my throat.

"I have come to tell you that I love you, that I'm sorry for hurting you, and that you need to stay away from Sebastian. He doesn't come in peace. I wasn't lying to you when I warned you the other night. He comes to hunt you. He is smart and cunning. He will take his time so he doesn't show his true self. You do not know him. He is *not* the man of God he once was."

Confusion flooded my veins. "Let me ask you this Gavin. If you love me like you say you do, then why did you hurt Jenny?"

Gavin exhaled and shook his head. "I had nothing to do with that. I was merely checking on a rumor I had heard. There was talk of happenings going on that I was unaware of. I went to the location, and there you were. It was merely coincidence that we ran into each other."

As I listened to his words I was totally confused. "Are you saying you're not the father of Jenny's baby?"

Gavin laughed. "I'm glad you think so highly of me Haden. I'm not desperate. I had nothing to do with Jenny's impregnation."

I sighed, watching him closely. "I don't believe you."

"That is your choice. My innocence is what it is. I have better things to do with my time than force myself on young girls."

As much as I wanted to believe he was lying, I didn't. His eyes said much more than that. They said that he was truly in love with me.

I closed my eyes and opened them again, inhaling slowly. "If your brother is the threat to me that you say he is and you care for me the way you say you do, then why are you leaving?" I asked, hurt.

"If I thought you needed my services I would stay, but you will be well protected. I must go. I have made up my mind." Gavin sat up straight and pulled something silver out from underneath his dark shirt. It was a huge silver cross. He kissed it and removed it from around his neck, handing it to me. "It is yours now."

"What's this?"

"It is the cross my father gave my mother. Ironical that I would wear a cross, I know. My mother said that my father gave this to her to call on him when she needed him. One morning when Sebastian and I were toddlers, she woke up with a goodbye note from my father and this cross sitting on it. He had abandoned all of us. I couldn't even tell you what he looked like." Gavin stopped and inhaled as his eyes filled with tears at the memory of his mother. "Before she died she gave it to me. She told me that she saw light in me and that she loved me. She asked me to wear this to remember her and my father, that if I were ever in danger it would lead my father to me. I never used it. I didn't want to know the waste of space that left my mother. Sebastian has resented her giving this to me for years. This cross was the only love I had ever known until I met you. I want you to have it."

I could do nothing but cry. "I can't accept this, Gavin."

"Please, you will offend me if you don't. I want to leave you with something of mine." He put his hand on my neck and pulled me close, inhaling deeply. Slowly he leaned in and kissed my lips so softly. I almost exploded inside from his electric touch. I could feel his body stiffen as did mine. He pulled away and kissed my head. Pain was oozing off of him, and I struggled not to cry harder. "Never will anyone entrance me the way you have." He stood up and I followed.

"Please don't go," I said through tears. I had no idea why I was asking this of him. All I knew was that the thought of him leaving was hurting me in ways I never imagined.

"That is our blood bond speaking, Haden. It will never break, but the further I am from you the more the feelings will lessen."

I didn't know whether he was right or not, but I didn't care. I had been wrong about him and my heart didn't want him to go. I could help him, and maybe he could help me. Maybe *he* was the answer to my prayers. If I could help him change then maybe I could make some sense out of Taylor's death. God cares about that one lost sheep. Taylor wasn't lost, but Gavin was.

"No, you can't go. I won't let you," I said quickly.

A look of confusion washed over Gavin's chiseled face and then he smiled. "I have always enjoyed your feistiness, Haden, but I have made up my mind. It's as good as done."

"Well I have made up mine too, and I'm not letting you leave. If you love me then you will just have to put your selfish wants aside and stay." I knew the chance my words were working was slim, but I had to try, nevertheless.

Laughing, Gavin's face lit up. "Those words are like music to my ears. I do love you, and because I love you I must go." With those words his face became solemn again. "You will understand when the time is right."

"I will never understand why you've come to tell me you love me and then leave. What if you're the answer to my prayers, Gavin? What if God's using you to help *me*?"

Gavin took a deep breath. "Maybe so, my queen, but I will not be helping you by staying here. It is best for you that I leave." By now my hormones had run amuck and I was crying harder. "Please don't cry. It pains me so to see you this way," Gavin said, wiping a tear from my face.

"Then don't leave," I spat. "Stay and protect me."

"You are in good hands, Haden. You just have to remember to stay far away from Sebastian."

I looked at the beautiful silver pendant on the silky black rope chain and then looked back at Gavin. "Who better to protect me from Sebastian than his brother?"

Gavin exhaled and knelt down before me on one knee. "Today I will make you a promise. With my kind, Haden, it is against our very nature to go back on our promises, which is why I haven't made one in forever. I will never fully leave you. You have my word. Should you *truly* need me, hold this cross up to the sky. I will feel that need and come to you. You will *always* be my queen."

He stood up, bowed, and left without another word, leaving me sad and alone. I dropped to my knees and sobbed like a baby. Melly was at my side only moments later.

"What happened? What's this?" She grabbed the cross from my limp hands. "Oh my, it's beautiful. Haden, where did you get this?"

I didn't answer her. I took the cross back and put it in my jeans back pocket where I knew no one would notice it. The last thing I needed was to worry my brothers. Halfway back to the house I was so weak I could barely walk. I stopped to rest, leaning on a tree, when Melly called Brad to come carry me home. I didn't argue. I didn't say anything at all. When Brad showed up I saw them exchange looks at each other, but neither said a word. He picked me up as if I was as light as a feather. I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes while he carried me home.

The absence of one's whole heart had a way of making time become meaningless. I knew no time anymore. It didn't matter what hour it was or what it would be. I was empty and alone. I was lost in the woods of my own hell and feared no one would ever find me. I was that one hundredth sheep who had wandered far away from his master. I was lost, scared and alone. I needed to be found.

24. Deliverance (Taylor)

The picture of my wife's beautiful sleeping face was one of the highlights of having all of my previously muted senses back in full working order. Upon their return, I had made it a habit to join her in her dreams without her knowing. Seeing her angelic face as she slept filled my restless nights with peace. Not once did she catch on until just recently. It was a night just like any other night. I lay down on

my back and forced my open eyes to close. In mere seconds I was with her, watching her soft slow breathing.

Something about that night had been different. Maybe it was my anticipation of knowing I would be holding her in my arms soon that caused her to stir. Unlike all the other nights before, this one I crossed a line which I had previously told myself was off limits. I sat quietly in the chair as she tossed and turned. She looked so uneasy, breaking my heart with each little moan that escaped her beautiful lips. Finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I needed to let her feel me, even if she wouldn't know it was really me there with her.

Slowly I got up out of the chair and walked over to her bed. Leaning over I gently kissed her lips, letting mine rest just a moment before removing them and taking my place back in the chair across the room. The minute my lips touched hers, I felt her body relax. It wasn't until I pulled away that she began to toss and turn again, eventually opening her eyes. She was looking right at me. Not wanting to startle her, I didn't move but instead remained still, waiting for her to speak. My mere presence caused a look of such severe anguish in her eyes that it knocked the wind right out of me. It was the first time I had seen her beautiful eyes in many long months. They were not the same eyes I had known once upon a time. No, these eyes had seen things I had not witnessed, and those things had left their mark. These eyes were full of sorrow and pain. Albeit difficult on me to witness, I couldn't help but smile. Those were not the eyes of a happy bride to be. She was not in love with him as she had once told me. Her wedding ring still lay gracefully on her left ring finger right where I had put it on our wedding day. Seeing that, I knew that she hadn't given up on me. In that moment, no words needed to be said. She was waiting for me and I would go to her.

She held my stare only briefly and then lay back down as if she was seeing things. I continued to watch her as she cried softly, wishing I could go to her. Seeing the intense anguish in her sorrow-filled eyes, I knew it was better that I wait. The last thing she needed was to see me and then wake up in an empty bed. I couldn't be that selfish. Instead, I suffered through the heartache of watching her softly cry herself to sleep. *I'm with you my love*, I thought to myself, wishing I could say it aloud. *I'm right here. Sleep. It will all be okay soon.*

I spent most of the night watching my wife until sleep finally overtook me. I awoke in the same cold and empty bed beneath the sea, surrounded by my swimming friends. My masked visitor had come to me just this morning to make me aware that the time was at hand. He informed me that the danger had lifted from Haden for a few days but would be back and that she needed me there to protect her. In that moment, I once again wanted to ask my friend to share his identity with me, but I knew he was hiding it for some reason or another so I again refrained from asking. He had already done so much for me and I owed him greatly. Prayers were all I could give the masked man. From the sound of his pain-filled voice this morning, I knew he could use them.

It seemed the minutes were passing by slower than normal. I couldn't help but pace back and forth like a small child waiting for his parents to go to Disneyland. The anticipation was killing me. Soon I would see my bride. Soon I would be able to hold her in my arms and inhale her with every breath I took. My beautiful wife; she had been through so much so fast. She was still so young physically, and yet her spirit surpassed our peers. It always had, but after seeing her last night I knew she had matured even more.

I sat on the couch impatiently and let my mind take me back to our honeymoon. The look of pure joy on her face as we touched each other for the first time had my heart racing even now. She and I had waited so long to be together, to share the love we had battled with inside since we were young. Remembering how her soft cotton nightgown hung on her delicate frame excited me. Knowing the fact that I would soon be able to rest my eyes on her once again filled me with longing. Oh how I loved watching her brush her long, silky hair before bed. There was nothing I didn't love about my wife.

My next thought took me back to our first time alone at the cabin. Clueless Kiernan had shown up with an unexpected guest. Without asking, he had invited Amber, a simple girl from my past who had once liked me more than she should have. The memory instantly brought a smile to my face. Poor Haden had been bit with the jealousy bug that evening. If I could have only told her how much I loved her back then, how no one could have ever had the hold on my heart as she alone did; maybe I could have saved her all of that unnecessary grief. I shut my eyes and remembered Haden walking out of the hall into the room to greet us. She looked like a beautiful blue flower in spring, opening its petals wide for the very first time. I was speechless when I saw her. Just the sight of her had me forgetting Amber's name. I only had eyes for her back then, and I still do today.

I sat back up on the couch as I heard footsteps heading in my direction. They were not my friends. They were unrecognizable to me. I hung my head low and once again pretended to cloud my mind.

"Is this him?" a gruff man asked.

"Yes it is," the female voice answered coldly. "I think I can take it from here," she said, walking toward me.

"Is the lady sure she will not need my services?"

"Didn't I just tell you that I don't?" she bit back.

The door slammed shut and I continued to play my part.

"Well, if she could only see you now. I bet she wouldn't think you were nearly as special as she had before you left."

The female's voice was incredibly familiar to me. I wanted to catch a glimpse of her face but forced myself to keep my head hanging low.

"Looking at you now, I wonder if I should have saved you that day. Then again, I am sure you will be quite delectable when you are changed, Taylor. Personally I never understood why you wasted your time on Haden. You were always better than her."

Michelle? Could it be? Had they changed her that day when she tried to save my life?

"Come on now; there's no need to hang your head down. I thought Arkos told them to lesson your dosage. Soon all of that will be unimportant. *Soon* you will be one of us."

I looked up slowly, squinting my eyes so that she would think my vision was still impaired. "Michelle?" I asked, trying to slur her name some.

"So you *do* know who I am. That's fabulous." She clapped her hands together and got up to come sit next to me.

"Why... are *you*... here?" I asked slowly while blinking at her.

"Well darling, I'm here because Arkos chose me. The minute he saw me it was love at first sight for both of us. It's just splendid here. You will love it when you're not all loopy like you are now. I have to admit that I was quite excited to hear that you were going to be staying with us. It will be nice to have someone here from home."

The door opened and in came Arkos with a couple of his goons. I moved my head up slightly in his direction and then put it back down again.

"Have you and your friend from back home been able to do some catching up, Michelle?" Arkos asked before sitting across from us.

"Not as much as I would have liked. He is still so drugged it's hard to understand him when he talks," she pouted.

"Well, I will have to speak to Demetrius about that. He was given strict instructions to lesson his dose." Arkos looked at me and apologized. "Soon my friend, you will be as clear as a bell; your senses will be better than ever," he smiled. "I take it you have given thought to my offer."

This was one of those moments in life when you can't help but wonder *why now*. It was only a matter of time until my friend helped me escape this dungeon of evil, and here I was, caught between a rock and a hard place. My hands were tied, leaving me only one option... to pray that my masked friend was as smart as I thought he was. I looked at my hands and then slowly at his face.

"I... do not accept." My words were clear as crystal.

Neither Arkos nor Michelle said anything at first, and neither did I. I looked back down at my hands and stayed silent.

"I told you they hadn't lowered his dose. He's not in his right mind, Arkos. Maybe you should give him a couple more days. Then he will answer the way you were expecting."

I was silently praying that he would take Michelle's advice. I had a date with my wife soon and I wasn't about to let him ruin it.

"No, I'm afraid not, Michelle. It might actually work out to his benefit if we were to change him while he was still under the influence of Hencinol. It has been known to ease the change some. I will send for Demetrius. You may wait here if you like. I must be going. I have a meeting."

Arkos stood and Michelle went to him, embracing his side. "Whatever you say, my love."

Arkos looked down at me, and I up at him. "I look forward to meeting you again in a few days, my friend."

Michelle waited with me, talking my ear off about her new life until Arkos's goon arrived. I wondered how well my friend knew Arkos's lair. I could only pray that he knew it better than I did. It wasn't long before Demetrius showed up, and I found myself having to concentrate on stopping my heart rate from accelerating. Time was running out.

"Time to go," he demanded, emotionless.

I didn't bother fighting. I had prayed and was now waiting for the answer. There was absolutely nothing I could do but wait. Regardless of whether my masked friend showed up or not, I was leaving this place sooner than later. I just had to be patient; my life depended on it.

We walked down many a hall, surrounded by the sea and its inhabitants. We were definitely in an underwater dwelling of sorts. We arrived at our final destination and Michelle laced her arm through mine, leading me into the room where my immediate fate lay. The four walls were black in color, reminding me of a dark tattoo parlor Kiernan had dragged me into once. In the center of the room there lay a black lacquer bed with deep red satin bedding and several silky black pillows. Above the bed on the wall was a red and black mural, possibly a Rothko. To the left was a red leather dentist chair with restraints.

"Where . . . am . . . I," I asked, purposely stumbling over my words.

Michelle was quick to answer. "You're in heaven. This is where your new life will begin."

Demetrius grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the chair. "Get in," he demanded.

I did as he asked, taking a deep breath and praying my friend was close by. Demetrius locked my arms and legs to the chair in four quick motions.

"You may go now," Michelle ordered the large man.

He didn't look as if he really wanted to do as asked, but as soon as she cleared her throat he obeyed her orders anyway.

"Don't mind him. He doesn't like taking orders from a female," she laughed. "I myself have to be going for now. You will be fine in here. Soon Arkos will join you and your new life will begin. You should feel honored, Taylor. Arkos has chosen to change you himself. That is an honor indeed. When you are changed, you will be forever linked to him." Michelle blew me a kiss and was gone.

I looked at the locks now holding my limbs hostage and anger rushed through me as I tried to process how the day had come to *this*. When the door opened again, I instinctively relaxed my arms and slowly looked up to see a short blonde girl walk in.

"You don't have to pretend with me, Taylor. I know you can see. I'm here to help get you out," she said bitterly as she reluctantly pulled a key out of her pocket and began unlocking the restraints.

I waited patiently as she unlocked each one. "Thank you," I said, watching her closely.

"It's nothing," she sighed. "Just doing as asked," she said, looking at her watch. "There's not much time. We will wait here for . . . well, we'll wait until he's ready." She looked me up and down. "Oh

my, you are quite the looker. Personally I don't know what all the fuss is about her. If you ask me, I don't think she deserves *you*." I narrowed my eyebrows but said nothing. She too knew Haden? "Taylor, you could be *so* much more than the toy to some *supposed* prophetic girl. I just don't know what it is about her that has you guys whipped the way you are."

"I beg to differ," I said harshly. "Do you know my wife?"

"Oh yeah, I do. She stole my boyfriend."

I didn't know what she was referring to, and I didn't waste even a minute of my precious time pondering it. It was obvious that she was a bitter person by nature, and I wasn't in the mood for anyone's trivial self-esteem issues. I was focused. I was leaving this place, today. The bitter blonde girl continued to go on about how I deserved better when finally my masked friend walked in.

"Caina, that will be enough. Your bitterness has the air tasting acidic," he scoffed. I started to laugh and she shot a look of disgust in my direction

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," she huffed. "Do you know how much trouble I'll be in if I'm caught?"

"You will not be caught," he told his little cranky friend. "Taylor, you will need to follow me closely. Put these on." He handed me sunglasses and I did as he said. "Good, now... we will be encountering a lot of light, more than you have ever seen. Keep the glasses on no matter what. The intense light would blind you if you were without them. Now put this coat on," he said as he handed me a long black leather trench coat resembling the one he too was wearing. "A pure vampire would burn without the proper attire. The light mimics sunlight, just way more intense, which is why a pure vampire would char at their seams so to speak. Vampires sensitive skin can tolerate the sun; *this* not so much. It wouldn't be pretty so say the least. You being half human will lessen the effect on your skin, but we shouldn't take any chances." He handed me a hat and black gloves. "When we walk, keep your head down."

"What about you?" I asked.

"I am a Nightmare. I can go anywhere, anytime. Now, it's time. Let us go." He turned to Caina, "You know what to do."

"Yes, master," she said sarcastically.

He opened the door and I followed him down seemingly endless tunnels, all surrounded by water, until we came to a glass elevator.

"We won't be seen?" I asked, concerned.

"Did you drink the juice I brought you this morning?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then no, you won't," he said, stepping in the elevator and inserting a key. The elevator took off and began going up through the water.

"Can they see *you*?" I questioned as we sped upward.

"Yes, they can. I am not the problem. It is you they don't want leaving. That is why I had you drink the juice this morning. It contained Glaston extract. Because you ingested it, they will be bothered if they look in your direction. Vampires are highly sensitive to its effects and will encounter severe headaches the closer they come to it. It is in their nature to look the other way when it is used. Another time your humanity has come in handy today," he smirked.

"Oh," I said in awe. "Won't they know that I've taken it?"

"No, it hasn't been used in a *very* long time. No one but Nightmares and Arkos would recognize it. We are safe for now."

The elevator was quickly approaching the underneath of what appeared to be endless metal.

"Now is when you will need those glasses. Once they are on, do not take them off. You *will* go blind. Follow me closely, Taylor."

I did just as my friend asked. When the elevator opened I had to squint a little, even with the glasses on. My masked friend was fast as the light itself, and I found myself having to work to keep up with him. The power and strength that radiated off of him was indescribable. He was definitely someone Arkos trusted. No one else would have been able to walk out of there with me unnoticed.

We heard footsteps approaching and he pulled me down a different hall where we both leaned up against the wall until the two large men in puffy black space suits and face coverings passed. He looked at me and nodded so I would follow him again. This time he was walking even faster. His movements were so fluid like, it almost gave the appearance that he was floating as he walked. I could see his eyes looking all over with each new step he took.

In minutes we came to another door, which led to a stairway. I followed my friend through the door and down two levels of stairs before we went through another door, which led us to a garage full of cars. He pulled something out of his pocket, looked around, and disabled the alarm to a red and black Bugatti similar to the one my brother-in-law drove.

"Get in," he breathed softly as he checked behind him once more. I did as asked and in seconds the engine roared to life. My masked friend backed out of the parking spot and floored it.

"They will come looking for both of us soon," he said as a matter of fact. "I will drop you off at the edge of the forest on the far side of Kenton Manor. They will not expect you to seek refuge so close to home at first. I have no doubt that they will go where your scent is strongest, which is precisely why I previously marked your scent throughout a few forests on the other side of town. This is why I had you try on clothes for me this morning. Those are the very things that will save your life. They know you won't want to lead them to Haden. Where I am taking you now, I need you to stay overnight. Let them have their hunt.

They will eventually take a break. That is when you will be able to go home to your wife. I had a few Warrior Wolves do me a favor and mark their scents all over where I'm taking you. Arkos will not be eager to invade what he believes to be their territory. The Stidoniums will no doubt pass by it tonight or tomorrow, yet they won't approach where you are, and the surrounding area will no longer have your

scent. I give you my word. Tomorrow you will wait until the wolves give you the okay. Then and only then can you return to your wife."

"I can't thank you enough," I said, wanting so badly to repay this stranger, yet I had nothing.

"None needed; I have only done what was right. The Bugatti came to a halt and he handed me a bag. "Some food and blood for you, in case you forgot how to hunt," he joked.

I thanked my masked friend one last time, took the bag, and got out of the car. He nodded at me and sped off into the distance. I looked around and then ran toward the forest where I would spend my last few moments without my wife.

25. Delirious

I spent the last two days in bed sleeping away the intense pain in my heart. Gavin's disappearance had thrown me into an even bigger depression. All I could do was replay the last year of my life. How could I have been so blind? Of course he loved me. It was so obvious now. Gavin never said he was the one to take Taylor's life. I had assumed that all on my own. But if he hadn't killed my husband, who had? These questions were too important to let go of. I wouldn't stop until I found the answers I so longed for.

A knock at my door made me bury my head under my covers. Thankfully it stopped and no one forced their way into my room. My baby must have felt her mommy's sadness because she hadn't been moving quite as much as normal either. Sanity was beginning to escape me once again. I closed my eyes and visualized my husband's perfect face. Then I pictured him standing next to Kasey. Thinking about Kasey made me want to throw up from the pain I knew I was causing him. I cared so deeply for him, and yet I was hurting him with every breath I took. I hurt everyone I loved. I was a waste of space. If I was that hundredth sheep, I was a black one that not even God seemed to want. At least that's how I felt inside. I had called on God like Kasey told me to do and yet I felt worse. I was all alone. He had left me. Not that I blamed him. I didn't deserve his love. I didn't deserve anything.

The knock at my door came again. This time I called to let whoever it was come in. Slowly the door opened and I peeked above my covers to see Kasey's perfect face smiling at me.

"How about I take you out for some lunch?" he asked, sitting on the loveseat.

"No, thank you; I'm not hungry." I wasn't kidding. I had no urge to eat. If anything, my stomach had been in knots all day long.

"Look, I've let you have your sulking time. I don't know what happened the other day that pushed you over the edge, but I do know that you need to eat. I love you and I am taking you to lunch whether you like it or not."

I exhaled, knowing it was a losing battle. "Fine," I caved. "I'll take a shower and then I'll text you to let you know when I'm ready."

Kasey's smile lit up my room like a full moon brightening even the darkest of night. Then, just as quickly as his light filled the room it vanished along with him, leaving the room as empty as my heart-felt inside. I rolled over carefully and opened the drawer of my bedside table where Gavin's pendent lay. I picked it up and held it to my heart. *Why did you leave? I would have helped you.* I already knew the answer to that question. He didn't want my help. I saw the pain in his eyes that night. He didn't want to be a burden in my life any more than he already had been. Why did life have to be so confusing? Those dark brown eyes had so much they wanted to say to me, and yet they held everything inside. As much as I wanted to ignore the new ache in my heart Gavin had left, I couldn't. I felt his absence, and it didn't feel right. I saw it all too clearly now; he and I *were* connected like he had said so long ago. I was a part of him and him of me. I sighed and placed the large pendent back safely in my drawer under my Bible.

I showered as fast as my overtly pregnant body would allow and placed just a touch of makeup on my sad face. If only mascara could make your eyes smile. Sadly, I knew better. I wasn't feeling very good today physically either, and no makeup was going to change that. Right as I stepped out of the shower I became extremely nauseated, emptying the contents of my stomach into the toilet. I needed a vacation from my life and I needed it soon. I had no doubt that the stress was killing me. I finished getting ready and then wobbled out my door and down the hall toward the elevator, where I bumped into Jenny. I had totally forgotten to text Kasey.

"Whoa, mama, you look like you're about to pop!" she said, looking me over.

"Why thanks, Jenn. That makes me feel so much better." My words were sarcastic and full of self-pity.

"No, seriously; that baby is coming soon."

"No kidding," I said, rolling my eyes. "Thanks for the news flash."

"Wow, all that sleep you had the past few days didn't do you much good, did it? Maybe you should go back to bed," Jenn griped. My sour attitude had struck a nerve with her.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "You're right. I'm in an awful mood. I don't feel good and Kasey wants me to go out to eat with him," I said, unhappy. "I just want to be alone."

Jenny was about to take up for Kasey when suddenly there was a loud howl outside. Jenny looked at me. "What in the heck was *that*?"

She and I both started walking toward the front door. "I would know that sound anywhere. It was a wolf in pain," I said, worried. "Where's Melly?"

"I have no clue. I was hanging out with Kiernan and Joshy," Jenny said, her face mirroring mine. "You don't think it was Melly, do you?"

"Oh God, I hope not," I said, wanting to cry.

We weren't the only ones who heard the scream. We almost ran right into Talon and Gabriel as we got to the front door. Gabe immediately asked us where Melly was when we heard another cry and a loud howl. "There are two of them out there," Talon said as he threw the front door open.

About one hundred yards from the house we saw two wolves. Kathryn was hovering over one, blood dripping down her face. Talon, Gabriel, and Jenny all sprinted toward her. When Kathryn spotted Jenny, she smiled devilishly and ran off. Jenny took off, running after her until Talon called her back.

I hurried as fast as I could to where the wolves lay. What I saw made me sick. Melly's wolf was covered in blood, struggling to get up, while the other, unfamiliar she-wolf lay silently as she bled profusely from her neck. Before anyone could say anything, Gabe had Melly's wolf in his arms and Talon was carrying the other one, both running toward the house.

Kasey was on his way out when we got to the door. He stepped out of the way to let Gabe and Talon through. He shook his head and searched my face for answers. "What happened?"

I tried to answer him as best as I could while we followed in my brother's dust. Jenny was kindly keeping pace with me. I knew she was trying not to make me feel any worse than she already had.

"I don't know. We heard them crying. When we got to the door we saw Kathryn hovering over them," I answered him, emotionless. I was in shock.

Jenny quickly picked up where I left off. "That psycho chick Kathryn was having some sort of feeding frenzy on the front lawn. I don't know why Melly didn't eat her for lunch. If it were me, she wouldn't have had time to blink. Melly's way too nice if you ask me."

Kasey put his arm around me. "Your sister will be fine, Haden. Don't worry." He knew it was silly to tell me that, but he did anyway. He wouldn't have been himself without doing so.

We got to the infirmary to find Melly back in human form sporting a robe with bandages all over her upper body. I looked at her, sad, and started to cry. I ran up and hugged her tightly.

"I'm all right, sis; no worries. She wouldn't have killed me anyway," Melly said, trying to reassure me.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Kasey interjected. "If there's a next time, don't underestimate her. She is a cold, calculated killer and she doesn't think of you as a sister."

"Or next time you could just call me," Jenny added happily. "I would have no problem tearing her apart."

"Jenny!" I couldn't believe what she was saying. Where had my kind, jovial Jenny gone?

"What, Haden? She was going to *eat* your sister, and look at what she did to her." Jenny pointed at the petite almond brown wolf lying on the table covered in stitches. "From the looks of it, that one had no chance."

I walked over to her and Talon looked at me, concerned. "I don't know if she'll make it. She's pretty banged up."

"Who is she?" I asked, hoping he had some answers.

"I've never seen her before, honestly," he said, never taking his eyes off of her.

"She sure is beautiful, even with all those stitches," Jenny said, poking her head in between Talon and I.

"Yes, she is," he agreed.

Jenny looked at me, her eyes wide. "Not as pretty as me though, right Talon?"

"Jenny, there could never be another you," he said, smiling at her, and then walked off.

She looked at me and whispered, "What did that mean?"

I laughed, "It means you're the only Jenny for him."

She still looked confused but left it alone, thankfully. I suddenly became very fidgety, which of course everyone noticed, and all eyes were suddenly on me. Then my stomach got sick again. Jenny saw all the color leave my face and gently pushed me toward the large trashcan where I threw up again. Jenn was still holding my hair up when she put her face closer to mine.

"You look awful," she muttered.

"Wow, you're full of so many compliments today, Jenn." My sarcasm filled the air as I tried to sip the glass of water Talon handed me once I regained my composure.

"I don't feel so great," I said as Jenny pulled a chair up for me. Kasey was by my side instantly.

"I think we might want to reschedule our lunch date, and maybe you should go take a nap," he said, concerned. "I think you're overexerting yourself. I can have Nanny Mena bring you some food later if you get hungry."

That was the best idea I had heard all day. Seeing that Melly was okay, I agreed. Of course, they wouldn't let me go to my room alone as I would have wanted. Instead, Jenny volunteered to walk with me. As much as I loved her, I was in no mood for her many questions. I took a deep breath and prayed that the urge to puke was gone for good.

"So, have you figured out what you're going to do?" Jenny's voice was perky and determined.

"About what?" I asked, knowing good and well what she was referring to.

"Um you know, your man situation. Are you going to marry him?"

"Am I going to marry Kasey? That's a good question. I have no idea what I'm going to do," I said honestly. "Right now I'm just thrilled I'm not throwing up." I was so hoping she would take a hint and drop it. Unfortunately that didn't turn out to be the case.

"You know I love you, right?" she asked with a smile. Anytime Jenny said that, I knew something hard to hear would soon follow. Becoming a vampire hadn't changed her problem with timing. Now was definitely not the time for this kind of discussion, but her radar was still broken apparently.

"Yes, I do." My words were dry. I wanted nothing more than for her to leave me alone.

"Well, if I were you, I would jump all over Kasey's proposal. I mean seriously. He's gorgeous. He's madly in love with you, and you may never have another shot at happiness if you don't marry him." I nodded, acknowledging her as I kept walking, but I kept silent.

"Taylor's not coming home, Haden, so you might as well be as happy as you can be. You don't want to throw away the only good thing that you might ever have."

Jenny's words cut through me like a knife. I stopped short and looked at her with such hate that I could have spit at her. "Why would you ever say that to me? How could you say you're my best friend and then be so cruel?" It was obvious my response caught her off guard.

"I told you that *because* I'm your best friend. I know your life has been hard, but it's time you get over yourself and move on. We're all getting pretty sick of your pity party."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I looked at her with disgust and then turned and walked away.

"*What*, now you can't speak, Haden? I'm the only person who is willing to be honest with you, and you can't face the heat. Are you scared you're gonna catch something on fire?" she laughed.

"Yes... you," I said coldly. "If I were you, I would stop talking. I love you, Jenny, but you're testing my patience."

Jenny laughed again. "I'm not scared of you."

"Maybe you should be," I said, continuing to walk toward my room. When I got to it, I opened the door and then slammed it in her face.

"See you whenever you're done wallowing in your self-pity," she called through the door.

As soon as I knew she was gone, I opened my door and headed toward the back stairs. Making my way down them as fast as my puffy body would take me, I checked the house for any sign of life. Seeing that I was alone, I made my way toward the back door and opened it, shutting it quietly. As soon as it shut, I began running. I hadn't run in months. It felt amazing. I took my shoes off and threw them behind me; then I veered, spotting a cluster of wolves in the distance. To the right of them was a clearing, a complete chance of fate I would quickly take full advantage of; never before had there been a clear opening without eyes keeping watch for me. It seemed today was my lucky day. It was a cold day in early February and snow would be scattered around the forest, but I ran toward it anyway. I would just have to assume the heat from my inner wolf would keep the baby and me warm.

My precious little angel slept peacefully as I ran. Thinking quickly, I ran in the one direction I had never been. The cold air tickled my face as my feet moved rapidly above the forest floor, my body moving at one with the wind. My pace was slower than I was accustomed to, but I didn't care. As I

entered the forest I took a deep breath in through my nostrils and continued to run as fast as my swollen feet would carry me. The patches of snow here and there felt good on my hot feet. I ran until finally my breathing was becoming more and more labored. As much as I didn't want to stop, I had no choice but to acknowledge the weakness of my body. I would be forced to rest... for now. Walking slowly, I continued on. Deep into the forest I spotted a deer and wondered if I still had it in me. Oh how I wanted to hunt. Not paying attention to everyone's warnings about me hurting myself while hunting, I crouched and began to sprint toward the clueless animal. As luck would have it, I tripped and twisted my ankle. The severe pain sent me falling to the forest floor, startling the deer.

I sat for a brief moment, but even the throbbing pain in my ankle wouldn't keep me down. I might not be able to hunt, but I was going to walk as far into the forest as I could. Being surrounded by the giant trees had me filled with a sense of peace I hadn't felt in a very long time. I wasn't about to let that feeling go . . . not until I knew how to get more of it on my own. Tonight I would spend in the forest amidst the trees... *alone* with no one hovering over me. No more babysitting. I would be doing things my way from now on. I was done with the twenty-four hour surveillance. Tonight, it would be just me and my baby with thoughts of her father. We would once again be a family. At least for tonight.

The more I hobbled, the more I noticed some slight pains in my lower abdomen. My due date was still a couple weeks away. Melly had read every pregnancy book known to man to me. I knew quite well that they were probably just Braxton-Hicks contractions preparing my body for the real thing. I paid the twinges of pain no mind and continued walking, resting as I needed.

It began to get dark, the clouds filling the sky above me, giving the forest an even colder feel and yet I continued to push on. So did the pains in my abdomen. I did my best to ignore them, reassuring myself that as soon as I found a nice spot I would rest and they would surely stop. The pain in my ankle was intensifying with each step I took, right alongside my cramps. Finally I decided to stop right where I was. I needed to take a moment and catch my breath. I was tiring faster than I had originally expected, and I hadn't anticipated my fall which had so kindly damaged my ankle. The sudden rise of pain in my abdomen caught me off guard once more. Trying to ignore the intense cramps now radiating through my lower abdomen and lower back, I closed my eyes and pictured my husband's face. Here, tonight in the forest it would be just him and me. No one could tell me what to think or what to do. I wanted my husband and my husband I would have, even if it was only memories of him to keep me company.

I slid down against a tree and tried to steady my breathing. Multiple text messages began coming through to my phone. Jenny was apologizing and apparently she had told Kasey about our disagreement. Both now knew that I wasn't in my room and both were asking me where I was. I took the phone in my right hand and crumbled it, throwing it far away from me. No one would find me until I was ready. I closed my eyes and went to a place I would forever be attached to, the cabin. In my mind I was back there with my husband, riding on his back in the dark of night to our lit up dream world, his kisses so deep and tender that they caused my heart to melt with each one; all the while our love lit up the night sky like fireworks in July.

I moaned as another pain struck my belly. I took a deep, slow breath and tried to ignore it. Nothing would keep me away from Taylor tonight, especially pain. I closed my eyes again and the cramps seemed to ease, allowing me to drift off into a dream world of my own, one where no one was invited except my husband.

I awoke to darkness and a debilitating pain in my lower abdomen. Night had fallen around me while I slept and the temperature had dropped severely. I wasn't usually one to get cold, but suddenly I was shivering. I tried to stand up, unable to because of how weak my body had become. With the slightest weight on my ankle, I collapsed back to the forest floor. I tried to gather my thoughts when another sharp pain hit me, knocking the wind out of me. If this was labor, it was *not* a good time for me at all. I looked over to where my crushed phone lay and I laughed. *Nice*. I had really done it now. I would just have to hope that I wasn't in labor.

After the next couple of sharp pains I decided that I would start timing them. I hadn't been through any birthing classes, but I had read a few books and I knew that timing them was an important indication as to how far along your labor was. I looked at my watch and began with the next one. They were ten minutes apart and as regular with their timing as the sun was with its rising. I don't know how, but I managed to get to my feet, hurt ankle and all. I began limping in the direction of the house. With every contraction it seemed they got stronger. I would have to stop and hold on to a tree. The trees were quickly becoming my best friends.

I walked for what seemed like hours in the span of a mere twenty minutes. I was exhausted and in full-fledged labor. My baby was coming tonight no matter what. I was cold, hurt, and alone in the forest with no way to call for help. I was in deep trouble. My resolve kicked in and I pushed on, continuing to walk even further. I was determined not to have this baby by myself. I pulled a relatively small branch from a tree to use as a cane. With its help I began walking faster until I misjudged and tripped over a rock, falling hard to the forest floor.

I grabbed my stomach and cried. The pain was almost unbearable. *Oh God, help me... please!* I crawled toward the nearest tree and continued to cry. The pain in my lower abdomen was indescribable now, its intensity growing by the minute. I began humming one of the songs from Taylor's violin CD, hoping I could calm myself. Fear was knocking at the door of my soul and I was doing everything I could not to answer. I knew before long it would force itself in. I would do everything in my power to stop that from happening.

Looking around, I saw branches thrown everywhere. Slowly and carefully I crawled, all the while moaning, to gather the dry ones. I put them all in a pile and leaned back against the tree. My baby would need fire to keep her warm once she was born. With the recent knowledge that I could cause a fire to grow, something was still missing. I had absolutely no clue how to start one. I focused my eyes on the wood and concentrated . . . nothing.

I can do this. I told myself. *God please help me. I can't survive out here on my own. I need you.* I focused on the wood and again... nothing. I began to cry when another contraction struck, this time more severe than the last. I turned around slowly and grabbed hold of the tree, digging my nails into its bark. When the contraction was done, I sat back down. I thought of Jenny and the hurtful things she said to me. I thought of Gavin, and Kasey, Kathryn, and Taylor and I began to get angry--so angry that I screamed through the next contraction. Then it dawned on me. My anger was what fueled the fire that day. During my next contraction, I focused all my anger onto the wood in front of me. A flame came out of nowhere. The more I stared, the bigger the fire got. I was doing it!

I leaned my head back against the tree and braced for the next contraction, which came only five minutes after the last. I knew now that I was doomed. I was having this baby in the forest all by myself. I had no one. God had forsaken me. I didn't understand why, but I understood clear as day that

He had indeed abandoned me. Honestly, I didn't blame Him. That fact made me more hurt and angry than anything. I deserved everything I was getting. It was my baby who didn't. With every contraction I battled, the fire would soar. I finally had to crawl away from it in fear that it would overtake me.

By now my contractions were coming closer and closer, and even though sweat poured down my face, I was shivering. Fear had settled in as I knew it would. Thoughts of the end swept into my head like the flaming fire before me, and for a brief moment I debated on screaming for help but refrained. It would be pointless. No one would hear me where I was. I had wandered off way further than anyone would have expected me to. They probably weren't even out looking for me. I'm sure they were all trying to give me the space I had been begging for.

As another contraction hit, it knocked the wind out of me once again. I had never felt anything so painful in my entire life. Desperation-laced tears came streaming down my cheeks, causing me to do something I knew would be stupid. I called the one person I wanted, my husband. *Taylor*, I cried in my head... *we need you. She's coming and I'm scared. I'm alone in the forest. I need you.* I knew it was pointless, but I didn't care. I had nothing to lose. More than anything, I needed to tell my husband that it was *him* we needed.

During my next contraction I heard rustling in the leaves. Turning my head slowly I saw the figure of a man moving toward me cautiously. I was in so much pain I could barely speak. I was now lying on the ground continually shivering. "Taylor," I choked out through tears.

When the man got closer to me, I saw that it was Kasey. "Haden," he said, taking his jacket off and laying it on me. Then he felt my head. "You have a fever. How close are the contractions?"

"Close," I screeched as another one overtook my body. "I'm going to die," I barely choked out.

"I won't let that happen." Kasey knelt next to me, calmly timing my contractions. I could feel warmth radiating off of his body. "Haden, it looks as if we're going to have ourselves a baby tonight in the forest. Those contractions are really close." He held my hand in his and said, "I'm not going to leave your side. Soon you will be holding your baby girl in your arms."

I rolled my eyes back and shut them. The pain was so intense that I had somehow disconnected from my body. "Taylor," I mumbled as my husband's face flashed in my head.

"Haden, it's me, Kasey. Taylor's not here," Kasey said, his voice drenched in misery.

"Taylor," I called again softly, delirious and in pain. "I need Taylor." With the next contraction I sprung up and screamed. I looked at Kasey with tears streaming down my face, "Help me," I cried before dropping back down. Kasey held my hand and squeezed softly. "Look at me," he demanded. "You must stay with me, Haden." Kasey held my hand in his and looked up to the sky. It looked as if he was praying. I forced my eyes back open and looked deep into his eyes. What I saw next filled my mind with such confusion it was almost too much to bear.

"Kasey . . . you're glowing," I choked out.

Right as he was about to speak, the wind carried more sounds of rustling leaves. I inhaled deeply, and using the little bit of strength I had left in me, I sat up. Standing only a few feet from me was

the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life . . . my husband. I reached out my hand toward him and then my world went dark.

Join Haden and Taylor as their journey continues in the highly anticipated 3rd volume of the Ice Moon Series.

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1. Dark & Light Collide (Taylor)

Staring at my wife's lifeless body draped before me across the forest floor, my muscles tensed in agony as I stared helpless, waiting for her beautiful eyes to reopen. That moment did not come. Cringing, my defenses kicked in and I crouched down, ready to attack the stranger beside her. Slowly he got up, stepping away from her limp body. The pain in his eyes was almost too much for me to bear, as it somehow mirrored my own. I knew right then; he meant no harm. Kneeling down I grabbed Haden's face and felt her head. She was burning up.

"She has a fever," the stranger said pained. "We need to get her out of here immediately or she and the baby will both die."

Clenching my jaw, I slowly turned my head towards him, analyzing his features. As much as I wanted to hate this person before me, my instincts told me otherwise. He was no threat to her. In fact, what they were saying was far worse. He too, was in love with my wife.

Forcing myself to silence the repulsion deep within my soul, I inhaled deeply. The smell of my wife's blood burned my nose. I looked down, and my body tightened from the site of her. She was now lying in a puddle of thick red blood. He was right. She needed help . . . *now*. There was no time to spare. I nodded my head in agreeance with the stranger, and picked up Haden's limp body as carefully as I could, holding her close. Before I could run I heard another unfamiliar voice say my name.

"So *this* is the infamous Taylor," the sinister voice said, followed by a laugh.

I moved quickly to face the direction of the voice, but saw nothing. When I turned back around, Haden's light haired friend's expression sent off every alarm in my body. He was no longer the solemn man I had first seen. He was much more intimidating than only minutes before. The stranger in the dark was no friend of his, which made me doubt that he would be mine. I could see his breathing intensifying with each new breath as he searched the forest with his eyes.

"Get her out of here, Taylor," he demanded with a slow, steady voice while he continued to scan the surrounding area.

"*Now, now*, Kasey.. .that's no way to talk to your fiancé's husband," the hidden voice laughed.

My heart froze at the sound of the word *fiancé*, sending a blow to my soul. Arkos had been right. I looked at my wife and back at the man who loved her too. How had everything become so complicated? I knew the answer all too well . . . I had let it.

Kasey's eyes narrowed as he continued to search the forest, turning his stare up into the trees. In a low growl, he spoke to the antagonizing voice in the shadows. "Sebastian, I don't know what it is you think you're doing, but if he doesn't get Haden out of here *now* she will die and you will never get what you want."

A soft thump of the ground had the stranger standing directly in front of both Kasey and I. Haden's heartbeat was so slow it was now barely audible, and her body was on fire from her growing fever. Helpless, I looked at Kasey and then back at Haden, hoping that he would see the severity of the moment in my eyes. Time was running out. Thankfully, he returned my stare with his own of understanding. Worry was plastered all over his face. Nodding at me, he slowly moved his body until he stood in front of Haden and me, his body creating what appeared to be a glowing shield.

A smile stretched across the man called Sebastian's face. "Aw, how sweet Kasey. You're going to try to protect your competition," Sebastian said clearly amused.

Kasey turned around and mouthed the word, "Go!" to me. I turned and began running as fast as my feet could carry me. Within seconds I heard growling. Hands came out of nowhere, stopping me short, and pulling me back with an unrecognizable force. I dug my hands into Haden's body in an attempt to hold on to her, but the pull was simply too strong. Her body fell to the forest floor, her head hitting a rock. I gasped as I watched blood begin to seep from her head.

Before I could gain my footing, I was blindsided and tossed across the forest floor like a rag doll, opposite my wife. I looked up to see two men dressed in black smirking. Kasey's eyes were glued to them with the intensity of a bull preparing to charge. It was those very men who had stopped me from escaping only moments before. Sebastian watched on in amusement as the men turned towards Kasey and then lunged forward, yet never quite grasping him. It seemed Kasey was always one step ahead of them. The group as a whole moved so fluidly that I found it hard to break my stare. Each of their movements was so fast that I could barely make out one from the other. I could only tell Kasey from the others by the flashes of blonde hair moving back and forth. My eyes darted towards my wife where Sebastian was now hovering over her.

I summoned every ounce of strength I could and jumped to my feet. Right before I lunged forward, Kasey flew past me, throwing Sebastian off of Haden. I looked back to see the other men lying

on the forest floor, helpless. Kasey and Sebastian began to dance around each other before Kasey finally got hold of Sebastian, tossing him into a tree, breaking it.

Hurriedly, I ran over to my wife right as she opened her eyes and screamed in horror. They were huge with fear. "Taylor," she yelled as she shot up into a slight sitting position.

"I'm here love, I'm here," I said trying to comfort her. "I'm gonna get you out of here." I picked her up again, cradling her to my chest. This time I would get her to safety.

At the rate she was losing blood I knew that she and the baby were in trouble. Turning to make sure I was clear to run, Haden's eyes fell on Kasey, who was now pinned up against a tree with Sebastian's hand around his neck. Sebastian looked back at Haden and me, and laughed as he threw Kasey into a tree next to us, sending a thunderous crash throughout the forest. Haden's body jumped in fear, and then went limp.

Sebastian slowly began walking towards she and I. "Where exactly do you think you're going," he asked wiping a wet iridescent substance off of his face with his finger and licking it. "Tastes like heaven."

With no way to fight the dark stranger, I closed my eyes and prayed for a way out. Then as if the sky opened up just enough to let the sun shine through, I saw our escape as clear as day. Standing behind Sebastian was my masked friend, side by side with Kasey who nodded at me, letting me know that I could run, and run I did. I turned on a dime and let my feet carry us home as fast as they could. Sebastian was on my heels only seconds before he was thrown to the ground. Sounds of growling, hissing and several loud, thunderous bangs filled the air. I turned back, but only once. What I saw had my heart aching for Haden. Right as I turned, Kasey broke his stare from Sebastian, letting his eyes rest on Haden for a brief moment. It was just long enough for Sebastian to get the upper hand, throwing him up into a tree. I watched as Kasey's body fell to the forest floor with a bang.

"Get out of here," the masked man ordered and I did just that, never turning back.