

Bryxx

A Crimson Forest Novel

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

BRYXX

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Written by Tarisa Marie.

Also by Tarisa Marie

Black Petals

Halfling
Changeling
Pure Blood

Crimson Forest

Bryxx
Onyx
Tempted
Torn

Tainted

Tainted Crimson
Tainted Heart
Tainted Magic
Tainted World

To my loving husband who puts up with my insanity.



by Tarisa Marie





Chapter 1



Walking into the vastly treed area for the first time in eight years fills my heart with joy, regret, hate, and a plethora of other intense emotions. Returning to the small farm I grew up on, for the first time since I was fifteen, is bitter sweet. In some ways, I've missed the place. Things like the fresh air, scent of wild flowers, the peace and quiet. In other ways, I completely loathe this place. Most of my memories here aren't good ones, but instead painful ones, ones that over the last eight years, I've worked my very hardest to forget or push aside so that I can live a relatively normal life. In truth, I never thought I'd return here. *Ever*. I never even thought I'd return to the state of Montana in general. Yeah, that's how bad it is.

As the trees part and give way to the old farmhouse my great grandpa built on the family homestead over one hundred fifty years ago, a pang of distress hits me square in the chest as a flashback takes over my mind. The last time I was in the house, the last time I was anywhere near this worn farmhouse at all, was the day my mother attempted to kill me.

The memory of that day isn't the only bad one that I have, not by a long shot. My grandma passed away in her sleep here when I was seven. My brother and his friend went missing when they were nine while playing ball hockey in the backyard, I was only eight at the time. To top it off, my father died of a heart attack here four years later when I was barely twelve. That's just family, I could go on and on sharing the numerous tragedies of Sunnybrooke, Montana, but I won't bore you.

Some would say that the tragedies that have occurred around here are just plain, rotten luck. Others would say that there's something seriously wrong with this place, something *peculiar* about it. Me? If I'm being honest, I'm not too entirely sure what I think, the entirety of my childhood feels like it was some sort of dream. Well, *it did* for the last eight years up until I arrived here today as a twenty-three-year-old adult.

Today, big surprise, I return here because of another dreadful event. I debated even coming back here at all, not wanting to have to experience the flood of old memories, but I eventually jumped in my car and made the eleven-hour drive to Sunnybrooke.

The reason I return began when yesterday I received a phone call from my great aunt regarding my mother's demise. She wasn't living here when it happened, but her last will and testament stated the house, the entire homestead in fact, would go all to me, her only remaining child upon her death. I don't want the house or the farm, so I've come to assess what needs renovated to get my money's worth out of it when I sell it. I want this property out of my family's life once and for all.

I walk up the steps towards the front door and pull the key out from under the ragged, ancient welcome mat which has been severely aged by time and weather, before slipping it into the rusty lock and twisting. The antique, wooden door squeals as it slowly moves open.

I remain standing in the doorway for a moment while I take in how unchanged the interior appears. No one has been here in eight years. After my mother attempted to kill me, she pleaded guilty, was diagnosed with schizophrenia and deemed mentally unstable. She was then placed in a 24-hour care facility and my great aunt became my legal guardian. Whatever caused her to snap all those years ago, messed her up badly, to the point where the caring mother I knew my entire life, was completely gone. Before the day she tried to kill me, she was generally a normal mom. I don't recall her doing anything out of the ordinary or anything, just normal mom stuff. Could it have been my brother's

disappearance and my father's death that sent her over the edge? Genetics? I've heard that some bloodlines are more prone to mental illness. I have no idea what the cause was and doubt I ever will.

The first thing I notice about the living room is the dark red stain on the grey shag carpet from my blood. No one ever cleaned it up. I recall the feeling of the bullet hitting my chest after my mom fired one of dad's old hunting rifles. The pain was both splitting and agonizing. I drop my overnight bag onto the porch floor and find myself grimacing. This place is the last place I want to be, but if I want to have enough money to finally attend college or get my own place, I must push through this.

I walk up to a picture frame on the stone fireplace, now covered in dust. Wiping the dust off the glass, a picture of my smiling older brother Daniel becomes better visible. I forgot how much he looked like me, even more so now that I am grown up and no longer a child. I can't just leave all these keepsakes here, no matter how painful they are. I remove the back of the frame and carefully pull out the photo of my brother Daniel. I do the same for the three other photos on the mantel. One of myself, my first-grade photo; one of my grandparents on my mom's side; and one of my mom, dad, brother, and myself before our lives turned for the worst. We looked so happy, so normal. Now, I'm the only one left.

I place each photo into the sketchbook in my overnight bag, so they won't get bent. I then realize that I should've brought a couple storage containers along with me, but, then again, I wasn't planning on bringing anything from this house back home to Seattle with me.

A loud banging thump from upstairs causes me to jump and my heart to race. I didn't see my aunt's car in the driveway, and she's the only other person with a key. My first thought is that an animal must've gotten in somehow, maybe there's a broken window or something. The house has been empty for several years, so it's entirely possible.

I ascend the stairs to the upper level and glance around, finding nothing out of the ordinary, that is until I get to my mom's room and push open the door. On the far wall above her dresser, written in red paint is a strange symbol consisting of lines and circles. Vandalism. Great. This doesn't explain the thump though, and I must assume that maybe it was a bird flying into the outside of the house or something, even though it sounded much louder than a mere bird.

I walk up to inspect the symbol painted on the wall. I notice that there's no footprints on the dusty hardwood leading up to it, so it must be old. It probably happened shortly after my mom tried to murder me. The incident rocked the area and small town near our farm, in fact, all our family drama made quite it's rounds around here, not that it was the only drama because it wasn't, but that's only another reason that I never wanted to come back to this dreadful place—the small-town rumor mill is not uplifting by any means.

A knock on the front door excites me, and I begin racing to greet my aunt. My great aunt Beatrice took me in and legally adopted me after the incident with my mom, she was the only blood related family I had left that I had any sort of contact with, and she would never let me be put into the foster system.

I love my aunt, but as soon as I turned eighteen, I moved out of her home and into an apartment with my friend Jane who was attending college. I got a job at a gas station pumping gas. It was all I really had qualification for straight out of high school with no work experience.

Aunt Betty opens the door before I can reach it and shouts, "I'm here!" in her usual joyous tone.

A grin instantly arranges itself upon my face, and I wrap my arms around her tightly. It's been nearly a year since I last saw her. Her home in Savanna, Georgia is not a quick drive to Jane and I's apartment in Seattle, Washington and neither my aunt nor I have the money to visit one another as often as we'd like to.

"Aunt Betty!" I cry. "It's been so long!"

She chuckles and rubs my back. "Yes, it has, love. How was your flight?"

"I actually drove here overnight. You nearly beat me here," I explain, knowing I'm about to get scolded by her.

"You drove eleven hours through the night, in the dark, and all by yourself, May?" she asks dubiously.

I cower a little, but then brush it off. "Yes, Aunt Betty, if I would've waited until morning to come, I wouldn't have slept, and I couldn't afford the plane ticket anyway, it was cheaper to drive."

Her expression softens. "You know, if you need money, you can always ask me for it."

I look at her with disdain. "You know you can't afford to give me anything, and I have this house now."

She shrugs. "If you needed it, I'd find a way." She looks over the house quickly and swallows harshly. "It looks the same as it did the last time I was here. A little more dust maybe is all."

I nod. I can't help but agree, it's almost eerie how unchanged everything is.

"There's also graffiti in mom's room," I tell her with annoyance. "But the door was locked when I got here and there's no footprints in the dust, so I'm thinking it's been there for a while."

Aunt Betty doesn't at all seem surprised. Her smile falters a bit as her gaze falls on the blood stain on the carpet. I'm positive that she's glimpsing back into the past, just as I had.

"Are you sure you want to stay here? We can get a hotel if you'd rather. I know this place is...*dreadful*. I know how much you loathe it," she mutters under her breath, as if partially lost in thought.

"It's too expensive. It's fine. This is more convenient and it's cheaper," I assure her. "I have many good memories here, too." I attempt to lighten the mood but my voice cracks.

She looks at me with pity.

I turn away, not wanting to see it. I don't want people to pity me, that's one of the main reasons that I moved away from here in the first place and vowed to never come back.

"May, your mother loved you, you know. She was just ill, *very* ill. You know, I think that...if you don't go to the funeral, one day you'll look back and regret that decision."

I know my mother loved me, but that doesn't make me want to attend her funeral. The woman tried to kill me for heaven's sake. She shot me and then *laughed*. If it hadn't been for the mail man that day, who knows, maybe she would've shot me again and actually killed me.

"Go for you, not for her," she attempts to persuade me, a hopeful glint in her aged eyes. Since last time I saw her, I see how much life has wilted her. The wrinkles below her eyes have doubled in number and her skin has taken on that thin, saggy texture that old people get.

"I'm sorry. I just can't," I tell her harshly. "For all I know, she killed Daniel," I don't mean to say this, but it slips out.

Aunt Betty sighs deeply and rests a hand on my shoulder. "Is that what this is about? You think she killed Daniel?"

"I... I don't know," I ramble quickly. "She was crazy and who knows how long she was crazy for. Maybe she was really good at hiding it." I nervously brush a loose lock of my long brown hair behind my ear.

She seems to debate this, her thin, pink lips pursed together.

"Don't tell me that you haven't thought the same thing." I push her carefully, crossing my arms. I'm sure everyone has thought it.

Aunt Betty's features don't relax, instead they become more intense as her brows furrow and her wrinkles show more intensely. "I have, but I don't think she had anything to do with it. After she attempted to hurt you, after she snapped out of it and realized what she'd done, she was incredibly hurt and regretful. When Daniel and his friend Kai disappeared, she was scared and worried." She walks over to the stain on the carpet and stands over it, her short grey curls wrapping around her neck. Did she have that much grey the last time I saw her? I follow her.

"You've had a rough life, dear. I don't blame you for being bitter or assuming the worst. Your grandmother, your dad, your brother, and now your mom, and that's just since you were born. There's quite a long history of tragedy around here, especially within your dad's family it appears. All that pain and loss and you're only twenty-three years old. It isn't fair."

"Why don't I help you haul in your bag," I mutter, interrupting her before she continues. I don't want to start crying right now. No, I want to get this place ready to put on the market.

Her expression of hurt changes to a small smile, the wrinkles on either side of her eyes become more pronounced. “I have it right here.” She glances to floor beside the door where a black handbag sits.

“That’s it?” I wonder. Here I brought a suitcase large enough to fit my entire wardrobe.

Her smile widens. “Yes, dear, I pack lightly. I had eight brothers and a sister, so my mom—your great grandma—always made sure we could fit everyone’s things on trips. The habit stuck I guess.”

I wonder what it would be like to have so many siblings, probably quite chaotic, but you’d never be lonely. I never met my grandma on my mom’s side and none of her siblings either besides aunty Betty. Aunt Betty was the youngest of the bunch, and she’s outlived her siblings by a long stretch. She swears up and down that it’s because of all the green tea she drinks, but I’m not sure I believe that.

“Well, I guess we should see if the washing machine has been stolen. We can’t sleep on dusty bedding tonight!” she sings enthusiastically and clasps her hands together. “Let’s get to it, shall we? I hope you brought your duster and your work ethic!”



Chapter 2



I wake up to complete darkness and sit up with a short gasp. It takes me a minute to put together where I am, but I have no idea what has woken me with such a start. I gaze around my old bedroom, squinting through the darkness. All I can make out is the shape of the two dressers, the nightstand, the doorway, and the closet. Maybe aunt Betty had to get up to use the washroom and has wakened me. She *is* old, and she always insists that her bladder is shrinking with old age. I don't know if that's something that actually happens or if she's joking, so I usually just giggle and muster a grin.

I lie back down and close my eyes. After all the cleaning we did today, I'm exhausted, and if we're going to have to do it all again tomorrow, I'm going to need to be rested up. Just as I'm falling asleep again, a loud bang, like the one I heard upon my arrival here, sounds again, only this time it's closer, louder, and definitely not something I am expecting to hear in the dead of night. I jump in surprise and leap out of bed, determined to get to the bottom of this.

I race to the light switch and flick it on before peeking into the hallway and scampering to the spare room where aunt Betty is staying while she's here. I press my ear to the door carefully to see if it's her banging around, but the light is off and I can hear her deep breathing. Stumped, and still a bit enthralled by adrenalin from the surprise, I continue surveying the house. Maybe there's a bird or a bat stuck up in the attic or something is banging against the house in the slight wind. I never inspected the outside of the house when I got here so that could be the case.

I sigh in annoyance and decide to head back to bed—I'm being ridiculous—but just when I'm climbing back under the covers, the bang returns with a vengeance. I swear it's getting louder each time. How is aunt Betty sleeping through this? How am I supposed to fall asleep with this noise? That's it.

Throwing my covers off to the side, I get up again and head to the far end of the creaky country house where the stairs to the attic sit. We used to use the attic as a playroom when we were little kids, but as we got older, it slowly turned into a storage room, much like the cellar-like basement.

After climbing the steps to the attic, I find the door locked. My mom used to lock it to keep me from rummaging through all the neatly stored boxes in search of things that I told her she could put in storage but I then soon after changed my mind and wanted it back, like my frilly pink quilt that I thought I'd outgrown as a teenager but then decided it'd look nice on my bed and I missed it. She wasn't too happy to find my banging around up there and tearing open boxes in search for it.

I jiggle the knob and push my weight into the door to no avail. Losing my patience, I run back to my bedroom, grab the keys, and then return exasperatedly. I swallow hard when I see the door cracked open before I have the chance to put the key in the lock. Am I losing my mind? I *know* it was shut and locked. I *know* it was. Is someone else in the house? I can't help but let my imagination wander and wonder if someone is living in the attic. This house has been abandoned for nearly a decade, it's not unfeasible. I glance back to my aunt's room, my heart pounding erratically. Her door is still closed, light off.

I debate my next move. Do I continue into the attic alone and unarmed, do I wake aunt Betty and explain what happened, or do I grab some sort of weapon and do this armed? Deciding that I might be half asleep or losing my mind like my mother, I decide against waking up aunt Betty. There's no reason to make her think I'm crazy like my mom and have her worrying. Also, like I noted earlier, there were no footprints throughout the dusty house when I arrived. Someone can't just be hiding in the attic without food or water.

Just in case, though, I grab a mop from the hallway that we were using earlier and use the hand to gently push open the attic door. It creaks eerily as it slowly swings open. The smell of mothballs hits me like something else. God, I hate that smell. It's darker than hell in the attic since there's no way for the moonlight to get in, not even a little bit. I pull the string that switches the light on and the room illuminates immediately. I quickly turn in a full circle, looking for any danger, but all I see are boxes piled atop each other. Clearly, I'm losing it. There is nothing up here that shouldn't be. Maybe it's returning to this house that has me all jumpy. Maybe this place *is* cursed. I'm not superstitious, nor do I believe in anything paranormal, but this place is seriously just awful. The longer I stay here, the more I want to go back home.

I wait awake in bed for another bang, but nothing comes. Eventually, I drift into unconsciousness.

I wake up to morning sun seeping into the room from behind the closed blinds. I feel exhausted, like I never slept a single minute all night long. I can hear the shower running through the wall, so I know that aunt Betty has already gotten up. I check my phone for the time to see that it's nearly eight already. I groan in protest before dragging myself from bed and dressing in some sweats and a casual sweater. I then make my way downstairs. I'm surprised to see a batch of fresh pancakes on the kitchen island.

Did she run into town this morning already and pick up some food? I open the fridge to find some milk, eggs, and butter. We spent a large part of the day yesterday cleaning the mold-infested fridge. It hadn't been cleaned out when we left the place, so it was quite terrible. I insisted I'd just buy a new one, but aunt Betty wasn't having it. I could still faintly smell the ick from yesterday but surprisingly, it wasn't so bad.

I grab a plate and knife and wash them in the sink to remove the dust and then dig into two pancakes. It isn't long before aunt Betty comes downstairs and joins me at the table, a beaming grin on her face. I forgot how much of a morning person she is.

"How was your sleep?" she asks me casually while spreading butter on a pancake.

"I'm exhausted," I tell her truthfully and set my fork down while I chew. "Did you hear that banging sound last night?"

She looks up from her breakfast and raises an eyebrow. "*Banging?* No? What happened?"

I shrug. "I'm not really sure. I woke up to this loud banging, and I couldn't figure out where it was coming from. It stopped, so I went back to bed. You must sleep like a rock because it was *loud*, like really loud."

She looks dumbfounded but returns to her food. I catch a whiff of her lavender perfume, the same kind she's worn for as long as I can remember. It relaxes me a little, comforts me. I'm so glad that she agreed to come do this with me.

"I thought there might be a bird or something in the attic, so I went up there, but I didn't find anything," I explain to her further.

Her brows pull together and she shrugs. "Who knows. It could've been something outside. Maybe the gate swinging in the wind or something."

I nod, although I'm not convinced. The sound was far too near and far too loud to be made by the gate all the way across the yard.

A knock on the front door startles both me and aunt Betty, and I automatically jump up to get it, not sure who to expect. I wonder if it could be a neighbor coming to check and make sure no one is breaking into the house.

When I lift the curtain covering the front door window, a young man near my age in a professional grey and white suit stands there on the porch, hands in his pockets casually. *Great*, a salesman. I open the door quickly and greet him with a soft smile, hoping to get rid of him without one of those long chats about whatever merchandise the guy is selling. Part of me kind of hopes it's cleaning services because we could really use some help with this giant mess.

"Hello," I say kindly and meet his eyes. They're dark brown, appearing nearly black in the shadow from the porch. His black hair is tousled and yet at the same time it's incredibly neat. Unlike most door-to-door salesmen I've encoun-

tered, this guy isn't clean shaven. He sports a five o'clock shadow and somehow pulls it off, it suits him perfectly. I can't help but observe how attractive he is.

"Good morning," he greets me in return and nods to me respectfully. "I didn't realize this house was occupied. I live down the road a ways..." He tosses his thumb over his shoulder. "...and I noticed a couple of cars parked in the driveway. Have you recently purchased the old Thomson property?"

I used to know all the neighbors around here, but this man, I don't recognize at all and trust me, I'd remember him if I'd ever met him. He's not someone you easily forget. Then again, he probably would've been just a kid last I saw him.

"Uh, my name is May *Thomson*, actually. I just inherited this place. My mother recently passed away," I respond quietly. Am I being shy? Why do I feel like I need to cower away from this man?

His eyes widen slightly but he seems to catch his reaction and his face becomes stoic. "*Oh*, I was sorry to hear about Everly," he sympathizes. "I lost my mother, too, years ago. It's tough."

I nod and wait for him to say goodbye and walk back down the driveway to his car, but he stands staring at me as if he's looking right through me. Is he staring behind me? I turn and glance behind me to see what he's looking at. There's nothing exciting behind me unless you count bleach as excitement.

"Was there something you needed?" I wonder, not realizing how rude I sound until after it's out. I hear a sigh and glance back behind me to see Aunt Betty hurrying towards the door to see what all the commotion is about.

"No, no. I just thought I'd welcome any new neighbors we might have is all," he mutters through an awkward chuckle. "Will you be living here now that you've inherited the home?"

I shake my head, denying this far too quickly. "No, definitely not. I'm only around for a couple days to clean up and get some ideas for renovations. Then I'll be selling the place," I explain to him briefly. "Know of anyone looking to buy a rundown house and crappy farm land around here?" I ask, trying to make a joke and seem less negative but I only end up seeming more negative.

His stoic expression changes into a full-blown smile. "Uh, maybe, actually." He chuckles and then before I can reply his grin fades. "Well, while you're around, I must warn you about the...*er...*situation around here."

I cock a brow and Aunt Betty tilts her head in curiosity. She now stands behind me with one hand on my shoulder.

He continues, "Last week a body was found just down the road here. The police suspect homicide and now this morning another body was found near the same spot. A child this time. Police are looking for a possible serial killer in the area. Well, as I'm sure you're aware, the police have been poking around here for some answers for as long as anyone can remember." He runs a hand through his hair.

Aunt Betty speaks up. "Beatrice Harris, young man. Thank you for the warning, but we're already well aware of the crap that happens around here. May grew up on this farm so she's been caught up in it for years." Aunt Betty seems ready to get this man off the porch though I'm not sure why. Was it my tone with him? He's been nothing but friendly.

"Yes, a lot of strange stuff has happened around here over the last few centuries, stuff that's gone completely unexplained. Sure does makes a guy wonder," the suited man murmurs thoughtfully.

"About?" I ask curiously. My family has lived here for as long as our recorded family history goes back and no one has ever been able to find answers, so I'm always curious to hear theories from people, especially locals.

He looks at me apologetically as if he doubts I'll take his next words well. "Makes a guy wonder what is going on. I'm not a guy to believe in the paranormal, nor am I a religious fellow, but even I have to admit that it's *weird* beyond coincidence. I'm not the only one either. Last year the FBI was sniffing around here."

My eyes widen. The FBI? I've always know that a lot of odd things—okay—terrible things have happened in the twenty-mile radius surrounding our house, but never have I heard anything about the FBI looking into it, though it's definitely something they should've been doing years ago. Locals have always wondered why no one bigger than the Sunnybrooke police unit has gotten involved."

I'm surprised by aunt Betty's silence over the matter. She usually has a lot to say about this place.

"I guess..." I say quietly while in thought. "Did they find anything?"

The man shrugs and straightens his tie. "Not that I'm aware of."

"Who are you?" Aunt Betty finally speaks up and eyes our visitor with a squinted gaze, the wrinkles on her forehead becoming more prominent.

"Just a friendly neighbor concerned about locals," he replies, beaming in her direction. How are his teeth so impossibly white? I internally roll my eyes at myself. What is wrong with me? You'd think I'd never seen an attractive man before.

Aunt Betty eyes him as if she doesn't trust him as far as she could throw him. "You aren't supposed to be on your way to work or something, boy?" she asks him rudely, and I look back to scowl at her.

She shrugs my glare off. "He's wearing a suit at nine in the morning in the middle of the country, dear. Speaking of strange things..."

I must agree with her, but I'm just not so rude about it. It's uncommon to see someone around here in a suit unless they're attending a funeral or something. Most people are farmers and dress in work clothes.

The stranger chuckles and takes a step back from the doorway. "I'm actually on my way to work—yes, and I must be on my way. It was nice to meet you the two of you."

He turns to leave, but I clear my throat. "What did you say your name was?"

His lips twitch, showing a hint of a grin. "Kade, ma'am."

I nod, and he turns and walks back the way he came, down our ridiculously long path leading to the driveway. I swivel to glare at aunt Betty for being rude. She cowers away but says nothing.

"That was rude," I scold her lightly and walk past her to finish my breakfast which is now probably cold.

She follows behind me. "Something is off about that boy. He gave me the chills."

I roll my eyes. Why are old people so judgmental? There was nothing wrong with the man. He was just a friendly, concerned neighbor.

We finish our pancakes before cleaning up our dishes and getting a start on the cleaning. Aunt Betty settles in for a nap around two in the afternoon, and while she sleeps, I decide to take a quick walk out into the yard to inspect the outside of the house for anything that could've caused the harsh banging last night. I slip on some sandals and quietly leave the house.

As I walk around the building, I breathe in the fresh air and relax a little. I hate cleaning almost as I hate this place. After inspecting all sides of the house and finding nothing, I walk over to the backyard to the now very rusted hockey nets that my brother used to play with and can't help but think about him. What happened to him back then? Is he still alive somewhere? If so, where? Is he dead? If so, why? What happened? I find myself venturing into the trees, where I recall the police search party rummaging through upon his disappearance. I remember the amber alert being sent out, the news showing his face, the police dogs racing around the house. Sirens, my mom sobbing, my dad trying to comfort her while he too cried, police radios, snoopy neighbors stopping by to drop off food and flowers just so they could catch the latest. I was only eight but it feels like it was yesterday. I remember it so clearly.

I have to remind myself that I have good memories here, too. It's not all bad. Like playing hide and seek with Daniel and my dad or my dad building us forts in the trees or to my mother's dismay, with blankets in the living room. I used to pretend I was an explorer when I was a kid and I'd wander through these trees until I got to the barbed wire fence that I wasn't allowed to go past.

Sometimes, if I was feeling really rebellious, I'd slip past the fence and go deeper into the trees, but like now, back then I couldn't keep a secret, so when I returned to the house, I'd tell mom or dad what I'd done and then I'd get scolded for it.

My dad told this story about an old well being out past the fence where my grandpa's brother Ernie, my great uncle, fell in and died as a child. For that reasoning, we weren't to go out past the fence.

With all the family tragedy that's occurred on this homestead, I've always wondered why our family didn't just move away. Maybe because it's the *family* homestead and no one's wanted to be the one to sell it out of the family. I don't know. But what I do know is that I'm not keeping this place. It's practically cursed. If you live here, you die young or you go insane. That is a fact.

I lean down to pick a purple wildflower and then hold it up to my nose. I miss the little things about this place like the scent of these flowers, the silence, the lack of people around. The smell of spring rain, mud, flowers, and you know what, even the smell of cow crap.

My foot catches on a fallen tree as I walk through thick brush and before I can catch my footing, I fall to the ground below with a thump. I lay there for a moment before sitting cross legged and staring at my surroundings. The tree canopies above me block the view of the sun and clouds, very little light makes it down to the forest floor. I find myself laughing at myself. I've always been clumsy, so I take it in stride.

A crunch of branches to my left causes my head to instinctively snap in the direction of the sound. Expecting to see a deer or a coyote moseying along, I'm surprised to see nothing. The crunch sounded like it was made by something larger than a squirrel or small animal would make, but maybe that's all it was. I get back to my feet and brush myself off before scanning the brush again. I nearly jump out of my skin when my eyes land on a young girl dressed in a pink dress, standing only mere feet away from me and gazing directly at me with a worried expression. Her hair is in loose brown curls that extend down to her waist. She appears to be maybe only eight or nine. Her eyes are a sad, deep brown. I stare back at her in shock. What in the heavens is a girl so young doing out here in the middle of nowhere by herself?

"Hello," I say quietly, half wondering if I really am losing my mind. Am I seeing things?

The girl tilts her head to the left as if she's trying to understand what I've said but cannot. Is she deaf?

"My name is May. What is yours?" I ask, my voice shaking with surprise.

She nibbles her bottom lip and looks about to speak but instead she looks down at the forest floor and sighs.

"Are you lost?" I ask her and take a step towards her as my heart rate slows down.

"No," she whispers so low that I'm not sure I've even heard her correctly. "My name is Harriet. I've lost my puppy."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Harriet. I haven't seen a puppy around, but I can help you look for it if you like. Where are your parents?" I ask her wearily and scan the trees again for anything out of the ordinary. Surely, they are around here somewhere. I wonder if they know about the well.

She shrugs. "I don't know where my dad is, but I don't have a mom," she explains to me frantically, coming out of her shell. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers. My dad says you're dangerous."

"Do you live around here? Can I help you find you dad?"

Harriet presses her lips together tightly. "I live over there." The girl points in the direction I came in.

"I live that way as well, Harriet. Would you like to walk with me?" I ask, trying to place which neighbor's child she could be, but honestly, I don't even know which neighbors would have a kid her age these days or which neighbors are even the same as they were when I lived here, surely some have come to their senses and moved away in the last eight years since I've been gone.

"I can't. I..." she hesitates and looks around wearily. "I mustn't speak to strangers. I'll find my puppy. I'll find my dad too."

I hear a loud flutter in the trees above us and glance up to see a crow landing on a tree branch and cawing loudly. I then glance back towards the girl, ready to respond. To my shock, the girl has disappeared within the second I was distracted and without a single sound. My heart sinks into my abdomen and a deep chill races over my body. My pulse quickens. What the hell?

“Harriet?” I call quite loudly, scaring some magpies and sending them flying from the trees. My voice echoes but goes unanswered.

Is this place making me lose it like my mother or has coming back here just sped up the inevitable loss of my mind? I glance around one more time. Nothing. What. The. Hell.

Before I can think about my next move, acting on pure instinct, I race back through the trees the same way I came, leaping over branches, fallen trees, and other brush in a race to get back to the house. When I finally break through the trees, I don’t stop running. I continue until I round the front corner of the house, headed straight towards the door. I stop when I collide harshly with something warm and hard.

Falling to my ass, I look up, startled to see the same man who visited earlier this morning. Kade.

“You alright?” he utters through a deep chuckle and extends a hand to help me up. I take it gratefully. “It looks as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

I swallow harshly. “Yeah, fine. I was just out for a run while my aunt had a nap,” I lie.

I’m a terrible liar, so I’m not surprised when he doesn’t appear to believe me, one brow raising and then falling again, a smirk playing at his lips. This only aggravates me, as sexy as it may be. He knows it, too, I’m sure, how can’t he? I won’t give him the pleasure of knowing how I feel. He doesn’t need that confidence boost. He has enough as it is. “Are you training to be a navy seal? Do you normally run through that much untamed brush on your runs?”

Feeling like an idiot, I release his hand and step back before sighing. “No, I was reminiscing on childhood memories. I used to play in those trees a lot,” I admit truthfully.

“You should be careful. Many people have gone missing out there as you’re aware. I’d hate for something to happen to you.” His over concerned voice lightens his expression relaxes. “I’ve heard people say it’s aliens, sasquatch, you name it.”

I scrunch up my nose and shake my head. “My family has been here for generations. No one has ever reported seeing aliens or sasquatch.”

“No?” Kade looks both amused and surprised. What did they blame all the strange things on then?”

I think about this. “Coincidence,” I state plainly.

“Do you really believe it all to be coincidence?” he asks me, appearing to sincerely wonder how I feel about this.

I have to think about it. “I don’t know,” I answer finally, staring at the ground.

“Well, then how do you know it isn’t aliens or sasquatch?” He argues and then smirks again.

I can’t help but be enamored by his dimples, which normally I would find boyish cute at the very most, but on him they’re immensely attractive for reasons that I can’t even explain. Have you ever watched a show on television or walked through a mall and your eyes just land on someone for no apparent reason and you find yourself taken aback, attracted to them beyond what’s normal? That is what Kade is to me. I’m not saying that he wouldn’t be attractive to the average eye, but I’ve met a lot of men, and yet none I’ve been more attracted to than Kade. Where my aunt Betty can simply see past his looks and make a judgement on him based on his personality and her common sense, I can’t seem to get passed his fricking dimples which isn’t like me at all. I’m a fairly rational person or so I’d like to think.

“You’re looking me over as if I have two heads,” he says finally and his smirk fades into a grimace. “Do I have something on my face?”

I reassure him. “No, sorry. Just deep in thought.”

“Oh?” he encourages. “About?”

“Getting the hell out of here,” I admit, what’s it going to hurt? “I can’t wait to get back home to Seattle. It’s going to be a bigger task than I thought to get the house ready, which means that I’m going to be here longer than I expected. I’m just not too happy about it is all. I just want it sold and done with so I don’t have to deal with it anymore.”

“I’ll buy it,” he says quickly. “And I’ll buy it as it is. That’s what I came here to tell you.”

I cock a brow and can't help but laugh. "You already live in this shit hole. You want to buy another property here?" I ask dubiously, struggling to keep my composure. Wow, I'm a great saleswoman.

He nods quickly without skipping a beat. "Yeah. It's a good investment. There's a lot of land tied to this property and the price of land only ever goes up."

"No one will buy it from you. No one wants to live here," I remind him even though it's only hurting my chance of actually getting rid of this place.

"Yeah? Well I bought land here, your family did too. Like you said, it's probably all just a coincidence all that strange stuff, so no one should be too worried about it."

I can tell that he's baiting me, challenging me to argue with him. "Do you really think its aliens or sasquatch?" I ask, wondering if this guy is insane or if he's playing with me.

Kade scoffs. "Of course not. Now are you going to sell me this place or not?"

"If you want to buy it, then buy it, but you don't even know what I'm asking for it yet or how rough the inside is. Do you have time to look around right now? Are there any inspectors you know of around here so you can make sure you're not getting ripped off?"

Kade wets his bottom lip quickly. "No, I don't need an inspection or a look inside. Let's just sign the papers."

"You don't even know what I'm asking yet," I remind him. Is he yanking my chain here? He wants to buy this place as is and without an inspection?

"Okay, well, what're you asking for it?"

"Two hundred thousand for the shitty old house and the land around the house. That includes the field behind it that's treed, rocky, and useless for farming as well as the quarter to the east and the quarter to the north." I tell him, raising my asking price a few thousand.

Kade seems unperturbed. "Deal. I will take it. Get me the paperwork as soon as you can. You know, you could've gotten more out of me, right? It's better to go high and negotiate from there."

My mouth drops open. "Are you serious? You'll take it for two hundred thousand? You're not messing with me?"

"Like I said, the price of land only ever goes up. I plan to stay here, farm here. Your land is next to my land. It's an investment."

I look at him in disbelief. "You're young. Can you even afford to buy this place?"

He laughs and cocks his head. "I have a lot of money, May."

"How's that? You look maybe twenty-five at the oldest." I observe and cross my arms.

"Investments," he answers with amusement. "Amongst other things." He shifts his weight and fiddles with his keys in one hand.

"You don't want me to clean it or paint or take our old stuff out?" I ask in bewilderment.

"Nope, take whatever you want to keep. Leave the rest."

I can't help but be skeptical. There's no way that this guy wants to buy this shitty run-down property as it is whilst knowing all the shit that's gone on around here. If he's a smart investor with lots of money, as he wishes me to believe, then why in the hell would he want this place of all properties? It doesn't make sense, but I could use this two hundred grand that I'm entitled to inherit if he's willing to pay me it. I don't even have to do any work. What do I have to lose? If the paperwork all goes through that easily then I'm rid of this place and the bad taste it leaves in my mouth, and I can go back home to my life.

I continue to stare at Kade gapingly and he continues to stare back me with his lips quirked.

"Are you a drug dealer?" I demand and point an accusatory finger at his chest. I can't help it, it just slips out like some sort of word vomit.

A loud rumble of a laugh escapes him. "No, why would you think that?" He shakes his head as if he finds the mere thought ridiculous.

"Well!" I start. "You show up to my house in a suit, you really seem to think that something fishy is going on around here. For all I know, that something fishy is your family drug operation where you just kill people who get in the way or something like on those tv shows. You want to buy this crap property in the middle of nowhere, and you look like you're barely an adult. A barely adult who seems to have way too much money to throw around. I bet if I walk down the driveway you're driving a Mercedes or something stupid."

He cocks a brow and winces. "It's not a Mercedes. It's a Lamborghini actually," he corrects me.

I gape at him.

"I'm joking, May. Do you really think I'd drive a Lambo on these crappy gravel roads? It'd get destroyed. I drive an Escalade. It's not even mine. It's a company vehicle," he explains quickly.

"And you do what for a job, besides deal drugs?" I ask him and rest my hand on my hip.

He hesitates. "I don't sell drugs. I don't grow nor make drugs. I don't even do drugs. I work for a friend of my dad's who is an investor amongst other things. A jack of all trades you might say."

"Well, you're going to get yourself fired if you have him invest in this shithole, you know. He clearly didn't hire you for your common sense." As soon as the words leave my mouth I wish I could pull them back. I want to get rid of this place, don't I? Why would I encourage him not to buy it?

He sighs and shakes his head back and forth once before taking a step away from me. "You're ridiculous, May Thomson."

"I'm ridiculous?" I take a step towards him.

"Yes, you are." He reaches into his suit jacket pocket and pulls out a business card before handing it to me. "Get the paperwork in order and then call me, and I'll come sign it."

I snatch the card from him and look at it. All it is is a piece of cardstock with a phone number written on it. How professional.

Just as he begins to turn away and head for his vehicle, I ask, "Hey, you know a lot of people around here, right?"

He stops and shrugs. "Yeah, you could say that I guess."

"I was just in the trees behind the house and there was this little girl looking for her dog. Her name was Harriet I think. About eight years old. I was going to help her get home, but she was gone before I could. Like I looked away and then she wasn't there. I guess it's a good thing I don't have any kids. I can't even keep track of one girl in the middle of nowhere, imagine me in a mall." How had I become so distracted by Kade that I forgot about the girl?

Kade's brows furrow and he scratches his forearm as he repeats the name. "Harriet, you say?"

I nod.

"What was she wearing? Do you remember?"

"A pink dress. Her hair was brown and curly. Do you know her?" I ask hopefully. The least I could do is call her house and let her dad know she's out wandering around.

He shakes his head. "No, and it's quite a ways to the nearest farm. I can't see why a young girl would be out here alone."

If he doesn't know her, why is he wondering what she's wearing? Something occurs to me then. "Should I call the cops then? I'd hate for something to happen to her."

Kade looks down at his shiny, black dress shoes and then shrugs. He bites his bottom lip for moment and then he takes a step closer to me. "May, this place isn't what it seems. You need to leave here and never come back. *No matter what*. Nothing good happens to those who live around here. I know that; you know that. This place will have you go mad," he says in a rush. "It makes people lose their minds. There wasn't a girl in the trees. There's no girl out here named Harriet. I would know."

A pit falls in my stomach. "There must be. I saw her." Even as I say this, I remember the way she just disappeared. Is it possible that this place *does* cause people to go mad? Murders, suicides, mental illness, it's all a constant issue

amongst this area's residents and visitors. I wish that I could laugh at Kade's seriousness and brush it off as him being the crazy one, but in truth, I've always thought the same thing. I've always known that something was off about this place. Everyone has. "If you're so sure that this place makes people insane, then why do you live here?"

"So I can warn people like you to leave and never come back," he answers playfully, lightning the mood. "You know, doing my part in society as good citizen."

"You're not afraid of going crazy?" I wonder, my eyes narrowing.

"If you already know the truth about this place, it won't make you feel insane, it will just make you unable to sleep at night."

A chill creeps up my spine. "And you know the truth about this place?" I ask carefully, gauging his reaction to my question. "What would that be?"

He nods once. "The truth would rock you to your very core and challenge all your beliefs irrevocably. Trust me when I say that you're better off ignorant of it."

We stare at each other for a moment, his eyes seeming to become multiple shades darker. Something in his words sends a seriously creeps me out. It's as if a part of me believes his every word, like he's only verifying what I already know, another part of me though, wonders if he's insane, but does that not only further the proof that there is something exceptionally wrong about this place? I swallow hard.

He begins to turn, his expression now stern and serious, but stops. "Take your things, leave here, and never come back. I will come by tomorrow morning to get everything in order with my newest purchase. Goodbye, May."

I watch as he walks down the sidewalk through the trees to his car.

I don't know how long I stand there before Aunt Betty opens the front door, shaking me from my daze. "May? Are you out here?"



Chapter 3



“May?” Aunt Betty attempts to grasp my attention as I day dream.
I drop my fork in surprise and it clatters to my plate.

“Are you alright?” she asks me, her brows furrowing. “You’ve been spacey all afternoon.” I have yet to tell her about my visit with Kade or our agreement.

“I’m sorry. This place is just getting to me I guess,” I mutter and stab at a boiled carrot with decade old salt and pepper sprinkled on it.

Her furrowed brow increases. “Your mother used to say that.”

“And then she went crazy,” I finish her unspoken thought.

Aunt Betty nibbles on her garlic toast. “I think it’s best we finish up here and leave. Your past here is too much. It would get to anyone.”

“Do you think that this place is the cause of all the stuff that happens here or do think that it’s the events that have happened here that lead to further events, like some sort of domino effect?”

My aunt takes a deep breath and finishes chewing and swallowing her mouthful of food slowly before answering. “I’ve never liked this place. I’ve only been here a handful of times. The first was when Daniel was born, the second when you were born, the third when he disappeared, and the fourth when your mother tried to kill you. From the very first time I came here, I thought something was off. I can’t explain it really. It’s just a feeling. A chill, something cold creeping up my spine every time we drive past town and into the country side nearing this area. Maybe it’s silly, but I can almost feel the crossing of a border somewhere between Sunnybrooke and here. A few miles out of town and I just get this *feeling*. I told my sister that—your grandma—once and she thought I was nuts. Well, until your mother told her all the weird stuff that had happened out here and that continued to happen. Your mother continued relaying the events of this place to her over the years and then she would relay it to me. I never understood why your parents never left, especially after your dad passed away and your brother went missing. Your mom had no reason to stay here really. Maybe she felt closer to them here. I’m not sure I’ll ever understand, but the day that I got the call about what happened between you and your mother... I swore I’d take you away from here and make sure you never came back. Yet here we are now. To answer your question, I’m not sure I believe in whatever it could be that would make this place so...deadly, but then I’m not sure I believe in such a coincidence either. Too much has happened around here to be coincidence. I wish I could think of a rational explanation for it all, but I can’t, no one can.”

She raises a good point. If there is something weird and unbelievable going on here, then what is it? What could it possibly be?

“Kade stopped in while you were napping. He’s an investor and he agreed to buy the place as it is. We just have to take what we want and go. He will deal with the rest. He will be here in the morning to sign papers and switch over utilities and stuff before we go.”

My aunt looks surprised but nods as if she’s more than ready to get the hell out of here. “Good. It’s not healthy for you to be here any longer than needed. What papers does he need to sign right now? Did he even come in to see the place?”

I shrug. “I don’t really know what is entailed in selling a house honestly. He seemed really intent on buying it as is. Maybe he’s planning to knock the place down.”

She seems a little skeptical. I am too. My aunt chuckles and nods. "We'll have to call a real estate agent tonight then, because I've never sold a house either. My friend Cheryl sells houses. I'll give her a call."

After my aunt goes to bed rather early in the evening, I walk about the house, taking it all in for the last time. I think about taking pictures but decide against it. The memory of this place is enough. I grab a box and take a few photos from around the house and put them in it to take home with me. I also take a few knickknacks from my old bedroom to bring along with me, some old photo albums I found in the attic, and a quilt that my grandma made my dad when he was a kid. After my packing, I retreat to my old room and lay down in bed on top of the covers. I stare at the roof deep in thought.

I can't wait to return home to my apartment and friends. I pull out my cellphone to check my messages, forgetting that out here in the middle of nowhere, there isn't any cell service. I can't help but wonder how Jane is doing back home in our apartment all alone, though I'm sure she's not really all that lonely. I'm sure she's had her boyfriend Darrel over the entire time I've been gone. He practically lives with us.

I close my eyes briefly, relaxing. It's too early for me to be able to sleep and there's too much on my mind to sleep anyhow. My thoughts keep going back to Harriet. Part of me feels beyond guilty for not reporting seeing her to the police, but another part of me is paranoid about what Kade said earlier.

A rush of air causes my hair to tickle my face and I open my eyes quickly, thinking that my aunt has woken up and just opened my door. My door is closed. I snap my head to the window. It, too, is closed. A prickling sensation hovers over my skin and my heart skips a beat. I watch as the long grey curtains in front of the window ruffle as if wind has swayed them. After a moment they go still. I leap up from bed, not sure what I'm about to do exactly. The soft breeze continues to move through the room only causing me to continuously become more shaken. I approach the window and check for a draft. Then the now familiar, annoying, loud thump causes my hair to stand on end. What is going on?

Out of nowhere a man dressed in farmers garb with long, wavy blonde hair and crystal blue eyes is standing in front of me, looking at me curiously.

Before I know it, my knees are becoming weak and I'm kneeling on the floor feeling light headed, a scream of confusion, frustration, and fright ready to escape my lungs, but before it can, everything goes black.

I wake up lying on my back in bed, the room dimly lit by the small bed side lamp that I've kept on while staying here. The previous events rush back to me at once and I gasp, racing out of bed to flick the lights on. Knowing that I'd clearly dreamt it all up or else I'd have been on the floor right now, I slowly calm down. I take deep breaths to relax myself and pull my phone from my hoodie pocket to check the time. It's shortly after two in the morning. Not wanting to go back to sleep after all that, I lie back down in bed and decide to read a book on my phone to calm down.

By four, I'm doing everything I can to keep my eyes open. I take to pacing the house, somehow ending up in my mother's room for only the second time since I've been back here. My eyes land back on the graffiti in red on her wall and anger replaces some of my fright and confusion. I find my mother's old jewelry box and rifle through it casually. I find a necklace she used to wear often and memories flood back to me. Fond memories. Since that day she attacked me, I've always wondered what happened to her. Was she always mentally ill, I was just too young to see it? She was never a bad mother before then. She was an excellent widowed mother, especially after everything. My aunt seems to think that what happened with my dad and brother tipped her over the edge, but why did it take so many years for her to snap after those events? To me, it just doesn't make sense.

Hours before my mother attacked me, we'd been baking cookies for my school bake sale, eating the dough, and laughing. I drop the necklace back into the case and close the lid.

I was fifteen. In all actuality, I wasn't all that young. Surely, I'd have noticed if her mental health was declining, no?

I move to her closet and discover her now slightly out dated wardrobe and a pile of shoes. I look through the old clothes remembering more and more of her. I find myself feeling a bit guilty for not visiting her when she was taken into the psych ward, but it's too late now.

I kneel down to her shoes and can't help myself from slipping on one of her favorite sparkly, white heels. After years, I've come to the conclusion that the woman who shot me was not the woman who raised me. My mother never would've done that. She loved me.

I remove the heel and toss it gently into the closet before closing the door. I move to her desk in the corner and lift a picture of her and my grandmother from the cork board, smiling at it before placing it in my pocket. I see the drawer that had been locked when the police searched the house for any clues as to why my mother decided to try and kill me. They'd forced it open and now the wood was chipped and broken. I slide it open, finding it empty. The calendar on the top of the desk dated back over seven years ago shows her shifts at the hospital and my first day of high school marked clearly. My eyes curiously move to the day of the incident. It's blank besides the simple note 'cookies for bake sale.' Nothing leads me to think she planned to kill me. If she was to kill me, why waste time making cookies? I flip to the next month where she has my fall dance marked down, the one she was supposed to chaperon. I hadn't been too happy about that fact at the time, the memory causes me to giggle quietly.

I cough from the dust I sent whirling when I flipped the calendar page, the rush of air causing more dust to fly and then a coughing fit from me. I find myself laughing uncontrollably for no apparent reason.

I quiet myself before I wake up Aunt Betty and sit down in the edge of my mom's bed for a moment, taking in the room for the very last time. I take in everything from the design of the blinds, to the way the laminate floor is chipped in the one corner from my dad dropping the heavy safe once in a drunken stopper after a Christmas party in town, where he'd won the raffle and decided that he needed to move the safe to a more secured location for the night until he could take the money in to the bank. He'd only won two hundred dollars, so now it seemed silly that he'd have moved that thing across the room to the closet, or at least tried. After dropping it and wrecking the floor, my mom had scolded him and told him to go to bed. She wasn't really *that* mad though, because I remember hearing them both giggling from my room. Looking back now I realize that they were flirting, and my dad was probably being the humorous guy he always was. I miss his goofy smile.

Thinking about the safe for the first time in many years makes me wonder what, if anything, would be in there now. Would I find more family pictures or something of the sort that I could take back home with me? Recalling that my dad had ended up actually moving the safe to a more secure location the following day, I go into the spare bedroom next to my mom and dad's room and attempt to recall where exactly he'd taken apart the floor. I push down on some of the floor boards for a clue but come back empty. It could be anywhere in the whole quarter of this room I'd seen him sitting in that day with a pile of tools.

Then I see something that catches my eye. A small X shaped scratch in the corner of one of the floor boards and I know I've found the right spot. I try to pry the board up with my nails, but I fail and have to go grab a flat screw driver from the closet down the hall. I jab it into the crack and then position it at the right angle to pry it up. It snaps up fairly easily and I move to the ones surrounding it. When I'm done, a whole two feet by two feet is visible and the old dusty safe I remember appears. Feeling a bit like a treasure hunter, I smile in triumph before reaching down and pulling it up out of the hole. The thing is heavy, and it takes all I have to pull it up, I barely get it out of the hole.

Try to lift the lid, I discover that it's locked of course. How in the hell will I ever find the passcode to this thing? I try the house phone number, family birthdates, everything I can think of. Then I try the obvious ones. One, two, three, four; Two, four, six, eight; and so forth. I am beyond surprised when the green light flashes following the input of four ones. I lift the lid to find a heck of a lot of paper. I assume birth certificates, passports, deeds to the house, all those types of important things, but when I lift up the first envelope and flip it over to see it labeled 'May. Read at

18', I wonder if it's the will we never found or something along those lines. I can't help but open it. After all, I'm over eighteen.

A pull out a letter. *"May, by now I will be long gone, and hopefully your mother will have remembered to give you this if all is well with her. I understand that if you're reading this and you're now an adult, that many years have passed, and many tragic things have probably happened since I've passed away. You might wonder why I know this. Well, as I'm sure you've come to understand, this place is not normal. Bad things happen here. You might wonder why we never moved away. If we moved away, the bad things would only follow us. We have both everything to do with the tragic events and nothing to do with them. You'll understand eventually, but until then I hope you live as happily a life as is possible under the circumstances. Know that I am alright where I am now. I am okay. You will be too, no matter what happens. We're strong. Our family is strong. When the time comes, know that you're not going insane, you're not crazy. Don't be scared. Be strong. I know that right now you're probably reading this and wondering if I was a bit crazy, but this will all make sense to you one day whether it's tomorrow or five or ten years from now. Stay strong, dad."*

I close the letter, confused and set it to the side. Was my dad like my mother? Did my dad really pass away from a heart attack at 28 years old like I was told? Who has a heart attack that young? How have I never thought about this before? How did he know he was going to die? With shaking hands, I reach for the next thing in the safe. The next thing is a blue print of the house, and then just the regular safe stuff. Pictures, important documents. I take a few pictures of the stuff and take my long-lost birth certificate, but leave everything else inside. I could just leave the heavy safe where it is, but for some reason, I feel the need to put it back where it was.

I wipe a tear from my chin. Thinking about my dad always leaves me in tears. He was a good man. I miss him so much.

I decide to head down to the kitchen and make myself some seven-year-old tea.



Chapter 4



It seems like no time has passed before the sun has begun to rise and Aunt Betty has made her way down to the kitchen where I still sit, drinking my third mug of tea. She eyes me carefully before sitting down next to me.

“You couldn’t sleep?” she asks, as if already knowing the answer.

“Bad dream, I guess,” I mutter. “No offence. I loved seeing you again, but I can’t wait to get out of here.”

My aunts answering look is filled with sympathy. “I know, dear.” Is it just me or does it look like she’s aged since being here? I’m probably just being dramatic.

After a few minutes of silence, I’m not surprised to hear a knock at the door. Kade is here.

After talking about a few things and agreeing on terms, our conversation turns casual as he asks what I will do now that the property will be out of my hands.

“I think I’ll head back home and go to school. I’ve been saving the money to go,” I admit.

He looks both surprised and content. “What do you wish to take?”

I shrug, unsure. “Maybe psychology. I can’t decide. I hate school, but I need to do something with my life.”

He smiles and nods. “I could see that. Dr. May Thomson the psychiatrist.” He then extends a hand to me, and I reach mine out to his and shake it firmly. “Drive safe, May, and good luck.”

My aunt Betty left to catch her last-minute plane back home before Kade could finish, but she was sure to make sure that Kade was serious about the sale and wasn’t going to try and scam me out of my money. This means, that now that I’m done here with all loose ends tied up, I can go back home to Seattle.

I reach into my pocket and hand over the keys to the property. Kade shoves them into his own pocket and we head towards the door in silence.

I take a last look around the entry way before walking out the door for the last time. Kade shuts it behind us gently and locks it before we begin to walk down the long sidewalk through the trees to where our vehicles are parked.

“Are you going to miss this place?” Kade asks me casually.

I shake my head. “No, it’s time that I officially move on from this and go back to what I’ve found in Seattle. This place is just...”

“Filled with bad memories?” he finishes

I shrug. “And good ones, but it’s just time to move on. I can’t explain it. It all feels so long ago that my whole family lived here, like another lifetime. I think the only reason my mom didn’t ever sell it was because she kept hoping that my brother would come back. He went missing here when we were kids. He and his friend. I’ve never understood why she never sold it after dad died. It was a family property, it’s been in the family for generations, but that doesn’t mean it should remain in the family. I don’t feel that way anyway. It’s just a place.”

Kade nods and tucks his hands into his jacket pockets. It’s a little chilly outside today. It must be his day off because he’s not dressed in his usual formal attire but instead in a black jacket and dark jeans. His hair is tousled in short waves. “I lost siblings too. My younger sisters. One died of cancer and one was murdered.”

My gaze flicks to his quickly. “Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Well, at least I know what happened to them, you have no idea what happened to Daniel,” he says sympathetically.

I'm about to nod when I realize something. I never mentioned my brother's name to Kade. "How do you know his name?" I ask, trying to sound casual although something about this just feels wrong.

Kade seems to stiffen and his eyes widen slightly. "Small town. Word gets around."

Isn't that the truth?

We approach our vehicles, and I stop dead in my tracks when I see that there's no vehicle in the driveway besides mine. I search the yard again but come up empty.

"How did you get here?" I ask him in confusion.

"I ran. I run every morning, and I had to come by your place anyhow so instead of my regular route, I ran here." He says this offhandedly like it's completely normal.

"You must live fairly close then," I mutter. I don't run. I have never understood how people enjoy that activity.

Kade chuckles. "You look like you just bit into a lemon." He points down the road and then to the left. "That way about three miles or so."

"You ran three miles this morning? And now you're about to run three more back?" I gape. "Do you want a ride back? I don't mind." And he thought *I* was the one training to be a navy seal.

He chuckles again and shakes his head, his hair bouncing. "No thanks. I don't keep in such good shape by skipping my morning workouts," he quips.

I can't help but laugh with him. "Well, alright I guess. Have a fun run then. If you have any questions about the property, feel free to call me."

I open my car door and jump in, feeling as though a large weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

"Drive safe," he says with a grin and then turns and begins running in the opposite direction.

I check the back seat to make sure that all my boxes and things are in a good position where I can see through the back window. Then I start the car, shut the door, and pull out of the driveway slowly, heading down the gravel road towards the nearest highway.

I'm so tired that I'm not sure how I'll make it home in one shift. I figure I'll probably have to get a hotel room for the night somewhere along the way. I turn up the radio but find that I'm too far from any prominent civilization for FM radio, and I have to instead switch to AM where an old country song blasts through my speakers, but it's all I have so I turn it up to keep me awake.

As I look up from the radio, I see too late that a deer is making a mad dash across the road. I instinctively slam on my brakes and swerve left in the opposite direction of the deer, but my car clips its rear end and the deer somehow flips up into the air, landing on top of the roof with a bang. I hear one of my windows shattering and the jerk from the impact sends my head into the driver's window, which also bursts apart. Still managing to be alert, I pull my wheel back to the right to keep on the road, but the sharp action sends my vehicle violently fishtailing on the gravel and then rolling into the ditch when I attempt to correct my situation. The roof of my car hits the ground harshly with a screeching crunch and my head snaps in a very wrong direction. Before the car comes to a stop, my vision goes black and I lose consciousness.

I wake up, my head resting on wet grass instead of the window that used to be there, my pulse racing. The sun is setting so I know I've been here a long time. I muster up my strength and reach to unbuckle my seatbelt before searching rapidly for my cellphone which is nowhere in sight. By the time I see it in the back seat, I am starting to really feel just how injured I am. My head pounds furiously and my left shoulder, ribs, and neck ache ferociously. I snatch up my phone to find the screen absolutely smashed, the glass not even fully intact, it's fallen out somewhere. I push the on button and as I assumed, nothing happens. Great.

If this road wasn't in the middle of nowhere then maybe someone would have driven by now that could help.

I curse and debate just how I'm going to get out of the passenger side of the car through the window. I place my feet on the side of the center console and then peek my head out the window before resting my hands on the outside

of the car and attempting to push myself up. I fail, not having the strength and instead have to bring my feet up to the right side of the passenger seat which takes more effort than I have to give, and I barely manage to lift myself out of the car and on top of it. Maybe it's the adrenalin. I sit on the passenger side door for a few minutes, gathering myself and taking in the scene around me in disbelief. About a hundred feet away is what remains of a white-tailed deer, it's back half destroyed and the rest of it scratched up. I have no doubt that it died at impact by its appearance. Then, ahead of the deer, I can see the sparkle of glass hitting what's left of the sun above the horizon, then there's my erratic tire tracks to the point where my car took to rolling and then finally I see a trail of glass and blood into the ditch. I lift my hand up to my head where my scalp burns from being cut by the driver's window. My hair is soaked, and I'm not at all surprised to see blood when I pull away my hand. Why did I have to speed? Why did I have to fiddle with the radio?

Down the road I can still see the driveway to the property I just sold to Kade. If I can make it there, I can try the house phone, that is, if it's still connected. The power and water were one thing that my mother never stopped paying, but the phone? I'm just not sure if that's something she would've thought of in her state. The only reason that the power and water were on was because they were on automatic withdrawal that no one ever told her to shut off. The phone though, I remember recovering monthly bills for, but that doesn't mean she stopped paying it or that it wasn't also automatically withdrawn.

I slide to the front of the car which is closest to the ground and then I leap down, stumbling a bit but not falling. Then I take a deep breath and begin heading towards the house, debating how I'm going to get in. Perhaps one of the windows isn't locked. The people who vandalized my mom's room had to have gotten in somehow, so I should be able to, too.

I try not to give attention to my aching body or the blood running down my face as I walk, but that's next to impossible, and I know my heart is racing erratically.

When I reach the house, I feel light headed and dizzy. I first try the door, hoping Kade didn't lock it; although, I know he did. Next, I try the large window on the porch and all the basement windows. By this time, I'm not even sure how I'm still on my feet. It begins to rain large droplets of water, not helping my situation.

I wobble back to the front and then pull off my sweater, standing in front of the front door window. I ram my fist into the window with everything I have, but I don't even crack it. I'm going to fricken die out here in the rain. No, *no* I'm not. I am not dying. There's no fricken way.

Sighing, I try again with a renewed strength but just come up with a sore hand. Annoyed, I turn and find some old two by fours lying under the deck and fetch one, before ramming it into the window. No luck. I'm about to give up when I have one more idea. I go down to the overgrown lawn and find a medium sized rock. I then get fairly close to the window and chuck it towards the glass as hard as I can. The window presents spider like cracks from the place of impact but does not break. You got to be kidding me right now! I then use my sweater covered hand and send my fist flying into the glass one last time. The glass breaks and large shards fall towards my feet. I move the rotted old patio chair to just below the window and then stand on it while knocking any sharp remaining shards out of my way. Then I lift myself through the window, landing on the floor in a heap of pain and taking a minute before scurrying up to the old house phone, which is no longer covered in dust thanks to all the cleaning we did in the kitchen. I place it to my ear, praying for a dial tone, but I'm greeted with utter silence. With a curse, I then dial 911 and hold it to my ear, hoping to hear ringing. To my dismay, I hear nothing. Dropping the phone to the kitchen floor and sliding down the wall to lie beside it, I let out a whimper, not even having enough energy to cry. Upon physically giving up, my mind also gives in and I give into the exhaustion wracking me; although, I'm aware that I quite possibly have a concussion and I shouldn't sleep, my mind and body give me no choice.

I am awakened by a loud clatter and a door slamming. I open my eyes to complete darkness. I roll over on the hard linoleum and groan when the pain hits me.

"May?!" I hear a frantic voice calling. "May?! Where are you?"

I blink, not immediately able to react. What is going on? Why am I on the floor?

A light flicks on and I'm startled enough to sit up painfully.

Kade stands in front of me looking extremely worried. "Oh my god, May. Are you alright? I drove by your car and thought...I thought you were dead. Oh, Christ, May, you're just covered in blood."

His hands fly to my shoulders and he looks me over carefully. My vision blurs and I wonder how long I'll be conscious.

"I need a doctor," I whisper, speaking taking more effort than I can handle right now.

His hand flies to my head where it hit the window of my car and he winces. "Tell me what hurts."

Knowing this is a good idea since I'm about to pass out and the doctor will need to know, I answer, "My head. It broke the window. I probably have a concussion. My ribs need an x-ray, I think some are broken. My left shoulder. My neck but that's probably just whiplash seeing as I can still move it and I'm not paralyzed or anything." I try to muster and reassuring smile but I'm sure it looks more like a wince.

He nods. "Alright. Okay. I'll get you help right away. Until then, you need to relax. I know you're in pain but just try to stay awake and don't move, you could make something worse."

I nod, knowing that I won't be able to stay awake long enough for an ambulance to get all the way out here.

He pulls out his phone and presses some numbers before putting it next to his ear. By this time, I'm doing all I can to keep my eyes open, but it just isn't working, and I fall to sleep.

I awaken for a third time, but this time I don't recognize my surroundings at all. I'm in someone's home. Not a hospital like I thought I'd wake up in. I reach up to my head to find that the matted hair and blood is no longer there, but instead my fingers meet dry brushed hair. The pain is still there, but clearly my wounds have been treated. My shoulder is stiff but no longer aching, and my neck feels perfectly fine. I wonder how long I've been out. I look around for a clue. It's daylight, and I'm in a room with frilly purple curtains and a bed spread that smells like old people.

Confused, I swing my leg over the side of the bed and stand, gauging my physical reaction, but to my surprise, nothing hurts. This both relieves me and worries me. I don't want to be in pain, but I also wonder how long I've been out for the pain to be basically completely gone. I think back to those tv shows where people go into comas and wake up years later. I shiver.

The mirror across the room reassures me that I'm not fifty, and I haven't fully healed yet or else I wouldn't have a bandage across my neck. Wondering, why exactly it's there, as I don't remember being injured there, I peel back the adhesive bandage to find a nearly healed wound of a cut the length of my hand. By the looks of it, it appears to have been very deep, but then why don't I have any stitches? Have they already been taken out?

I creep to the door and press my ear against it. I can hear muffled voices seemingly coming from downstairs, so I carefully drop to the floor where I then press my ear against the soft carpet.

"She's out of the woods. Her internal injuries are healed and most of her external ones. I've done all I can do," a female voice chimes with annoyance.

"I'm sorry. I just don't like seeing her hurt. What are we going to tell her, Clarissa?" Kade asks, I recognize his voice.

The woman sighs audibly. "Lower your voice. She will be awake soon. I don't know. She is immune to compulsion, so we're going to have to just tell her she went to the hospital and they sent her home, so you brought her here until she woke up."

"The hospital wouldn't send her home before she even woke up." An irritated sigh from Kade.

I then hear a door opening and slamming shut. "Where is she?" A male voice demands frantically.

"Upstairs. She's doing fine," Kade relays.

"Is she still asleep?" The male voice asks.

“Yes,” the female voice, who I’ve decided must be Clarissa, responds. “Or she was five minutes ago anyway. I can hear her tossing and turning up there now and again. She could wake up soon. I’ve been meaning to give her another pill but Kade has been questioning me for the last half an hour. Make sure she stays asleep while you’re up there. We’re not ready for her to wake up. Give her the pill I left on the nightstand, please. She’s still resisting compulsion. She’s immune.”

“I will,” the unknown male says. “I just have to get out of this bloody shirt.”

I jump up from the floor and leap into bed, pulling the covers over me as quickly as I can before lying on my side and shutting my eyes. About a minute later, I hear the door ease open and soft footsteps on the rug next me.

Someone, I assume the man whose voice I didn’t recognize, lightly runs his hand along my forehead and then tucks a strand of hair behind my ear before sighing loudly.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers. “My little Mayflower.”

The use of a nickname that I haven’t heard in over a decade nearly causes my eyes to spring open.

My mind races. The only person who’s ever called me that was my older brother Daniel.

Before my reason can overcome my curiosity and hope, I open my eyes. I stare into the dark eyes of a man a few years older than me. His face partially coated in a beard. The last time I saw Daniel he was only a kid, but the resemblance is uncanny. He looks surprised to see me awake, and I’m sure my expression mirrors his as I realize that my brother is still very much alive. *Holy shit.*

We stare at each other for close to a minute before his mouth falls open as if he’s about to say something. He closes it a minute later and smiles softly. “Go back to sleep, May.”

He wants me to sleep? Sleep after I just realized that my brother who went missing over a decade ago is still alive? Is he insane? “No,” I mutter with a croaky voice. Am I seeing things again? I have to be.

He seems surprised by my defiance, though I can’t imagine why. “Sleep, May. *Sleep.*” He insists.

I’m so annoyed that I sit up and glare at him. I reach out and touch his knee to make sure he’s real and not some hallucination from painkillers or something. “Sleep? Are you insane? I haven’t seen you in over ten years, Daniel, what is going on?”

He winces at my outburst and appears rather shocked by it. “Sleep,” he mutters once more, more intensely this time.

By now I’m annoyed, shocked, and beginning to get angry. “Daniel!” I shout. “What in the actual fuck is going on?”

He cowers back slightly and looks at me as if he’s seeing a ghost. By now, my outburst has caused Kade to race to the bedroom door where he stands gaping at me and Daniel.

“Put her to sleep,” Kade says frantically and fully enters the room, a young woman not much older than me entering behind him. I guess she’s the voice from downstairs.

“You don’t think I tried?” Daniel shouts loudly. “What’s wrong with her?”

“I told you. She is immune to compulsion, even Kade’s, which is why you were to give her the pill I told you to *before* she woke up,” Clarissa barks, pointing to the dresser.

Daniel shakes his head quickly and runs a hand through his dark hair. “Now what?”

The woman shrugs. “I’m not sure. Options are limited to say the least. She’s your sister and you’re an adult so that’s on you. Either way, you know what you have to do. I’ll make the arrangements now.”

Kade’s jaw clenches and then he says, “Daniel, we have two choices and you know very well what they are,” through tight lips.

Daniel doesn’t appear very happy with this. He rolls his eyes and then storms from the room.

The woman who've I've identified as Clarissa clears her throat and approaches me. "I'm sorry, he will be back to explain everything, but I just want you to know that your injuries have been tended to and you're safe here. If you need anything, call for me. My name is Clarissa."

I'm safe here? They were talking about drugging me so I wouldn't wake up yet.

She then turns and Kade takes her spot beside the bed I rest in. "I know you don't know me that well, but I promise that you're safe here. Clarissa is a good doctor."

"How is he here?" I mutter, still in shock, not caring about much else right now. My brother is alive and well.

"Well, that is for him to explain to you. I'm sure that once he gathers himself, he will be back to explain. He was surprised to see you too."

Surprised to see me? I'm not the one who went missing. I'm so confused. "Where am I?" I ask next.

"This is Clarissa's home. We're a few miles from where I found you. When I found you, you were in pretty rough shape and the hospital was at least twenty minutes away, so I called Clarissa and she told me to bring you over. She looked you over and did what she could. She didn't think you needed to go to the hospital, so we were just waiting for you to wake up. What happened?"

I want to ask him about their conversation downstairs, but I also don't really want to let him know what all I know, though it isn't much, it's all I have. "I was changing the radio, tired, and speeding, and I hit a deer and rolled the car."

He nods. "Well, you're doing far better than the deer. That's something." He opens his mouth to say something further, but Daniel enters the room again and Kade dismisses himself, his hand resting on Daniel's shoulder for a moment on the way out.

"How are you feeling?" Daniel asks me, one hand entangled in his brown hair. He looks beyond stressed. Why is *he* stressed?

"Alright, my head is a bit sore, though, but that's not what's really bothering me right now." I can't help but look him over again, making sure that what I saw a few minutes ago was real. This is my missing brother Daniel, standing mere feet away from me.

"I know. I guess I have some explaining to do."

I wait for him to continue.

"I don't really know where to start," he admits. He sits down in the chair next to the bed and rests his forehead in his hand, his elbow resting on the arm of the chair.

I whisper, "The beginning."

He gathers himself before starting. "We were playing in the backyard and I sent a slap shot at Kai. It missed the net and it flew into the trees, so...we both went after it knowing it was quite possibly lost for good. We looked for it for a few minutes and were about to give up when Kai fell into a hole in the ground that had been covered with grass. I think it might've been that old well that dad used to warn us about. I'm not sure really, but I went to see what happened and I couldn't see or hear him down there, so I went back to the shed in the yard where dad's cattle lamp was, and I brought it back to shine into the hole. I'm not really sure why I didn't go get help, but I was young, and I didn't realize how urgent things were I guess."

He swallows and takes a second before he continues. "When I shone the light down the hole, I saw the top of Kai's head and that was it. The hole was tight, and he knocked brush and dirt down with him. I shouted at him, trying to get him to move, but he was far down and stuck. That's when I went to get help, but before I could make it back to the house, I ran into a man walking through the trees, so I got his attention, told him what happened, and he followed me to the hole. Instead of helping me, he pushed me into the damn thing with Kai, and I fell probably almost twenty feet before I stopped. There was mud in my mouth and it was so tight that I couldn't move. I suffocated there."

Shocked, I sit up and shake my head. “How did you get out? Why didn’t you come back home?” I have too many questions to get out at once.

Daniel’s head dips and he stares down at the grey rug. “May, here’s the thing...I *didn’t* get out. I died down there.”

Confused, I shake my head. “What?”

“We both died....in a way anyway.” Daniel meets my disbelieving gaze without faltering. He’s completely serious. Either he’s gotten a hell of a lot better at lying or he truly believes that he died and came back to life.

Oh my god. My brother is as crazy as my mom. I nod carefully. “Oh, okay, well you should probably tell the police what happened,” I prompt.

Daniel rolls his eyes. “May, I’m not crazy. I’m serious. As hard as it is to believe, I died but then I came back. Sort of. I woke up in Kai’s House, his sister washing all the dirt off of me. Kai told me I was immortal. Apparently, Kai woke up in the hole and he made me immortal before climbing from it and taking me to his house.”

I gawk at him. I clearly need to get him to a doctor. How has he not been noticed living around here for so long?

“You think I’m crazy. Of course, you think I’m crazy,” he groans to himself and then raises his head. “Kai!” he shouts loudly and then after a few moments a tall man with short jet-black hair, a black t-shirt, black jeans, and bright blue eyes enters the room, looking bored.

“Yeah?” he asks deeply.

“This is my little sister May. She’s awake now, and I’m trying to explain to her what happened to me. She resists compulsion, so I need to explain things to her, and I just don’t know how,” Daniel explains sounding frustrated and directs his attention to Kai who now appears amused.

Seeing Kai again after all these years is strange. He’s familiar and yet so unfamiliar, like Daniel. Kai used to have blonde hair and wore superman shirts all the time, a far stretch from his goth-like attire now.

His eyes flicker to me, his stance relaxes but yet somehow alert. Something I can’t place passes across his face, and then he smiles gently. “May, it’s been a while. I’d say you look good, but you look rather beaten up actually,” Kai greets me and takes a step closer.

The only thing I manage to get out is, “Uh, *hi*.” Then look back at Daniel. You want me to believe that you died and came back to life? If you’re trying to be funny, you’re just pissing me off.”

Daniel’s palm flies up to his forehead where he rubs it harshly and then stares up at Kai for help.

Kai looks between Daniel and me a few times before chuckling deeply. “After all we’ve been through to keep her ignorant of all this you’ve decided to let her know everything?” Kai sounds almost irritated by this.

“I wasn’t expecting her to wake up as soon as I came into the room. I didn’t have a lie handy, she recognized me, and she resisted compulsion anyway. What else was I to do? You know how terrible a liar I am, and I don’t know. The truth slipped out and here we are, alright? Can we talk about this later?”

Daniel gets up and begins pacing the room, one hand still sprawled across his forehead.

Kai glances at him, his brows furrowing and then turns back to me and one side of his mouth lifts into a half grin. “I hope you’re not as rash as your brother here. He’s always getting himself into all sorts of trouble.”

I swallow and take a deep breath.

“Look, I’ve never been human truly, I’ve always been a part of this world, so I don’t know what it’s like to not be able to freely accept it. I really don’t. I guess it’d be like you trying to tell me that unicorns exist or that’s what Daniel says it’s like anyway.” Kai shrugs quickly and he looks back to my brother with worry in his eyes and something else that I can’t place. Respect? Admiration? Clearly, they’re still best friends. Then Kai looks back at me again before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a jackknife and flipping out a small blade. He takes a weary step closer to me and I lean back. I’m in a room with two men who are quite possibly insane, and one has a damn knife.

Kai rolls his eyes. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to show you something. It's the quickest way to prove that we're not nuts." He then out stretches his free arm and uses the hand with the blade in it to cut a very deep, very long cut from his wrist to the inside of his elbow. He winces and grunts.

I scream. I can't help it. It's involuntary. That is going to need a doctor, maybe even a surgery *right now!* I check my pockets for my phone before remembering that it's destroyed from my accident.

"You're scaring her!" Daniel hisses and points to the door. "Out!"

Kai rolls eyes at Daniel this time and then tosses the knife to him who catches it easily. Kai steps nearer to me and uses his shirt to wipe away the gushing blood.

By all hell, he's going to bleed out right here in front of me if it keeps bleeding like that. I'm in such shock that I can't even get a word out. I just stare at his arm, gaping. Thank god I'm not a paramedic or a nurse or something.

By the time his shirt is drenched in blood, which is only a matter of mere seconds, the bleeding has a nearly stopped completely. Wounds like that one do not just stop bleeding like that unless the heartbeat stops and causing it to discontinue spurting. It still bleeds lightly and Daniel hands him a pillow case from the dresser across from the bed. Kai wipes at his forearm and then presents it to me. The cut doesn't appear nearly as deep as I thought. I watched the knife sink to the hilt in his flesh and then cut across it. I feel like vomiting.

Before my eyes, the cut, surrounded in dried blood, becomes fainter and then fainter yet as I gather my voice and rational thought. Then, nothing is left but a pale pink line of scar tissue. Before I know it, even that has disappeared. His unmarred forearm presents itself to me. I know what I saw. There's still bloody evidence of the cut. Before I can stop myself, I clutch his wrist and pull him towards me to closer examine his arm. I grit my teeth when this only confirms what I suspected. It's completely healed. I release his arm and begin shaking my head back and forth, speechless.

Daniel stops his pacing and points to the door. "Kai, now you're just going to give her a heart attack."

"I was giving her proof, so she doesn't think we're crazy. Humans always say, 'seeing is believing' or however it goes."

Daniel glowers at Kai who reluctantly leaves the room, shirtless.

"I'm sorry about that...he's not used to being around humans," Daniel mutters and then starts his pacing again.

"Could you stop? You're making my head spin even more than it should be right now."

He stops in his tracks and then nods. "Right, yeah, okay."

"So, you're like him? You're immortal?" I ask, not sure if I'm beginning to believe this all or I'm just playing along.

He nods. "Yes."

"Okay. What else can you do besides heal impossibly quickly?"

Daniel seems to relax a bit. "Uh, we stop aging at adulthood, so we don't have to worry about dying from old age. We also don't get sick or contract disease or anything like that. We're basically just a more durable human being I guess. We're stronger, faster, our hearing is far better."

"So, you're not about to tell me you suck blood and sleep in a coffin, are you?" I ask for reassurance.

"No, I don't do either of those things," he confirms slowly.

"Oh, thank god." I clearly watch way too much TV. This all has a scientific explanation. It must. Maybe it's some deformity. But just how did this come to be exactly?

"You're not one of those people who watch all that crap on TV, are you?" he asks, squinting at me through slitted eyes.

I decide to ignore his question. "You said Kai made you immortal. How exactly did he do that?" I try to keep my expression blank.

"Long story short, he mixed our blood. From what I understand, this type of immortality or whatever you want to call it, transfers through blood." He then looks to the blood-soaked shirt on the floor. "A lot of blood. Not just a few drops. I mean *a lot* of blood, preferably directly into the heart or near it, a main artery."

Okay, I can still make sense of this from a scientific stand point. It proposes some sort of rationality, at least to me and that's all I need to be able to believe this all at least a little. It's feasible. It's some sort of virus or disease or something that transfers through large amounts of blood. That's possible...isn't it?

I have to push this all aside for at least a while because right now, all this isn't what matters most. What matters most is that my brother stands before me for the first time in years. That is what matters right now. The rest can wait. Can't it?

"I'm so glad you're alright," I breathe. "Everyone assumed you died. You just disappeared out of nowhere."

Daniel doesn't respond for a moment and we sit in complete silence.

Finally, he looks up at me and meets my eyes. "I know. I'm sorry, May. I would've come back if I could've, but I was so young, and I had no idea how to cope with who I suddenly was or what I was I guess. I would open a door and rip it off its hinges or put on clothes and rip them. I could've hurt you or someone else. There was no body for me to leave to give you closure. I did all I thought I could do at that time, I was just a kid and the woman who raised me after that was only just barely an adult."

"Did you hear about mom and dad?" I ask him quietly and run a hand through my tousled hair, a tear slipping down my cheek. Part of me hopes that he has just so that I don't have to tell him.

"Yeah, I did, I didn't know about dad until I turned sixteen though. Meredith—Kai's sister and our guardian growing up—thought it'd be best that way. I needed to cut all ties to my human family and that was hard enough as a kid."

"Do you know what Mom did to me?" I ask sternly. Just how much does he know?

He nods. "Yeah, I do."

"Why didn't you come back then? You would've been sixteen at that time. You could've come back!" I say this almost angrily, and I have to take a deep breath to calm down.

"I couldn't come back just to leave again in a few years, May. I will never grow old. I will look like this forever. How would you have felt if I'd come back just to vanish again? I couldn't do that to you or anyone. I'm not part of that world anymore. I can never go back to it. That's why I wish you'd never have woken up to see me. I want you to be able to live a normal life." Daniel struggles to get each word out. "You can't do that knowing about all this." He throws his hands up in the air, motioning to our surroundings. "I want better for you."

"What does Kade have to do with all this?"

"He's an...*acquaintance* of ours." Daniel's face scrunches up. He looks unsure of his answer. I can tell in his tone that he's not a huge fan of Kade, but I don't comment.

"And Clarissa?" I wonder.

"A friend of ours. Meredith's roommate." He sounds more sure about this answer.

"They're both...like you?" I ask, feeling strange asking it.

He nods. "Yes. They're not human." He picks up a snow globe from the dresser and fiddles with it. Maybe he's feeling as awkward and *nervous* as I am about all of this.

I look at him questioningly, awaiting a further explanation. "I am what is referred to as *Bryxx*."

We're interrupted by Kade appearing in the doorway with Clarissa who knocks lightly and then approaches me carefully. "I'm sorry to interrupt but I've made a casserole downstairs if you're hungry. Also, the only flight I could get leaves in just a few hours from Billings."

It's not until that very moment that I realize how hungry I am. When was the last time I even ate?

Clarissa notices my interest peak and smiles warmly. "Would you like me to bring you some up or would you rather stretch your legs a bit and come down?"

"Don't go out of your way. I'll come down. You've helped me enough," I reassure her and then can't help but wonder how it is that I've healed so fast. I watched Kai heal before my eyes, but I'm not immortal.

Daniel looks over at me and appraised me slowly. "You're frightened," he decides finally.

"Yeah, amongst a lot of other things. How exactly have I managed to heal so quickly? How long have I even been here?" I groan as I push myself out of the bed.

Clarissa glances to the digital alarm clock on the nightstand. "Almost three hours."

Three hours? That must be a joke.

"I didn't have time to take you to a hospital," Kade explains. "You barely had a pulse."

Daniel then seems to snap out of his funk and directs his attention to someone other than me. "Kade, you saved my sister's life in more than one way the past few days and I owe you an unpayable debt because of it. Thank you."

Kade's eyes widen slightly, his forehead wrinkling, but then he gathers himself and musters a soft smile. "For the record, I did it for her benefit, not yours, and as for the debt you owe me...you may repay me by making sure she gets home safe. That's all I want from you. You know the rules, though, Daniel. You have broken the law by telling her what you have already, get her out of here before matters escalate. For her benefit, not yours. I'd hate from my father to catch wind of this."

"Your father? He's a cop or something?" I wonder.

Kade grins, his eyes twinkling. "No. My father is many things, but he is no cop. He is one of the six men who make up the council that keeps our society in line and undiscovered by humans."

"Your society of *Bryxx*?" I ask for reassurance.

Kade tosses me a half smile. "Yes, May."

I want to know more, but my stomach rumbles and the smell of the casserole Clarissa made wafts up the stairs towards me, causing me to salivate.

"You guys never answered my question about how I healed so fast," I recall and head for the bedroom door.

"Clarissa is a doctor of sorts in our society for people like us who are very critically injured. She also aides in delivering babies, injuries, sickness and things in the humans who live with our community," Kade explains and side steps from the doorway so I can exit the room. He looks on edge, his body stiff and his movements choppy.

Clarissa walks in front of me and leads me to the kitchen. "May, I have materials unlike what human doctors possess. It was some of these materials that caused your rapid healing."

As we descend the stairs, a large entryway opens up. A living room appears to be on the left and the kitchen on the right. I turn towards the kitchen, still following Clarissa. In the kitchen, at the huge mahogany table sits Kai reading a sports magazine, a blonde woman around my age dressed in slacks and a pink blouse, and muscular man in a tight-fitting navy-blue t-shirt and matching shorts. The man catches my eye because his arms are covered in multiple unique tattoos and his hair is tousled like he didn't bother to comb it. To say the least, he looks rough.

Clarissa motions to Kai. "May, this is Malakai. He lives down the road with your brother but always seems to end up here for meals." She smirks at him.

Kai nods politely to me without moving his eyes from his magazine before sipping from his yellow coffee mug. "What can I say, Clarissa, you're the cook around."

Clarissa then points to the blonde woman. "This is Meredith. Kai's older sister and my roommate."

Meredith looks up from her cell phone and eyes me carefully, her eyes running over me slowly as if she's inspecting me. "Hello, darling."

Clarissa then moves towards the rough-looking man seated at the table. "This is my son Garrett."

As I shift my gaze from Clarissa to Garrett, I realize that he's staring at me with an odd smile on his lips. He looks amused and also curious, I decide.

"I'm glad to see you feeling better," Garrett says sincerely.

After a moment of staring at him like an idiot, I recognize him. "Garrett Meyer?" I ask incredulously. It's been years since I've seen him, but I know it's him. He has longer hair and a beard but it's him.

“You remember me?” he asks, his lips twitching.

“I took swimming lessons with you in Sunnybrooke for like three years in a row,” I muse, not sure why I’m so excited about this fact.

“It was about the only human thing my mom let me do growing up.” He cuts a glance at Clarissa who sends him a scolding look, I swear her eyes go ten shades darker. “Well, *it was*.”

“I wanted you to know how to swim, and I couldn’t very well help you with that. It’s something I’ve always wished I was taught young. It’s a good skill to have.” Clarissa wipes a spot off the counter and tosses a pan into the sink.

“So would’ve a human education,” Garrett grumbles and rests against the back of his chair with his arms crossed. I can tell this isn’t the first time this argument has ensued.

Clarissa sighs. “It was far too dangerous. Look at you. You turned out fine, son.”

“I turned out human raised in a world of immortals that I don’t even belong in,” Garrett continues gruffly.

Clarissa’s eyes begin to fill with water but before anyone notices but me, she turns her back to everyone and sighs loudly. “Let’s eat shall we. Garrett, you’re being rude. We have guests. If you’re so interested in humanity, well, there’s a human standing merely feet away from you.” Clarissa ends the discussion and takes to cleaning the kitchen.

Garrett’s eyes meet mine again.

“So, you’re human?” I ask him, already knowing the answer, but hoping to break the awkward silence.

He nods once. “Yup.”

Kade leans against the open yellow wall beside the table. “Clarissa is Bryxx, but Garrett’s father was human. It’s rare and against the law for this pairing to occur but it does happen and when it does, the offspring have a fifty-fifty chance of turning out human or turning out Bryxx,” Kade elaborates, answering my unspoken question. “Of course, there’s no way to know which they will be until either they die and do or do not return from the dead or they reach maturity and become Bryxx or they do not and they remain human. A Bryxx doesn’t gain full power until either they die or they reach maturity. Kai, for example, died and triggered his Bryxx genes early, before maturity whereas Meredith’s Bryxx genes began working after she reached adulthood.”

In a small town like the one near where I was raised most of my life, everyone knows everyone. I recall meeting Garrett in one of our swim classes because he stood out, the reason being that he wasn’t from our school, no one had ever seen him before. He was a shiny new toy.

Clarissa dishes me up a plate of casserole and sets it across the table from Garrett who looks up at me welcomingly, so I take the seat. I hate eating in front of people, especially people who I barely know, but I’m starving so I take a quick bite and chew self-consciously while everyone at the table watches me curiously. I feel like a three-headed elephant in a zoo enclosure.

“What’s the plan?” Kai asks, directing his question at my brother who still stands in the doorway, looking a little bit like a statue.

Daniel heaves a deep breath before taking a step into the kitchen. “She knows now. She can’t be compelled. She’s in the same boat as Garrett.”

Garrett lifts his head. “Except I was born into this shit and spent my whole life dealing with it. This is normal to me. To her, it’s like you just threw her into the land of Oz. Also, she still gets to leave here. I don’t.”

Daniel grimaces and scowls at Garrett who doesn’t cower away and instead raises his brows in challenge.

Kai shrugs. “Well, I don’t want to be involved with any of this. You should’ve lied to her. You know the risk.”

Daniel’s head snaps up and he turns to face Kai with a tense glare. “*No?* You don’t want to be involved? If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t be here to begin with!”

“No, Daniel, *you* wouldn’t be here if I’d never have saved you, because you’d be dead in a hole, but *she* still would be here you realize. You’d be dead in an old well and she’d be here, the exact same way that she is right now. Actually,

no, because Clarissa would've made sure she stayed asleep and didn't wake up to a waterfall of confidential information. She'd be nearly on her way back to Seattle, back home, back to safety."

I flinch away from Kai's bitterness. He tosses his magazine down on the table harshly.

Daniel's jaw clenches and then he relaxes slightly before turning to face Kai again. "She's my sister. Either you're in or I'm out." The way he says this is erupt and final, like he's about to lunge at Kai and do god knows what to him. Daniel is not happy with Kai, that much is very, very clear.

Kai and Daniel make eye contact for a long, awkward moment before Kai nods once. "Alright. I'm in."

The tension in the room is palpable, making things feel stranger than they already were. I dig into my food, straying from any eye contact. My stomach growls even as I shovel food into my mouth.

"Kade, you shouldn't stay here much longer. Henry will be looking for you soon I'm sure, and we can't risk him tracking you here and finding that we have an undocumented human in the house. You broke a major law bringing her here and you know what it could lead to," Clarissa voices her concern. "Stop by tomorrow and I will update you on things. I wish you could stay. I'm sorry." She finishes drying a glass and puts it in the cupboard.

Kade glances down to me and makes eye contact before nodding. "I'll be back tomorrow then." He turns and heads for the door. "Take care, May."

"Kade?" Daniel chases after him and Kade turns to face him as he rests his hand on the doorknob. "You saved her life. I owe you. Thank you. I know you didn't have to do that."

Kade's lips turn up lightly. "You don't owe me anything for doing the right thing. I will see you tomorrow."

With that, Kade leaves the house. Garrett isn't far behind him.

"I'm going to be late for work with all this action," Garrett remarks playfully with a vibrant grin and throws on a pair of torn up work boots.

"What do you do?" I ask him, making conversation.

"I'm a farm hand down the road," he answers, a smile still on his lips, but not in his eyes.

Once he leaves the house I angle myself towards Daniel. "He hates his job," I state. "Why doesn't he do something different?"

Kai, Clarissa, Meredith, and Daniel all stare at me looking baffled.

Kai lifts his chin slightly. "How do you know he doesn't like his job?"

"His expression, he was smiling but he didn't mean it. It wasn't real," I reply as if it's obvious.

"Garrett doesn't get paid for his work," Clarissa mutters. "Humans in this world are often given jobs without pay that benefit the Bryxx society. Not many Bryxx understand humans and they are treated badly in our society."

Why wouldn't Garrett just leave? Why wouldn't he go off and live a human life? Or why not become Bryxx like the rest of his family?

Daniel sighs and comes to sit in Garret's spot at the table. "Humans are documented as belonging to the Bryxx if they know about us. Their lives are given to us to serve us. Garrett was dealt a bad card. His life belongs to the Bryxx and since he was born from a Bryxx and grew up to be a human, it is very unlikely that his body would accept Bryxx blood and take the transformation. His body would reject it and he would die a painful death. Not many Bryxx humans survive the change. It's rare." Daniel basically gives me my answer. I can't help but feel bad for Garrett.

"The bad treatment of humans is why we didn't want you to know about us," concludes Kai as he saunters over to the sink to wash up his dishes. "Too late now, but since the council doesn't know that you know anything, you should be able to go back home and forget that this ever happened."

"Your car is unfixable, but I've booked you a flight already and since Kai and Daniel are both off work today, they will drive you to the airport." Clarissa gathers up the rest of the dirty dishes, including mine.

"I will buy you a car. It will be at your apartment in Seattle when you get there. The keys will be in your mailbox. Kade collected some of your belongings from your car earlier and brought them here. We will mail them to you this

week.” Daniel grumbles, “You have to forget about all of this. You can’t tell anyone about any of this. It’s dangerous knowledge.”

“Will you visit?” I ask my brother meekly.

He shakes head. “It’s too dangerous for you. I won’t risk it. I don’t want you to have the life that Garrett does. You deserve better.”

How do they expect me to just up and forget that immortals exist? I sigh in resignation. What else can I do? I don’t want to be like Garrett. I’m scared, shocked, and taken aback by all of this. I’m homesick for my apartment in Seattle and I hate this place, but then there’s my brother. How can I just forget he’s alive and live my life knowing that I can’t talk to or see him ever again?

“The council makes sure that humans turned Bryxx lose contact with their human connections and don’t regain them. It’s wouldn’t be safe for me to keep in contact with you as much as I wish I could,” Daniel finalizes, flipping through the magazine Kai was looking at absentmindedly.

“Wait, did you just say you were going to buy me a car?” I ask, remembering him saying something about a car being at my apartment. “I’m broke. I can’t afford a new car. I don’t know if I can even afford the plane tickets,” I admit with embarrassment.

Daniel cocks his head. “You don’t have to pay me back. It’s a gift. It’s the least I can do. Now that I have bought the land that you inherited, you shouldn’t have reason to come back here. This place isn’t safe. You should never come back here. Ever.” Daniel sighs deeply. “I wish that we could be part of each other’s lives, but we can’t. It’s not safe for either of us.”

“You bought the land? I thought Kade bought it,” I mutter with annoyance.

“I bought it, but I couldn’t very well do the transaction myself, so I asked Kade to help me. He owed me a favor and I cashed in on it.”

“You seem to have a lot of money to throw around,” I observe.

He shrugs. “The Bryxx are well off, and I work a respectable job that pays well.”

Clearly. “Why don’t you like Kade?” I ask him. It was impossible to not see the tension between Kade and any of the others. He was not a welcomed guest.

Daniel cocks a brow. “Well, you’re observant.”

Meredith leaves the room, and I hear the front door open and close. She must be off to work.

Kai continues reading his newspaper as if we’re not even in the room and Clarissa finishes up some dishes.

“Well, Kade’s story is a complicated one. It’s not that I don’t like him exactly, it’s just that he’s very different than me or Kai or any of us.”

I can tell by Daniel’s tone of voice that he’s leaving something out, but I decide not to pry if he chooses not to tell me. What’s the point anyway? It’s not like I’m ever going to see he or Kade again. The thought causes my eyes to swell with tears as the reality of this all starts to really sink in.

“Don’t cry, Mayflower. It’s better this way. The less you know, the safer you’ll be. If I could take the memory of all this away, I would, but you seem to have some kind of immunity to influence.”

“You can really brainwash people?” I ask him through a snuffle.

He chuckles. “I can persuade people to do something or forget something. I can implant false memories.”

“You shouldn’t do that without people’s permission you know,” I scold him. “It’s not fair.” I wipe my tears onto the sleeve of my borrowed shirt.

Daniel glances to the clock above the table and snaps his fingers. “Kai, we have to get going if we’re going to make that flight Clarissa booked.”

Kai sets down the newspaper he's reading on the table and glares at Daniel. "You're really ruining my day you know. I had plans this afternoon. Relaxing in front of the tv without clothes to start. Now I'm playing taxi for your human sister."

Daniel glares back with pure anger in his gaze. "Kai, what is with you today? You're being a complete dick."

Kai seems to cower at Daniel's scolding and grits his teeth before standing. "I'm sitting in the back seat and napping for the ride."

Daniel rolls his eyes at him and Kai heads to the porch and throws his shoes on.

"He doesn't really have to come does he?" I ask Daniel in a whisper.

Kai is the one who answers. "Yeah, I do. As soon as a Bryxx leaves the protection of the community, the demo-"

Daniel presses a finger to his lips and a growl escapes him. "The less she knows the better. May, for safety purposes, it's better that we both go."

I sigh heavily and part of me wants to protest but I don't.

"It's just a precaution. We will be fine but you just never know is all," Daniel finishes and leads me into the porch where he pulls out a pair of runners and hands them to me. "Your shoes are wrecked. Clarissa will give you a pair of her's, god knows she has extra."

"I feel bad for troubling you so much," I admit and slip on the shoes. "I'll have to repay you somehow. I've caused a lot of trouble."

"That's an understatement," Kai grumbles and Daniel punches his shoulder hard enough that Kai almost tips over. "Well, it is."

Daniel appears about to explode but settles down slowly and tosses me a jacket from the closet.

"Safe travels, May. You boys take good care of her. Here is your plane ticket and what Kade found left of your wallet." Clarissa hands me an envelope. "I wish you all the best."

I thank her and then I'm ushered through the front door into the chilly outskirts of the house. It's surrounded by trees and greenery.

Daniel opens the passenger side door of a blue truck with windows so darkly tinted that they're barely see through. Is this even legal? I hop in and squint through the glass.

"Uh..." I trail off as Daniel jumps in.

He looks to me questioningly and sees my confused expression. "Light sensitive. We can see in the dark, our pupils let in more light than a human's. Mid-day is uncomfortably bright."

"Well, how do you drive at night with this on here?" I wonder.

Daniel shrugs. "We don't usually drive at night. We go on foot. This is mostly for the odd day trip we take around the community."

"You're going to get pulled over in the city," I warn him.

He laughs. "Were not driving this the whole way. Just to Kai and I's house so we can grab the car. The sun is on its way down and we have no need for the tint anymore. When Clarissa called to tell me about you, the sun was still high in the sky."

"Are you saying that you can't stand the sun at all? Like you don't go out in it?"

He shakes his head. "It doesn't kill us. It's just annoying. Anyways, Bryxx thrive during the night. It's when we work most of our jobs. Most of us sleep during the day while it's safest."

"You say that like you're always in danger or something."

"Something like that. I don't want to go into details the less you know-"

"The safer I am. Yeah, yeah I get it," I murmur with annoyance.

Kai snorts out a laugh from the back seat as we pull out of the yard.

We drive down the gravel road about four miles before taking a left turn and driving another two or three miles and then turning down an old beaten path through a field full of trees. We stop at a no trespassing gate and Daniel punches something into his cell phone before the gate swings open and we are able to head on through it. After a bend, we stop in front of a large, blue two-story house. Daniel shuts off the truck and both he and Kai get out of the vehicle and begin heading towards two matching cars parked on the left. One is neon blue and the other dark red.

They choose the red one and soon were backing out of the driveway we just entered. The interior of the car is slick and modern, a car that I'd never be able to afford. Unlike the last vehicle we were in, this one doesn't sport tint on every window. Instead, Daniel pulls out a pair of sunglasses and I hear Kai do the same.

I keep quiet as we speed down the gravel road, stewing in my scattered thoughts.

Daniel's cellphone chimes and he picks it up and answers it. "Daniel here."

He listens intently to the voice on the other line before nibbling the inside of his lower lip and releasing a mumbled 'ok'. Then he ends the call and reaches into the backseat. I glance behind me to see what he's doing. He plucks two ear buds from Kai's ears.

Kai scoffs. "Seriously? What now?"

Daniel gives him the finger before handing him his cellphone. "That was Darla. There's a mandatory meeting that everyone is to attend at sun set. It's regarding this."

Kai takes his phone and looks at the screen briefly. "He has an alibi."

"Not one he can tell the council without getting us killed or banished or in some sort of shit," Daniel argues.

"I knew this would come back and bite us in the ass. It hasn't even been 24 hours," Kai rants and shoves his ear-phones back into his ears.

Daniel takes his phone back and types in a number. "You alone?" he asks the person on the other line. There's a pause. "Good. You're under investigation. A body was found by the authorities and I bet you can guess how the vic died." Another pause. "Yeah. Exactly."

Daniel runs his hand through his hair before putting it back on the wheel. "Yeah, that is what I'm wondering. If you're going to say something, then you know we have to get out of town and quick."

I try to put the puzzle together but I'm missing too many pieces.

"Okay, I owe you another one. More than that. Good luck," Daniel says finally and puts his phone away.

Kai takes out one earbud. "You trust that monster?"

Daniel debates this. "What choice do I have? He did just opt for saving a human's life over killing her. By telling the truth about having an alibi he's going to get into just as much trouble as he would if he took the blame. This way, at least the rest of us are okay."

"This is about Kade helping me, isn't it?" I determine. "He's being blamed for a crime but his alibi—saving me—isn't valid because it's just as illegal?"

Daniel and Kai both stare at me before Daniel nods. "You're quick."

I shrug. "You're not that great at speaking in code. I'm not a child. Wait, did you say there was a victim that died? They think Kade murdered someone?"

"Someone is coming down the road. May, duck down so they can't see you," Daniel instructs.

Sensing the urgency in his voice, I do as he says.

After the vehicle passes by, Daniel clears his throat. "Okay. You can come up. We're almost out of the general community range, then we will be in the clear. To answer your question, yes, they think he killed someone but that's all I'm saying about the matter. It's not your concern. He would've been blamed for it if he'd been saving you or not."

I'm not sure what to say. When I start to ask if there's anything I can do, Kai clucks his tongue and snorts out a laugh. Neither one of them will talk about it any further, they ignore any attempts I make.



Chapter 5



We pull up to a gas station roughly an awkward hour of silence later. What do you talk to your long missing, immortal brother about? Kai goes inside the store to get a snack and Daniel begins filling the tank. Kai returns with a bag of chips and stops at the pump to chat with my brother. It isn't until then that I realize something strange. I can't hear what they're saying. At all. In fact, I can't hear anything happening on the outside of the vehicle. Is the car soundproof?

I close my eyes and focus on hearing anything but I hear nothing. It *is* sound proofed. How strange. Could it be for privacy sake since Bryxx can hear so well? It makes sense I guess.

Before I know it, we're on the road again.

To my surprise, Kai offers me a chip, but I decline. So far, I've gotten the impression that he doesn't care for me much.

The sun disappears below the horizon shortly after we leave the gas station, and we continue on the final leg of our car trip. It's another hour until we reach Billings where the airport is stationed.

Daniel and I converse lightly about growing up before talking about our shared love of a cop comedy drama on tv. Even Kai chimes in a few times, and I finally see the bond between the two of them as Kai opens up and relaxes his walls. They joke and tease one another.

"Remember when we were hunting deer last fall and you fell right out of the tree stand and onto your ass? Are you seriously telling me that you have better balance than I do?" Daniel demands incredulously, attempting to put a comment from Kai about his lack of balance to rest.

Kai whistles. "Well, at least I can drive. Do you remember what *you* did last hunting season?"

Daniel squeezes his eyes shut momentarily in a cringe. "Kind of hard to forget."

"You should've saw him." Kai laughs so hard I think he's about to suffocate. Once he calms down he continues, "He drove the four-wheeler right into the creek, the front tires got lodged in the mud and the thing stopped but he kept going and I swear he flew twenty feet! He landed head first in a patch of thistle!" Kai chuckles. "I've never met someone so prone to accidents. You're lucky you're immortal, Dan!"

Daniel shakes his head back and forth. "It wasn't that funny. You're exaggerating."

"You didn't see it! You just felt it!" Kai snorts and I can't help but giggle at both Kai's uncontrollable laughter and the story.

"Yeah. I was injured, and you were too busy laughing to help me push the four-wheeler out of the damn creek," Daniel mutters in a growl.

I interrupt. "I love how you guys can laugh about the types of normally tragic stories that would have a normal person like me killed." Wouldn't it be nice to not have to worry so much about death every day of your life?

"There are perks to this life for sure, but it's not all good," Daniel reminds me. "I'd rather be what I am now than dead, but if I were to choose between being human and being Bryxx, I would choose being human in a heartbeat."

I am about to ask why but we've parked in front of the airport and there are cars behind us ready to drop off passengers like myself. I wish we had more time.

"Thanks for everything. It was really good to see you again, both of you," I tell them honestly. I reluctantly gather my plane ticket and driver's license so I can get on the plane.

"I wish you the best," Kai says with care. "I hope that you got some closure seeing Daniel again, finally learning what really happened, and knowing that he's alright."

I smile softly and nod in thanks. "I wish you two the best as well." I reach over and hug Daniel over the center console awkwardly and shake Kai's hand. A car behind us honks for me to hurry up.

As I climb out of the car, a single tear slides down my cheek.

"Stay safe and have a long, happy life, May," my older brother asks of me. "I'll see you again in another life."

With that, I close the car door behind me and head into the airport without looking back.

Two weeks later

"May, do you have to go? You know you can stay here." Jane tucks the apartment key I just handed her back into my jeans pocket. "Keep it. In case I go out of town and need you to check the place or...you want to stop by for some wine and girl talk." Her face pinches. "Girl, it's going to be so weird without you," Jane, my best friend and now roommate whines.

"I know, but it's time I grow up and get my own place." I sigh. "You know I loved living with you, but this apartment is small, and I know you can easily afford it without me. I can afford my own place, too, now." I embrace her in a tight hug and kiss her cheek. "Anyways, I'll just be a few miles down the road," I assure her and pull away before lifting the last of my belongings, a clothes basket filled to the rim with towels.

Jane gives an unsure nod, still not too keen on the idea. She's been trying to convince me to stay ever since I made the decision to move out two weeks ago. "I guess you're right. It's just going to be different. We've lived together for over four years now. I'm going to miss you so much."

I smile. "You and that man of yours are probably dying for some alone time. Maybe he can officially move in now that I'm leaving. Change is for the best. We'll still see each other a lot. It's not like I'm moving to Australia."

A hopeful glint in her eyes tells me that she's already thought about having her boyfriend move in. "See you, May. If you need help unpacking, give me a call."

"Thanks, Jane." I turn and head down the hall to the stairs and out towards my new car. A black Audi that I told Jane I inherited with the family farm since I couldn't very well tell her I got it from my brother, who is still technically a missing person.

Since learning my brother's whereabouts and situation, since learning that immortals exist, my life hasn't really changed much. I see things a little differently, and I look at people with a new sense of wonderment. How many people do I pass on the street who aren't human?

I have so many questions that I wish I could have the answers to. Does the government know about immortals? Are Bryxx the only type of immortals, or are there others? Will I ever have the answers to any of my questions? Part of me feels like I hallucinated the entire ordeal, but then I have proof that I didn't. The return address on the package of my things that Clarissa sent me, the car, the new cellphone I found inside of my new car.

I huck the laundry basket into the trunk and drive down the street to my new apartment building. It's nothing fancy but with the money I will soon get from the house sale, I will be able to afford my own space for the first time in my life, and I'm more than looking forward to it.

I manage to have most of my few things unpacked and put away by the time supper rolls around. I make myself a bowl of sugary cereal to eat, too tired and grocery-less to make anything substantial. Sometimes simple is best.

I plunk down onto the couch that came with the furnished apartment, reminding myself that I'll need to get it rug cleaned before I forget. The thought of what types of bodily fluids amongst other gross things could be on it from the last tenants disturbs me. Not that I'm a germ freak, but I have noticed a handful of mysterious stains on the cushions. Ew.

As I slurp at my cereal, I pull out the letter that my dad wrote me, the one I found in my parent's safe. I'd nearly forgotten about it until I received the package from Clarissa with all the stuff Kade collected from my car after my ac-

cident while I was unconscious at Clarissa's. Amongst the smashed picture frames, ripped and water damaged photos, disappointingly, little made it through my roll. The letter was amongst the water damaged items, though still readable.

As I read through it once over and then twice, I can't help but become more and more confused. What was my father trying to tell me? Did he know something about the Bryxx, or could he have been as crazy as my mom? I don't recall him being crazy, but then again, I didn't think my mother was crazy either until she attempted to kill me. I set the letter down on the worn coffee table I picked up from a thrift store down town and finish up my cereal before heading into the bedroom for a quick nap. Moving is seriously the most painful thing in the world.

Just as I'm lying down in my freshly made bed, a knock on my front door startles me and I jump a little. I'm not expecting anyone. Has Jane already missed me so much that she's driven over here? That sounds like her. Shaking my head in amusement, I skip to the door and gaze through the peephole. The only thing I can see is a hairy elbow from this angle. Okay, definitely not Jane. Maybe a neighbor has come to welcome me to the complex or the landlord has come to officially meet me himself.

I leave the chain on the door but crack it open as far as it will let me. I am more than surprised by who stands on the other side of the door, staring at me with one side of his mouth quirked up in a friendly grin.

"What are you doing here?" I ask curiously and quickly close the door to unchain it. I wave for him to come in and he slowly steps just inside the apartment.

His burly shoulders rise and then fall. "I went to the address we sent the package to and the woman there told me you'd moved to this address."

I squint at his words as if this will help me understand. "Okay, but why are you here in Seattle?"

Kade smirks devilishly. "I've been banned from the Bryxx community."

"Because of that crime that they thought you committed, but you couldn't have because you were helping me, but you couldn't say that because that would get a whole lot of people in trouble?" I ramble off quickly without taking a breath. I wave him further into the apartment, realizing just how ecstatic I am that he's here. Maybe he will answer some of my questions. If I'm being honest, I didn't think that I'd ever see any of them again, let alone have one of them show up to my apartment two weeks later.

He nods promptly. "Yeah," he groans slowly. "*That.*" He crosses his arms at his chest lets out a deep breath. "At least they didn't kill me. They could've. I'm lucky all things considered." He nibbles his cheek. "Anyway...I didn't really have anywhere to go. I've never really been *free*..." he trails off in thought. "They seem to think this banishment is some sort of crazy punishment, but I'm not so sure. I guess I came here because you're the only friend I have that's not part of the community. At least, I hope we are friends." He smiles hopefully, a glint in his brown eyes.

"Yeah, of course. You saved my life and you got kicked out of the community because of it. You're a hero and they think you're a murderer because of me. I owe you it time." My heart falls into my abdomen and I feel terrible. This is literally all my fault. If only I'd been paying attention while I was driving.

His smile widens. "It's alright. I don't belong there anyway. I haven't for some time. It was more than worth it. I don't care what they think of me. All that matters is that I saved your life and I know that was the right thing." Kade stares down at his shiny black shoes. "Daniel doesn't know I'm here. He wouldn't approve of me coming to see you, but I wanted you to know that I'll be in Seattle for a while. I don't know for how long but if you need me for anything, don't hesitate to call." He hands me a card with his number scrolled across it. "I may as well be in the same city as my only friend." He sends me a teasing smile. "If you like this place, then maybe I will too."

I giggle. "Where will you stay?" I wonder, motioning to the kitchen table. I wonder if he'd like to stay for coffee. "And *I'm* the one who owes *you*, remember? So, if you need anything, *you*..." I point to him. "...call *me*." I point my thumb into my chest. "Okay?"

His warm grin is friendly and relaxed as he takes a step backwards towards the doorway, denying my request to stay for a while. "Of course, but you don't owe me anything. As for where I'm staying, I will be getting a hotel room for a few nights, until I can sort things out and find something more permanent."

"You don't have to waste all that money on hotels. That's just crazy. You need a place to stay and I have one. I owe you big time. Stay here. This couch has a pull-out mattress. At least stay here while you look for a place," I encourage him too quickly. He probably thinks I'm losing my mind. I hope he'll stay, not only because I owe him, but because maybe he will answer some of my millions of unanswered questions about the Bryxx and about my brother.

Kade shakes his head quickly. "No, no I can't put you out like that. Don't worry about me. I have lots of money put away. A hotel is fine. I don't mind, honestly." He pulls out his phone and check the screen momentarily before shoving it back into his pocket.

"I'm hardly around. I work fourteen-hour days, mornings at the gas station on 5th and afternoons as a janitor at the car dealership down the block. It's really no trouble at all. From what I understand, people like you..." I say the last part awkwardly, wondering if that's a rude way to put it. I continue anyway, "...are up at night and sleep during the day."

A soft, easy going laugh escapes him. "How about just one night then? I'll be gone in the morning." Kade seems to relax a little. "I'm sure you have loads of questions for me anyhow. You don't phase me as the type of person who'd just accept that supernatural beings exist without any questions."

I internally leap for joy but on the outside I keep it cool and just give a small smile. "I'm not that kind of person, you're right, but you don't have to answer my questions. I know it's not safe for me to know much. That's what Daniel said anyway, and this is a favor, not a job. I owe you, you don't owe me," I remind him and wave him inside.

Kade removes his shoes and sets them neatly next to mine. "It's no trouble. You owe me nothing and a bit of chatter might be good. I don't recall the last time I was able to have a friendly, casual conversation with a friend. As for knowledge being dangerous, sometimes being ill informed is even more so, so I can't say I fully agree with him on that one. The only thing that would be too dangerous would be staying in contact with him. If the community ever found out, it wouldn't be good."

Squeezing out a rag from the sink, I then wipe the table down. "But it's okay to have contact with you?" I question, tossing the rag back into the sink and taking a seat at the kitchen table.

"The community knows I have no familial connections to the human world, but even if I did, I've been banished. They have no authority over me any longer. I'm not their concern. The only reason that they banished me rather than killed me was because they couldn't prove I did it. They hadn't enough evidence." Kade comes across the room and sits in the chair across from me.

"How could they banish you like that without even being sure you did it?!" Seems unfair to me.

"Bryxx rules are not the same as human rules. The council voted, I was guilty. Without enough proof, I was legally to be banished to keep the community's safety. Shall I ever return, I will be put to death."

Death? That seems a bit crazy for a crime that they can't even prove someone has done. "Surely there must be other Bryxx communities. You can't join another?" My heart hurts for Kade and I can't help but feel this is all my fault. If I'd never gotten in that accident, none of this would've happened.

Kade places his cellphone on the table and begins to spin it in circles. "There are but they are all linked. I am banished from all. I have been shunned from the Bryxx community entirely. It's really okay, though. I've lived a long time, and if I've learned anything, it's that I don't belong with the Bryxx, not anymore anyway. Seriously, May, don't feel bad for me."

This is the second time he's made a comment about no longer belonging with the Bryxx. This makes me wonder what changed that he once did belong with them. I also can't help but wonder how old he is now that I know he is

immortal, although he looks to be only around my own age, for all I know he could be far, far older. Would it be rude to ask?

“The Bryxx community doesn’t exactly sound like a good place to be from all I’ve heard,” I admit sheepishly. “It sounds strict and unfair.”

“Do not kill Bryxx, and do not leak the secret to humans. Those are the only two major rules and they make sense. The Bryxx are arrogant.” This topic seems to be making Kade angry. The tone of his voice becomes hard and annoyed.

I decide to change the subject. “How the hell is it that I lived my whole life near a community of immortals and never knew?”

Kade relaxes into his seat, all signs of anger and annoyance gone. “They have *loads* of money. Between that and their power of influence, they can keep their communities well hidden from the humans. I bet you never knew you had so many neighbors, did you? The Bryxx that live on the outskirts of the community are well hidden within the tall trees or down beaten paths on pasture-like land, they go unnoticed or don’t stand out to humans. The main community though is not inconspicuous like Clarissa’s. It is a large, gated area spanning several miles in radius, housing nearly one hundred thousand Bryxx. Any human who stumbles upon it is influenced by one of the Bryxx on guard to forget what they saw completely. It’s not easy to stumble upon, though. It has been disguised as a large gated government research centre for the environment and only one road leads into it, a path disguised as a private road on private property, complete with a no trespassing sign.”

I cock my head. “There is no facility near where I grew up that could possibly house thousands of beings. That’s just insane,” I remark. “I’d definitely know if there were.”

Kade scoffs and leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. “Before any human gets close to it, they’re brain-washed to forget ever seeing anything.”

I’m not sure if I believe this but at the same time I wonder why I don’t believe it? Have I not already witnessed the impossible? What’s a little more insanity?

“As I thought. You have not always been immune to influence, May. As each car drives by, a Bryxx guard enters the passenger’s brains and erases the memory of such place. The Bryxx use their influence to have such a place removed from satellite images. It is marked a no-fly zone due to dangerous, interfering electrical waves from a power plant which is of course a lie. No human outside of the community knows it exists. Humans don’t have a clue about it.” Kade seems to have some sort of attention issues. He begins spinning his phone in circles in front of him again. Fidgety much?

Could this all be true? Although I struggle to digest such a thing, I can’t really disbelieve him. I lived my whole life not knowing that immortals existed up until two weeks ago. I had no idea at all.

If I were once susceptible to influence, why am I not now? Kade’s going to get the questions. They all seem to just ask themselves. “Why am I no longer susceptible to influence?”

He seems to debate this as he spins his phone. “I don’t know. I have never heard of a human immune to the influence.”

“Do you have any guesses?” I urge, unable to take my eyes off his spinning phone.

His lips press into a small thin line as he thinks about this. After a long moment of silence, he says, “Like I said, I’ve never heard of a human being immune to the influence...but what if you’re not entirely human?”

He awaits my response but I’m too shocked to answer. That’d be impossible wouldn’t it? I’m nothing extraordinary. I’m as boring and normal as a human comes, aside from my apparent immunity to influence.

“You saw that little girl looking for her dog near your old house. May, that girl died in 1704. If you’d have looked closer, you’d have noticed how dated she looked. Harriet has been looking for her damn dog since 1704. In fact, she died after getting lost while doing so and stumbling into something she shouldn’t have.”

I swallow hard. My mind racing.

“Most humans cannot see wraiths like Harriet, let alone have a conversation with them like you did. When your brother was pushed into that old well, the man who did it was another being that a human should not be able to see. I think you have some sort of inhuman blood, maybe just a touch, but enough that you have the ability to see the things a human cannot and reject influence humans cannot.”

“Another being? How many are there? Are you about to tell me that werewolves exist or something?” I demand, noticing that I’m shaking.

Kade sighs and stops spinning his phone. “I’m scaring you. I’m sorry. I’m not used to speaking with humans about such matters. I was born into this world, so this is all normal to me. I apologize. But no, to answer your question, werewolves are not real.”

I sigh in relief. Thank god. “It’s alright, it’s just shocking to me. Two weeks ago, I didn’t even believe in the supernatural and now I am sitting across the table from one who thinks I may have inhuman blood. Do you drink? I need a glass of wine,” I rattle off and get up to grab some wine from the fridge.

Kade appears slightly concerned, his brows pinching together as he watches me pour myself a full glass of the red liquid.

“Just a little for me,” he requests. “I’m not much of a wine drinker.”

“Whiskey? I have whiskey too,” I offer.

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

“Is wine too girly for you or something?” I ask jokingly, attempting to lighten the mood

“No, no, I just prefer the hard stuff. Something I got from my father I suppose.” He starts spinning his phone again.

I reach into my newly assigned junk drawer. “Have you ever heard of a fidget spinner?” I ask him, a laugh about to escape me.

“A what? No. Why?” He seems oblivious to the fact that he’s going to make his cellphone puke at any moment.

I dig through the drawer until I find the three-dollar item I rashly bought when they were all the hype. “A fidget spinner. Your phone is getting dizzy. Try this.” I toss him the small metal device.

He catches it easily in one hand and then holds it in his palm, staring at it with one brow cocked. “What’s it for?”

“People like you. It’s not hard to figure out. Just play around with it,” I suggest and laugh lightly at his confusion. There’s no way that he hasn’t noticed he’s been spinning his phone for fifteen minutes.

I pull the whiskey from the cabinet above the sink and grab a glass from the cupboard. “What do you want me to mix it with? I just have cola, but I’ve seen some strange people use water, though I don’t know how they could possibly stand the taste.”

This causes Kade to laugh out loud. “I drink it plain. No mix.”

I stare at him in disbelief. I’ve seen people do it at bars and on tv but the thought of it makes me want to gag. How could that possibly be enjoyable?

“You’re wincing as if you’re in actual pain, May, it’s just whiskey. You get used to it after drinking it straight for many, many years,” he teases.

I pour him a full glass of straight whiskey. Won’t this knock him out? He stands and reaches for the glass I’ve poured him and places it in front of him.

We take our seats back at the table and have the first sips of our drinks. I watch Kade as he swallows, waiting for him to gag or show pain or distaste if any kind but he swallows it as if it’s only water and then takes a second swallow.

“You say you’ve been drinking it for many years. You only look to be around my age but I’m guessing you’re much older,” I observe casually, watching him fiddling with the spinner in his hands, trying to figure it out.

"Is that meant to be a statement or are you wondering my age?" he asks with amusement sparkling in his eyes. He doesn't give me the chance to answer. "I was born in England in 1715, making me over three hundred years old." He gauges my reaction again, looking weary like this is uncomfortable for him to admit to me.

"That's so...*old*," I say it before I can stop myself.

He chuckles. "Yes, from a human's perspective, that is old."

"You don't have an accent," I notice.

Kade takes a drink of his whiskey and then seems to relax a bit when he realizes that I'm not about to become overwhelmed a faint or something. He swishes the liquid around in his mouth before swallowing and saying, "I do, I just do everything in my power to anger my father. He doesn't like change and if he'd never been offered a position of such high power here in America, we'd never have come here. He very much dislikes this country. When he disowned me, I took every chance I could to piss him right off, including my most recent plot of dropping my accent, learning American slang and pop culture. He loathes it. It seriously infuriates him. I'm an embarrassment to him anyway. I'm basically just stirring the pot."

"But...you're banned from the community now and you've chosen to keep it up?" I ask in confusion. I could see how having your father disown you could lead to such behavior but why keep it up if it's not you? I imagine talking in a foreign accent all the time and can't imagine how annoying and tough it would be. Conversation should be thoughtless, not a chore.

"I doubt you'd be able to understand me very well if I didn't."

I cock a brow. "Sure, I will. It's still English," I argue. "Try me."

He relaxes a bit. "Modern Americans have told me I'm hard to understand. My accent is more than dated."

"I guess I'll just have to learn to understand it. Do you have trouble understanding me?" I wonder.

He purses his lips. "No, I've had a lot of time to get acquainted with the American accent."

"Say something," I push, clasping my hands together and leaning forward in my seat.

A silent, semi awkward moment passes between us before he grins wickedly. "What would you like me say?"

"I don't know, just say something. Like comment on the weather or something." Why is this so amusing to me?

"Err...the weather is a bit sunny but there are also a few clouds and it's a little chilly," he describes in his thick native accent as he stares out the kitchen window. His gaze seems to catch something and it takes a moment before he pulls himself back into the kitchen.

I lean back and look up at the roof, pretending I'm deep in thought. "Okay," I nod finally as if studying his words very carefully. "I can get used to that."

This causes him to chuckle. "Can you?"

I nod a few times while trying not to laugh. "I can."

"Do you always make normal situations so awkward?" Kade mutters teasingly and takes the last gulp of his drink before standing and collecting both of our glasses and taking them to the counter. "More wine for the lady?"

I nod. "Yes, to the wine and also yes to the awkwardness. Sorry." My halfhearted apology causing his lips to twitch.

He returns with a full glass of whiskey for himself and a glass of wine for me. "Are you hungry? I could order us something for supper."

Shrugging, I recall my gourmet supper. Cereal. "What do you have in mind?"

"What do you enjoy? Chinese? Pizza? I have no preference." He leans back in his chair with his arms crossed firmly at his chest.

I jump up and dig through my purse until I find the takeout pamphlets I keep in the front pocket. I toss them in front of him. "Me neither. Surprise me."

As he flips through the menus, I sip my wine and watch him while relaxing back in my chair. It's nice to be spending my first night in my new apartment with someone else as I'm not yet comfortable here. It doesn't feel like home.

With everything I've learnt about supernatural beings existing, living by myself is still not something I am completely comfortable with. Looking at Kade in front of me, a supernatural being himself, I realize how contradictory my two statements are. I don't want to be here alone because of my discomfort surrounding the existence of supernaturals but I feel safer with one staying with me.

"So, ghosts are real?" I interrupt his browsing.

He doesn't look up from the menu. "Wraiths. Humans who've passed from supernatural causes."

"And both Harriet and the man who killed my brother before he became Bryxx were wraiths?"

Kade glances up at me. "No. Harriet is a wraith. Wraiths have no physical influence on the living world. They cannot touch or move anything like in movies. The man who killed your brother was something else entirely."

Confused, I wait for him to continue but he doesn't. "What was he then?"

"I'd prefer you not know *everything* about my world. Not all supernatural beings are like the Bryxx who generally leave the average human alone for the most part. Some are not so kind. If you think the Bryxx are unfair and cruel, you will definitely not like the beings that the Bryxx build the heavily guarded walls to defend their race from."

"The wall and the guards aren't to protect the Bryxx from human discovery?" I wonder.

He shakes his head. "Humans are no threat to Bryxx. They're weak and easily manipulated through influence."

I swallow, not sure if I do want to know what could scare the Bryxx.

"How about this pizza?" he points to the all meat choice and I nod. He calls the number while I contemplate some of the things we've talked about so far.

I get so deep into my thoughts, that I barely hear him when he asks me if I'm alright. Gathering myself, I turn my attention from my spinning mind to the man before me. "Sorry, I was just thinking. I want to know more about the Bryxx. I don't really know much."

"I'm not sure what Daniel told you exactly but Bryxx are far stronger and faster than humans and they have far better hearing and reflexes. They're immortal. They live in communities throughout the world. They can only be killed three ways. Damage to the heart or the brain. The third option is the venom of one of their enemies that I wish not to go into detail about with you. What else?"

"I want to know about those enemies," I blurt. "If I don't find out, it'll bother me my entire life."

"If you do find out, it will turn your stomach and bother you all your life anyhow, May. Trust me." He picks up the fidget spinner again and fiddles with it.

I nibble on my bottom lip. "Tell me," I decide slowly. "I want to know." I'm not exactly sure why it is that I want to know. Maybe it's because I hate the unknown or maybe because I want to know the third way my brother could die for real. They say curiosity killed the cat, and maybe this will kill me somehow down the road.

Kade mutters something unintelligible. "I suppose that you may be able to see them like your brother could so maybe you do need to know about them. On the other hand, if you can't already see them, and I give you this information and you believe it, then you will for sure be able to see them, and if you can see them, they can harm you, May. They feed on the weak and the scared."

This sends a bone chilling thrill up my spine. They feed on the weak and scared? What kind of beings are these? Maybe I don't want to know after all. I shudder.

"That's what I thought," Kade says, almost sounding...*disappointed?*

We sit there staring at everything except each other until the doorbell rings and both of us jump up to get the pizza. I insist on paying but Kade hands the delivery woman cash before I can even pull out my wallet.

We both dig into the warm comfort food as if we're starving animals. I realize that I could've grabbed us plates but it's too late now, Kade doesn't seem to mind anyhow but he probably thinks I'm a slob the way I'm devouring the pizza. I've never really been lady-like.

I wash down my third piece of pizza with the remainder of my wine, the affects of it starting to creep in. I get up and pour myself one last glass, making mental note that I'm cut off. I don't want to be drunk while I have a guest. I don't want him to think I'm a total mess. Then I do the math. Kade has been downing straight hard liquor like water. He's had far more alcohol than I and he barely seems to be affected.

"Do you have some sort of super tolerance to alcohol? You've drank enough in the past hour to knock an elephant out," I tease.

"As an immortal, alcohol has no ill health affects on me and so since I can remember, I've drunk a lot of it, something I got from my father and his friends I suppose. I have a high tolerance but I'm not sure it's because I'm immortal or because I've conditioned myself to it over a long time."

Fair enough.

"Enough about me. Tell me about yourself," he turns the conversation around.

We spend the next near hour talking about me and my life and I eventually cave in and allow myself a couple more glasses of wine as I find myself becoming more comfortable with him.

Eventually we fall on the subject of my mother and her attempted murder on me years ago. I go quiet as I recall the events of that day. What got into her? She'd been fine merely hours earlier and then out of nowhere she tried to kill me. There were absolutely no signs. I wonder if it was wrong of me not to go visit her while she was in the psychiatric ward all those years. Sure, she tried to kill me, but she was still my mom. Should I have really let that one terrible incident affect our relationship so? She had a mental health problem, so can I really blame her? This is something that's had me torn since the incident.

"She was ill, and you were young. Don't beat yourself up over it. It wasn't your fault nor hers. It was tragic, but no one is to blame," he attempts to reassure me, but I still feel guilty. She's gone now, and I'll never be able to make amends or understand what went through her mind that day.

I wipe a tear from my cheek quickly before he can notice. "Maybe I was young, but I'm not anymore. Why couldn't I have gone to visit her four years ago? A year ago? Two months ago? Gone to her funeral?" I wonder if aunt Betty was right. Maybe I should've just sucked it up and attended her funeral.

"Something I've learnt in my life is that we can't dwell on our mistakes, we have to learn from them. If you feel that it was a mistake not going to see her, then you've learnt a life lesson. I can't say for sure whether that was a mistake or not. I never knew her, so I can't make that assumption only you can decide that. You're the only one who went through all of that."

It's now that I realize I've done exactly what I told myself I wasn't going to. I drank too much and now here I am tearing up in front of someone I barely know. How embarrassing. He probably thinks I'm a mess.

Kade stands and checks his phone before finishing the last swallow of his whiskey. He drank an entire bottle of whiskey in a matter of a few hours. Who does that? Alcoholics, but Kade barely seems phased by the alcohol.

I glance at the clock and realize that it's only nine in the evening.

"Do you know my brother very well?" I wonder.

Kade raises his eyebrows and shrugs as if he's unsure how to answer. "No. Not really. I was disowned by my father and most of the Bryxx community before he became Bryxx."

"Why were you disowned?" I wonder, hoping that I don't cross a line, but it's been bugging me since he mentioned as much.

Kade's expression becomes blank and he briefly turns his back to me. "I can't say."

"You can't, or you won't?" I push, knowing I'm in dangerous territory.

Kade begins walking towards the entryway and my heart rate quickens. Have I scared him off? What could be so bad that he won't even tell me?

"You don't have to tell me," I say quickly. "I'm sorry."

He stops and runs a tanned hand through his hair before turning back to me. "Some things I wish to keep private," he says finally, and I nod.

"Of course. I didn't realize it was such a touchy subject," I mutter. "Don't go. Please. Stay. I am heading to bed anyway. I'm tired," I lie. I actually just got my second wind.

He doesn't respond and so I get up and head to my new bedroom.



Chapter 6



I wake up feeling groggy, my head slightly pounding. I glance to the small amount of light seeping in through the blinds. It must be nearly eight in the morning, but I can't know for sure since my alarm clock has yet to be set up, and I left my phone in the kitchen last night.

Feeling gross, I jump in the shower in the bathroom adjoined to my room, an extra about my apartment that I love. I shower and brush my teeth before changing into fresh clothes, doing my hair, and applying makeup. I don't have many plans today besides finishing up a few odds and ends from the move yesterday.

By the time I exit my bedroom, I've nearly forgotten that I have a guest. I find Kade fast asleep on the pull-out bed of my couch without blankets. I forgot to get him blankets. You must be joking, May. Get it together. I suddenly feel bad and race back into the bedroom to grab some. I return with a fresh comforter and drape it over him carefully, so I don't wake him. I then quietly prepare myself a slice of toast. I drop the bread into the toaster and then slide the lever down slowly until it clicks, and the bread stays put.

"He couldn't care less about who you are," Kade mutters, surprising me.

I turn to face him but realize that he's still asleep. He's talking in his sleep.

"Tell him to screw off," Kade continues, sounding downright pissed off.

What kind of dream is the man having? It doesn't sound so pleasant.

My toast pops. I grab it and slather some butter on it. A rustle behind me causes me to turn in the sound's direction. I look at the couch. It's empty. What the hell?

"Good morning," a masculine voice mutters in my ear, startling me so bad that I drop my toast onto the floor and gasp. Kade stands right beside me, mere inches away.

His expression switches from content to apologetic. "I'm not used to being around humans. My apologies, May. I didn't mean to startle you."

I reach down to get my toast but before I can reach it, it's no longer on the floor. I glimpse up at Kade who tosses it into the trash. He then appears very guilty.

"I'm sorry...again. I'm not used to being around humans. Last night I was more with it I guess I've just become too comfortable around you," he only jokes but it makes me smile.

I want him to be himself around me. It's only fair. "No, it's okay. You just surprised me is all. I'm not used to being around immortals."

"Let me make you some new toast," he offers and makes sure his movements are slow on my scale as he grabs the bread.

"What are you doing for fun today?" I ask him and grab the broom to sweep up some of the crumbs.

Kade stares intently at the toaster. He is either studying himself in the reflection or he's deep in thought. The former is confirmed when I watch him fix his hair. I hold back a giggle.

"I'm not sure yet. I'm not used to having nothing to do to be honest. What are you doing today?"

"I was going to finish a few things around here and then I'm not sure," I admit. "I don't have anything planned."

"I was hoping I could find a hotel nearby here. I like this part of town," he tells me. "Do you have any suggestions? I don't know the area."

My toasts pop and I quickly pluck it from the toaster and drop it on the counter before it can burn me. Then I slather it in butter and take a bite before answering him. "What's your budget?"

He shrugs. "Whatever. I have the means."

"You really can stay here. I'd like it if you did. I'd like to hear about Daniel. I know you said you're not really friends but you probably at least know a little about him, don't you?" The hope in my voice is very apparent.

"Fine. One more night, but then I'm out of your hair," he resigns quickly and puts the butter back in the fridge for me.

Kade heads out to run some errands a few minutes later. Apparently, the community kicked him out without giving him time to collect any of his belongings, so he needs to get some essential things.

While he's out, I finish a few things around the house and put the finishing touches on the new place, personalizing it a bit with things like pictures and decor. When I'm done, I decide to take a walk of the building. It's nothing too crazy, just a cheap little building downtown, but there are a few amenities that I'd like to check out, including the gym in the basement.

I skip down the stairs two at a time in a fairly joyous mood all things considered and scan my keycard by the door. It clicks open and I enter the empty work out room. Treadmills line one wall and weights line another. Simple, small, but perfect. I hop onto one of the machines and fiddle with it until it turns on. Before I know it, I'm at a steady jog. It's been a while since I've ran so I take it slow. I always used to run when I needed to think about something, it isn't until now that I realize how much I've missed it.

I crank the speed up a tad and fiddle with the incline. When I look back up from the screen, my heart plunges into a tub of ice water. In the mirrored wall in front of me I see myself on the treadmill, but I also see someone standing directly behind me. A man about in his thirties with a bald head and squinty brown eyes. I didn't hear him come in and now he's watching my backside as I sprint.

I reach for the stop button on the treadmill but before I can hit it, I stumble and the speed of the treadmill sends me flying backwards and landing harshly onto my back on the ground, knocking the wind right out of me. Although I'm in pain, I force myself to flip over and scan the room as soon as I get my breath back. It's nearly knocked out from me a second time when I see the man standing over me with a devilish smile, a creepy, inhuman smile. I don't know what it is, but something in me screams that this man isn't human. *I know* he isn't. My suspicion is confirmed when he leans over me, his close-lipped smile changes to a toothy grin, or should I say fangy. He has actual fangs. Like a vampire would have. A vampire. Could they be real? I swallow hard as my heart rate increases rapidly.

The man closes in on me. "You shouldn't be all alone little girl. Where'd your body guard go?" I've been waiting for him to leave you alone."

"I don't have a body guard," I argue. "You have the wrong person."

His nose meets my neck and I struggle to get out from underneath him but he's far stronger than me. He sniffs me intensely. "I beg to differ, sweetie. You wreak of him."

I cringe away from him as much as I possibly can which unfortunately ends up only being millimeters.

"It'll hurt just a little," he murmurs into my ear, sending a prickling, cold chill down my spine for a second time.

Is this seriously happening? There can't possibly be a real vampire about to rip out my throat can there? No. This isn't real. There's no way. I try to convince myself that I'm hallucinating or something, but the fact is that now that I know that some supernatural beings exist, I can't help but believe that this is a real vampire.

This is confirmed when piercing pain radiates from my neck, then a pulling like I've never felt in my life causes my entire body to ache excruciatingly. I become paralyzed. I can't move. My vision wanes and blurs and the sound of him devouring my neck seems to dim until all I can hear is a dull buzzing. I am helpless. There's absolutely nothing that I can do. I'm going to die here. This is it.

That's my last thought before the weight on top of me disappears and I slowly begin to become aware of my surroundings again. I stare up at the roof, writhing in extreme pain. I expect the vampire to come back but I'm sure that I lie there for a full minute regaining control of my body. I finally manage to prop myself up a little. I'm extremely weak. It only took him a matter of ten seconds or less to cause this much damage, he could've easily just killed me. I look around and find the vampire slouched against a wall, blood streaming from his throat where it's been slit open, a thick patch of blood on his chest where I assume he's been stabbed in the heart. His eyes are open, but unblinking. I know he's dead.

A scream slips out of me as I'm suddenly lifted from the ground.

"Shh, May. It's only me," a familiar voice mutters soothingly in my ear and my fright eases slightly. It's Kade. He saved my life again. I can't help but lean into him for comfort and safety. I'm shaken to the bone. I can barely think. I feel paralyzed.

He carries me upstairs to my room and I'm thankful that no one is in the hall. He finds my keycard and lets us into my apartment where he rests me on my bed. "You're okay, May. You're going to be okay. Your heart rate is normal, a little fast but that's okay all things considered."

"You can hear my heart?" I ask of all things in that moment.

He smiles warmly. "Yes. How do you feel?"

"Cold, disgusting. It hurts. I can barely move," I explain frantically. I try to steady my breathing, but I can't. I'm hyperventilating.

He nods knowingly. "Alright. You need to rest and I'm going to get you some juice from the kitchen. It will help. What happened?"

"I was on the treadmill," I tell him. "He was in the mirror and I fell and then he...he bit me. He was a... He was a..." I can't seem to say the word out loud. Tears stream down my cheeks.

"He was a vampire. Yes. I took care of him. You're safe now," Kade soothes me, sitting on the edge of my bed.

"You killed him," I accuse, not sure why that fact bothers me. The thing was going to kill me, was it not?

"I had to. He had it coming," he says vehemently.

"I know but someone will find him," I warn him frantically, sure that the cops will be at my door any second.

"No. They won't. He is dirt by now. They don't last long after they've died. You don't have to worry about that."

I take a deep breath, starting to gain movement back. "I think he was waiting for you to leave, for me to be all alone before he came for me. What did it want from me?"

Kade seems to regret leaving me. His face is not the warm expression it usually is when he's around me, instead he looks mad, sad even. His brows are pinched, his forehead wrinkled. "I'm sorry. I didn't know there was a vampire nearby or I never would've left you."

"Don't apologize. It's not your fault," I assure him and close my eyes for a minute.

"May I help your neck heal?" he asks worriedly. "It won't hurt or anything. It will only help you heal. It'll save you a lot of pain over the next few days."

I am unsure how to respond but I know he would never hurt me. He's saved my life twice. I nod.

"It might seem gross to a human," he warns me. "I have to feed you a little bit of my blood. Just a little, a couple drops is all. It'll make you feel better."

I hesitate.

"Not nearly enough to make you like me or anything like that. I just want to heal your wound. It looks like it hurts. Your body will do the rest." His voice is shaky like he's beyond nervous.

My neck burns like someone's poured acid on my wound and the pain is only escalating.

“It won’t hurt. It’ll help, May. I promise. I’d never hurt you. The pain from the bite is only going to get worse for the next few hours. Vampires can inject venom to incapacitate their victims. You have venom on your neck. I can smell it. If it gets into your bloodstream, it’ll get much worse.”

As he speaks I find myself unable to comprehend what he’s saying. My skin is on fire where I’ve been bitten, and the fire seems to be spreading rapidly. I trust Kade. He’s saved my life twice. Not able to take it any longer, I nod, giving him permission.

He then digs his thumb nail into his wrist without even wincing and blood begins to pool where he presses. He lifts his wrist over my mouth and the salty liquid hits my tongue. The thought of it makes me gag but my body doesn’t let me actually throw up, it’s too focused on the pain. Only seconds after the blood hits my tongue, the pain completely disappears and I find myself experiencing a strange tingle over my skin, specifically where I was bitten. It’s almost an itchy feeling.

Kade quickly pulls away his wrist and then brushes my hair back from my neck. “Its healing.”

“You couldn’t have done that after my car accident?” I wonder in disbelief.

He shakes his head. “You needed more than a few drops and I wasn’t sure how that would affect a human. I didn’t know if it would make you better or worse, so I took you to Clarissa. She knows all about that kind of stuff. She knew how much you could have before it got dangerous.”

“But if I was going to die anyway...” I remind him.

He sighs harshly. “May, some fates are worse than death. I didn’t want to make you like me by accident.”

“You’d rather me die?” I ask abruptly, my forehead wrinkling.

He nods without even having to think about it. “No doubt about it.”

“But Daniel...” I trail off. I realize that I don’t know if Daniel would’ve rather died than become Bryxx. He wasn’t given the choice.

“It was not Kai’s decision to make, but he was young, and he didn’t know what to do. He didn’t want to lose his friend. Anyway, that was different. You need to rest. We will talk later, May. I’ll be in the living room.” With that, Kade leaves the bedroom swiftly, closing the door behind him before I can argue. How was Daniel’s situation any different than mine?

I find it impossible to rest after coming face to face with death, so I lie in bed and contemplate my life. It’s changed so much in such a short time. A few weeks ago, I didn’t know supernatural beings even existed and now my brother is one and I’ve become friends with one, one who is currently in my home.

I eventually drift to sleep somehow, probably from all the blood loss. I wonder just how much I lost. I wake up to darkness. I’ve slept all afternoon and into the evening, but it’s felt only like minutes. I cautiously raise a hand to my neck and feel for two holes or at the very least two scabs. I find nothing. It’s as if nothing happened. The fact that a mere drop or two of Kade’s blood healed me that significantly shows just how potent his blood is, how strong he is. I can’t help but wonder how fast he heals.

I get out of bed and find Kade sitting at the table fiddling with his phone. I can’t tell if he’s texting or playing a game or what but he seems entranced by whatever it is. Does he even know that I’m up? Surely. He has super hearing after all, right?

An amused smile sneaking onto my face, I lick my lips before whispering in as quiet a voice I can manage, “What are you doing?”

Kade carefully sets his phone down on the table and twists in his chair to see me. “I was just passing time with a game.” He cracks a grin. “How was your rest?”

“Good actually. Kade...I want to know about vampires,” I state bluntly. “I’m not going to be able to sleep again without knowing more about them. What kind of a coincidence is it that I go over twenty years without ever coming into contact with one and then merely two weeks after I find out that supernaturals exist, one tries to kill me?”

"It's not a coincidence at all," Kade confirms my suspicion. "I killed that vampire's maker years ago. I haven't seen a sign of him in over two decades. I thought someone had killed him. He's wanted me dead for almost fifty years. I had no idea he followed me to Seattle. He must've been waiting for me to leave the community. I'm so sorry, May. I nearly got you killed. A friend for a friend I guess is what he was going for." Kade rests his head in his hands tensely. "He wasn't after you for any reason but to anger me."

"Wait wait," I stop him. "You killed someone?"

He nods. "Many things, May. Only supernaturals and only the bad ones," he assures me. He bites his bottom lip.

I decide to come back to this. How can I be disturbed by him killing monsters like the one who attacked me? "And you haven't left the community in the last twenty years? Is that what you're saying?"

He shrugs, his face pinched. "No, I have. Just not alone."

As he tells me this, something dark passes across his face.

"It's alright, Kade. It was an accident. You had no way of knowing." I rest my palm on his back. "Tell me about vampires," I insist once more.

He cringes away from my words and stands. "Can we do this another time?" he asks, still nibbling his bottom lip.

"I was almost killed for a second time this month, this time by a mythical creature. I want answers." I can't help it. I begin pacing. I can't stand still.

Kade remains quiet for what must be nearly an entire minute before he, too, stands. He places his palms on the back of the wooden chair, using it for support. He faces me and nods. "Vampires are creatures that are controlled by bloodlust and instinct to kill. They're inhuman monsters with no ability to love or emotionally care for others. The only people they respect are their makers because of this thing called a sire bond that happens sometimes which links them to each other. What more do you want to know?" I stop pacing but he begins to do his own laps around the kitchen.

"Are there lots? How are they made? Can they go out in daylight?" I rattle off then slow down so he can keep up. Shut up, May, you're acting insane. I mentally slap myself, attempting to give myself a reality check.

He grimaces. "Yes, they can go out into the daylight, that's a myth. There are only a couple hundred in America as far as I know. They're made when a human or Bryxx consumes a certain amount of a vampire's blood. Depending on the amount consumed, they'll either die on the spot and come back or will fall ill and slowly die then come back. Vampires are one of the groups of demons that the Bryxx build their communities to protect against-" he discontinues abruptly and clenches his jaw. He told me yesterday that he wasn't going to tell me much about what the Bryxx built their heavily guarded communities to protect.

"I will say no more as it isn't safe for you as I told you yesterday. Unless you choose to carry the burden of that knowledge, I won't share it," he finishes off. "I suggest you stay ignorant."

Kade's attention flashes to the front door and he seems as if he's straining to concentrate on something. The only thing I can think of is that he's heard something with his advanced hearing.

"You okay?" I ask after a minute of waiting.

He doesn't seem to hear me. He continues to stare at the door until the doorbell rings. He looks to me. "Are you expecting someone?" he asks extremely quietly. "A man?"

I shake my head. "No. I-" I'm about to tell him I don't know any men to whom I've given my new address, but he presses a finger to his lips to shush me and then holds his hand up, palm facing me in the universal sign to stop.

I watch him skeptically, my heart fluttering. What is he so concerned about that he won't even let me open my own front door? Then I recall that I was just attacked by a vampire today and he's probably just being cautious. He walks to the door and looks through the peephole before taking two steps back from the door and motioning for me to go into my room. Trusting him, I do as he asks but I leave the bedroom door cracked open, so I can see what's going on. Kade opens the front door but leaves the chain on. Before he can even greet the person at the door, I watch Kade

speed backwards a few steps so fast that all I see is a blur. As he backs up, the door crashes inward so hard that I hear it bang against the wall. So much for getting my damage deposit back, not that that is my biggest worry currently as I watch an equally as fast blur enter the room and run smack into Kade, sending him flying into my kitchen table and cracking a leg off.

In complete shock, knowing that I'd be useless about now and would just get in the way, I stay where I am, unblinking. I watch as the two men push each other around violently.

Finally, after a few seconds Kade gets the upper hand and crouches on top of the other man while holding a knife to his throat. "Who are you?" Kade demands in a deep, commanding tone.

The man spits in his face and Kade sends the knife placed at his throat through the man's left hand and into the floor before reaching into his pocket, pulling out a second knife and placing it at his throat.

The man on the floor barely even winces. "John Taylor. You killed my sire you piece of shit!"

"How many more of you are there?" Kade demands in an even tone, the question obviously rhetoric. "I thought sire bonds were rare."

"Do you even know how many vampires you've killed?"

"A lot. Hundreds." Kade answers not sounding disturbed at all by the death count. "They all had it coming."

"I wouldn't expect I be the last one to track you down. Rumor spreads fast that you're no longer under Bryxx protection. One of us will get the final jump on you."

Kade doesn't seem phased by the man's words. He simply plunges the knife deep into the man's heart and then back out again before standing up and wiping his hands on his jeans. Then he walks casually to the front door and closes it, turning the dead bolt. By the time my gaze flickers from him back to the dead vampire on my floor, the body is gone. There's nothing even left in its spot. No blood, no bones, no dirt, nothing. Kade was right when he said that they don't last long.

Kade stands in front of the bedroom door, his expression flat. "It appears I've stirred more trouble up than I thought over the last few years, and I seem to have brought it right to your doorstep... Literally." The hard look in his eyes bores right through me and something in me tells me that this isn't good, not at all.



Chapter 7



Three days later, Kade and I leave the house for the first time after not having any more incidents at the house. Kade paid for the damage to my apartment even after I told him I would pay for it. We take a long walk down to a restaurant eight blocks away and enjoy lunch before walking back to the apartment and playing a game of cards. We haven't spoken much about either incident but Kade has decided that although he's saved my life twice, he's also put my life in danger twice, so he thinks we should call it even. I'm not so sure, though.

"You've been alive a long time and you seem to have money, have you travelled the world?" I ask him while flipping through a travel magazine that was at my door this morning. The subscriber must've forgotten to change their address when they moved.

Kade peaks over my shoulder while drying a dish with a tea towel. "Nope. I've been a few places, but I wouldn't say I've travelled the world. I'm not much of a traveler. I go back to England now and again but that's about it." He tosses the towel over his shoulder and turns back to put the dish away. "It's been a while since I've even been there. A long while actually. Do you like to travel?" he asks flippantly while tossing a cracker in the air and catching it flawlessly with his mouth.

I shrug. "I've never left America. I'd like to one day, but I'm not sure where I'd go. I'll never have the money to travel the entire world," I inform him and flip the page. A stunning view of the Canadian Rockies takes up both pages.

"You know, I have lots of money. I could help you travel..." he mutters, probably knowing I'd never accept the far too generous offer.

I chuckle. "I'm already indebted to you enough," I remind him. "How would I ever pay you back for something like that?"

"You wouldn't have to pay me back, but if you really wanted to do something in return, you could let me tag along with you," he offers, sounding unsure.

"You just said you weren't interested in travelling," I scoff and flip another page. A splendid picture of Mayan ruins.

Kade takes a seat across the table from me and rests his arms at his chest. "It's not the travelling I'm interested in. It's spending time with you."

I can't help but grin. The more time I spend with Kade, the more he seems to become comfortable with me and open. "I have to work to pay for my apartment and bills." I can't tell if he's serious or not about his offer. At first, I thought he was joking but the way he's looking at me now. I think he might just be serious.

"I'll cover it. I have *a lot* of money that I'll never be able to use in my lifetime. Let's do something crazy." He seems way too excited, like he's seriously considering this. "Let's do it, May. What do we have to lose? We're both basically without family, we don't have much going for us right now. You just told me this morning how much you loathe your job. Let's go."

"I can't just drop everything and take off travelling," I argue. "That's crazy."

"Exactly! It's crazy! It'll be fun. An adventure. I'd like to get to know you better, and I think this would be a fun way to go about it. Let's do it," he urges and jumps up from his spot at the table. "Tomorrow you can hand in your notice, and we will go."

I gape. I can't just take off like that...*can I?* I'm not going to lie; the thought is enticing. I'd love to travel, and travelling with Kade doesn't seem so bad. I feel safe and comfortable with him, maybe even a bit attracted to him if I'm being honest. Then again, who wouldn't be attracted to him? I can't help but imagine Jane's expression when she opened the door to him at her apartment. He's the type she'd swoon over, boyfriend or not. Don't get me wrong, she loves Darrel, but she still likes to look.

"You're thinking about it," he observes and bites his bottom lip. "Come on. Live a little. Your human life is too short to spend working a job you hate, being broke, alone, and not being happy with your life. Don't you want to travel?"

I nod. "Of course, I do. I just told you that."

"And you don't seem to mind spending time with me." It's a statement but it sounds more like a question.

"I like you. You're good company," I reply easily.

His slight smile turns into a wicked grin. "You like me? I like you, too," he says in a strange tone I can't place, one that makes my heart flutter for no apparent reason at all. He sits back down at the table and rests an elbow on it, his chin in his palm. "How much do you like me? Enough that you'll drop everything and travel with me?"

I eye him dubiously. "I've only spent a few days with you, so I can't be sure. Can we do a trial? I'll take five days off work and maybe we can start with a trial run," I say slyly, teasing him. "I'm not sure I like you enough to travel the whole world with you yet. I think we should take it a day at a time. You never know when I might get sick of you."

This only humors him further and his grin becomes impossibly larger before turning into an arrogant smirk. "I'm kind of hurt. Here I thought we were becoming the best of friends."

I shy away from his steady gaze and look down at my travel magazine. I flip back to the page with the beautiful mountain range and then slide it across the table to him. "How do you feel about going here?"

"Sweden?" Kade asks and pulls the magazine closer.

"No, Canada. It's only a day's drive or so away. It'll be our test trip. I'll take a few days off and we will give it a shot," I suggest.

He looks from the magazine to me then back to the magazine before resting against the back of his chair. "Alright, sure. A test trip. If this works out and we don't get sick of each other, we keep travelling. Deal?"

I nod. "Deal."

"I bet you don't have a passport though, May," he rises and pulls out his phone, punching in a number.

"No, I don't. How long do you think it will take to get one?" I wonder, having no idea.

"Hey, Tyson, it's Kade here. I need a US passport done up for a friend as soon as possible." He smiles at me and waggles his brows before he walks from the room.

Is he getting me a forged passport? I'm no genius, but last I checked, you couldn't just call and order a passport over the phone. My eyes widen and my heart slams against my ribs. You can get in *serious* trouble for that kind of stuff. I follow him into my bedroom where he pulls my driver's license from my wallet and begins rambling off information to the guy on the phone. I motion for him to stop by slicing a finger across my throat. He just grins and continues his conversation before hanging up and replacing my license.

"What?" he asks incredulously.

"Do you even know how illegal that is?" I blurt. "You can get major jail time for that!"

Kade rolls his eyes. "If anyone suspects it's fake I'll charm them with my compulsion. It's just for show so the other passengers and the cameras see us use it. I can't charm an entire airport."

He can't be serious. "You sound like you've done this before."

He nods briefly. "Bryxx communities don't exist to humans. We aren't registered. We don't pay taxes or insurance or anything like that. We're undocumented. If we need something we forge it. Tyson is a Bryxx from another community, one near Seattle. I used him for some other documents when I got kicked out of my community and needed

documents to blend into the human world better. He is unaware that I'm banished since it takes quite the time for news to travel between communities due to lack of modern technology. The older Bryxx, including the council and anyone of status disregard most technology."

"Oh my god, I'm a criminal," I groan and rest my head in my palm.

Kade ignores me and returns to the kitchen. I follow. "It'll be ready this afternoon. I'll meet him in a nearby cafe and pick it up. You have to stay here or he'll know you're not Bryxx and he won't give me it."

"Doesn't he need a picture of me?" I ask.

"Yes. He will use a fake one. They don't look much at the pictures anyway and if they do, well, we already discussed this. When I'm gone to fetch it, don't answer the door and keep it locked. Hopefully you can stay out of trouble for ten minutes or so."

Being alone after what happened last time, doesn't exactly sound like a good idea.

"I'll just be a block away and I'll sense if anything is off, alright?" he asks and lounges on the couch. "You'll be safe."

I'm not so sure but I keep my mouth shut because I don't know how to respond.

That afternoon when Kade takes off to the cafe to meet up with Tyson, I lock the doorknob, dead bolt, and put the chain on the door, though I'm not so sure that this will keep a super strong supernatural from breaking it down. Why did I go along with this? Surely, he can't sense a supernatural from a whole block away, can he? I realize that I don't know the extent of his special abilities. Maybe he can. I peek out the blinds and look out at the street. Everyone out there seems normal enough to me, but what do I know? I close the blinds and use the washroom before opening the search engine on my phone and searching 'Bryxx'. Nothing of use comes up. So, I instead search 'vampire' which brings up lots of results but after sorting through them, I come to the conclusion that most are useless. I only find a handful of promising ones. I click on the first, but it tells me nothing I don't already know from movies and tv, so I click the second, then third. By the time I open then fourth page, I hear Kade call through the heavily locked door.

"I'm back, May!" he shouts, and I race to the door and let him in. He hands me my forged passport. I open it and can't believe how real it appears. The picture is a bit off, but Kade claims that's not a big deal so I shrug it off. I better not get arrested for this or something.

Kade flicks the tv off and points to my bedroom. "You packed? We're leaving for the airport in an hour. Flights are booked. We're flying into Calgary, Alberta late tonight."

Tonight? I freeze for a moment. I haven't even taken off work. I'm supposed to work a night shift tonight. "I have work," I inform him. "I can't just up and leave."

He rolls his eyes. "We'll stop by your work and I'll tell the guy that he gave you the week off."

"But then he will be short staffed," I argue.

Kade shrugs. "It's a gas station. What's the worst that can happen? Live a little. You deserve it. Do you want to see the mountains or not? Plus, you told me that the guy's a complete dick."

I give in. I hate my job, I hate my boss, and I really do want to go on vacation. "Fine."

We head to my bedroom and I pull out my suitcase and place it on my bed. He sits on my bed and watches as I throw things into it as fast as I can. I pack the bare minimum as it's all I need and then I zip it up and lift it to the ground, it's quite heavy despite only packing the essentials, so I'm more than glad that it has wheels. Just as we're about to leave the bedroom, a loud smash and the sound of breaking glass hitting the floor comes from the living room. Wide eyed, I look to Kade for explanation, but he's no longer beside me or even in the room. What the hell?

I race into the living room, leaving my suitcase behind. Kade tackles a white man dressed in all black as a second man springs through the window and his gaze lands directly on me. Before I have the chance to react, I'm pinned against a wall, unable to move as the second man, looking bored, holds a knife to my neck. I can't breathe. My mind and my lungs seemingly refuse to communicate with each other.

“Kade!” I choke out.

“He’s a little busy, love,” the man in front of me says, his hot, disgusting breath invading my nostrils. I cringe away, and an unintelligible whining sound escapes me. I’m going to freaking die here. Just as I think that, the man is ripped away from me and I slump to the floor, limp with pure fright. I can’t help but recall my encounter with the vampire. Are these men vampires, too?

I watch as Kade slashes the second man’s throat. The disturbing sight causes me to dry heave as the man’s blood pours onto my living room floor. My gaze flicks to the first man who is being held to my wall next to the busted window with five knives stuck through his body and into the drywall. He, too is still alive and staring right at me. I wish I could do something other than cower in fear, but I can’t. I refuse to look back at the man with the cut throat in fear I’ll faint or vomit.

“Tell me why you’re here and I’ll think about letting you live,” Kade shouts in a disgusted tone.

The man with the bleeding throat attempts to speak but all I can hear is the gurgle of his blood in his throat and then a disturbing coughing as he drowns in his own blood. The other man, the one pinned to the wall, snarls, “You can kill us, but more will come for you. You’re a dead man. You don’t deserve to live.”

I glance to Kade who stands between the two men. His expression confuses me. He appears not angry, but saddened, like the man’s words hurt him, though I can’t understand why or how. Then, his sadness is replaced by rage as he lunges at the man speaking and I look away, knowing what’s coming. I hear the most sickening sound I’ve ever heard, and I begin to cry uncontrollably.

I don’t know how much time passes but I awaken tucked in in my bed. Did I faint?

“You’re awake,” Kade mutters sounding emotionless. “How do you feel?”

I don’t even know how I feel. There are too many emotions flooding me. I see him sitting on the other side of the bed, dressed in new, clean, unripped, bloodless clothes. He reaches toward me, but I instinctively cower away. He quickly returns his hand to his side. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have had to see that. I can’t believe I’ve brought all this to you.”

I don’t respond. I can’t.

“No human should ever have to witness anything like that. They should never have to be involved in anything like that,” he mutters, I almost think he’s speaking to himself.

I notice I’m shivering and I bite my lip, hoping the pain will overwhelm me enough to take away the fear and disgust I feel. I know that Kade did what he had to to keep him and myself safe, but the fact that he is capable of such terrible, disturbing acts is gut wrenching. I suddenly feel nauseated again. I can’t help hearing that terrible sound of him killing that man just before I fainted.

“I’m so sorry, May. I should’ve never come to you after I was banished. I really fucked up.” He drops his head into his hands. “And now I’ve dragged you into my mess, put you in danger. They know who you are and where you live and what you are to me, so I can’t leave. You’re stuck with me, an asshole who deserves hell, indefinitely, because I’m an idiot.” He shakes his head and rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands. He’s so disgruntled that it pains me to watch him. He really does feel terrible for coming into my life.

The thing is, although I have to admit that watching him do those things to those men disturbed me greatly, it also made me feel protected in some weird way. Although he’s the reason they were here in the first place, he’s also the reason I’m still alive. I just don’t know how to feel at all. The rush of emotions causes me to begin to cry. I try to hide it from Kade, though I don’t know why. He’s already seen me cry, faint, scream.

“May...” he murmurs as a sob escapes me. His eyes meet mine and I swear I see pain in his gaze, like he’s in pain because he knows he’s a large part of the reason I am crying now. He starts to reach out a hand to me, but then recoils, unsure.

I instinctively reach and grab his hand, grasping it in mine. He's the only person who knows what I'm going through, understands where I come from, and what I've come understand in the last few weeks, he's the only one who can comfort me, even if he's part of the reason I need comforting.

He squeezes my hand in his and lets me cry, without saying a single word for hours. When he finally speaks, the sun is coming up, it's already the beginning of a new day. I've run out of tears and instead I lay in silence. "I know you know that I can't leave you, it wouldn't be safe, but I can give you space I can rent that open apartment down the hall if you want."

I swallow and sigh. I don't fear Kade. I fear those supernaturals that keep coming after us. I know I need his protection and after staying up all night and morning thinking about the situation, I've come to a conclusion. Kade did what he had to. Kade is not human. This is his life, and my brother's life. I can either accept this or I can be uncomfortable with the only friend who gets my life right now, the man who's saved my life a handful of times even if some of those times were his fault. The truth is, I trust Kade. He did those terrible things to protect me. I really have no reason to not trust him or to be scared of him. I know he'd never hurt me. Those men were going to hurt us. He was defending us.

"Please stay," I say through a sob. "I need you to stay here. I don't want to be alone." I take a deep breath. "I trust you. I just...it was a lot, you know?"

After a pause he says, "I know. It's not something you see every day. As a human, you shouldn't have to ever experience anything like that."

"You're right, but I think we both know that although I am human, my circumstances are not ordinary. My life is involved in the supernatural no matter what. My brother is Bryxx, you're Bryxx and now there are other...things after me and you. It's too late to be an ordinary human, Kade. It's too late. This is my life and I have to get used to it," I decide with a sigh and finally sit up. It's true. I have to get used to it. This is my life now. If Kade has killed over one hundred vampires, then how many more must be pissed off enough to kill us? There's already be more than a few in the last few days alone and they seem to want me dead as much as they want him dead, maybe even more so. Even if they did stop coming one day, how am I supposed to sleep knowing that one could literally kill me before I even have the chance to blink?

We stare at each other without saying anything for what feels like an hour before he finally nods. "I dragged you into this, and I promise you that I will protect you with my life... Daniel is going to kill me and skin me alive." Kade doesn't appear worried when he mutters the last remark, but he does sound apologetic.

Maybe it's just who I am, but I immediately begin feeling bad that he has to protect me like I'm some fragile piece of glass even if it *is* his fault. This isn't just shit for me, but shit for him too. I'm sure he has better things to do with his life than babysit my helpless ass.

"So much for our vacation," I murmur to myself, rubbing my sore eyes.

Kade appears deep in thought, not paying attention to me. Part of me fears that his super hearing is picking up something and I begin to panic.

"What?" I demand and clutch his hand. "More?"

"More?... No, *no*," he answers swiftly and jumps from the bed slowly. "Sorry, I was just uh...daydreaming. There's a lot on my mind."

I relax back into the bed.

"Me, too. I feel like a livewire. I'm all flinchy and agitated, alert," I confess and get out of bed, stretching my stiff limbs. "And hungry."

He moves away from the bed faster than my slow senses can take in. "Let me make you something. You relax."

“No, no I have to do something or I’m going to go crazy.” I pull on a purple sweater from my dresser. “I need to take my mind off of this. Will you come with me to Jane’s today? I’ll introduce you two formally and we can bring lunch to her place. I need to get my mind off this or I’ll think about it all day.”

“Of course.” He answers nearly before I’ve even finished speaking.

I look at him funny but brush it off and pour myself a glass of milk before microwaving some instant oatmeal.

Later that afternoon, after Jane hasn’t responded to my texts and calls for hours, we decide to just head over there, figuring she has been lost in her books studying for her master’s degree or busy at work or school. When we get to her apartment, though, it’s clear that isn’t the case. Police tape is stretched across her door which is in shambles. It looks as though a bull has ran through it. I stop dead in my tracks, but Kade approaches the door and knocks. To my surprise it opens to reveal a bald officer with a badge that says ‘Arnold’.

Kade takes the lead as I can’t even muster a word. “What happened here?”

“I can’t share any information with you at this time, sir,” the officer says, sounding bored. Kade clearly isn’t the first person to have asked this question.

“What happened here?” Kade demands in an ‘I’m out of patience tone’, very clearly using his persuasion ability.

The officers face changes from impatient to relaxed. “A young lady was murdered here last night. We’re still investigating but the body was in pretty rough shape. Looked as though a wild animal got ahold of it.”

I stand frozen in place, not believing a word I’m hearing. Jane, my best friend, was murdered last night?

“Has her boyfriend been notified, her family?” I ask quickly, and the officer turns to me, his mouth turning into a thin-lipped frown.

“Has her boyfriend or her family been notified?” Kade asks using his persuasion.

Officer Arnold’s frown becomes an unemotional line and he answers, “Her boyfriend has been notified but we were unable to locate any family members. In fact, her name is untraceable. We only found her boyfriend’s number through the call history on her cell phone. Not a single contact programmed into her phone, just three numbers on the recently dialed page.”

This strikes me as strange. Jane always talked about her younger sister and brother and why wouldn’t she have names on her phone contacts? Was someone stalking her or something?

Kade grimaces before turning to me. “Do you have her boyfriend’s phone number?”

I nod. “Yeah, of course.”

“Bring me her phone,” Kade demands and the officer leaves our sight for a moment before returning with a phone in plastic bag. Kade takes it from him. “We were never here. Have a nice day.”

The officer nods and turns to get back to work.

“You can’t just take that!” I whisper harshly to Kade in shock.

“I just did. Do you recognize this phone?” he asks, changing the subject. He pulls it from the bag and looks it over. It’s a black flip phone. One of those things no one has used in over a decade. Jane’s phone was far more modern than that dinosaur. She wouldn’t be caught dead with that thing. I shake my head. “I’ve never seen that phone.”

Kade opens it and pushes a few buttons before pressing it to his ear.

“What are you doing?” I wail and try to jerk the phone from him, thawing from my frozen position of shock. Tampering with crime scene evidence is far from a smart idea.

He presses a finger to his lips to shush me. He’s far too tall and far too strong for me to snatch the phone from, and I definitely don’t want my finger print on that thing, so I give in and listen when he answers someone on the other line.

“Good evening. This is officer Brennon. From my understanding you’ve spoken to another officer recently, correct?” A beat of silence. “No, nothing further in the investigation. I just wanted to clear a few things up for our records. What was the relation of you and the deceased?”

I wait eagerly, not able to hear the person on the other line.

“Right. That’s what I have written down here. So, you didn’t know her well then?”

Kade continues to chat with the person on the other line before continuing with the next two numbers, giving them the same grilling. I tune it out as a bazillion thoughts race through my mind. Is Jane’s death my fault? Did a vampire track Kade to her doorstep?

“May, are you ready to head home? You need to rest,” Kade urges, startling me. When I don’t move from the bench I sit on outside the apartment complex, he lifts me up into his arms as if I’m a small child. I don’t fight him. For heaven sakes my best friend is dead, and my life is in shambles. If he wants to carry me, so be it.

When we get home I finally fish out my phone and search through my contacts. I press Darrel, Jane’s boyfriend and hover over his number. Kade watches me.

“The third number was Darrel’s,” Kade tells me. “He said Jane had no family. No brothers, sisters, aunts, parents, uncles, cousins, nothing.”

“She always talked about her brother and sister. I know she had family,” I reply in confusion. Darrel would know that. He had to have.

“What reason would Darrel have to lie?” Kade asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know I’m really confused.”

Kade seems to be in the same boat.

“I have to call him,” I whisper. “He’s a good friend and I owe it to Jane to make sure he’s alright.”

Kade nods and I hesitate over his contact on my phone before counting to three and pressing it with my thumb. I wait a second before moving my phone’s speaker up to my ear.

“Hello,” Darrel mutters into the phone.

“Hey, Darrel, it’s May. I just got the news,” I inform him and now I feel the waterworks coming on. Apparently, my shock decided not to last too long. Maybe I’m shocked out after everything that has happened lately.

Darrel takes a moment before replying, “Oh, May. I’m sorry, I should’ve called you, but I’ve been...I’ve been at the police station and the coroners, and I just haven’t been able to work up the courage.”

Something in Darrel’s tone is off, but I can’t place what it is.

“I’m so sorry. I know she was my friend, but you were her boyfriend,” I say through a snuffle.

He sighs. “I just can’t believe it, you know?”

“Me neither.” I sigh and wipe a tear from my cheek. “Has her family been informed?” I mutter. “The officer I ran into at her apartment wouldn’t tell me much.” Not a lie technically.

“Yeah, I got ahold of them. They don’t want to have a funeral or anything elaborate.”

I can’t help but think that Jane would’ve loved to have a fancy funeral, but I keep my mouth shut. If her family and her boyfriend think it’s best, then they’re probably right.

We sit in silence over the phone for what must be nearly five minutes before he says, “Look, I have to get going. I have a doctor’s appointment.”

“Oh, yeah, okay, right,” I ramble. “Uh, keep me updated and again, I’m really sorry.”

“Yeah, me too, bye, May,” he murmurs before hanging up.

Kade stares at me appearing dumbfounded which is exactly how I feel. With Kade having super hearing he’s probably heard the entirety of the conversation. “Did he just say he had a doctor’s appointment?” Kade asks skeptically as if he doesn’t trust his own ears.

I nod slowly.

Kade cocks a brow. “The day after his girlfriend was murdered?”

I continue nodding slowly.

Kade seems as confused by this as I am.

“Maybe he’s in denial?” I suggest with a shrug.

Kade scowls. “That’s just plain strange. He also mentioned that she does have family.” He purses his lips and looks at me straight in the eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“How well do you know this guy?”

I shrug. “Fairly well he’s been with Jane as long as I’ve known her, basically since senior year I guess.”

“Do you trust him?” Kade wonders next.

I nod. “Yeah, He’s a good friend but I have to admit that he’s acting strange.”

Kade continues to eye me but it’s as if he’s staring straight through me, thinking about something else.

“You don’t think he had something to do with it, do you?” I ask, but if I’m being honest, I’m actually asking myself this. As soon as I say it out loud, I gape at my own words. I know how deeply in love they were. He’d never hurt her.

“I don’t know what to think, but I think something about the guy is off. I have access to police records and shit. Can you write down his and Jane’s first and last names as well as anything you know about them that could help me search for them like birth places, birthdates, anything like that?” he asks of me and pulls out a laptop from small, slowly growing number of things to his name.

“You have access to police records? How? Isn’t that illegal?” I ask as I watch him open his laptop and take a seat at the table.

“Yeah. Comes in handy for us immortals sometimes. It’s a good skill to have so I got one of my dad’s computer guys to teach me in exchange for sparring lessons.”

I decide to brush this off. This is one of the least biggest concerns on my mind right now. “What do you think you’ll find?”

“Maybe nothing. Maybe something. I don’t know but it can’t hurt to look. Write that stuff down and try to get some sleep. You’ve had a rough couple of days and barely any sleep.”

“I can’t sleep after all this,” I argue. “Why are you doing all this work? Why don’t you get some rest too?”

“I don’t need much rest. Anyway, I’m doing this so we can figure out what happened to Jane. Those human officers are next to useless. They’re incompetent.”

“Why do you care what happened to Jane?”

He appears confused. “She was your friend.”

“So?”

“I care about *you*,” Kade says as if it’s obvious. “So, I want to help you find closure.”

I turn my attention to the paper and pen next to the fridge and jot down the information for Kade before handing it to him and sitting next to him.

“Thanks. May, you really need to rest. If you don’t go lie down, I’m going to use persuasion on you.”

My eyes widen. “You wouldn’t even if it worked on me. Not without my permission.”

“Try me,” he mutters while typing quickly and staring at his laptop. “Maybe this time, since you’re so worn out, it will work. Don’t tempt me.” He seems too concerned about me, like I could break at any moment. Maybe he has a right to be concerned.

I sigh. I *am* exhausted.

“Sleep, we will talk about everything in the morning, but you need to rest now. You’re exhausted. A few hours isn’t going to change anything.”

“I want to sleep, but I don’t want to sleep, but it doesn’t matter because I won’t be able to sleep anyway,” I admit, realizing that I am making no sense.

Kade glances up at me over his laptop. “Would you like me to try and help. Do I have permission?”

I nod in contempt. “Please. I’m exhausted. I just want to shut off my brain for a while.”

His eyes meet mine seriously. “Okay. Don’t resist it. If you resist it, it’s not going to work. We’ve figured that much out. You *want* to sleep, right? So don’t push me out. *Go* to your bed, get under the covers, and sleep, May, until I come wake you in the morning.”

I know he’s using persuasion on me, and I know it’s working at least a little when I yawn and find myself uttering, “I think I’ll go to bed and get some sleep now.”

Kade and I stare at each other for a moment and a small smirk makes its way into his lips. “That’s right, darling, go get into bed and sleep.”

I find myself rising from my chair and walking to the bedroom. I know what I’m doing and why I’m doing it, but I find myself unable to stop it. My mind is too weak, tired, and overwhelmed to fight it. I get into bed and I fall asleep nearly as soon as my head hits the pillow.



Chapter 8



“Rise and shine, sunshine,” a male voice sings.

I wake up in a daze and find Kade standing over me with a plate of bacon and eggs. I sit up and take them from him hastily, starving. I can’t even recall the last time I ate. As I devour the food, everything comes back in pieces until I remember everything.

“Did you find anything?” I ask finally after inhaling an entire plate of eggs in a matter of a handful of seconds.

“I did actually. I don’t know how to tell you this but there is almost nothing about them in the police record system,” he explains.

“What does that mean?” I ask through a mouthful of bacon.

He thinks about his answer before sharing it. “Those aren’t their real names.”

I pause, the bacon halfway to my mouth. “What? Are you positive? Why would they lie about their names?”

“That’s what I wondered, but there was something on Jane’s file that was marked. Jane’s fingerprint was an exact match to a woman from Houston, Texas who went missing seven years ago. Jane and this woman Tina are the same physical person,” Kade lays out.

I find myself shaking my head. “I get the feeling that this isn’t all you found out.”

He sneaks a piece of bacon from my plate and chews a chunk off it before replying. “Tina had terminal cancer, three weeks to live when she went missing. There was no way she’d have lived seven years.”

“What are you saying?” I push, not understanding.

“Tina and Jane had the same body, but I don’t think they were the same people. I think whoever Jane is, possessed Tina’s body. I think Jane is some sort of being that can possess other bodies.”

I gape. “Jane was not supernatural in any way. She was completely human. Trust me. I’d know if my best friend wasn’t human.”

Kade gazes at me as if he’s not sure he believes me which rubs me the wrong way. He can’t honestly think that I’m that oblivious, can he? I find myself scowling. Heat floods my cheeks and my head feels as if it could explode.

“If the existence of supernaturals was such an obvious thing, wouldn’t humans know about us?” he murmurs and taps his index finger lightly on the wall behind him as he leans against it.

I get up from my bed and snatch up the last bacon piece, pointing it at him erratically as I simmer. “You have a valid point but I’m just not sure I believe it. I knew Jane. I did almost everything with her until recently. I would’ve known.”

Kade remains quiet as I poke the greasy bacon toward his chest.

We’re interrupted by my cell phone ringing. I lower the bacon back onto the plate and snatch my phone from the bedside table. It’s Darrel. Without hesitating I answer. “Hello?”

“Hey, May, sorry about yesterday. I’m just shocked and you know...it’s all just crazy,” he mutters and places a ragged sigh at the end.

It takes me a minute to get words out. “Oh...hey, no problem. I’m still in shock too. I can’t believe it.”

“Can we meet up? Soon. I’m actually only a couple blocks away. Would you mind if I stopped over? I just need someone to talk to. Someone who knows what I’m going through.”

I don’t hesitate. “Yeah, of course come right over.”

Kade's head snaps up from the spot on the floor he was inspecting, his eyes widening as he turns his attention to me.

"See you in a few." Once I place the phone back down onto the nightstand, Kade stands up straight and struts out of the bedroom so fast I barely seem him move.

"What the hell are you doing?" I demand. "Don't scare me like that. I'm not used to light speed." I follow him out of the room.

Kade rifles through his small but slowly growing duffel bag and pulls out two long leather objects. I watch as lifts his pant leg and straps one of the objects to his calf and then stands and shoves the second into his pocket. I realize that they're weapons, and I can't help but glare daggers at him.

"Do you really need two knives or whatever those are? Darrel is harmless," I reiterate for the last time.

"First off, he's far from harmless. I'm rather convinced he and Jane are some sort of demons," Kade rattles off as he throws his duffel into the porch closet. "Second, I have a lot more weapons on me than a measly two knives, May. Those two were just extras. You can never be too prepared for a demon fight."

I gape. "Demon? You think my friends are demons? Are you insane?" As I speak the words I find myself off put. Demons. Demons exist too? Oh, hell. Why wouldn't they? Why am I surprised by this?

"Yes to the first question. Maybe to the second," he mutters in a grumble and starts opening cupboards in the kitchen.

"Well if they were both demons, wouldn't I be dead? Aren't demons scary, bloodthirsty monsters from hell or something? I'm not religious but I know a thing or two."

"Where's your salt?" he demands in a whisper.

"Having a hankering for sodium? You're warm," I tease. He moves to the left quickly opening another cupboard and digging through it. "Colder. Freezing now."

"Where is it, May?!" he growls.

"You're no fun. It's on the stove. Right in front of your nose."

He clutches the shaker and takes off to the bedroom at lightning speed. "You're not dead because they must want something from you. How is it that your family has gotten so wrapped up in this and you don't even have a clue about it?"

"My family? What happened to Daniel was an accident."

"Yes, but what happened to your parents wasn't," he snarls.

I freeze. "What?"

He stops and slowly looks up to the roof, his back to me. "Demons stalk the Bryxx border. Every once in a while, they get bored or tired of waiting for Bryxx, so they harass or kill humans. You grew up on that border. You said yourself that your parents were religious. They probably believed in demons. If you believe in them, you can see them and they can hurt you. Even if you don't believe in them fully, they can subconsciously drive you towards insanity. They probably killed your dad and lots of your family before that. They probably drove your mom to insanity."

I have no idea what to say or think. "The demons are what you wouldn't tell me about a few nights ago."

He nods and then slowly turns to face me.

"What changed?" I ask in confusion. How much worse can this possibly get?

"You deserve to know what you're in for. I have a really bad feeling about all of this. I put salt down here if things go south, get into this bed room. Demons can't pass over lines of pure salt." Kade suddenly has his index finger pressed to his lips. I follow his instruction and keep quiet. A few moments later there is a knock at the door.

I'm surprised when Kade lets me open the door. Of course, it's Darrel, looking debonair as always in a suit. "May, it's good to see you." He stops a few steps after the door frame when he spots Kade seated at the kitchen table. "Who's your friend?"

"I'm Kade. Who are you?" Kade mutters in a grumble.

Darrel takes a step towards me and embraces me in a hug. In the corner of my eye I notice Kade stiffen uncomfortably.

Darrel turns back to face Kade. "Darrel."

The two men stare at each other for a long second before I break the tense situation by speaking up. "Darrel, Kade is my temporary roommate, a friend of the family." It's not exactly a lie, is it? Well, I wouldn't say Daniel and Kade are friends exactly, but this is the first thing that comes to mind.

Darrel continues to study Kade and vice versa.

"Kade, Darrel was Jane's boyfriend," I explain, knowing he's already well aware of this.

The following silence is unbearable as they study one another.

"Darrell, has a date been set for Janes funeral?" I ask seriously and begin mixing some punch in the kitchen.

It takes a moment for Darrel to pull himself from his staring contest with Kade and answer me. "She didn't want a funeral so there won't be one. She's being cremated."

I stop stirring the juice and glance at him in disbelief. Jane not wanting a funeral? Not one part of me believes this for a second.

"Where are you from?" Kade asks Darrel, interrupting our conversation and leaving me to stew in my thoughts. Jane was the most extroverted, outgoing, attention seeking woman I knew. How could she have not wanted a funeral?

Darrel clears his throat. "A small town in Minnesota."

"Oh, I'm familiar with Minnesota. Which town?" Kade wonders. I know exactly what he's up to. He's comparing Darrel's answers with the information he found on him and received on his fake police investigation call, which wasn't too much.

"Oh, it's called—wow I love the colour of those..." Darrel trails off pretending to become distracted by my blinds. This sends warning bells blaring in my head. The last thing Darrel cares about is home decor. I could blame this strange behavior on his loss, but something is off about that as well. He really doesn't seem as sad or grieving as he should be in this situation.

Kade gives me a dubious look before looking back at Darrel. "What was the population?"

"The town was pretty small about 400 people so not many people have heard of it. You wouldn't know it."

"Try me," Kade tests him.

Darrel leans on the counter next to me. "Cheyenne."

Kade cocks a brow and taps his fingers on his chin lightly. "I swear your police report said you were from Alabama."

Darrel's jaw slackens.

"Oh, I'm a cop. I was on Jane's case a few hours before I was pulled off of it due to conflicts of interest, seeing as May and Jane were close."

Darrel purses his lips before managing to say, "Oh, well I was born in Cheyenne but raised in Alabama."

Kade smiles. "Who are you really, Darrel? Where's Jane?"

Darrel flinches and stands up straight from his position at the counter.

Kade nears us.

"Jane is dead, you asshole. Who do you think you are?" Darrel suddenly snaps. I'm super good at reading people and I can tell that Darrel is panicking. He's been clearly caught in a lie, one he wasn't so good at hiding. How didn't I see through him before? Maybe because I wasn't looking for a flaw in his story.

Kade chuckles. "Her host is dead. I know Jane isn't human and neither are you. Now you're going to explain yourself, explain everything and maybe I won't kill you for good."

Darrel's eyes enlarge to the size of saucers and he nods quickly. "Yeah okay uh...so yeah, I lied. I didn't kill Jane, though, I swear. I didn't hurt her either. She's okay. She's just out of town. I'd never hurt Jane."

"What do you two want from May. Start there," Kade demands in an impatient tone.

Darrel nods quickly. "Yeah, sure. Uh...okay, so we don't really want anything from her, though. We're just doing our job. We were told to protect her with our lives, but then these vampires came out of nowhere the other night. Like I mean nowhere and tore up Jane really badly. I got out of there while I was only scuffed up. They tore up Jane's body so bad she had to leave it and go in search of another."

"Who are you protecting her from exactly and who sent you?"

"We aren't privy to that information and no one's tried to attack us before. Well, not until those vampires came."

"You're young," Kade mutters. It's not a question.

"Yes, sir, this is my first job and Jane's second."

I can't get any words out, so I just slump into the counter behind me, so I don't collapse.

Kade nods slowly. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"I overheard someone at our last meeting say that May's father requested she be kept in the dark about everything for as long as possible. I don't know what that means but that's all I know really. Oh, and we were instructed not to follow her to Montana. Which was odd because they usually don't let us let her out of our sight. We're never more than a few hundred feet away from her at all times. We've been watching you come and go from here. Jane said you were a family friend of hers. We were concerned of course, but she seemed fine and you never seemed to want to kill her so we kept our distance."

Kade shakes his head. "You could get killed for not following orders and not protecting her. What if I were a vampire or one of the people you're supposed to protect her from?"

Darrel groans. "I know. Report me, Jesus. I don't always follow rules, okay? Look, she's fine. I care about her, alright? I wouldn't let anything happen to her. If I thought she were in danger, then I'd be at her side doing my job, but nothing has even tried to get her in seven years. She's fine."

"The vampires attacking you weren't a sign that maybe you should be watching her more closely?" Kade sounds absolutely pissed off.

Darrel groans again. "No, man, I'm pretty sure they were after Jane and me. You know, just trying to rattle us. They just came in and tried to kill us, didn't ask anything about May at all. May is our friend, if we thought she was in danger, we'd be watching her closer."

"Why would you want to be friends with a human? That's not your way," Kade hisses.

Darrel glances to me then away from me quickly. "May is more important to us than our own lives."

Kade sighs deeply. "I want to say that I don't believe you, but my gut is telling me you're being honest. Mostly because I've established that you're not very good at lying."

"Hey, May never suspected a thing, did she?" Darrel rebuts.

Kade changes the subject. "So Where is Jane right now?" Kade rubs his temples.

"Waiting for some girl in the cancer ward to die so she can take their body," he answers as if this is perfectly normal.

Kade cocks a brow. "Why does she need to die first? I've seen demons possess many living beings."

Darrel stiffens. "Not all demons are psychotic, uncaring assholes you know, guy."

Kade appears about to argue but instead changes the subject again. "And you have no idea why May needs protected?"

Darrel shakes his head and shrugs. "Nope. Not a clue. We're just following orders. Why do you get to ask all the questions, guy?"

I finally get annoyed enough that I snap out of my daze. I really have to stop doing that. "His name is Kade, Darrel."

The boys both look at me as though they forgot I was even here.

“Guy, what questions could you possibly have about any of this?” Kade asks with clear snark.

Darrel ignores him. “All this time, we worked to keep this secret from her and now I find out she knows about demons? That would’ve been fricken awesome to know. I hate this damn body. Look at my hair?” Darrel ruffles his brown locks. “It’s so gross and greasy. Humans are so ick. No offence.”

“I just found out about demons today actually,” I answer vaguely and pour myself some punch. “A few minutes ago.”

“And you’re not the slightest bit freaked out?” Darrel asks dubiously and grabs an empty glass I set out on the counter and pours himself a glass as well. He pokes my arm and scowl at him. “I always thought you’d have a mental breakdown if you ever found out.”

Kade answers for me. “She’s known about the Bryxx for a few weeks, so it wasn’t a huge shocker.”

“Did you tell me that if I didn’t know about them they couldn’t hurt me, and I couldn’t see them? I can see him.” I recall. “I’ve been able to see him for years.”

Darrel answers for Kade, I see Kade purse his lips in frustration. “Yeah that’s true but only when we’re in our true forms. While we’re possessing a body, that doesn’t work. As for the hurting you thing, we only have access to the abilities that the body were in can use. As I’m in a human body, I’m pretty much just human. If I were in a Bryxx body, then I’d be faster and stronger and all that.”

“If you’re supposed to protecting her, shouldn’t you be in a stronger body?” Kade asks. “You are so incompetent. How did you even get this job?”

Darrel shrugs. “Again, I’m just following orders. If needed, I could always jump out of my meat suit. Not the end of the world. As for how I got this job, that I’m not really sure. My uncle probably put in a good word for me. He’s high up somewhere.”

“That makes no sense unless whatever you’re protecting her from can’t sense what you are in a human body.” Kade shakes his head and crosses his arms.

Darrel chuckles. “Well the only thing that would be is a vampire obviously.”

Kade clenches his jaw and nods. “A vampire. Why would a vampire be after her, though? That makes no sense.”

“The only thing those leeches want is blood. That’s all they care about,” Darrel growls. “Those little bastards are a pain in my ass. A pain in everyone’s really. I’m not sure why we don’t just get rid of them all.”

I can’t help but have flashbacks of my encounters with vampires. They’re definitely not very friendly.

An awkward silence fills the air for longer than necessary before Kade shrugs. “I have nothing. My inference is that something about her blood must be special but that’s all I have.”

“Me too,” Darrel agrees. “Hey, what are you anyway? Obviously not a demon the way you bash us, you Bryxx?”

Kade nods slightly, his expression emotionless. “You can’t tell?”

“Nah, too young. What are you doing out here? Don’t you guys travel in packs or something? I’ve never run into a Bryxx thank god, but that’s what I’ve heard.”

Kade rolls his eyes. “I got kicked out. They think I killed someone.”

Darrel stiffens. “Why would they think that?”

“I’ve been under suspicion or watch I guess for a few years after an altercation and this murder has a lot of evidence that corresponds with that altercation and so I was first to be accused, and since I didn’t have an alibi, and I wasn’t working where I was supposed to during the murder, I was accused.”

“But you didn’t do it?” Darrel asks, his eyes turning into slits.

Kade growls in his chest. “Of course, I didn’t.”

“So, uh, are you going to kill me? Isn’t that what Bryxx do? Kill us,” Darrel sputters, all his anxiety coming out at once.

Kade heaves a sigh of annoyance. “No. You mean no harm, keep an eye on May and I will, too. You don’t need to be by her side all the time because I will be. But if I need back up, you better be close. You’re a harmless, sad excuse for a demon, kid. You’ve been around her for seven years and not hurt her so be glad I’m not feeling like killing you today.”

Darrel nods once, and I watch as he slowly approaches the front door. He’s making his escape.

“Thanks for stopping by, Darrel,” I mutter and take a sip of my juice.

He nods once. “I’ll be around.”



Chapter 9



“Could you not? There’s not going to be anything left to bake!” I scold Kade as he shoves a glob of cookie dough into his mouth whilst smiling.

He chews slowly, savoring it. “I can’t help it. It’s so good,” he says through a full mouth.

I slap his shoulder playfully and put the last pan of cookies into the oven. I’m so distracted that my finger makes contact with the singeing rack for a brief second. I jerk my hand away and throw the oven door shut. Then I rush to the sink and run it under water. Kade is at my side in a mere instant shoving my finger into his mouth and sucking.

Taken aback, I just stare for a moment before realizing what’s going on. The pain radiating from my finger eases into nothing and he releases it from his mouth. I hold it up in front of my face. There is so no sign of a burn. For that I am thankful because burns are the absolute worst.

“You have magic spit?” I observe.

“It’s not as strong as my blood but it will heal small wounds,” he affirms, grimacing. “You should be more careful.”

“You distracted me,” I accuse him.

His lips press together in a fine line, one side slightly curled up, but I doubt he knows I’ve noticed.

“Can we get out of this house? I know it’s dangerous, but I’m in danger here as we’ve found out. It’s been almost two weeks since the last attack. Let’s go grocery shopping tonight or something,” I plead.

Kade chuckles. “If you could get out of the house to do one thing, it would be to grocery shop? How about we go for lunch.”

“But we’re running low on groceries,” I explain.

“Well, how about both then?” he decides and switches the song playing on the speaker from some rap song to a country music station.

“Sure. Country?” I’m not sure why his taste in music surprises me.

“I love country. If you don’t like it, I can change it,” he says meekly.

I shake my head. “I have no problem with it. I love this song.”

Kade joins one hand with mine and wraps the other around my waist, swirling me around to the music as if I weigh nothing. I’m not good at dancing but he is amazing. Our eyes meet and something I can’t explain passes between us that causes me to shiver and grin. I haven’t been as happy and content as I am now in this moment in years.

We dance in silence until the timer beeps and interrupts us. The cookies are ready.

After pulling out the cookies and leaving them on the stove top to cool, I head to the shower before warning Kade that if I come back and the cookies are all eaten, he’s going to be in major shit.

I am almost surprised when I return to the kitchen and see that he’s already put the cookies in a container and he sits on the couch ready to go, dressed in slacks and a dress shirt.

“I didn’t know we were dressing up,” I ramble, looking down at my sweats and t-shirt.

He chuckles. “You look perfect. Come on. We have a reservation downtown.”

I gape. “I can’t go in this. I thought when you said lunch you meant fast food or casual dining.”

He smirks. “You look fine. Come on. I’m driving.”

“What time is the reservation?” I ask in a panic. Do I have time to change? I’m not even wearing makeup. My hair is pulled up in a bun.

“Soon. Come on. It doesn’t matter what you’re wearing,” he says enthusiastically.

I clench my teeth. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise. Come on we’re going to be late,” he insists.

I make a mental not to scold him later for not giving me notice but now is not the time. I follow him out the door and get into the passenger side of his car.

We’re both silent as we drive. He turns the radio onto none other than a country music station.

We drive by a large park and he parks the car in a parking space. I look around, looking for the restaurant.

“Where are we going?” I ask again.

“It’s a surprise,” he answers blandly and begins walking into the park.

Moments later he stops in front of a concession stand. “What would you like?” he asks.

I can’t help but burst out laughing. Here I was picturing some fancy restaurant. When I finally stop, the teenage boy running the cash register is looking at me as though I’ve lost my mind. “A hotdog please and a water.”

When we have our food and we’re looking for a spot on the ground to eat, I giggle again. “You said we had a reservation.”

“Are you disappointed?”

“No. I love hotdogs and sweat pants.”

Kade chooses a spot under a tall maple tree and sits down first. “Good. Me, too. I don’t take you for someone who wants six forks and eighteen courses of overpriced food for lunch.”

“Good, because I wouldn’t even know what to do with the forks. Why does everything need a different one?”

Kade shrugs. “That’s what I’ve always wondered.”

“Are you not some kind of Bryxx royalty? Shouldn’t you know these things?” I tease and take a bite of my hot dog.

He shrugs. “I *was* royalty but that doesn’t mean I agreed with everything that comes with that. I don’t know why there’s so many utensils. I know what they’re each for, but I don’t know why they have to be there. One fork is enough for me.”

“Me, too. Do you miss home yet?” I ask before I can stop myself.

He automatically shakes his head. “It wasn’t home. I feel far more at home here in Seattle with you than I ever did living with the Bryxx. I never fit in there.”

“On the drive to the airport, Daniel told me that you’re a really good fighter, well, and I’ve seen for myself. How’d you get to be so good?”

He bristles. “I was never taught to fight more than minor self-defense, but from my bedroom window I could see where other Bryxx trained. I watched for years until I decided to go for it. I asked my dad a thousand times, but he always said no, so when I made up my mind to go against him, I knew I’d be in trouble when he found out. I told him I would be taking extra tutoring in the new year and I’d be busy. He didn’t really notice me, so it took months for him to realize that I wasn’t being tutored in math or law, but instead I was out learning how to fight. My trainer kept it quiet and told one, just as I did. When my dad found out, he was so angry that he made me quit. A few weeks later there was an attack and all sorts of demons got into our house. If I hadn’t have been trained, both me and my father would’ve been dead along with our guards. I saved his life and in return he let me continue training in secret. Eventually, after years of training, I worked up the courage to leave my royal position and take a place as a guard. My father wasn’t happy and wanted me to be no longer be recognized as his son nor royalty, but the council voted in my favor. It was a close vote, but it did the trick. I couldn’t do quite the job I wanted, but at least I was allowed to do what I loved.”

“And you’ve worked as guard ever since?” I clarify.

“Sort of. A few years ago, there was an incident. After that I was stripped of my royalty and surprisingly allowed to stay within the Bryxx community. From that day on, I was placed under the direct supervision of one of the coun-

cilmen. I lived with him, worked wherever he wanted me that day. Since I was no longer recognized as royalty, I got to work the position I wasn't allowed beforehand, so I can't complain. The man who took on babysitting me treated me better than my own father ever did but all my Bryxx rights were stripped. I was treated by other Bryxx as a threat and less than dirt. Garret, as a human Bryxx, was far more respected than I was there. The whole murder accusation situation was bound to happen sooner or later with the lack of trust I had from the community. It was only a matter of time before they found an excuse to get rid of me."

I want to ask about the incident that he has referred to a number of times, but the fact that he hasn't expanded on it makes me think that he doesn't want to talk about it. If he did, he'd have told me by now. "What are you planning to do with your life now that you're not with the Bryxx?"

He tilts his head slightly to the left then slightly to the right while looking up at the cloudy sky. When his gaze flickers back to me, it's expressionless. "To be honest I have no idea. You're the only one I know that treats me like an actual person."

"And you think that if you told me more about this incident that would change?" I take a leap.

I know I've hit the nail right on the head when he doesn't answer and looks away from me, suddenly fascinated by the tree next to us.

"You've saved my life on multiple occasions. I trust you with my life. You've been here to help me digest all of this when my own brother just shot me back to Seattle with a new car. You've answered my questions and you've been patient and truthful with me, not hiding truths because they're hard or sad. You treat me like a person, not a fragile little human like my brother. You're a good friend. I respect you and anything you want to tell me that you want me to keep to myself, I will."

His eyes come back to meet mine. "That means a lot. That's probably one of the nicest things anyone's ever said to me. You'll understand, though, that I cannot risk ruining what we have because of something that happened before you were even born. It's history and I want to move on from it. I've been given a chance to start over."

I nod slowly. "Fine, but answer this: did the incident affect you negatively or positively as a person? Sometimes big events, though tragic and painful, can make us better people."

"Are you a councilor?" he teases.

I giggle. "No, but I've seen enough of them that I could be certified."

He nods, his lips slightly parted. "It was a negative experience, one that changed my life and how I viewed it. It was hard and still is hard, but it taught me just how cold the Bryxx are, how unaccepting of change and differences. It taught me to be a lot more open minded. I have come to appreciate the small things in life more." He pulls a knee up to his chest and rests his arm on it.

I finish my hotdog and crumple up the paper plate it came on just as Kade does the same.

He stands and then holds out a hand to me. I take it firmly and he pulls me up in one easy movement. I'm not necessarily heavy, but I'm not light either. His strength is mind blowing. "Shall we go get groceries, m'lady?" he asks in gruff tone, pulling the hand he grasps in his up to his mouth and landing a soft kiss on the back of it.

"You're such a dork," I respond and let him lead me back to the car.

It doesn't take long to get groceries. He insists on buying them, saying he's not paying any rent and he eats the most. There is no arguing with him, so it isn't long before I drop it and just let him pay.

When we get back to the apartment building, I begin to feel nauseous, probably food poisoning from the concession hot dog.

"You okay?" Kade asks while putting away a box of crackers.

I shake my head. "I feel lightheaded. Dizzy."

His eyebrows pull together and he's standing in front of me in an instant. He presses the back of his hand to my forehead. "You're burning up. Are you getting ill?"

I shrug. “Maybe food poisoning. Do you get fevers from food poisoning?” I realize I don’t even know. Usually if I get food poisoning it only lasts a few hours, so I pray to god that that’s all it is, and I’m not coming down with the flu or something ugly.

“I wouldn’t know. I can’t get food poisoning. I don’t know much about human illness. Lie down. What can I get for you?”

I follow his instruction and lie on the couch. The room spins erratically like I’ve drank too much alcohol and I’m on the verge of either vomiting or blacking out. This isn’t good. I’m about to tell Kade that I need to go to the hospital, but before I can, everything goes black.



Chapter 10



I hear my heart beating in my ears. I'm alive. It's dark. I don't have enough strength to open my eyes. I hear the familiar sound of my bedside clock ticking. Kade moved me to the bed. For this, I am grateful. I don't hear a motion beside me, but I feel his presence before he touches me.

"May, if you can hear me, stay calm. I'm going to give you a couple drops of my blood. It should help," he whispers into my ear.

Part of me wants to gag and protest but I have no strength. My thoughts are scattered, and my body feels as though it's floating.

I don't know how much time passes before I become conscious again, this time I come alert to the sound of Darrel and Kade arguing. Darrel scolds Kade for not taking me to a hospital. Kade claims he doesn't know much about human illness and he thought this might be normal but wasn't sure so that's why he called Darrel.

"I'm going to look at her," Darrel warns Kade and then I hear footsteps near me.

I feel Darrel brush away a strand of hair that's stuck to my sweaty forehead.

"This isn't good. This isn't normal. I'm not an expert on human health either, but my gut is telling me this is bad. How long has she been like this?" Darrel asks, sounding worried.

"Almost seven hours. Should I call an ambulance? Should I drive her?" Kade asks, looking for Darrel's sincere opinion.

Darrel sighs. "Give me twenty. Watch my body and make sure no demon tries to snatch it up. I need to talk to Jane about this. She will know what to do."

Silence fills the air and I feel someone sit on the end of the bed by my feet. A hand falls to my ankle and rubs it gently. "It's going to be okay." I can't tell if Kade has said this to me or to himself, but I don't have time to debate this because I phase out again.

When I awaken, this time the darkness seems to gnaw at me. I crave opening my eyes, but the strength isn't there.

This time I hear a woman's voice. "We've been instructed to find stronger bodies. May is in some sort of transition and that's all they'll tell us besides that vampires will be coming at her from all angles. She's going to be some sort of crack to vampires or something."

"What do you mean?" Kade asks, sounding frustrated.

"Can't you smell it? I'm in a human body and I can. She's *sick*. She should smell like sweat but she smells sweet like sugar," the woman answers.

"I can smell it alright and it's strong, getting stronger. A vampire could probably smell her from halfway across the city," Kade replies.

"Seattle has an irregularly low vampire population but for some reason there's been a spike in vampire attacks in the city the last couple weeks. It's like they can sense something. Her. My superiors are calling in backup. They're sending in my five-hundred-year-old sister tomorrow." Darrel sounds annoyed. "They said this should only last a couple days. She should be almost out of it."

I'm still conscious what must be an hour later. Jane has gone out to get a new, stronger body, leaving Darrel and Kade to babysit me.

"I need to get some fresh air," Kade mutters, sounding almost angry. "I can't watch this anymore."

“Don’t go too far in case I need you,” Darrel says flippantly. I can hear the TV in the background. A game show. No wonder Kade needs fresh air. If I’ve learnt something about Kade since he’s moved in, it’s that he hates game shows.

I continue to fade in and out until I finally open my eyes. This is a good sign. It means my strength is coming back. My mind struggles to make sense of the conversations I heard while half conscious. I breathe in deeply trying to smell the sweet scent that they were referring to but all I smell is the candle lit across the room.

“Kade?” I croak out, my voice rough and raspy.

A moment later Darrel comes into the bedroom, a small brown-haired teenager behind him. I put two and two together and realize that this must be Jane, or could it be Darrel’s sister?

“May, girl, you’re awake. How are you feeling?” the tiny girl asks and takes a seat next to where I lay on the bed. Definitely Jane.

“Where is Kade?” I ask. “How are you feeling?”

She giggles lightly. “How am I feeling? I’m perfectly fine. The real concern right now is you. Kade is outside the building.”

I wasn’t expecting him to be so far away while I was so sick. “Why?”

“May, you’ve been really sick. Your blood is changing. We don’t know why, but it’s becoming a bit of a problem,” Jane explains, I can tell she’s tip toeing around something.

Darrel rolls his eyes. “I told you, Jane. She knows. May, we have a problem. We have vampires flocking in from all over the city trying to eat you. Kade is outside making sure none of them get in here. He’s our first line of defense, but we’ve already had one get passed him and Jane had to take care of her.”

I swallow hard. I already knew some of this from overhearing their conversation. I don’t know how to respond.

“Darrel has to go find a new body, but when he gets back, I will switch off with Kade, so he can come in and see you alright?” Jane asks and rubs my shoulder gently. It’s strange seeing her in a different body.

I nod. I don’t have enough energy to argue. I’m so tired. At least the spinning has slowed down.

When Darrel returns in the Bryxx body of a tall, muscled bald man, Jane switches out with Kade. Kade knocks on the bedroom door before letting himself in. I reach for the remote to turn off the tv beside the bed that Jane brought in, but before I can wrap my hand around it, Kade has already shut the tv off.

“How are you feeling?” he asks and leans against the dresser.

I try to sit up but fail to do so. “A little better. I guess I don’t have food poisoning.”

I thought he’d find my joke funny enough that he’d at least crack a smile, but his expression remains somber. I’m reminded how serious this problem really is.

“We have to get you out of the city,” he explains briefly. “We need to go where there aren’t many vampires. You can’t live the rest of your life stuck in this apartment being guarded by immortals.”

“What’s happening to me?” I ask quietly, almost to myself.

His expressions softens slightly. “I believe...I *know*, actually. Although it’s illegal with the punishment of death for *all* parties involved, two human Bryxx having a child together leads to an offspring with strongly scented blood. It’s only happened a few times that I know of and usually that person dies by death penalty dealt from the Bryxx or by a vampire killing them. It’s said that ingesting all of the blood of this offspring can revert a vampire back to their primary species. The demons must be protecting you for a reason, but I don’t know what that is yet. I don’t even know if you’re a first generation or a tenth. The gene flaw carries on indefinitely through generations, but no one knows if it fades at all, because like I said, they don’t seem to live long.”

I recall the letter I found from my dad in his safe. It makes sense now. When I don’t reply, Kade shifts slightly.

“I want to hide you from the demons. Jane and Darrel agree. The demons want you and probably not for good reasons. If the Bryxx found out what you are, they’d want you. Curing a vampire would be an asset for them, a large as-

set. If word gets out amongst vampires about you, which it will sooner rather than later, there are only three of us, four when Darrel's sister shows up. We stand no chance against a herd of hungry vampires. I want to take you to Canada."

"Canada? Like by the mountains?" I ask. I don't know much about Canada.

"No. East of the mountains. Saskatchewan. They have an extremely low human population, so there's not many vampires either, especially out in the country away from humans. There are no Bryxx communities in Saskatchewan either. What do you think?" he wonders hopefully.

"Well, you'd know better than I would. I don't really want to die. You'll come with me, though, right?"

"Of course, but the others won't be coming. They can be tracked too easily." Kade rolls up the sleeves of his plaid button up.

Makes sense. "Won't they get in trouble for losing me?"

"Yes, but demons are tough. They shouldn't have entrusted two young ones with such a hefty job. Obviously, they weren't too terribly concerned about keeping you safe or they would've sent in older, more experienced guards. They'll tell their boss that a vampire got you."

I cringe at the thought, imagining my blood splashed upon the walls.

"We fly out tonight on a private plane I've rented, before Darrel's sister gets here. Jane will help you pack." With that, he leaves the room. I've never seen him so somber. I know this is bad, really bad. His concern doesn't even compare to the concern he showed while the vampires were attacking because of him. Whatever is going on with my blood, it isn't good. Not at all. I wonder when, if ever, my parents were going to tell me about my heritage.

Soon after he leaves, Jane prances into the room with a duffle bag and starts sorting through my drawers and tossing stuff in. She whistles as she works. She pulls out a red top and blue top that are identical besides colour. "Which one?"

"Blue."

She continues hand picking my wardrobe. Next, she pulls out a pair of white granny panties and scowls glancing at them then to me. "Really? Have you not learned anything from me? I'm tossing these."

"They're comfy," I argue, glad to have Jane back.

"Sexy isn't comfy and if you want to snag that badass, buff Bryxx man outside, then those are a no go," she babbles flippantly and continues packing.

Confused for a moment, I'm silent. When her words hit me and fully process in my mind, I gasp.

"What? You don't like him?" she asks with a pouty lip. "He's hot. I could eat him up if he wasn't my mortal enemy, and he sure does like you."

"He does not. We're just friends, Jane," I argue with an eye roll.

She sighs dreamily. "He looks at you like you're his queen. He's been worried sick about you the past few days, never taking the slightest break since I've been here." I realize how easy it is to get used to her new body. Jane is still Jane, it's just like she's gotten...I don't know...a lot of plastic surgery?

"He does not. You know he can hear you right? He has super hearing," I shush her.

She cackles. "He can't hear us. Bryxx have good ears but not *that* good."

My eyebrows pull together. She's wrong. I know Kade can hear things from blocks away sometimes. I don't argue, though. One thing I've learnt about Jane is that she always has to win the argument.

"You can't tell me you're not interested in him," she states and wrinkles her nose at a t-shirt with a boy band plastered on it. She tosses it in the no pile.

"He's nice," I whisper quietly, knowing she will hear me but hoping that Kade won't. "And attractive," I add in a quieter whisper.

"And?" she encourages in a singsong tone.

"I like him, but it's not like we would ever work out. He's immortal. I'm not," I remind her.

She giggles. "There are ways around that."

"No offense, but I'm not about to get myself turned into a Bryxx or a vampire or something just to be with some guy I've known for a few weeks," I scold her dramatically.

She sighs. "Well, that's not what I meant. If you ever did that I would kill you myself. Just because I'm a demon who has feelings doesn't mean that I don't also have a psychotic side. May, you're too sweet to be a part of my world, so for your sake, I hope Kade's plan works out and you can have a happy life."

I'm not sure how to respond so I remain quiet.

She finally finishes, zipping up my bag and tossing it on the bed before plunking down beside me. I have to admit that her new look is a little strange. At first, I wasn't completely sure that my Jane was in there but now it's clear she is.

"What's it like being a demon?" I blurt. Jane and I have always been extremely close, and I hope that hasn't changed now that I know about her. How much of our friendship was fake?

She smiles kindly. "It's hard, but it's all I've known."

"What is hard about it?" I ask her, pushing.

She nibbles her bottom lip. "You know how vampires have this innate urge to drink blood, so strong that they can't control it? Well, for demons like myself, we have an innate urge to cause pain. Other demons have the urge to murder or others to taunt humans. There are demons who live to cause jealousy or infidelity or lust so extreme that it makes humans or Bryxx do terrible things. We feed off the negative emotion we cause. We don't need it to survive I don't think, but we'd never know because it's almost impossible to suppress the urge for long. Even if that means I stick in ten snide comments in a week that hurt your feelings. Maybe I didn't cause major pain all at once, but it adds up and it's still enough to cause major pain."

"You're not like that," I argue.

"Just because I struggle every single second to resist those urges, doesn't mean that I don't give in now and again and mess up or have terrible thoughts. Just now when I taunted you about your ugly underwear, I fed off your hurt and annoyance. See? I just did it again by telling you that."

"You're just teasing me. It's not like it's a big deal."

"If I continued to taunt you about your wardrobe, your choice in music, whatever, for years I could seriously knock down your self-confidence. One small comment like that can lead someone to commit suicide. Trust me. I've seen it." She nibbles her lightly glossed bottom lip.

A knock on the bedroom door interrupts us and Kade comes in, hands in his jean pockets. "Ready?"

I nod and attempt to get up. Jane is suddenly on one side of me trying to help me up and Kade on the other. Between the three of us, I get up on my two legs.

"Alright. I'm okay. You can let go," I assure them and they both carefully release me. I still feel weak, but I'm confident I can make it out to the car. My first few steps are a little shakey, but it isn't long before I'm saying my goodbyes to Jane, not knowing if or when I'll see her again. Once outside the apartment building, we quickly say goodbye to Darrel. I wonder if he picked a bald man so he wouldn't have the same hair problem he did with his last body.

The drive from the apartment building to airport is silent as Kade listens and watches for any sign that we've been followed.

When we park on the airport runway, getting special access, Kade hustles me towards the small private plane and we take off quickly. It's not until we're in the sky that he speaks. "I thought at least a couple would follow us."

"How many came while I was unconscious?"

"Four. Not sure if they came for me or you, but once they smelt you, they lost their minds." He grits his teeth, the muscles in his jaw clenching.

As we take off, I see a BMW plow through the security gate that separates us from the street. Security members come out of nowhere, approaching the car with stealth. A blond woman with a gun begins shooting at the plane but misses and the pilot veers to the left.

Kade growls. "That one was on our tail. We got out of here just in time."

I watch as the airport security land bullets in her chest, skull, and other body parts. She falls to the ground but gets up and points her gun on them, taking two innocent human men down. I gape. Their deaths are on me. I lose sight of the scene as we ascend above the clouds.



Chapter 11



Our plane lands on a small runway in what appears to be the middle of nowhere. The land is flat and barren. I can see for what feels like miles. Kade thanks the pilot and hands him a wad of cash before helping me off the plane. A car waits for us off to the side of the runway and we head for it quickly.

Kade opens the passenger door for me and then hops in the driver's side. He hammers on the gas, leaving skid marks behind us. He keeps the radio down as he whips a U-turn and one handedly fiddles with the gps. He types in longitude and latitude to my surprise and the gps chimes that we are sixty miles away. I grab onto the handle on the roof, a bit scared of his reckless driving even though I know he'd never hurt me.

We drive the sixty miles without incident and in total silence the air seems thick with tension the entire ride. Why is he acting this way? Could he have heard Jane I's conversation? Yes, but he was acting strange before that. Is he just being completely professional and in tune with our surroundings in order to keep me safe? I hope so.

We drive through a small town or village as the sign states. "Welcome to Village of Green Lake". Population is stated as 418 people. My god, we *are* in the middle of nowhere. He wasn't exaggerating. We don't stop in Green Lake. We keep driving. For a while, there are bodies of water on each side of the road and then we cross over a river and turn left onto a gravel road which we follow for at least ten minutes before we pull into a yard surrounded by evergreen trees. The property looks out of place when considering the barren land around us. Although empty, the area seems to have its own sense of beauty, the land so untouched by mankind.

We stop in front of small, grey house, a barn off to one side. Kade gets out first and grabs our bags, before opening my door for me. I manage to get out all on my own. The silence here is deafening and reminds me of where I grew up in Montana. Birds chirp and the wind rustles the trees. In the distance, I hear cows mooing.

"This is it," he breathes as if relieved to finally be here. I know I am.

The house is dainty but larger than my apartment. It has two bedrooms and the entire house is furnished. There are even groceries stocked.

"Who did all this?" I ask while digging through the fridge.

Kade comes up behind me to inspect the fridge. "I'm paying someone to pick up groceries and whatever else we need once a week from a nearby town."

I frown. "Why? I think a little social interaction would be nice once a week."

He grimaces. "Maybe in a couple weeks. I want to make sure the area is safe first."

I nod. I guess that makes sense.

"What are we going to do with ourselves out here?" I ask.

"We have four cows and three chickens," he offers, a grin playing at his lips for the first time in too long.

I can't tell if he's joking or not.

He points out the kitchen window to where four cows stand in a small pasture and a little chicken coop sits.

"Can I name them?" I ask excitedly. I love animals and he knows it.

His grin gains strength. "They're cows, May."

"They still deserve names!" I argue and race out the door to see them.

When he doesn't stop me, I speed up in excitement. This is the most freedom I've had in days or even weeks.

“Jane.” I point to the plain brown cow. “Betty.” The black one. “Georgia.” The brown one with the white nose. “And Violet.” The white one.

Kade nods, impressed. “You going to name the chickens too?”

“Of course!” I duck over to the coop and find three brown chickens looking around.

Kade opens up a large white pale and pulls out a handful of feed before dumping it into the coop. The chickens begin pecking at the ground.

“Lucy, Dorothy, and Marie,” I decide, unable to tell them apart yet but knowing I will figure it out eventually.

“Why are you naming our farm animals after old ladies?” Kade chuckles and drops in another handful of feed.

I scowl at him. “Because it’s cute.”

He snorts out a laugh. “Why don’t you get settled in and pick which room you want while I feed the cows?”

I shrug and skip off to the house, glad to get some alone time, not that I get sick of being around Kade all the time because I don’t, but sometimes being alone is just nice, even if I know he will still be able to hear everything I’m doing.

I pick the bedroom with the attached bathroom, seeing as Kade doesn’t use the bathroom as much as I do. The only thing he uses it for is showering and fixing his hair.

I unload by duffle bag and have a quick shower. By the time I’m out and ready to make something to eat, Kade is already on it, frying up some hamburgers on the barbecue on the back porch.

“You already killed one of our cows?” I tease, mocking shock.

He chuckles deeply and turns from the BBQ to face me. His smile falters slightly.

“What’s wrong?” I ask him. Is there something on my face? There shouldn’t be. For heaven’s sake I just showered.

He sets the flipper down on the BBQ and takes a step closer to me. He brushes a strand of wet hair behind my ear gently. “Nothing. You’re just beautiful.”

I know I don’t imagine the spark that manifests between us. My breath catches for reasons that I can’t explain, and I find my heart picking up pace. He comes closer yet and just as I begin to think he might kiss me on the lips, his lips fall to my forehead. As quickly as he’s neared me, he puts a few feet of distance between us. I back through the patio door back into the house. I’m suddenly thirsty and I grab a glass from the cupboard, pouring me some tap water and then chugging it down hastily.

A moment later Kade comes in carrying our food. It smells amazing and I’m starving. When was the last time I even ate?

He sets the plate down on the table which has already been made and pours us each a glass of wine. “What do you want on your burger?”

“Just ketchup and onions, please,” I answer, still partially dazed. I can’t help but imagine the kiss he pressed to my forehead, being placed on my lips instead. It makes me queasy with emotion. I realize that I wanted him to kiss me. Jane was right, I do like him like that. I’m not sure why the revelation surprises me.

“You okay?” he asks as he puts my burger together and hands it across the table to me.

I take it from him and sit down. “Yeah, sorry just hungry.”

He smiles, and I swear I see the same emotion in his eyes as I’m sure I have in mine.

We both dig in. The food is delicious. After we eat, we clean up the table and then sit back down to finish our glasses of white wine.

“So, do you like it?” he asks hopefully.

“The hamburger or the place?” I ask, unsure to which he is referring.

“Both,” he decides after a moment of debate.

I nod. “The burger was decadent,” I assure him and snicker. “The place is perfect, too. Did you tell Jane and Darrel that we made it safe?”

He nods back. "Yup. I texted them." He takes the final swig of his wine and then pours himself another. I finish my first glass but decide to stop there seeing as I haven't been in the best of health lately. I take my glass to the sink and then return to wipe the table down with a cloth.

Suddenly, Kade is gone from his seat. I'm about to panic thinking that there's danger when I feel his presence behind me. I glance back as I wipe down the table and meet his curious eyes looking over my body. A small rumble sounds from deep in his chest and startles me a little. His hand touches my waist and he spins me around to face him, backing me up against the table slightly.

Our bodies are so close that I can smell his light cologne. Musky and woodsy just like I'd have thought. He takes in my reaction and must take it as a green light because he presses his body closer to mine so that were touching. I can feel his breath on my face. We've never been so close. I clench my teeth, a reaction I can't control.

I'm so lost in him in that moment that the cloth falls from my hand and makes a splat sound on the linoleum. We ignore it.

His head lowers down to mine and he pauses ever so slightly. "May I?" he whispers.

I'm speechless. I just give a slight nod of my head.

His soft, moist lips meet mine tenderly and his body presses into mine impossibly more, causing me to press into him in return in order to not fall over backwards onto the table.

His breath hits my tongue and a small moan escapes me. I want more. I kiss him harder, the kiss going from gentle, to hard and needy. He doesn't protest and instead picks me up by my thighs, wrapping my legs around his torso. He carries me easily to the wall across from the table and leans me against it for a moment and then takes off with me again as our lips dance. I am partially surprised when I find that we are in his bedroom and he's lying me down onto the bed. This is so unlike him, then again, it's so unlike me.

Did he hear what I told Jane, does he feel the same about me? Was she right? Excitement takes over my rational thought. I should be thinking about how fast this is happening, not about how much I want him to get impossibly closer to me.

He lies down over top of me and presses his hips into mine harsher. I gasp and pull him closer. Another growl escapes him before he pulls away from my lips and stares down at me, breathing heavy. I've never seen him so breathless. I didn't even know it was possible. He clenches his jaw. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me."

He's sorry? "Don't be sorry," I breathe.

He begins to pull away.

"Don't go," I basically beg. I want him so bad, all of him right now.

"I have to, May. I'm sorry. I'll be outside if you need me," he breathes and then just like that he's gone, and I'm laying breathless in his bed.

I awaken the next morning still in Kade's bed. Crap. How did I fall asleep? *Oh*, a long day of travelling while not in very good health might do it.

I spring up from the bed and race out to the living room where Kade is seated on the couch staring at the blank tv screen.

"Good morning," I greet him. "Sorry about falling asleep in your bed."

He swallows hard. "It's alright, May. I didn't sleep much anyway. I have bad news."

My heart drops with the hard tone in his voice. "Betty is dead." He quickly corrects, "Betty the cow. I found her this morning."

Breath rushes into my lungs. "What? What happened?"

"Probably a coyote, I suppose," he says solemnly. I can't tell if he's truly sad about her demise or if he's anticipating my reaction.

"You didn't hear it?" I ask in disbelief.

He looks to me and bites his cheek. "No. I didn't. Well, I did, but it was too late."

I blink back tears for the stupid cow that I only knew for one stupid day, not even. Yet I have yet to shed tears over the two men at the airport who were murdered by a vampire who was after *me*. I wonder if anymore people were hurt at the airport. I can't help but think the worse.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"It's not your fault," I answer. "Can we bury her or something?" I feel like such a baby. I've lost family members and friends alike, but here I am throwing a fit over a cow?

"Of course. I will start on the hole," he decides to my surprise. I was ready for him to tell me I was nuts, and he wasn't about to dig a hole size enough for a cow. He leaves the house in a blur and I attempt to follow close behind him, but well, that's a fail and a half. I go out to the cow pen where Betty lies on her side in the hay, blood strewn everywhere. I gasp at the sight. It looks as though the coyote or whatever it was physically tore her body apart. Can a coyote even do that? Are there wolves around here, cougars?

Kade comes out to the field with a shovel and goes full speed at the ground, tossing dirt behind him in a pile. I am fascinated while watching his inhuman movements. It only takes him a matter of a handful of minutes to dig a hole large enough for Betty, something that would've taken me hours or maybe even days and a ton of sweat.

When he's done, he drags Betty into the hole and then starts filling it. Violet watches and lets out a loud moo. I wonder if she knows what happened to Betty. Does she understand that Betty is gone? Can cows mourn?

I press myself against the gate without noticing I'm doing it and out of the corner of my eye I see Georgia digging at the dirt with her hoof. Common sense seems to escape me in that second as I'm stuck watching Betty's burial. Georgia runs at me and I barely have enough time to back up a few steps to avoid being hit. Kade steps between the two of us and shouts at Georgia who doddles away at his request.

"Be careful. These cows can be dangerous," he scolds me and tosses his shovel over the gate. His hair is ruffled and his face smudged with dirt. He's covered head to toe in dirt understandably.

"Yeah, I got that. I was raised on a farm. I'm just off today, I guess." I recall the dozens of cows Dad used to send to get butchered. We had some drown in slough in the pasture, we had calves born stillborn, we had a couple go missing to be found a day or so later after being hit by a car. Why is this one cow causing me such turmoil?

We walk into the house in silence. He's clearly back to brooding. While he showers and cleans up, I put in a load of laundry. I'm startled when my phone rings. Expecting it to be my aunt Betty I'm surprised when an unknown number comes up. A Montana number. My heart races. Could this be Daniel?

I answer it. "Hello?"

"May? Oh my god. Thank god. Where are you? I was told that you were dead, killed by vampires because of some genetic blood mutation or something." It's Daniel sounding beyond panicked.

"What? Who told you that?" I demand.

"Well it was all over the news that you were found dead, and when I went and demanded an investigation from the council, they told me this crazy story about our family having some weird mutation," he rattles off.

"Calm down. I'm okay. I'm in hiding from everything. You can't tell anyone that I'm alive or I won't be alive for long. I'm serious. No one can know, not Bryxx, demons, especially vampires because apparently I'm some sort of irresistible crack to them."

He sighs deeply on the other end. "I won't. You gave me a heart attack though. I'm just happy you're okay. Are you safe? Who are you with? The council said you had demons protecting you because of some deal Dad made or something."

This is news to me. "I'm in Canada, actually. I probably shouldn't tell you where or my body guard might kill me. It has to stay a secret."

“Who is with you? May, demons aren’t safe, they probably have some ulterior motive to hand you in or get you killed.” Daniel is about to combust, I can hear the rage and panic in his voice.

I shake my head although he can’t see me. “I’m with Kade. I’m okay. I trust him.”

After a long moment of silence Daniel squeaks, “What?”

“Yeah, he’s just in the shower. Do you want to talk to him?” I ask and head for the bathroom. I get to the door, surprised that Kade is taking so long in there. “Kade? Open up.”

“Why are you with Kade out of all people?” Daniel demands, his voice sounding near hysteria. “May, where are you? Tell me where you are. I’ll stay with you. Where ever you are, I’m coming.”

I bang on the bathroom door again. No answer. Weird. I open the bathroom door and although the shower was on at some point it’s not anymore. The window above the toilet is wide open. I look out of it and see nothing. Where the hell did he go and why wouldn’t he have used the front door?

“Hmm...he seems to have slipped out for a minute,” I determine. “Anyway, how are you doing?”

“*May*,” Daniel whispers harshly, he sounds as though he’s in physical pain. “You *have* to tell me where you are. You’re not safe with him. Did he force you to go with him?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Of course not. He’s a good guy. You know him, you should know that.” Something dawns on me then. Why would Kade jump out the window on the midst of a shower? Vampire. I nearly drop the phone. “I think there’s a vampire here. He seems to have abandoned a shower and jumped out the window. I know that sounds nuts, but why else would he do that?”

“May, where are you? You can’t possibly think hiding from vampires with a vampire is a good idea,” he snarls, and I hear him start his car on the other side of the phone call. “Especially with this crazy blood thing that going on with you.”

“It’s fine. Kade is strong. It’s not the first one he’s fought off,” I reassure him.

Daniel groans as if in agony. “May, I’m not talking about the other vampire that’s supposedly wrestling with Kade right now. I’m talking about Kade. The vampire Kade. The one that got banished from the Bryxx community for draining a Bryxx child dry.”

What? Confusion causes my brows to wrinkle together but they relax slowly and instead my heart picks up pace when what my brother is trying to tell me finally clicks. No. It can’t be. I’ve misunderstood.

“Kade is a vampire?” I whisper with a shaking voice.

“You didn’t know that?! He never told you that before he started supposedly *protecting* you? Where are you, May?” he demands, sounding hysteric now.

“Uh, north of Green Lake in Saskatchewan, over a river. Oh god, I don’t know. The middle of nowhere. I’ll send you my location,” I ramble and can’t bring myself to move a muscle.

“Okay. Good. Relax. He can hear your heartbeat, May. As soon as he gets back he will know something is up. Relax.”

“I’ll tell him I was worried when I couldn’t find him,” I suggest. “I should go. He’s fast he will be here soon probably.”

Daniel grunts. “Text me every half an hour, May, I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Then the phone disconnects and I’m left staring out the window in complete and utter shock. It makes sense. His stronger compulsion, his better hearing, the fact that he barely sleeps when I know he told me that Bryxx sleep, the way he’s been acting towards me since my blood has been changing.

I nearly scream when a hand lands on the window sill and then another. Kade’s head pokes up and he throws himself through the window a second later. I nearly shriek.

“Shit, sorry, May. I thought I could slip out before you noticed. I thought I sensed a vampire,” he mutters. “False alarm. I ran the whole property and it’s clear.”

Something else dawns on me. Bryxx can't sense vampires. He's the one who told me that once.

"You okay?" He asks, standing half naked in front of me, the only thing on are his pants.

I nod once. "You just scared me." It's not exactly a lie. "I need to lie down. I'm not feeling myself quite yet."

He shrugs and nods as he pulls a shirt over his head.

In truth, I just need to lie down for a while and sort through all this.

I get into bed and slip under the covers. I shoot my location to Daniel, knowing he knows I am around Green Lake and he's probably already on his way.

I have to think this through rationally. Kade has never hurt me. He's never showed any intention of hurting me. He's only ever saved my life and protected me. Do I really need to be frightened of him? I decide that I am pretty damn sure that he's indeed a vampire, though there are differences between him and the other vampires I've encountered. Kade is friendly, caring, and has control, where as other vampires I've been around have been murderous, bloodthirsty animals.

I send Daniel a quick text at the half an hour mark. 'I don't think he will hurt me. He's been living with me for weeks and he's done nothing but protect me and be kind to me.'

Daniel's response is almost immediate. 'You overestimate a vampire's control. He might not want to hurt you, but eventually he will lose control. With your blood being so potent to vampires, he will be walking on egg shells fighting for his self-control. Keep your distance from him. Do not entice him. He is in physical pain when he is near you. Give him space.'

With that, I decide to listen to my brother. He knows more about vampires than I do. Could Kade actually be in pain every second that he's around me? I lay in bed, sending my brother the necessary half an hour texts he requested. Later in the afternoon, Kade knocks on the door and comes in.

"How are you feeling?" he asks sweetly and sets down a cup of juice beside me. "You've been in here all day."

"Better than yesterday but just tired. Upset about Betty," this isn't a lie but it's not the full truth either.

He sits on the edge of the bed beside me and feels my forehead with the back of his hand. "Your fever is almost gone. You look much better, too. Do you want me to make you something to eat?"

"No thanks I'm okay," I answer quietly.

"You should eat something. After I feed the cows, I will make us something okay?" he decides.

"I can make something while you're feeding them," I tell him and sit up.

He asks, "Are you sure?" He's not looking too convinced that I'm okay.

"Yup. You go take care of the cows," I encourage and he nods before leaving the room.

I swallow hard and then I head out to the kitchen and pull out a loaf of bread. Sandwiches sound like a good idea tonight.

I pull out four slices of bread, a couple lettuce leaves, a tomato, some sliced ham, and two cheese slices. I put together the sandwiches quickly. I lastly slice into the tomato and cut two slices. In my haste, the knife slips in my wet hands and slices my index finger ever so slightly. A small bead of blood collects on my finger tip and I turn on the tap to wash it off. Darn knife. Way to go, May. Clumsy as always.

My heart sinks into my stomach when I hear the front door open and close and suddenly Kade stands in front of me gripping my hand with the cut finger. He stares intently at it as if transfixed.

"Kade?" I squeak and try to pull my hand back to no avail.

He pulls it closer to him.

"Kade!" I shout loudly, panic settling in. I really don't want to die this way. Why am I so stupid?

His grip lessens slightly and then he pushes my hand under the running water before scratching a red line into his inner wrist with his index finger of the other hand and pressing his bloody wrist to my wound. He pulls us apart

almost immediately after and I watch as my skin heals before my eyes. He then runs his wrist under the water until all the blood is washed off and his wrist has healed.

We both stand there in shock, neither one of us speaking.

"I'll be more careful," I whisper uneasily.

He squeezes his eyes shut. "You shouldn't have to be." He sighs deeply and his jaw tenses and untenses.

"But I do. You almost fricken ate me," I slip out nervously in a rush before thinking, my mind going into freak out mode.

He takes two steps back from me, his eyes wide.

"I *know*, Kade. I *know* you're not Bryxx," I admit sheepishly. "I didn't mean to cut myself. I shouldn't have even used a knife knowing what you are."

He opens his mouth slightly then closes it again. He says, "How did you find out?"

"To be fair, I would've found out on my own, eventually I would've put all the pieces together, but I hadn't yet and then my brother called me after hearing that I was dead. He asked who was protecting me and I told him, and he almost exploded."

Kade closes his eyes briefly, tilting his head up. "When is he going to be here?"

I shrug. "Last I heard he and Kai we're getting on a plane to fly here. That was an hour ago." The fact that I tell him this reminds me that I do indeed trust Kade whether he's a vampire or not. He can't help what he is. He could've killed a thousand times already, but he hasn't and after seeing how hard it was for him to restrain from killing me, I know how much he cares about me that he was able to resist that urge. I might not be safe with him because of what he is, but I trust him more than anyone in my life vampire or not.

Kade sighs. "Alright. As soon as they get here, I'll go. Believe me when I say that you'll be safer with me here until then than alone. I give you my word that you're safe with me until then. Just don't go bleeding again *please*."

"You're leaving?" I ask, hearing the disappointment in my voice.

He quirks a brow. "You want me to, don't you?"

I shake my head. "No, I don't. I know you better than my brother and Kai both, and I trust you with my life. If Kai and Daniel are here, they can make sure you don't kill me, and you can take breaks from me if you need to. Unless you don't want to stay. I'd understand. Daniel said it hurts you to be near me. Is that true?"

Kade nods. "It's true, yes, but it's worth it. I care about you more than you know. They might not want me to stay."

"Well that's too bad for them," I reply. "Because I want you here."

"You're not scared of me?" he wonders with curiosity in his gaze.

I nod. "I'm not scared of who you are, but I'm scared of what you are. I've seen the damage a vampire can do."

He swallows. "I have to tell you something before you make the decision of whether or not I stay or I go." He hesitates. It's clear that he doesn't want to tell me whatever it is he's about to. "Last night, I got carried away with you. Your blood is always a temptation but so are you. The two mixed together is a deadly game. I almost lost control of my bloodlust because of my feelings towards you."

"What do you mean?" I ask for clarification.

"Jane was right when she said that I care about you. I more than care about you, May. I know we only just met, but I'm freaking *in love* with you. I was drawn to you the day I met you and I risked my life only days after meeting you just to save your human life. I can't keep away from you. I followed you to Seattle. I was relieved when they banished me because I knew I could go see you." He peers down at the floor rather than at me, probably too scared to see my reaction.

"I care about you too, but I don't know if I'm ready to tell you I love you. You kept a really huge secret from me and you did just about kill me because I cut my finger. That's kind of a big deal breaker," I ease.

He lifts his gaze up to mine. "If I hadn't lied would you have let me into your house?"

I debate this. "I'm not sure. Living with a vampire sounds like a pretty stupid idea, so no, probably not."

"Would you be able to say that you loved me if I was Bryxx?" he asks nervously.

This is a tough one, but I know the answer even if it might be painful for him to hear. "Up until last night I wasn't sure. I didn't think I could fall in love so damn fast, over a matter of weeks, but yes."

His gaze drops back the floor and he nods. "I can't say I'm happy about it, but I do understand. I am a danger to you. No matter how much I care about you and don't want to hurt you, I will always be dangerous. It's in my nature to want to kill you." He winces at his own words. "The other night I got so carried away, I almost lost it. I had to get away from you before things went too far to turn back from. I went out to the pasture to get some air, but I was so thirsty. Your blood was in my nostrils and my lust was out of control which didn't help any. I was so worked up that I..." he trails off with a sigh and the pain that fills his expression is almost unbearable. "May, it wasn't a coyote that killed Betty, it was me. I drank her dry because I lost control. I knew you'd be heartbroken, but I did it anyway and I was up all night trying to figure out a way to make it better, but I knew I couldn't. That could've been you and the look on your face when I told you what happened...I'll never get that out of my mind. Ever."

I hear myself gasp at his words and my hand flies up to cover my gaping mouth.

"I'm so sorry, May," he grimaces in pain, shaking his head and the sincerity in his tone is overwhelming. His pain and regret is so strong that it overrides mine and I actually find myself feeling bad for him. He can't help what he is. I repeat to myself.

"It's okay. People eat cows all the time. We just had hamburger last night," I attempt to joke before thinking about what comes out of my mouth, afterwards I realize how bad my joke is.

His grimace deepens and my mind races. I truly don't know what to think about this. We stand in silence, neither of us finding the words.

"I don't want you to be scared of me, even though you really should be," he whispers. "The incident that I don't like to talk about was my becoming a vampire. I was turned while on the job. I was banished from the Bryxx community because a body was found drained of blood, but I swear it *wasn't* me." He shifts his weight. "I've never killed anyone because of my bloodlust, well, besides our cow. I have it under control or I *did*. When I lived with the Bryxx, my father would send me to the prison once a month to drink from one of the criminals who was locked up, awaiting death row. That was all I needed and in exchange, I'd guard the community and do whatever crappy jobs the council had for me." He runs a nervous hand through his hair. "The reason vampires want Bryxx blood so badly is that it's stronger than human blood. It calms the thirst longer, over a month. A human will only last a day or two and even then, you're thirsty, it's just enough to numb the pain slightly. Bryxx blood numbs it significantly more; although, there's still pain. As the days go on, I'm getting thirstier and now your blood has literally become irresistible to vampires. They will die to taste you."

"Why haven't you then?" I find myself asking.

He purses his lips. "You're my friend. I don't have many of those. Not since I became a vampire. I still have morals. If I tasted you, I'd never be able to stop. I'd kill you."

"Well, if I'm causing you pain and all this distress just being near you, then why take me all the way out to the middle of nowhere? What happens when you get so hungry that you snap?"

"I hired a lady to come clean and bring us groceries, remember? It's not that I don't think we can manage the cleaning or that we can't go to town without getting attacked. She's my meals," he admits sheepishly. He seems disgusted by his own words.

Before I can stop myself, I cringe.

He takes a step back from me. "I'm sorry, but you need to know."

Daniel and Kai are not going to want you near me," I state the obvious.

Kade nods slowly. "I know. They'd rather see me dead probably."

“You’ve saved my life so many times. I’d be dead if it weren’t for you. You’ve never hurt me.”

He doesn’t reply.

“I trust you,” I decide. “I’ll tell them that I’m not going to go anywhere without you. They can’t give up their lives with the Bryxx to guard me for the next however many years I live.”

“I have no doubt that they won’t leave your side for as long as you live now that they know about your blood and the risk. They will do anything to keep you safe. Sending you back to Seattle and cutting contact was to protect you. Daniel will protect you with his life and because of that, so will Kai.”

“Well, Kai could at least go back. There’s no sense in ruining his life. He has family to go back to,” I attempt.

Kade quirks a smile. “He won’t leave Daniel’s side. I am positive of that.”

Something in his tone has me wondering if I’m missing something.

“Look, I’m going to give you some space. You have a lot to think about before they show up here. I’ll be nearby, but I’ll keep my distance. I’m going to go for a long run. I have lots to think about, too,” he murmurs and before I can protest, he’s gone.



Chapter 12



When I hear the car pull up in the driveway, my nerves peak and I freeze thinking that it'll take them a minute to get into the house. *Wrong*. As soon as I hear the car, they are blasting through the front door.

"Where is he?" Daniel demands, a long silver knife in one hand.

"It's okay. I'm fine and he's outside. Don't hurt him!" I shout in a panic. What the hell is planning to do to him, stab him?

Daniel's lips curl up angrily and Kai's leather clad body hurls towards the door they just came in.

"If he was going to hurt me, don't you think he'd have done it by now? He's been with me for weeks! If it weren't for him I'd have been killed more than a few times. Daniel, I swear to god, if you hurt him!"

Daniel closes his eyes briefly and takes a long, shaky, deep breath. "I know you don't know much about our world, but you have to know that vampires are volatile and they're not in control of their bloodlust. He could snap at *any* minute."

I keep the fact that he already almost snapped to myself and also that fact that he killed a cow to myself, knowing that tidbit of knowledge won't help Kade's case any. "He won't. I trust him with my life," I admit partially to Daniel but also partly to myself.

A whoosh of air causes me to glance to my left. The blur slows beside me. Kade. Then Kai storms through the front door again. My senses are too slow to see Kai and Daniel both rush at Kade, but a moment later, I see Kai dazed on the floor looking confused. Kade is holding Daniel against the wall.

"You know you're too young, weak, and untrained to get the upper hand on me, but I must say I like the effort, boys," Kade snarls with annoyance. "Now, can we talk this through like civilized men? May is little delicate for us to be throwing ourselves around in close proximity, don't you think?"

Daniel's body relaxes, and he nods once, his face still pinched. "Fine."

Kade releases Daniel and steps back from him. "Why don't we sit at the table?" Kade suggests civilly and points a thumb to the mahogany table.

Daniel sighs and begins walking towards it, his feet dragging.

Kai stands up from the ground. He glares daggers at Kade. He then fixes his disheveled hair before following the other two men to the table. My stunned ass doesn't follow until all three of them are seated at the table and looking at me expectantly. I hurry over.

Just as I sit, Daniel points a finger into Kade's chest. "You get banished and the first thing you do is shack up with my little sister?!"

My eyes widen and my jaw drops.

"It wasn't like that. She was the only person outside of the community that I knew. I didn't know where to go. I screwed around for two weeks and then I just sort of ended up in Seattle on her doorstep," Kade explains himself and crosses his arms at his chest. Technically, he ended up on my old doorstep but I don't correct him.

Daniel groans. "I can't have you around her. You know why. It makes *no* sense for you to be here."

Kade's jaw clenches but he says nothing. I am hurt when he doesn't argue. Why won't he stand up for himself?

Kai finally gathers himself, though his glare doesn't lessen any. "You go, Kade. Daniel and I will stay and protect her."

Kade glances to me, a question in his deep gaze. "Is that what *you* want?"

I swallow and shake my head automatically. "I want him to stay," I admit. "He's saved my life multiple times and never once has he hurt me. I trust him. In fact, I know him better than either of you two."

Kai and Daniel stare at me as though I have three heads, their jaws threatening to fall open at any moment.

Kade smiles softly. "You have my word that I won't hurt her."

"That's not enough," Daniel mutters gruffly and curses. "Kade, you can't possibly think this is a smart idea. You'll kill her. You'll kill my sister."

"If you don't believe me then why don't you stay with us and see for yourself?" Kade offers, seemingly relaxed. "There's a second bedroom."

"Where will you sleep?" I ask Kade, worried that he'll be putting himself out.

"Vampires don't need sleep, darling. I only sleep to pass the time." His gaze turns from me to the other men.

Daniel looks to Kai. "We can't sense vampires. We'd never know one was near until it was right on the doorstep. Not unless it was running inhumanly fast and we could hear it. We're also not much against a vampire. Let's be real here. We not exactly the ideal protection either."

"There isn't much to do here. I will train you in our free time," Kade offers, sweetening the deal.

Kai gapes and his glare dissipates slowly as he considers this. "Why would you offer us your training?"

"Because you guys need it desperately if you're ever going to protect her, and I want her as protected as possible. Her safety is *very* important to me. It'd be for her benefit, *not yours*." Kade's tone turns icy, so cold that it doesn't even sound like him. I've never heard him sound so snippy.

Daniel and Kai silently stare at each other almost as if they're having a conversation that I can't hear. Daniel finally nods once. "We could use professional training from someone as advanced as yourself, but we need some sort of assurance that you're not going to hurt her. We can't blindly trust a vampire you understand."

We sit in silence, none of us having a clue how to prove that he won't hurt me.

Kai's expression turns hard. "We chain him down and see what kind of will power he has. That's what we'll do. It's all we *can* do really." Kai appears eager to put his plan in action, too eager really.

Daniel rolls his eyes. "As if, Kai. Do you *really* think the two of us could get him in chains?"

They want to chain Kade up? Here I thought that vampires were the bad guys but here's my own brother and his friend, both of whom are Bryxx, wanting to *chain* up Kade, a vampire.

Kade nods. "If it'll prove to you that I won't harm her then I'll do it."

All of our eyes land on Kade who shrugs and crossed his arms firmly at his chest. Not for a second do I see uneasiness slip into his expression. He is determined.

"What?" I ask, not understanding. "You're going to let them tie you up? How smart is that? What if they don't let you out?"

Kade nods slowly and rubs the scruff on his chin. "I need to earn their trust. If roles were reversed, I'd need to be able to trust me too. I see where they're coming from."

"Good thing we threw in the vampire restraints, Danny," Kai shares awkwardly.

Kade rolls his eyes. "You didn't actually think you could get me into those without my cooperation, did you?"

Daniel shrugs. "It was worth a try. If we *had* managed to get the upper hand somehow and *didn't* have them, who'd be kicking themselves?"

Kai stands abruptly and leaves the house, presumably to fetch the restraints.

I can't believe this is actually happening and Kade seems perfectly okay with it. It's three against one. Is there even any point in me arguing?

"Where should we do this?" Daniel asks Kade, his voice stern, no hint of the laid-back brother I know.

"The barn," Kade mutters with a sigh. "Let's get it over with."

Kade leads the way out to the barn. Kai brings a bunch of metal chunks and chains and drops them onto the ground with a loud thunk. He then begins screwing things together quickly, the metal screeching and moaning, until four attached heavy metal chains lie on the ground.

“Silver diminishes a vampire’s strength to that of a human,” Kai explains to me and puts the final bolt together. It’s clear that it isn’t the first time that Kai has set up these chains.

Kade steps in front of the contraption which Kai has screwed into the brick barn wall somehow. He offers his wrists.

Kai doesn’t hesitate, he slaps the restraints onto them fluidly. “You know if you don’t pass this test, you’re not getting out of these, right?” He waits until the restraints are on his wrists to say this.

Kade scoffs. “Yeah, I know.”

Kai then clasps Kade’s ankles in the lower silver chains.

“You don’t have to watch this,” Daniel assures me. “We can just prick your finger outside and you won’t have to see any of this.”

“I’m staying. I need to see this,” I decide and look up to Kade who doesn’t appear incredibly impressed by my decision but doesn’t argue.

Daniel looks about to protest but Kai glowers at him and Daniel slumps in defeat.

“Ready?” Kai asks and takes a step back from Kade. “Test the restraints, vamp.”

“Yeah.” Kade pulls on the metal but the chains are far from giving out.

Kai nods in contentment and then pulls his blade from his pocket. He runs the sharp edge in a thin line down his index finger, slicing it open. I watch as a tiny drop of blood seeps from his finger and rolls down his hand. Kai stands a safe distance from Kade and lifts his open hand up so that Kade can see the blood as it slides down his pale palm.

Kade observes Kai’s finger intently as if fascinated by it or intrigued but he doesn’t show any sign of losing control.

Kai then takes the blade and positions it over his wrist. He slices a far longer, deeper cut there. Blood rushes out and drips to the ground, puddling there. The sight makes me a bit queasy but after seeing what I’ve seen the past few weeks, I realize that seeing blood doesn’t have nearly as much an affect on me as it used to.

Kade squirms a tad and I hear his breathing become labored. A grunt of struggle escapes his chest and his lips part slightly to reveal two elongated incisors. He swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

The sight of Kade’s vampiric teeth startles me. The only time I’ve ever seen such things were in near death situations when vampires attacked. It’s unsettling to say the least.

“He’s not thrashing against the restraints,” Daniel states with interest.

Kade then closes his eyes for a moment. His teeth recede and his breathing evens out before he opens his eyes again.

“Hmm,” Kai expresses, his lips turned down in a stiff frown. He turns to me in a blur.

Daniel pulls a pocket knife from his coat pocket and flips it open. “Do you want me to do this or do you want to?”

“I can,” I whisper and take the knife from him. I take a moment before pushing the sharp tip of the blade into the tip of my finger.

All eyes are on Kade who watches with such pure intensity that his gaze could light fires. His hands ball into tight fists and his eyes, I swear they flicker red. His teeth escape his gums again and a pained snarl radiates from him. This is hurting him. It’s obvious. Sweat forms on his forehead. He doesn’t lose control, though. He fights it even though it hurts.

Daniel and Kai watch in amusement and shock, both of their gazes slackened.

I’m tempted to brush my finger on my jeans to get rid of the blood, but I know this won’t help any. Instead, I bring my finger up to my mouth, needing to stop Kade’s pain. I suck on my finger, hoping that the bleeding will soon stop.

Kai pulls my finger from my mouth. "That was only a prick. We need more blood. Chances are if you get hurt, more than a drop of blood is going to be present. A paper cut would cause more blood than that. Don't worry. We will heal you after, okay."

I don't argue, knowing that he's right; although, I'm not so sure about having myself sliced open. I hand the knife to Kai, not sure if I'll be able to cut myself.

He doesn't slice open my wrist or anything insane, instead he takes the knife to my quivering palm and very quickly slices it open.

I gasp in pain and Daniel is at my side instantaneously. "We shouldn't do this. Let me heal you, Mayflower"

I shake my head. The worst of the pain has subsided. This has to do with life and death. We need to see if Kade can handle himself in this situation, because if he can't, then that could mean my death.

A throaty growl escapes Kade, then a snarl. He pulls against the restraints erratically. The chains clunk and thunk and rattle.

"Frick that hurts," I whine as I stare down at my bleeding palm. I'm such a baby.

"She's in pain!" Kade snarls gruffly. "Heal her!"

Kai raises a single brow.

"Heal her or I swear to god I'll kill you!" Kade shouts angrily.

Kai crosses his arms in protest, but Daniel takes a step towards me and lifts up my hand.

Kade's fangs recede. "Heal her! She's hurt!"

Kai gapes.

Kade is fully in control. He pulls the restraints as he tries to approach me, but not to harm me. His eyes are no longer flickering red. He's himself and he got that way because he knew I was in pain.

Kai and Daniel seem to have gotten their answer.

"Go to him," Daniel instructs me. "Let him heal you. He won't hurt you."

I glance at Kai who nods in agreement.

I approach Kade carefully, not wanting to set him off. My hand is still bleeding viciously and stinging like something else. The pain of it is causing my hand to shake.

"Take the pin out of the right-hand restraint," Kai instructs, and I do as he asks one handedly. The silver falls from Kade's wrist, freeing it. Part of me is still afraid that he could snap at any moment although he appears more concerned about my hand than anything.

Kade brings his palm to his mouth and bites down before offering me it to me. I give him my hand and he clutches it in his, letting his blood heal my flesh.

The pain disappears almost immediately as tingling replaces the ache.

"If I knew they'd hurt you, I'd never have let this happen," he whispers. "I'm so sorry, May," he seethes and shoots daggers at the boys behind me.

"It's okay, Kade. It needed to be done, right? I'm okay," I assure him and then I pull the pin from his other wrist, then his two ankles.

He shakes away the chains and finally moves towards to Daniel and Kade. "What was that?" he snarls at them. His eyes burn red and incisors poke through again.

I swallow hard and step between him and the other two. "Calm down, Kade." I say this as calmly and carefully as I can muster.

"Did you know?!" Daniel shouts, nostrils flaring. Why is he so angry? I thought he'd be happy that Kade was in control. Daniel approaches Kade and shoves him with both hands. Kade stands his ground. Why in the hell would Daniel shove Kade when he's on the verge of snapping? Way to poke the damn bear.

Kade shakes his head once. "No...*but*...I suspected."

“Know what?” I ask, feeling left out of the conversation.

Kai sighs deeply. “He’s in love with you and he’s claimed you. He cannot and will not hurt you. You’re safe with him.”

“What?” I sputter. “What does that mean?”

Daniel stiffens. “It means that he’s subconsciously decided that you’re his. It’s a vampire thing. You’re under his protection until the day you die. It’s something they do when they rarely find their soul mate.”

“A vampire and the descendant of two Bryxx parents. How *weird*,” Kai mumbles. “Never heard of anything like that.” He kicks at a pile of straw, sending dust flying around.

“You know I can’t help it, right? It’s not something I willingly chose. It just happened,” Kade scolds them, his teeth finally receding again. “And as if you two can talk. It’s not like you two are a traditional couple,” Kade mutters vehemently then freezes after he says it.

It takes a moment for what he said to click. Daniel and Kai are...a couple? How have I not been told this? My brows pull together as I think about this. I haven’t spent enough time around them to really see it, but one of them could’ve told me.

“We we’re going to tell you ourselves when the time was right,” Daniel rattles off quickly. “I’m sorry.” Daniel backs away from me, palms raised as if I’m some wild animal about to pounce on him.

I glance between the two of them. “When the timing was right? Why not just introduce him to me as your boyfriend rather than you friend?”

“We didn’t know how you’d take it,” Daniel admits quietly and looks to Kai who is seemingly ignoring this entire conversation, entranced by the hay floor.

“What?” I ask, confused. “You were worried I was homophobic or something? Because I’m not. Not at all. It’s not the olden days anymore.” Kai and Daniel relax, Kai finally looking up from the ground and meeting my eyes.

“The Bryxx don’t accept homosexuality,” Kade explains. “They’ve had to hide it for years.”

Daniel faces Kade. “I want to know how *you* knew,” he grunts.

Kade shrugs, appearing bored now. “I just knew. I’m good at reading people. You two look at each other all lovey.”

“Do other people know?” Kai asks, sounding concerned, but his expression not giving anything away.

Kade shrugs again. “Not a clue.”

I lose my patience with this side conversation. “Can we back up to the part where I’m apparently his...” I point a finger at Kade. “...soulmate? We have bigger fish to fry here, guys.”

Kade nibbles his bottom lip, apparently not about to answer me.

The silence is killer as I wait for someone to respond.

“What about it?” Daniel finally asks as if I shouldn’t have any questions about this at all, he slips his hands into his pants pockets.

“We’ve known each other for barely over a month. How does he just get to decide that? You can’t know that type of thing in a month!” Heat floods my cheeks. I’m on the verge of crying and I can’t even place why. Am I mad about this? Sad? Disappointed? Confused?

Kade cringes away from my words. “I didn’t *decide* this,” Kade answers meekly. “It’s something that just...happens.” He throws his hands up, palms facing me.

Daniel nods. “As much as I’d really love to choke him for falling for my little sister, he can’t control it any more than we can. In this case, I really can’t complain because this actually works out to your advantage safety-wise. You couldn’t ask for a better bodyguard than him, especially if he’s no danger to you. This could ultimately save your life, May. This is a good thing.”

I’m still stuck on the whole soulmate thing. “Okay, but what does this mean? What is the downfall to all of this? I have to marry him or something?” I know my voice is tense and bitter but in the moment, I don’t care.

Kade physically seems to cringe away from my words again and seems to wince. He turns his back to me and paces to the front of the barn. He runs a hand through his hair, grasping and pulling at it as he does.

Daniel looks between the two of us. "You don't have to do anything if you don't want to, but if his soul sensed that yours is the one, then it's the one, May. It might take you longer to see it, but he *is* the one for you. I know that's probably really fucking weird for you, but I'd think that after all you've accepted thus far, this wouldn't be the end of the world."

I just love how I have no choice in the matter. I'm in my early twenties. I don't want to be tied down to a vampire of all people. This is insanity. Can my life get anymore awful and just plain ridiculous? I find myself wanting Jane here more than ever. Like some sort of brat, I begin to cry at the unfairness of everything.

"Kade, go for walk while she cools down. She just needs some time," Kai mutters quietly to Kade who doesn't hesitate to disappear from the barn.

Kai and Daniel both stare at me as *if I* am the problem.

"What?" I ask them with annoyance. I feel like pulling my hair out. What ever happened to me working at the gas station, my only real worry how I was going to afford to go to college?

"You hurt him when you refuse him," Kai tells me. "Imagine you've fallen in love with your soulmate and then they tell you that they don't want anything to do with it and they're actually angry at you for falling in love with them. For you it's weird, for him it's not, it's who he is and what he knows." It surprises me that Kai defends Kade, so much so that I force myself to place myself in Kade's shoes for a moment. I get what Kai is saying but it's still not fair to me.

"You will love him back one day, Mayflower. Whether that's tomorrow or in fifty years from now. He's who you were created to be with," Daniel finishes and bring his down to rest on my shoulder comfortingly.

"Don't turn your back on the idea so quick. Let it process. You might not want to be with him now and that's okay, we're not saying you have to start dating him today, but you *will* marry him one day, May, mark my words. That there is your future husband, the man you will one day have no qualms about giving your life up for." Daniel seems both frustrated with me but also understanding. He lightly gives my shoulder a shake.

"I know what you're saying," I whisper. "He's already in love with me and I just basically told him that I couldn't care less that he's my soulmate." Which isn't true might I add. I do care about Kade, more than I've admitted to myself. I realize that he and I need to talk one on one. "Where is he?" I ask, knowing that they'll have heard where he ran off to.

"He went east then wrapped around, kicked a metal corral in and then took off west. He's out of my hearing range," Daniel answers. "He will be back when he blows off steam. He won't go far."

"Why don't you guys go settle into the house, that is if you're going to stay here?" I ask.

"We have clearance for four days, then we need to be back," Kai answers and turns hastily for the door.

"Okay, well you guys can go get your room ready then. I think I will stay out here for a while. I need to think."

Both men nod in acceptance and then leave the barn, stranding me with my thoughts. I pace around the barn and then I head outside towards the chicken coop, thinking I may as well feed them while I'm out here and collect the eggs. When it gets into eye view, I see that I'm not the only one with this idea. Kade sits next to the coop with his back against a piece of ply wood propped up against the metal gate. In his hands is Dorothy. He pets her as if she's a dog. Lucy and Marie run around in front of the coop, pecking at the ground.

I know Kade hears me coming, but he doesn't look up or acknowledge me until I'm right in front of him. "I'm sorry," he apologizes. "If I could change it and make you happier, I would." I look down to his hand as something catches my eye. The fidget spinner I gave him weeks ago. I can't help but grin when as I watch him spin it.

His words only make me feel worse, though. "Don't be sorry. I was just surprised. That's not something you have to deal with in my world." Or what seems to be my old world. "I understand better now and I'm okay with it. I just

don't know if I'm ready to commit to you yet. I'm young and I have a lot to learn and a lot to experience. I wasn't expecting this at all."

He nods. "I know and there's no rush, but when you're ready, I'll be waiting."

"And next time I upset you like that because I don't think before I speak, please talk to me, don't run off to the chickens," I tease, and he smiles.

"Deal."

"Do you want me to make something to eat? Are you hungry?" I ask him, my stomach growling fiercely.

He chuckles gruffly. "I don't actually need to eat food. It gives me no nutrients. My body just disintegrates it."

This is a strange thought to me, but I guess it makes sense. "So, is that a no?"

"I will cook for you while you catch up with your brother. What would you like?"

His thoughtfulness makes me grin. "How about a turkey sandwich?"

A low grumble of a laugh escapes his chest. "I guess I have my work cut out for me."



Chapter 13



Daniel explains the shocking family history he learnt from the Bryxx council to me during supper. As it turns out, our great something grandma and grandpa on dad's side were human Bryxx who gave up one of their twin daughters to demons in order to guarantee the other's protection from the vampires and the wrath of the Bryxx.

When the Bryxx heard of the deal their family made with the demons, they enacted their own deal with the demons, knowing how important the family was to them. The Bryxx offered to protect the family alongside the demons if in return the demons continued to keep humans in the dark about the supernatural world.

Each generation then on would give their life, blood, and soul to the demons as a sacrifice for their children, ending with my and Daniel's own father. The demons could come at any time and take them away, meaning that our father didn't die of a heart attack, instead he'd given up his soul for us to be protected and able to live long, normal lives. I can't help but wonder if our father knew what happened to Daniel.

"Where was this protection when you died?" I squeak in shock.

Daniel bows his head. "Mayflower, Dad wasn't my biological father, so I wasn't protected under the agreement. He thought I was protected, but somewhere in the fine writing I wasn't, and I didn't really need any protection since I didn't have the Bryxx blood. If I did have the blood, I probably would've died rather than made the change to Bryxx. Those with Bryxx blood rarely make the change, remember? Our mom had me before her and dad got together. I don't know my biological dad and I probably will never know who he was."

My jaw drops. I never would've guessed that Daniel entirely biologically related to me. We look so similar. "How long have you known that you weren't dad's?!"

"Since yesterday," he admits quietly. "The council told me."

"Oh my gosh, Daniel!" I blurt. "Are you okay?"

He shrugs. "It doesn't change anything, May. You're still my sister."

I'm about to argue but I decide against it when Kai covertly shakes his head at me behind Daniel's back.

Kade gathers up everyone's sandwich dishes and places them neatly in the dishwasher.

"You'd make a good housewife," Kai teases, lightening the mood, a thin smirk on his lips.

Kade doesn't seem bothered. "I don't like clutter."

"What do you guys do for fun around here?" Kai wonders while wandering around the kitchen like he's bored out of his mind. "Kind of boring out here."

Daniel rolls his eyes. "We're on vacation. Relax a little, please, Kai."

"Vacation? I was hoping we'd get to kick some vampire ass," Kai retorts and picks up a flipper from the utensil vase, flipping it in the air and then catching it. "What kind of vacation is this?"

"Yeah?" Kade goads. "Try it. Let's see how many times I can pin your ass to the ground before you give up." Kade's tone is cocky and rightfully so. I've seen the guy fight.

Kai grins. "You're on, vamp!"

"Take it outside," I groan and point to the door. I know just how much of a wreck these people can cause in a fight. It's like having two bulls in a china shop for heaven's sake.

Kade zips out the door and Kai follows him. Daniel waits for me to make it out the door before he follows and closes it behind him.

The scuffle has already started and ended by the time we get outside. Kai is pinned to the ground groaning in pain.

“Vampires are faster and stronger than you. Use that to your advantage by using it against them. Use surprise by implanting an uncommon fighting style or move. Don’t stick to the basics. It’s predictable. Up. Let’s go again,” Kade demands and backs away from Kai quickly.

Kai immediately lunges at Kade who grabs his wrist, twists it back, then manages to flip Kai onto his back with a thump.

I can’t help but wince. That’s gotta hurt.

Daniel takes a seat on the front steps, so I sit beside him.

“Why is Kade so much better than Kai? He can’t even get the upper hand for one second.” I hope that Kai is too into the fighting to hear me.

Daniel snorts, “Kade is a legend. He was the best Bryxx guard they’d ever had.”

“Why would they give him up so easily if he was the best? They accused him of a crime he didn’t commit. If he was so important to them, then why not take it to trial?”

Daniel pulls out his phone and lights up the screen before returning it back to his pocket. “Well, when he was attacked by a whole herd of vampires, he stood little chance. They turned him, but that also meant that the Bryxx lost their best fighter. It normally wouldn’t come down to a vote. Bryxx turned vamp, are to be killed. No matter what. If it had been anyone else, they would’ve been killed on the spot then and there, but with his talent and his royalty status... Well, one councilman stood up for him and thought that he should be kept with the Bryxx but controlled closely. This led to a vote. It was a close vote, but it ended up that he was allowed to stay under a long list of conditions, and if he were to slip up even once, they’d banish, or more likely, kill him. His royal title was stripped to top it all off. It was a shit deal, but he took it over death. Even as a vampire, he hated vampires and it wasn’t like he had anywhere to go. He got to do what he loved most and I think that’s why he stayed. Without his royal status, and with the fact that he was now disposable, they let him go on missions that could actually use his advanced skills rather than have him be stuck guarding the Bryxx walls which really doesn’t take much talent. He lost a lot, but he also gained a little.”

I watch as Kai attempts to leap onto Kade’s back, but Kade whips around, jumps, and kicks him in the side. Kai gets sent rolling through the air until he hits the ground ten feet away. I gasp hoping that he’s okay. Kai springs right back up, ready to go again and Daniel chuckles easily. For the first time since I found out that Daniel was still alive, he’s relaxed.

“Aren’t you scared he will get hurt?” I ask Daniel, although I know Kade would never seriously hurt him.

Daniel shakes his head and smiles warmly. “We get tossed around a lot in our job. In our level of work, Kai is used to being one of the best. It’s kind of funny to see him getting repeatedly knocked on his ass for once. It reminds him that he’s only a level blue.”

“Level blue?” I ask, crinkling my nose.

Daniel explains, “There are ten levels of fight skill. Each skill has a different job set. In order from lowest to highest rank there is: white, yellow, green, purple, blue, orange, brown, red, grey, and black.”

“Kade is a black level?” I ask for reassurance, though I’m already convinced.

Daniel nods. “Not very many people have that kind of skill. Some of the lower Bryxx are white, yellow or green, mostly kids in training. Usually by the time you’re eighteen you’re a purple, but some people just aren’t good at fighting, so they get shuffled into other jobs at eighteen rather than continue physical training. If you make it to purple by eighteen, you keep training and you go into guard work. You start as basically an errand boy and you continue your training until you get to blue level. At that point you actually start guarding the walls. You get lots of action with the smaller demons that the higher defenses let through to focus on higher threats.”

“You and Kai are blue?” I ask to make sure I’m following.

“Yes. Every year you’re tested against the level higher, and if you fair well, then you move up. Orange and brown are the next line of defense. The middle, I suppose. They take anything that gets through the main line of defense and filter through the small stuff and send it towards the blue. Then there is the main line of defense which is the red and grey. They basically just take down the big bad guys and let everything else pass through. Their main worry is to get the things that are the biggest threats. There are tons of different types of demons, part of the job is knowing which are which and knowing how to kill them, which isn’t easy. We can innately sense demons if they’re in their true form, except vampires. We also learn how to point out a demon in another body and how to pick out a vampire from a crowd.”

“I thought you told me you were a combat trainer, not a guard?” I recall vaguely as I focus on trying to depict the motions of the sparring men in the yard, but they’re far too quick for me to catch everything. I catch a move here and there but I miss most of it.

Daniel grins. “You remembered that? I’m a combat trainer for level purple but only three days a week. The other four I’m on guard duty. Being a trainer is a well-respected position, even if it’s for one of the lower levels. It means I am giving up time I could be using to do what I was born to do, kill demons. I’m also giving up *me* time to learn and strengthen my skills to teach the next generation of fighters.”

So, if those are all the defense lines, then what does level black do?” I wonder as Kade throws Kai into a tree, sending a large branch timbering to the ground. I wince, but of course Kai gets up again.

“Level black gets sent out on missions around the world to take down demons in problem areas. They also help guard when they’re around, usually running a larger perimeter around the community to stop demons before they even hit our defenses. They’re like our form of special agents.”

“Okay, Dan, you’re up, I need a break,” Kai calls from the ground about twenty feet away where he lies on his back.

Daniel stands and removes his black jacket, handing it to me. Kai slowly saunters over to me and takes a slow seat beside me on the opposite side that Daniel was just on. He moves carefully as if he’s stiff. I can’t imagine why. I glance at the broken tree.

“Alright, vamp, let’s get my beating over with,” Daniel mutters as Kade moves the fallen tree branch out of the way.

Kade grumbles an amused laugh. “Never doubt your skill, kid. You’ll never improve if you do.”

Kade using the work ‘kid’ to refer to my adult brother confuses me for a moment until I remember just how old Kade is compared to Daniel, Kade, and myself. He’s old enough to be my great something grandfather. The thought feels strange in my mind. Humans Kade’s age have been dead for centuries.

Kai groans and lifts his hand in front of my face. “Does my pinky look broken to you?” he asks with a smile behind his playful grimace.

I look at the bluish, reddish, purplish appendage and can’t help but gag when I see its position. Definitely broken.

He laughs and then uses his free hand to bend it back into place.

“Ewww,” I squeal when I hear it crack and crunch. I cringe away from him.

His laughter only gets louder. “It’ll heal in a minute or so. You better get used to being queasy if your soulmate is a vampire.”

I can’t help but think he’s right. I recall the cow. Kade literally drinks people’s blood. The thought makes me gag.

Kai wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me in for a hug. “You’ll get used to it darling.”

“Easy for you to say. You were born into this, so was Kade, and Daniel’s been around this since he was a kid,” I complain.

Kai shrugs. “Daniel cried every night for the first six months he was away from his family. He was a nine-year-old kid that died, came back to life as a supernatural being, and was told he wasn’t going to ever see his family again; and he didn’t until the day Kade found you after your car accident. As soon as he saw you, there was a part of him that died that day in the woods that came back to life. He sent you away and that was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to watch him do, but it was for your safety.” Kai rubs his hands together roughly. “*Then* we get called into a meeting with the

council after finding out you're dead, and they give us his whole family history. Councilman Henry meets us outside just as Daniel is about to go into complete meltdown mode and pulls us aside, out of reach, and gives Daniel a note, tucks it in his pocket and tells him to open it when he's home and alone. The note said that you were alive but in hiding and that no one else could know about it for your safety. It said to call your cell phone."

I gape. "What?" I ask. "How did this Henry guy know where I was?"

Kai shrugs. "That's what we'd like to know. Someone obviously trusts the senile bastard, someone who knows him very well which not many people do." Kai's eyes wander to Kade who is on top of Daniel pinning him down.

Kade glances over to us and jumps off of Daniel. "I told Henry," he admits. "I trust him, and I knew word would get out about her death, and when that happened, I wanted Daniel's reaction to her death to be authentic so people didn't grow suspicious, but I also didn't want him thinking May was truly dead."

"You trust councilman Henry?" Daniel asks vehemently.

Kade nods. "More than you can possibly imagine. We have much in common."

Daniel and Kai appear confused, their faces crinkled. Kai mutters, "I've only ever seen the guy be a dick to you."

"He's a dick alright, but he's a trustworthy dick, one that I trust immensely. He's done a lot for me over the years believe it or not," Kade clarifies and straightens his clothes. Not a speck of dirt on his plain t-shirt and sweats. I wish I could say the same for Kai and Daniel who are both covered head to toe in dirt and rips.

The next few days pass quickly as I get reacquainted with my brother and get to know his best friend and boyfriend Kai. When it's time for them to leave, in order to keep appearances up and keep their places in the Bryxx community, I am sad to see them go, but at least this time I know I will see them again. I am now part of their world, even if the reasoning why isn't so pleasant.

They pull out of the driveway in a rented red suburban and I watch them go until they're out of sight. Kade stands behind me on the porch quietly. Because the other two have been around the last few days keeping him busy with combat training, I haven't had much time with him, which has been good since it's given me time to think about everything that's happened lately.

I eventually turn around and smile softly at Kade. "I'm actually surprised they left me with you," I tell him honestly.

He smirks sexily. "They didn't really have much of a choice," he replies, then his expression becomes serious. "They don't trust me, but they trust that I'll do whatever I have to in order to keep you safe."

"I think they like you more than they let on," I admit truthfully.

Kade shrugs. "They have the instinct to hate vampires and it's drilled into them their whole lives. I know I loathed vampires when I was Bryxx, even now I loathe them still. I can't blame them for hating me or not trusting me, because if we switched places, and they were the vampires, I'd hate them."

I think he's wrong about them hating him, but I don't argue, truth is, he knows them better than I do.

"Thank you," I say, and wrap my arms around him tightly.

"For what?" he asks, a smirk appearing on his lips. He hugs me back.

"For keeping me safe and for letting my brother and Kai lock you up and..." I trail off recalling Kade's behavior, the sight of him almost losing control. A demon, yes. Terrifying but that's not the emotion that's strongest when I think about that situation. I feel sad for him. A small sob escapes me before I can stop it.

He holds me tighter. "No need to thank me. I'm sorry you had to see that, but you needed to none the less."

I have to agree but I stay quiet.

"Did it scare you?" he asks absentmindedly.

I debate lying but instead I state, "Yes, it did."

"Are you afraid of me?" he asks, his grip loosening on me slightly.

I shake my head into his chest. "No."

"Good, because I'll never hurt you," he promises.

“Checkers?” I ask simply, a few days ago he promised to show me some new tricks after he beat me in a matter of only a few moves.

He lets out a grisly laugh. “Alright. You set up while I grab some whiskey from the pantry. I need a drink now that those two are finally gone.”

“They annoyed you that much?” I ask in amusement.

Kade sighs. “No, I enjoyed kicking their asses over and over again actually, but I do like to be alone with you more.”

“Why don’t you set up the checker board while I get the whiskey? You’ll probably have the board done up by the time I get to the pantry,” I remind him and release him from the hug.

“Deal,” he agrees and then he’s gone.

I roll my eyes. I wish I could do that.

After playing four rounds of checkers, all in his favor, I’m thoroughly unimpressed with my skill level which is strongly lacking. He doesn’t seem to get bored of kicking my ass though, much like how he found beating up Daniel and Kai amusing. I decide he either likes teaching or he likes winning or maybe both.

“You’re getting better,” he reassures me to no avail.

“I think I’m getting worse,” I inform him and flick a checker across the board at him. He stops it mid slide with his index finger and then takes a sip of his whiskey.

“Donna should be here soon.” His voice is casual, but I sense a hint of hope in it. I realize that he must be getting hungry. He hasn’t had anything to drink since the cow, which he says barely touched his thirst, and before that the last he had was when he left the Bryxx community.

I swallow and take a sip of my own whiskey to think about my words. I reply. “How are you feeling?”

He bristles. “I’m getting edgy.” He takes another gulp then swirls his glass around. “This helps take the edge off.”

“When is she supposed to come?” I question him, trying not to sound concerned.

He glances to the calendar on the wall. “She was supposed to start yesterday.”

I raise my brows in surprise. “What if she doesn’t come?”

He sighs. “If she doesn’t come before tomorrow morning I will have to figure something out. Maybe we will take a drive to town tomorrow morning and do our own grocery shopping, or we will take a backroad drive to a neighbor’s.”

I smile softly even though the thought is a bit sickening. He’s going to drive to the neighbors, knock on their door and bite them? “Alright. Did you try calling her?”

“No answer,” he heaves and taps his fingers on the table.

“Did you do a background check on this lady?” I wonder curiously.

He nods. “Yes, but she has terminal cancer and now I’m afraid something bad might have happened to her.”

My eyes bulge. “You hired a lady with terminal cancer to feed from?”

“It’s not quite what you think. I hired her because of her cancer because I thought if she came around every couple days and I took a little from her then healed her, I might be able to cure her cancer over time.”

“Your blood can heal diseases?” I’m not sure why I’m surprised by this.

He gets up and pours himself another full glass of whiskey. “I don’t know. I thought it was worth a try though.”

“Why do you care about her cancer?” I hope I don’t sound rude.

Kade sits back down and leans against the back of his chair. “I’ve never not cared about others. It doesn’t matter what species they are. If they’re good people, they have my acceptance. I am not prejudiced. Henry once told me that even bad people should be greatly respected in some way because they are the protagonists of their own stories. No one is born bad. Life makes us swing that way sometimes.”

I don’t respond but instead I finish my drink slowly and we sit in a comfortable silence for a while.

“Will you tell me more about how you became a vampire? I know Daniel said you were attacked by whole group of them, but is there more?” I’m not sure why I find myself thinking about this but ever since Daniel skimmed over it it’s been on my mind.

Kade sets his glass down with a clunk. “I was out guarding as usual. Although I had the skill to be a level black, my father wouldn’t let me do anything higher than an orange and that was only on occasion. Usually, I was a blue. On that particular day, I was working as an orange level though. Vampires don’t usually make it past the first line of defense, but they do now and again and it’s not usually a big deal. This time though, it was the biggest vampire attack we’ve ever had, a lot got through and they were after me, specifically. I’d killed a lot of vampires and in some ways, I was famous—royalty that wasn’t protected within the walls of the Bryxx community. All the vampires wanted to kill me as a sort of scapegoat for all the shit the Bryxx has ever done to them or I don’t know why exactly, but they all came at me before the others even noticed they were around. No one had been radioed that vampires got through because the first line of defense was still fighting more. By the time my colleagues got to me, the vampires had torn me apart, drained me dry, then one of them forced me to drink her blood as a final *fuck you*. Why *wouldn’t* they turn me, a royal Bryxx, into what I loathed and let my own people kill me? It sent a message alright,” he relays to me solemnly. He takes a big gulp before continuing. “My colleagues were trained to kill the infected on the spot, but because I was who I was, they hesitated and informed the council first. My dad wasn’t in, and thankfully so, or he would’ve been the first contacted and I know he’d have ordered them to kill me right there.”

I grit my teeth, my mind escaping into his story.

“Instead, it was Henry who took the call for my dad. He ordered two black levels to bring me into the cell room under the courthouse. Henry met me down there but everything that happened in those next few hours is a blur. I was in pain from the transformation and my thirst was increasing. When the transformation was done, Henry gave me a bag of Bryxx blood. I wouldn’t drink it even though every part of me wanted to devour it. I forced myself to throw it back at him.” He chuckles sadly. “Eventually my will power snapped, and I drank the blood which made me feel a lot better, but I was still in so much pain, overwhelmed by the new thirst I had. It never fully goes away. Henry told me that I’d be going to trial which surprised me because I was pretty sure I was a dead man, and to be honest, I wanted to die.”

Kade rubs his hand over his prickly chin. “I went to trial and after taking some pointers from Henry, who saved my life, the council voted, and I wasn’t killed...as you know. Henry promised that within a year he’d train my self-control so well that I could be sent out to fight demons for the Bryxx. I was forced to live in a dungeon-like place near Henry’s home with shackles and the whole bit for two months while guarded by four black levels. Now and again he’d release the black levels and come in and teach me control. He thought it’d take me a year to leave the dungeon and be able to be around the Bryxx again without incident, but within two months he let me out of the dungeon and presented my self-control to the council. I passed, and the council was surprised by the lack of encouragement I needed to go off and fight for them. They bribed me with Bryxx blood. When I completed a mission, I could drink.”

He seems to become frustrated suddenly. “I continued to live with Henry when I was around, and he let me start staying in his home with him unbeknownst to the rest of the council. I helped take care of his farm and I did whatever they asked of me, but I was miserable and as soon as I was alone, with no one to stop me, I went out to the dungeon with one of Henry’s guns and I shot myself in the head. It didn’t kill me because it wasn’t a silver bullet. Henry had known I would try to kill myself somehow and left fake silver bullets out in his house. He found me soon after and shackled me again so I wouldn’t hurt myself. He spent an entire night telling me all the reasons that I should keep fighting. He saved my life a second time.”

Instead of being too shocked to speak like I normally get, I gasp and my hand flies up to cover my gaping mouth. “You tried to commit suicide?” I ask for clarification, not believing his words.

He nods. "I'd become the very thing I spent my whole life killing. Henry gave me a new perspective and shared some of his own experiences. Henry taught me how to sense vampires instinctively, a trait that I'd repressed along with my ability to move quicker than Bryxx speed. I wanted so much to not be a vampire that I repressed my nature and only caused myself more pain. I practiced sensing vampires for two weeks before I got the hang of it. I returned to Henry's after a mission and I realized why Henry was so quick to lend me a hand. I sensed what he was, and I didn't believe it at first, but I learnt that Henry was a vampire too, he's been masquerading as a Bryxx for centuries unnoticed."

"The councilman?" I ask in disbelief.

He nods with a small smile on his lips. "In the years since, he's taught me much more than my father did my whole life. He is to me, my true dad. The dad I never had. As a boy, Henry was always abrupt with me, but once he learnt I'd been secretly training, and once I saved my dad's life and I started working in the guard, he grew softer with me. I think he thought I was just another entitled royal brat but later he learnt that I was nothing like the other royals. If Henry hadn't been there for me, I'd have been killed, there's no doubt about it. I wouldn't have even made it off the ground that day I was attacked."

"And that's why you trust him so much." It's not a question. It's obvious.

Kade finishes his drink and is about to pour another when his gaze moves quickly from the near empty bottle to the window next to the table. It's dark outside and I can't even see across the yard. My heart races. Is something out there? Should I duck down? What is it?

"What is it?" I ask in a rush, realizing that I've been holding my breath.

His gaze flicks back to me, looking unconcerned. "Probably nothing."

"Probably?" I ask him, my voice cracking.

"I'm probably just hungry and imagining things. I thought I smelt blood come through the window with that gust of wind, Bryxx blood."

Bryxx? What Bryxx would be out here? The wind blows again, harder this time. A storm must be coming.

Kade draws his eye brows together.

"Is it from the barn, Kai's blood?" I ask hopefully.

"It's not old, dried up blood. It's fresh."

Not good, I tell myself. I let him feel the situation out, not wanting to distract him.

"Stay here," he instructs and leaves through the back door in a blur.

My first instinct is to move away from the window. I don't know why, maybe I'm concerned someone will watch me through it or maybe that someone will leap through it, though why wouldn't they just use the front door? Really, the window shouldn't be a concern right now, but I move away from it anyway and stand up from my chair, pacing the kitchen.

When Kade returns only a few seconds later, he sets a medium sized black cooler on the table and opens it. Then he pulls out not one, but ten bags of blood surrounded by ice. Then he pulls out a plastic bag with a piece of paper in it. He opens it and unfolds it. He reads it out loud, a harsh wrinkle forming on his forehead. "Kade, for taking care of my sister. We knew you wouldn't accept it if we offered it before we left, so we compelled the nurse at the hospital to drive it after work to the edge of the farm where you would find it. In case you don't see us for a while. I hope this helps you not eat my sister, vamp. It's the least we could do. Thanks again, Daniel and Kai."

Kade unblinkingly sets the letter down and then slowly sits down in his chair at the table. He almost looks as if he's shocked. He rests his forehead in his hands.

"I told you they don't hate you," I remind him. "They didn't have to do this."

He lifts his head up and I almost think I see tears forming in his eyes before he blinks them away. "I know." His voice cracks. "I never would've expected this."

I lift up one of the bags carefully in my hands, knowing how precious it is to him and not wanting to break the bag open somehow. I inspect it momentarily before getting queasy and then I hand it to him, placing it in front of him on the table.

“How long will this last?” I ask him, unsure.

He swallows and clears his throat before answering. “I can freeze it, if you don’t mind it being in the freezer. This is enough for three months at least, maybe even four.”

The reality of how much this helps him really sets in when I remember him telling me how much more satiating Bryxx blood is and how it numbs the pain from the thirst longer and more fully. This will also save him from having to find someone to feed from every day or two in the future.

“You can definitely put it in the freezer,” I assure him, did he really think I’d oppose that?

He picks up the bag I set in front of him and lifts it up, the thankfulness of the gift pushing into the back of his mind as his thirst starts to take over. I see it in his eyes as they flicker red like that day in the barn. His breathing catches and then he closes his eyes and gathers himself also like I watched him do in the barn.

“Aren’t you going to have it? You’ve been tense all afternoon and don’t think I haven’t noticed it’s been getting worse quickly, you’ve been drinking alcohol like it’s water.”

“Not near you,” he answers sternly. “I will do it outside in the barn.”

As much as I really don’t want to see him drink blood and as much as it disturbs me, I need to get used to it and I want him to feel comfortable around me. It’s who he is. I eat around him, and he should be able to eat around me as well.

“I don’t mind,” I promise him. “We can play another game of checkers while you drink, if you want to.”

I’m startled by his thunderous laugh. “May, I can’t really focus on much else when I’m drinking. I won’t be able to play checkers while I drink. I have excellent self-control, yes, but not enough where I can sit at the table and sip at a cup of blood. I only wish it were that simple.”

I realize that I’ve only ever seen him *smell* blood. If his reaction is that strong to the smell of it, what would his reaction be to the actual taste? “I guess I didn’t think about that. I want to watch. I need to know all of you eventually, right? Why not now?”

He grimaces. “It’s not as simple as that, May. Maybe if it were human blood and I were more in control, but this is powerful stuff, this will likely cause me to black out for a while and it’s not safe for you to be around me if that happens.”

“I thought you wouldn’t hurt me?” I ask. “No matter what.”

“I won’t, not on purpose, but I’m not about to risk blacking out, smelling you, and attacking you. Vampires usually bond with other vampires, not humans with divinely scented blood. This hasn’t been tested before and you’re not about to be the guinea pig.”

I decide not to argue. He would know best and I surely don’t want to die, as sure as I am that he won’t hurt me. “Fine.”

“Will you come tie me up in the barn please? I don’t have much control left in me, May. I’m starving.” For the first time since I’ve known Kade he seems to truly be panicking. His eyes flash red again and he grits his teeth.

“Tie you up?” I question.

He nods. “I’m going to black out and want to drink any blood I can smell when I run out. You have to keep me tied up for at least an hour so I have time to calm down after.”

“What if a vampire comes during that time?” I challenge. “I’ll be dead.”

He groans and seems to writhe in his chair. “Shut the barn door and lock it. It’s vampire proof.”

“What? You built the barn?” I ask him, knowing I should be asking this later.

He manages a small grin. "No, Henry had it hauled in from one of his properties just below the border. He's an investor, has probably hundreds of properties. It's custom made. How is it that you rambling off questions is somehow distracting me from losing my mind? You'll be the death of me, May, I swear to god." His accent is thick when he says this, thicker than normal.

The urgency in his expression stirs panic in my gut. What am I doing? He's right. "Okay, let's go." I run towards the barn and by the time I get there he already has one of his arms in a shackle. Sensing his rising urgency, I clip the other hand into the other shackle and then quickly snap both of his feet in. He has me use a small key to lock each of the four cuffs and then he has me drop the hook in the roof that holds his hands separated at his sides. His arms are then free to move around, this will allow him to hold the bag.

"Okay, put the two bags at my feet and then go into that little room off to the left and don't you dare come out until an hour is up, no matter what, May," he scolds seriously. "No matter what."

"You're tied up. You can't hurt me," I remind him steadily, standing my ground. "I need to see this. I need to know about this. I need to understand. Apparently, one day I am going to marry you, so I think this is something I need to witness eventually. Why not now?"

He groans as I push the two bags in front of him. Then I back up out of his reach. "Please don't argue, May. Go to that room before I lose control, please. I don't want you to see this. You'll never look at me the same way again. I will scare the wits out of you. I am a demon. You have to understand that. Neither of us are ready for this."

"Which is why I need to see this, because the last thing I think of you as is a demon," I counter. "I need to understand, Kade."

Sensing he's not going to win the argument and he's only prolonging satiating his thirst to a manageable level, he scowls at me before giving in. His muscles tense and a feral, inhuman snarl escapes him. His eyes don't just flicker red, they completely *turn* red, a dark blood red. His face pinches into a wince as instinct rapidly begins to take over. His mouth opens slightly to make room for his lengthening incisors and then in a movement so quick it's only a blur to me, he crouches down to the bags and lifts one to his lips, using his teeth pull the small tube up and then uses it like a straw, pulling the liquid into his mouth savagely. A few drops fall to the ground and he grabs for the second bag, a gruff groaning filling the barn. The only other sound is him sucking at the bag, the need to drink so strong that the Kade I know has been pushed far back into the corner of this demon's mind as the monster inside him takes over my Kade's body.

When he's done, he groans in protest and then to my surprise, his crimson eyes lift to meet mine and he thrashes against the shackles in my direction, snarling, and wincing in pain. He is in so much obvious torture. Part of me wants to go to the house and get another bag but he said he only needed two. After a few moments of trying to get at me, I glance at my phone to see that only *five* minutes have passed. Fifty-five more to go. I debate sitting down but I'm too on edge. It's torture watching him struggle. He crouches back on the ground and snatches one of the empty bags, ripping it open and getting the last few drops, then he reaches for the second but it's just barely out of his reach.

He moans in distress and then his pained eyes meet mine in silent question. In that moment, I see Kade, not the demon inside of him. I see Kade begging for my help and although I know I shouldn't, although I know Kade will severely scold me for it if he remembers me doing it, I take a few steps towards the bag and then with the tip of my shoe, I slide it a few centimeters closer to him. He snatches it up and rips it open like the first. I'm so entranced that I forget to step back to the much safer zone. I'm out of his grasp until he finishes the remaining drops of the bag and then lunges at me again, this startles me so drastically that fall back on my ass, resulting in one of my feet to cross the invisible line between the safe zone and the kill zone. Kade grabs my ankle and yanks me towards him.

I scream bloody murder and claw at the ground but it's too late and I'm too weak. He pulls me up to standing position and presses my back into the wall harshly. In my horror of the situation, I claw at him, trying escape. I scream again, louder this time as he runs his nose down my neck from under my chin to my collar bone. His warm breath on

my skin brings a new sense of urgency flooding into me. His fangs scrape my neck ever so slightly and I just wait for the inevitable. I know I'm dead. I don't have a doubt in my mind about it.

His lips near my ear and he whispers, "I want to taste you so badly, love."

I shiver in fright; my whole body is shaking.

"Let me go," I beg, in a croaky, last-dodge effort.

He holds me tighter. "I know I should, but I can't." He rests his forehead on the cement wall. His breathing is heavy and his lips near my neck again, I can feel the heat of his breath on my throat. This time the fangs rub rougher and I'm sure they'll break the skin. I scream again out of survival instinct. Then Kade is pulling away from me slightly and looking at me dead on. "May, god *damnet!* What did I tell you? How did I get ahold of you?" he snarls. His breathing is severely labored.

It's silent as I catch my breath. The warm anger in his eyes tells me that this is Kade, or at least partially Kade, his eyes remain red, his fangs extended. "I was helping you reach a bag and you grabbed my foot," I ramble off.

He hisses in disbelief. "I swear to god, May. I could've killed you. I still want to *so* badly. I can't even let go of you." He closes his eyes and I know he's trying to gather himself but unlike the last few times this tactic has worked, his eyes open and they are still glaring red daggers at me. He's not calming down in the slightest. His mouth comes down on my neck, but he doesn't bite it to my shock, he licks a fine line up and then down it and then lightly sucks, his incisors scraping my flesh with urgency. He moans.

"It was my fault, don't blame yourself, I knew better," I rattle, my fear tangible. "Just do it quick if you have to do it," I beg him.

He groans and pulls away from my neck. "May, I need to focus on something else. Do your excessive questioning thing again," he suggests, his eyes closed tightly.

I struggle to find words. "What do you want for supper?" After I've asked it, I know how stupid I am. I mentally face-palm myself.

He chuckles lowly. "You, my sweet."

I set myself up there. "I... I..."

He comes in closer to me, his body pressed against mine again. "If you can't question me, then for heaven's sake, May, do *something*."

Not knowing what else to do, and acting on instinct, knowing full well that it could get me killed, I decide to play on the part of him that would never hurt me in a million years. I bring my sleeve up to the corner of his mouth and brush away the tiny dribble of blood before letting my lips find his.

It takes him a moment to understand what I'm proposing but when he figures it out, he's more than game. He groans and presses against me harsher, his warm mouth hard against mine, his tongue travelling along my upper lip.

He opens his eyes and they are back to normal color. When he knows I've seen them, he closes them again, letting me know that he's back in control.

"I should be so fricken pissed at you right now," he murmurs and then goes back to kissing me, pulling away again slightly after a second. "But I just can't seem to be angry with you."

Part of me wants to burst out in tears. My life just flashed before my fucking eyes. I could've died just moments ago. Instead, I'm distracted by his warm embrace, no longer frightened that his demon side is about to kill me, my feelings towards this side of him flourish and I feel safe and protected in his arms. It's probably insane. They're technically the same person.

I kiss him fervently, hoping that this moment never ends, and he doesn't pull away like he did last time we were intimate. I bring my arms around his waist and pull him closer, silently asking for him to not stop, to get closer even. He takes that as his cue and the intensity of his kiss changes from harsh to starving, but not starving for blood, this time instead lustful starving. I like it, I want more of him. I reach into my pocket and pull out the cuff key, forcing

it into his hand. He takes it and begins unshackling himself, but he doesn't stop kissing me, his lips stay plastered on mine. I hear the first shackle drop, the second, and he briefly disappears from my lips to quickly remove the ones on his ankles. I barely notice he's been gone when he returns, lifts me up and then sets me down onto the hay covered ground of the barn, his body resting on top of mine.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asks breathlessly.

I make a sound of needy protest and his answering grin warms my heart and flushes my entire body. He trails a line of kisses down my throat and again stops at my collar bone.

"Please, Kade, more," I beg, wanting all of him.

He shifts his weight, pausing, "Are you sure?"

I nod. Six hundred thousand fricken percent sure.

He lightly lifts my shirt and continues his trail of kisses down my stomach to where my jeans rest on my hips and then he makes his way back up, stopping to tease me where the fabric of my bra ends and the heave of my breast peaks. He licks there playfully and then slips his tongue a little way under the fabric. I clutch his head in my hands and push him into me, needing more.

He declines my request and instead he comes back to my lips. "You're bleeding," he whispers.

What? Where? Then I taste copper. He got me so worked up that I accidentally but my lip to keep myself from mauling him. I immediately look to his eyes for a sign of his control. They are his normal colour. I'm relieved by this. "It's okay, if you have to get away from it."

He shakes his head once and his eyes flicker red ever so slightly, I barely see it. "I can't go."

"Are you sure?" I ask and shift my body a little, afterwards realizing that this wasn't the best idea.

He groans with the friction. "You're going to make me lose it in a whole other way, May," he purrs. "Let me taste you, *please*...just a little."

I don't know how to answer him. Won't he lose control again? The memory of my fear surfaces and makes my heart pound against my ribs.

"Your heart racing isn't helping me right now, May. Relax," he pleads and his head bends down. I think he's about to kiss me when his finger comes up and wipes the blood from my lip. He holds it close to his mouth, staring at it like it's the most enrapturing thing he's ever laid eyes on.

"I swear to god, if you kill me, I'll come back and haunt your ass," I warn him in a horrified squeak.

He smirks. "This is a whole other type of control I'm about to lose, May, love. You don't have to worry about me killing you right now."

"Why?" I ask, not convinced.

"Because all I can think about right now is carrying you into the house and onto the bed and..." he trails off, panting. "It seems we've found my grounding."

"Huh?" I mumble.

"I don't want to hurt you right now, May, even though I should. Your blood is only inches from my lips and all I want to do is make love to you. May, let me taste you, *please*."

"Is that smart?" I ask, my voice cutting off half way through.

"I won't hurt you. You'll enjoy it," he mumbles.

I somehow doubt that, but I decide to trust the man who nearly killed me minutes ago. Something is seriously wrong with me. I nod. "Just a little."

He smiles and slips his bloody finger into his mouth. When he opens his eyes, I expect to see that they are red with thirst, but instead they are only filled with lust. "See?" He whispers.

I nod in fascination and then he leans down to kiss me again. At least that's what I think he's doing until he sucks on my bleeding lip lightly, the sensation making me grind against him.

He pulls my lip into his mouth again, pulling blood into his own mouth and the strangest, most erogenous sensation starts at my lip and moves quickly to the rest of my body. I gasp as he grins knowingly.

He continues sucking on my lip and the feeling he's somehow causing by doing this intensifies until it peaks and I'm swimming in pleasure. I've never felt anything like it in all of my life.

His eyes meet mine, still brown. "I love you," he whispers.

I nod in agreement. "I love you, too."



Chapter 14



The next morning, I wake up to the sound of the cows bellowing and the birds chirping outside the window, Kade's bedroom window. I sit up quickly, the memories of the night before flooding back. I glance to my other side. Kade lies propped up on his elbow staring right at me, his hair tousled.

"What're you doing?" I demand, a little too harshly.

He smirks. "Waiting for you to wake up."

"You were watching me sleep?" I ask in horror.

His smirk grows. "Yeah, all night, couldn't get enough."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I probably snored all night. Jane always used to complain about my snoring.

"Are you mad?" he asks, his smirk starting to fade now as he mistakes my embarrassment for anger.

I shake my head. "No," I comment. "I'm embarrassed."

"Why?" He asks, his face wrinkling.

I sigh and brush my tangled hair out of my face. "I snore."

He chuckles and his smirk returns. "Yeah, you do, but that's nothing compared to what you had to deal with last night and you're still here. You didn't run for the hills."

"Surprised I didn't leave in the middle of the night? You thought you'd scared me off, didn't you?" I shoot back.

His tongue lightly licks the corner of his mouth. "You wouldn't get far, super hearing, remember?"

"Right." I click my tongue.

He looks up into my eyes and my heart feels like it's jumped off a cliff. Part of me wishes that he wouldn't have stopped last night, that we would've gone further, but due to his superior self-control, which makes mine look like nothing, it didn't go any further than one damn hot makeout session on the floor in the barn and then that life changing feeling of ecstasy that he treated me to.

"You okay? Your heart is racing," he mocks, knowingly.

I grit my teeth. "I'm fine."

"You're thinking about last night," he states, grinning.

I swallow. "I thought you couldn't read minds!" I accuse.

He shrugs. "I can't but it's all over your face." He jumps up from the bed in a blur and faces me. "Let me make you breakfast."

Before I can protest and tell him that I am more than capable of making my own breakfast, he's gone from the room. "Show off," I mutter to myself.

"I heard that!" he calls from the kitchen. Of course, he did.

I think back to last night again. The fear, the hurt, the acceptance, the passion, the love, it all blends together in a mixture of emotion that I can't process although I need to.

We told each other that we love each other last night. Was it a spur of the moment exchange resulting from lust or did it come from the heart? I know the truth but I'm not sure I'm ready to admit it to myself yet. I recall him carrying me back to the house in his arms last night as I basked in the afterglow of the pleasure he shared with me. He laid me down in his bed and then I fell fast asleep in his arms, a feeling of safety and contentment washing over me.

I start to smell bacon cooking and I spring out of bed, running my fingers through my hair quickly. I come out to the kitchen, feeling as if nothing can dampen my mood. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I am happy.

Kade stands in front of the stove, back to me, not acknowledging me. I know he's heard me come in, but he seems intent on his cooking.

I sit down at the table in my usual spot.

He turns. "I got a call from the errand lady I hired," he tells me and by the tone of his voice, I know it wasn't a good call.

"She's unable to work, she's too sick."

I expected as much. "That's too bad," I worry. The poor woman.

He flips the bacon in silence. He seems too upset about this stranger's illness.

Do you know her personally?" I wonder.

He takes a moment to respond. "No. We've never met."

"Why is it you're so concerned about her then?" I ask, hoping I don't sound insensitive.

He turns to me, resting his back against the stove. "My human half-sister died from cancer."

"You had a sibling?" I ask in shock, how has this not come up?

He nods once. "I told you that when I first met you, back in Montana."

A vague memory of him and I speaking about our shared loss resurfaces. How had I managed to forget?

"My mom never came with my father and I when we came to America. She left my father and then ran from the community soon after. The Bryxx found her a decade later and she had two children with a human man. They killed one of her daughters as punishment for running away and then dragged her back to the Bryxx community and killed her too for leaving. The Bryxx brought the other daughter and her father to live in the community as is mandatory if a human know about our society. Eventually the father died, and my sister grew up and died of cancer in her fifties."

"The Bryxx sure do like killing people," I mutter.

He doesn't disagree. "I also have two brothers. The one older than me works high up in one of the Bryxx communities in America. I haven't seen him in a few decades. We're nothing alike. He's like my father. My younger brother is only twenty, so I don't know him. He was born after I turned into a vampire and I was not welcome to meet him. I've only ever seen him from a distance. I've heard he's very intelligent. His mother, my step mother, I suppose, is the daughter of one of the other council members, so it's likely that my brother will one day become part of the council or at the very least something highly ranked." He shuts the stove off and drains the bacon grease into a cup methodically, not dripping a single drop onto the counter. What it must be like to be so confident in your movements. I can't imagine being able to move with as much grace as he does.

In a blink of an eye, a plate of eggs and bacon sits in front of me.

"Oh, my heaven. Are you trying to fatten me up?" I ask, incredulously. My plate is heaping. "Aren't you going to eat some of this?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "I was just eating so you wouldn't get suspicious that I may not be Bryxx. I don't need it and I don't crave it. Well, except a few comfort foods that I still indulge in now and again."

"Like?" I push and nibble a slice of greasy bacon.

He lights up. "You really want to know?"

"Of course," I say with an unattractively full mouth.

"Popcorn with butter is my ultimate favorite and any red meat." He sits across from me. "Rare of course," he adds onto the end. His smile suddenly transforms into a grimace and he's gone from his chair and out the front door in a heartbeat.

I stand up instantly, feeling the tension in the room. Something isn't right.

Unsure what to do, I act on pure instinct, I don't even think about it. I slip on my flip flops and take off to the barn as fast as I can. I shut the door behind me and lock it. My heart hammers and I feel like it's going to explode. That's when I notice something very, very wrong. A dark figure stands at the other end of the barn, arms crossed. He wears a black t-shirt and dark jeans. I'm not sure what gives it away, but I know that this stranger is a vampire. He stares at me, unmoving. I swallow harshly and scramble to my feet, trying to reach for the lock on the barn door. I've locked myself inside a vampire proof building with a vampire and I have no hopes of Kade saving me unless I unlock this door.

I'm hauled backwards and tossed into the straw on the floor. Even though I know he can kill me before my next blink, I hurl myself backwards in a modified crab walk. He knocks me over on top my stomach but doesn't hurt me which surprises me. The other vampires I've encountered have be violent and they basked in it. This one is being...*gentle?*

"Don't try to escape, you know it's no use," the man says, sounding bored. "If you want to live, you need to listen to everything I say."

I nod in agreement, knowing that if he wanted to kill me or drink my blood, he would've already done it.

He removes a vial from his jeans pocket and tosses it to me. "I need your blood to save my son's life. He's in transition to become a vampire. Your blood will halt the transition. I don't want him to succumb to my fate."

I nod. That's all? I can do that. Sure. "I don't have a knife," I tell him, meaning to come off sounding confident but my voice squeaks.

He approaches me slowly and hands me a switch blade. I take it from him, my hands shaking tremendously. "Would you like me to do it?"

I want to shake my head and refuse his help, but truth is, I'll never be able to do this on my own. I hand him back the knife and he holds my arm firmly so I can't instinctively pull away. He slices open my wrist while holding the vial under it. I wince and scream as my wrist spurts blood. Then to my shock he bites into his own wrist with extended fangs and then joins our arms together, letting his blood heal me.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I must do what I need to in order to save my son's life," he says apologetically. He sounds sincere. "Tell my cousin Kade I send my well wishes."

I nod robotically. I'm speechless. This is Kade's cousin?

He smiles slightly, though his eyes are dark and gloomy. "My name is Novice. I hope we meet again someday, dear."

I blink, and he's gone. I'm too stunned, too shocked to move until I see a blur. To my relief it's only Kade, he hovers over me and inspects me.

"What the hell happened?!" he demands angrily.

I can't seem to get out the words. "Novice," I mutter, hoping it will mean something to Kade.

Kade's eyes bulge. "Pardon me?"

"Your cousin," I get out this time. "He took my blood."

Kade's jaw drops.

"I'm okay. He healed me," I assure him.

He looks at the splattered blood on the floor and scowls.

"Don't be mad at him," I sputter. "He said it would save his son. He's in transition to become a vampire." My mouth is starting to work.

Kade appears dumbfounded but then anger welcomes itself to his face. "Don't be mad? He sent ten vampires to distract me and then came in here and took your blood. Look, you're terrified."

I swallow and finally attempt to stand. He helps me up. "Who is he?" I ask Kade, sensing something more.

"My dad's late sister's son. He died in a demon attack on his community almost two hundred years ago. At least that's what we've all thought. His son is my age. Last I heard he was living in a community near New York City but that was years ago. Novice was a good man."

"Maybe he still is," I suggest. "He cares for his son and he never hurt either one of us."

"He took your blood. That is enough," he snarls.

"To save his son from becoming a vampire. What would you have done? He never even tried to attack me."

Something I can't place crosses his expression. "He shouldn't have been able to control himself around you."

"He's old. Maybe he has some sort of super self-control like you do. Maybe you're wrong to think all vampires are terrible people. Maybe you've just only encountered bad ones."

He doesn't reply, and we walk back to the house in silence. He opens the door for me and I walk in and kick my flip flops off.

"I wonder how he found us," Kade mutters, still sounding angry. "We're in the middle of nowhere. How would he even know I'm with you or..." Kade appears to have an epiphany. "Henry. They used to be good friends. He had to have sent him, but I need to be sure." Kade picks up his cellphone and dials a number. After a few moments he says, "It's me. Did you send me a visitor?" Kade asks, seeming calmer, but his words still escape him in a growl.

After a moment's pause, he relaxes even further. "You could've warned me." Kade rolls his eyes at Henry's reply. "I'm fine. I hope Lawrence will be alright." Another pause. "She's not mad, angry, nothing but shaken up, but please warn me first if you're ever sending someone here." A final pause. "Thank you and yes I do care about her, a lot, so this can't happen again."

Kade hangs up and turns to me. "Henry sent him, knowing he wouldn't hurt either of us. Not that it excuses his lack of informing me or asking your permission first."

I'm not sure how to respond. The more I calm and reflect on the incident, the more I decide that I'm not mad at Novice for taking my blood. If my child were to be in vampire transition, I probably would've been a whole lot hastier to get the cure.

"My blood is like gold to vampires," I state the obvious, just now starting to understand it's worth.

"It tastes like ecstasy, it smells like ecstasy, enough of it can turn a vampire into its previous form, it can stop a transition, May, it's more than that, though. I haven't had the chance to tell you yet but since I've tasted your blood, I haven't been in any pain. I'm not thirsty like I've spent every day since my turn. I feel almost...Bryxx again and it's such a relief to be painless, you can't even imagine it." Kade looks dumbstruck, like he's not sure how to handle the revelation.

I can't imagine what he goes through on a day to basis, especially now that he's around me every day. "Novice, was only saving his son from an eternity of pain and thirst, Kade. I'd have done the same."

"I know," he admits with a strained sigh. "I would've too, but because I love you as much as I do, May, I can't fathom anyone hurting you. There is no reason in my mind that justifies his actions. I know that's not right, but I can't accept it."

I stuff a bite of cold egg into my mouth so I have a moment to digest everything further before I have to reply. "Let it go. He didn't hurt me. I'm okay. He was even going to let me cut myself. I just...I couldn't do it. I'm such a baby, Kade. How am I supposed to fit into this world when I'm scared to fricken death of everything? I couldn't even cut myself. I could barely poke my finger when Kai wanted me to. I'm so scared *all* the time."

"May, you're human. That's just human instinct. It's natural and expected. There's nothing wrong with it." Kade reassures me. "I'm centuries older than you, I'm immortal, and I still get scared."

"Yeah? What are you scared of? You're fearless and you're strong. You don't get it. I'm so weak. You could kill me before I have the chance to lift a finger. I'm so defenseless." I start to feel tears welling up and my vision blurs. Then a tear slides down my cheek, followed by another.

I see well enough to take in Kade's worry as he pulls up a chair next to me quickly. "I'm scared of losing you. You're vulnerable and fragile, that's enough to make me scared but then there's also the fact that you smell like absolute heaven to vampires. The demons want their hands on you, the Bryxx want their hands on you, not to mention

that vampires want to kill you. You're literally a beacon for trouble." He rubs the back of his neck with his palm. "And I'm selfish. I want to have you forever, even if that means that I have to make you like me or have you become Bryxx and that's more than unfair to you, but you have to understand that you may have at the very most, eight decades to live. To put that in perspective, my life expectancy is centuries. My dad is two thousand years old, give or take a few centuries. At a century a human is considered ancient, at a century, an immortal is still young."

Hearing his worries, I begin to see his life in a clearer perspective. I've never really thought about how he felt before this. "I have Bryxx blood somewhere in my ancestry. Even if I did make that choice it'd probably kill me, and I don't have the will power to be a vampire. I can't even resist eating this entire plate of bacon and eggs even though it probably has more calories in it than I should eat in an entire week!"

"I'd never force you to become immortal, but if it came down to losing you or trying to make you immortal so you could be with me forever, no matter how many fricking people you'd kill as a vampire with your apparently terrible willpower, I'd take that risk in a heartbeat and that makes me a terrible person. I know that but I'm selfish and you're all I have. I may have strong will power and I may not fear my own death or anything like that, but I do fear things, love. I'm weak in other ways."

I put my fork down with a clatter. "You realize that I probably won't live for another eight decades, right? My life expectancy is far below that *before* the fact that I'm basically vampire crack. I've probably already surpassed my life expectancy."

He gulps. "I know." For the first time since I met Kade, I see terror in his expression and I know he isn't exaggerating one little bit.

"But, there isn't anything I can do about it. I don't want to be a vampire. I'd never be able to be like you. I'd hurt people and I'd rather die than be like those vampires that attacked me in Seattle. I don't want to be Bryxx either even if it were likely I'd live through the change."

"Then I guess we better hope like hell that all my training has paid off and I'll be able to protect you." He doesn't seem convinced. "That or I'm going to have to make a deal with the devil."

I raise an eye brow. "Don't joke about that. My family made deals with demons, remember? And they all lost their lives because of it, probably their souls."

"I'm not joking, May. Maybe there's something I can give them in exchange for your immortality. They're powerful and they have ways of conducting such things."

I grit my teeth before spitting, "Their price would be more than we could pay. They take babies and souls. Don't you dare do anything stupid. Promise me you won't." I find myself growing increasingly angry.

He nods once but it doesn't convince me. "I won't."

We're interrupted by my cell phone ringing which startles me because it hasn't rung since Daniel called around a week ago. The caller ID is private. I show it to Kade, not sure if I should answer it.

He snatches it from me. "Hello?" There's a long moment of quiet where the only hint I have is Kade's reaction. He appears unconcerned but intent, as if he's listening to instructions. He thanks whoever is on the other line then hangs up.

"What now?" I ask in disbelief. Can we not just have some normal, quiet time for once?

"That was Jane. She and Darrel are alright. Whoever their boss is believed that you were killed. Your dad made a deal with whoever it is—his life for yours. Since you 'died' in their care, the deal has been broken, the contract destroyed, and your dad's soul has been released."

I have to admit that I wasn't expecting that. "What were they doing with it?"

"You don't want to know, May, but it's over now," Kade replies grimly.

"Where does he go now?" I wonder.

Kade debates this. "I'm not sure. I don't know much about deals with demons to be honest."

“Do you really think Jane and Darrel are alright? Shouldn’t they be in some sort of trouble?”

He nods. “I’m sure they’re in loads of trouble, but the fact that she was able to call us says something.”

After breakfast, a few games of checkers, a shower, lunch, some time with the cows and chickens, and supper, I lay down in my bed while Kade takes his turn cleaning up the dishes. I don’t mean to fall asleep, but the events of the day put a toll on me and I fall deeply into sleep still fully clothed on top of my covers.

I awaken in the middle of the night with a throw blanket tossed over me. My heart is leaping erratically in my chest for no apparent reason. I must’ve had a bad dream. I glance at my phone to see that it’s well past midnight. Something feels off, but I can’t place it. I get up from bed to grab a glass of water and see if Kade is awake or if he’s passing time with a nap.

I find the tv on but the couch empty. Strange. He never forgets to turn off the tv. On a whim, I tip toe to his room and crack the door slightly. The lamp is on, the bed untouched, but no sign of Kade.

“Kade?” I ask out loud, knowing he will be able to hear me anywhere in the house or around it.

I wait a handful of seconds. No reply. Are we under attack again? Twice in one day? When I am about to take off to the barn, although that never worked out so well last time, I hear the front door open and close violently. What the hell?

Before I have a chance to think, a dark, cloaked figure approaches me hurriedly. I don’t have a chance to move out of his way. He scoops me up before I even have the chance to scream, presses two fingers to my forehead and everything goes black.



Chapter 15



I wake up disoriented, partially thinking I dreamt the whole thing with the cloaked figure in the house. I realize, to my dismay, that I am wrong when I lift my head to see someone in a black cloak sitting back to me in front of a burning fireplace. I jump up from the bed. “Who are you? I demand.

The figure stands but doesn’t face me. “My name is Devon.” His voice is thick with distaste.

Not what I meant. “What do you want?”

He pulls down the hood of the cloak, revealing a tanned neck and black hair. “I want nothing from you. I’m only doing my job.”

The door to the left of the fireplace opens and a large, muscled woman enters the room. Her eyes land on me and she smiles eerily. “You *did* find her. I knew she wasn’t dead.” The woman’s voice is ice cold and makes me feel as if bugs are crawling over my skin.

“Yes, ma’am. She is yours,” Devon says respectfully. It’s clear that he fears this knarly woman with her ragged brown hair and scarred face.

“You may leave us,” the lady instructs the cloaked man.

He then scurries for the door. I see the side of his face for a short moment. He’s only a boy. Maybe age fifteen or sixteen. I’m not sure why this surprises me so much, but it does. The woman closes the door behind her and then stares at me, inspecting me.

“Come,” she demands, curling her index finger in front of her. Her nails are dirty and cracked.

I stand frozen in place. “What do you want?”

“I said come, human. Defy me and this will be a lot more painful than it has to be,” she thrills coldly.

“I *said* what do you want?” I snarl, my anger surprising me again. Why does everyone just have to push me around because I’m human?! I can’t live my life this way. I’d rather be dead than be treated so poorly. I stand my ground.

She hustles towards me, takes my forearm in her two hands and then twists my arm with enough strength that my arm buckles and skin tears. My bone snaps and the pain is so immense that I black out.

When I come to, I’m sitting in front of a mirror, my hair and makeup done to perfection, my arm healed and no longer in any pain. I look around the room to find I am alone. I try to get up but see that I am handcuffed to the damn chair. The room is decked out with mirrors lined on each wall. It looks like some sort of salon or dressing room.

“Good morning,” a soft voice greets me, and a tiny blood woman approaches from behind me. “I’m sorry about the cuffs. I have to do what I’m told or she will kill my daughter.”

“Who are you? What do you want?” I demand in a shaky voice. The memory of the pain of my arm breaking making me feel like puking. Pure fear, terror even consumes me. I find myself out of breath.

“My name is Cerisse. I have been put in charge of getting you ready for the auction this morning,” she admits, warmth in her tone.

“Au-auction?” I stutter.

Her already dreary features fall. “You don’t know why you’re here, do you?”

I shake my head and swallow, getting ready for what is surely terrible news.

“Madeya, the demon in charge here, she sends her minions out to fetch things worth a lot of money and then she auctions them off,” she explains. “I’ve heard that you’re very important to her. I’m not to cause you any harm.”

"I'm human," I plead, hoping she will believe me. "What does she want with me?"

"I know, dear, but I've overheard that your blood is not only human, that it's special and rare. You are a delicacy. Demons, vampires especially will pay much for you."

My heart falls into my abdomen. I'm about to be auctioned off to demons? No, this can't be happening. Where is Kade?

Cerisse sprays some product over my curly locks and carefully picks through them, pinning some up strands up with pins. Struggling now would be no use.

"Where are we?" I ask timidly.

"Madeya's home, my love." She looks content and relaxed as she picks through my hair.

"What are you?" I wonder. I know she's not a vampire by the way she moves, clumsier, less sure of herself.

"I am human," she confesses, confirming my suspicion.

"Why are you here?" I ask incredulously.

She grimaces slightly but manages to keep a small smile on her face. "My grandfather was dying years ago, and my grandmother was approached by a demon, Madeya, who said she could save my grandpa in exchange for something worth her time. My grandma, though very religious, desperately accepted the offer before thinking it through and told Madeya she'd do anything for my grandpa's health to return. Madeya took my mother, who was only a child, as payment to my grandma's dismay. Well, I don't even know if my grandma knows Madeya took her or what she thinks happened to her only daughter those years ago. All I know is that my mother was kidnapped by a demon in the middle of the night and brought here. Years later she met my father here and I and my three sisters were born." The petite woman seems chatty, more than happy to share her story with me.

I gape and struggle to hide my appalled look. "And now what?" I urge curiously.

"Now my family is forever indebted to Madeya, even after death, our souls will be hers."

And I thought I had it bad. "Why haven't you tried to escape?"

"I have two daughters to protect. If I try to escape, Madeya will likely do something terrible to them. I have come to accept that this will be my life. It's all I've known anyway. I was born here. It's not so bad really."

Easy for her to say. "Are we in Canada?"

She shakes her head, her brown hair rustling. "Florida."

How long was I unconscious for? Obviously a long time if we're in Florida. "How many people like you does Madeya have?"

"There's a couple hundred of us."

I gape. "How haven't the authorities found you?"

She giggles. "Many of the strong demons have this many servants. We are extremely deep underground where humans would never find us. We are in the world inside of the human world."

I can't even comprehend this. That makes no sense whatsoever. It's impossible. "Do you mean where it's extremely hot?" I ask, not believing her for a second, but playing into it to distract myself. I need to calm down if I'm ever going to try to escape.

"We are in between the crust and core somewhere. Far deeper than humans have been able to drill. The heat has scared them away but if they kept going it would get a bit hotter and then it would cool down again. Compulsion goes a long way in the demon's affect of human science. Humans only believe what the demons let them believe. Earth is the demon's playground. If it weren't for the Bryxx constantly making deals to keep humans in the dark, earth would be an entirely different place."

I seem to learn a whole lot of something new every day.

"When is this auction?" I ask roughly, deciding to focus on the main problem at hand here.

She shrugs. "Any minute now it will begin. They must wait for all the attendees to arrive. It's a very prestigious auction, only those with lots of money may attend."

I swallow. "I'm going to die," I whisper, not meaning to say it out loud.

The woman grimaces and nibbles her bottom lip. "I'm sorry. I wish I could help you, but even trying to escape here would only end up in both our deaths, and I can't risk my family you must understand. Remember, your soul will go on, the demons do not own it, they need permission to use a soul."

I sigh in frustration and I am surprised by how calm I am about this. Is it because I've been preparing to die, because I've resigned myself to this fate, or because I truly don't care if I die anymore. Am I no longer afraid of death? No, that's unlike me. I'm deep in shock.

I sit in silence, unable to do anything about my situation and my thoughts drift to Kade. Where is he now? Does he know where I am?

"That boy who brought me here," I begin, taking a breath. "He's a demon?"

Cerisse shakes her head slowly. "The cloaked boy? No, his name is Devon. He is half demon, half Bryxx. His father, a demon, raped his Bryxx mother and he was born. The Bryxx were going to kill both mother and child, so the mother made a deal with one of the high demons. Her soul and her son's, for their safety. She is now a servant as I am and the boy as well, but because of his mixed blood, he is very strong, the only of his kind. It is rare for such a bond to spawn a child. He is Madeya's personal servant. He does all her dirty work."

"He's just a kid," I murmur to myself.

Cerisse shrugs. "He can change his appearance. I've seen him do it, but the face he shows around Madeya is that of a young boy. He is two thousand years old, he is truly far from a boy."

This shocks me, but I don't have long to remain this state. A big burly man enters the room from a door on the left. "She's up," he grunts.

Cerisse's relaxed facade turns to panic as she rushes to undo my cuffs. It's clear that she is not a huge fan of the man.

Once she's finished with my cuffs, she pulls me up. "I'm sorry," she whispers into my ear.

The big man rolls his eyes and then pulls me by my shirt and drags me out the door. I want to lash out but what good would it do? He pulls me down a dimly lit hallway. I take in how there truly is no natural light down here. Could we really be underground? Then we ascend a set of stairs. He looks me up and down. "Look pretty, human. Walk through those curtains and greet Madeya with a million-dollar smile or you'll regret it."

Sheesh. No wonder Cerisse seemed frightened of the man.

I hesitate, and he slams a hand into the back of my spine between my shoulder blades. I wince and stumble forward through the black curtains. I am faced by Madeya standing a few feet in front of me smiling icily. She beckons me with a single finger as she did before. I'm too distracted by everything to be angry this time. In front of Madeya, the ground drops a few feet. We are on a stage. Below the stage are hundreds of men and women in black cloaks like Devon wore when he took me. All of them stand straight up at attention. I can't see their faces and this only unsettles me further. Bright lights shine from above, burning my eyes.

"Here is our main attraction of the night, folks!" Madeya shouts. "The bidding will begin at one hundred million for this fine piece, you've read the pamphlets, you've seen the invitations. She's a young, beautiful human with Bryxx ancestry, enough that the entirety of her blood can cure a vampire, a few ounces of it can diminish a vampire's thirst almost completely for days under normal circumstances. Beings as she are quite rare indeed. We haven't had one here for auction in nearly a hundred years in fact, so don't take this chance lightly."

There are a few light murmurs from the crowd of people before an auctioneer begins rattling off numbers. The cloaked figures begin raising their numbered signs. I don't have enough time to comprehend what's going on. I hear a

few numbers but this is no regular auction. The auctioneer speaks so fast that I can't even comprehend his words. The signs rise and fall so quickly that they're blurs.

Finally, the blurring signs lose in quantity and it seems to be down to only three bidders as far as I can tell. Then eventually it falls to two. I hear the number one billion and nearly faint. There's no way I heard that right. They are willing to pay a billion dollars for my blood? Why wouldn't Madeya just keep me for herself and sell my damn blood?

"Sold! To bidder one hundred twenty-six for one point two billion dollars pending payment! You can collect at the left of the stage!" Madeya screeches in excitement and clasps her hands together tightly. "Now let's move on to our next treat, shall we?"

The burly man pushes me forward and towards a set of stairs leading off the stage. A cloaked man, I'm guessing bidder one hundred twenty-six, makes his way through a secure gate with a security guard looking man, almost as burly as the guy pulling me along. I can't even imagine how heavy security is here. I just sold for one point two billion dollars after all. I glance around and see many burly men and women in uniforms, all eyeing the guests carefully as they pace around.

Guests on the other side of the gate lose interest in the current auction as it begins and instead their eyes fall on me. A cloaked figure rushes at the gate, slamming into it, and then a second does the same as I get closer. Then a third. The big men and women rush and incapacitate the flocks of cloaked people banging into the gate. I can only guess that these are vampires losing their minds over my blood.

Bidder one hundred twenty-six approaches me and to my surprise doesn't attack me. He inspects me and then wanders to a booth with the words 'Payments Here'. He's there for only a few moments while I shake next to the rude man who's been dragging me around. The winning bidder then approaches us and the man next to me hands me off to him with a slight shove. Then I am herded through a different gate, burly man leading my buyer and me into a long hallway. We walk in silence until we get to two metal doors. An elevator? The leader pushes a button and the doors open with a ding that's too pleasant to be in such a gloomy place. Definitely an elevator. Inside, stand four large men, more security I assume.

My buyer pushes me towards the elevator and I don't hesitate to get inside. Once the door closes behind us, an announcement in a female voice plays, 'Please make sure all humans are properly restrained before going up.' *What?*

My buyer folds down a metal chair from the wall and then forces me to sit down unit. Then the person pulls three heavy duty straps across my torso like seatbelts. Apparently content with my restraints, the buyer then pushes the up button.

I gasp when the small box begins going up. My stomach feels like it's being pushed down into my abdomen. The speed is insane as we sky rocket upwards. The others in the elevator look bored, like this is nothing new to them. A timer on the wall counts down from twenty minutes. This is going to last twenty fricken minutes? I already feel as though I'm going to vomit.

The buyer then hands me a plastic type bag as if knowing the affects this thing is having on me. I try to thank he or she but instead I end up vomiting violently into the plastic bag. My stomach and throat ache when only stomach acid comes up. When was the last time I ate anything? I dry heave and dry heave until my body finally gives up, feeling beyond weak. I rest my sweating head against the cold metal elevator wall and close my eyes, trying to think of anything else. This seems to help, though not much.

When the elevator makes a sharp dinging sound and then slows down until it stops, I am more than relieved. The cloaked person undoes my restraints and then pulls me up from the chair. I'm too weak to stand so instead the cloaked figure easily lifts me into their arms.

I have to keep my eyes closed as he walks with me quickly following the security. I peek my eyes open as we climb a long set of stairs and then walk through a hotel lobby type of place. Heads snap in our direction and building security holds back vampires who lunge towards us, fangs bared, eyes glowing red. Our small group leaves the hotel and

enters a very large underground parking garage. We jump into a large black Escalade and my buyer sets me down on the bench seat next to him.

The driver of the vehicle is a well-muscled female with curly brown hair. "Where to?" she asks emotionlessly and hands the cloaked person a tablet.

He or she takes it and types in an address before handing it back. From this, I gather that we are in Miami.

The Escalade lurches forwards quickly and leaves the parking garage after the woman scans a card at the exit. I am more than relieved when I see sunlight. Could Cerisse have been telling the truth after all? Could there be an entire demon world underground?

We speed through busy streets in silence until we stop at the airport. The cloaked person pulls me from the Escalade towards a private plane. They push me down into a seat and buckle my seatbelt for me before sitting across the aisle from me.

I feel like I should have something to say, something to ask, but I can't manage to say anything. Instead, I begin crying quietly, not wanting to piss off the person now in charge of my life.

The plane takes off eventually and I abandon my crying to look outside at the ocean as we fly over it. I've never seen the ocean and somehow, though not reasonable, this calms me. As we turn and begin flying over Florida, I focus back on the plane interior. I'm startled when I discover that there is a second cloaked figure in the plane with us, sitting two rows in front of me.

Over the loud speaker a deep male voice says, "We're high enough now, sir."

A motion to my left causes me to look over at the cloaked person next to me as they remove the cloak. I see the stranger entirely now, a man in black slacks, a black button-down dress shirt and neatly trimmed brown hair. He fixes the cuffs of his shirt and runs his hands down his attire, smoothing out any wrinkles.

Then a whoosh of air causes me to glance down the aisle as the other now uncloaked figure rushes towards me. "May, oh my god." Two hands land on my shoulders. "Are you alright?"

It takes me more than a few moments for it to register that Kade is standing a few feet away from me. My tears return, this time in sobs, only they aren't tears of fright but tears of happiness. I'm so relieved to see him.

He unbuckles my seatbelt swiftly and lifts me up into his arms, pulling me against him tightly. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" he demands, looking over me. "I'm so sorry, May, I'm so so sorry."

I bury my head into his shoulder, not caring that I'm ruining his shirt with tears. I want to assure him that I'm okay, but I can't get the words out.

"She's in shock, Kade, but she's not physically harmed. They make sure their product is in perfect condition upon sale," the other man bites out, sounding unimpressed. I nearly forgot he was here.

Kade brushes my curly hair with his fingers and rests his forehead against the top of my head. "You're okay now, May. You're safe. This is Henry, I told you about him. I owe him my life for saving yours today."

I quiet my sobs to look up at Henry, Kade's trusted friend, the man who has now saved both my life and Kade's. "Thank you," I say through tear filled eyes.

I see a blurry Henry nod once promptly. "Anything for Kade, he'd have done it for me. He doesn't ask for favors often."

"How much?" Kade asks Henry, sounding extremely agitated.

"She went for one point two billion," Henry states darkly.

A hiss of air escapes Kade. "I will transfer you the money when we land," Kade assures him and pulls me in tighter like he's scared to let go of me.

Henry chuckles deeply. "No need. We both know I don't need the money nor would I ever ask you to pay me back, son. Payment enough is seeing you this happy."

Kade finally releases me and motions for me to sit down. He sits next to me. We sit in silence for a few minutes until he says, "Did they hurt you?"

I want to tell him about how they twisted my arm and I blacked out from the pain, but I decide to keep that to myself, not wanting to further his anger or hurt. "Not physically," I lie. It could've been a lot worse. I could be dead right now. "How did you find me?"

"When you were taken, I first tried tracking you but once you were put on a plane, I lost all trace of you. I called Henry in a panic and he said he'd just gotten an invite to your auction. It was luck really."

"Why were you invited to a demon auction if you're sided with the Bryxx?" I ask Henry, not understanding.

Henry scoffs. "Most demon trading and auctioning, most demon business in general, is done in secret for obvious reasons. We each have an identity number and those numbers are ranked by our wealth, age, etc. We don't share our numbers with anyone. No one sees our faces or knows our true names. They have no idea who I am, only that I am very old and very wealthy, and so I am sent invitations to these high-end events."

"But how do you get invited if they don't have any personal information about you?" I ask.

He smiles welcomingly. "These days it's done by email, but before internet, it was a monthly auction for elites. You'd get the next date at the end of each auction."

"But how do they know you're not someone who just heard about the thing and showed up?" I ask, not sure why I care so much, maybe I just need the distraction.

"There is a password you give with your number upon entry. You would never share your password or your number with anyone as it is a criminal offence met with a death sentence. It's not hard to guess who is in the elite group. If they're sickly rich then they're probably in it, but because no one knows I, Henry am a demon, no one would suspect me as one of them."

I want to ask how he hasn't been found out by either the Bryxx or the demons, but I decide against it. I understand how the Bryxx haven't figured it out, they can't sense vampires, but the vampires can sense other vampires.

"Because they don't expect me to be a vampire, I smell of Bryxx since I live amongst them, and I try to keep my distance from demons in general. Oh, and I'm very practiced with compulsion." He answers my unspoken question.

"Very practiced," Kade clarifies. "The best I've ever seen."

I nod, not completely understanding but not sure what else to do. How strong could his compulsion possibly be?

"May is immune to most compulsion we've learnt. Unless she's being compelled to do something part of her already wants to do and she doesn't fight against it." Kade shares with Henry.

Henry doesn't appear surprised. "It's rare but some humans are very strong-willed and they are extremely hard to persuade."

"I don't see myself as strong-willed," I admit and shrug.

Henry chuckles loudly. "Maybe not in some respects, but I am willing to bet that you believe your mind and your actions are yours and yours only. If someone were to try and change your thoughts and poke around in your mind, you'd push them out, maybe not consciously but subconsciously, even if it were easier to just give in."

I can't argue with him there. The thought of someone messing with my mind makes me plain angry.



Chapter 16



Getting back to Canada is a relief, getting back to our home, an even bigger relief. When we're greeted by Daniel and Kai, in the front yard, I burst out crying again.

"May, we have something to show you or rather *someone* to show you," Daniel tells me as I wrap him in a tight hug.

"Who's here?" Kade asks, disgruntled. He scans the house intently.

"May, don't freak out, but he kind of just showed up here a couple hours ago," Daniel pleads before muttering, "Come out now."

The front door opens behind Daniel and a man in his forties comes out wearing jeans and a t-shirt. I recognize him immediately and nearly faint in Daniel's arms. "Dad?!" I ask in complete disbelief. I must be dreaming.

My dad smiles warmly. "May? My god you've changed, darling."

"The contract between him and the demons was burnt when they thought you died and he was released. You are no longer under their protection and we've convinced dad not to make another deal. We have to stop this cycle. We're all going to protect you. We left the Bryxx. We're going to make a permanent home here and dad knows how to ward against demons so they won't be able to enter the area."

"But Kade-" I argue.

Dad cuts me off. "Will be trapped inside the wards, not outside, as will I."

That's when it dawns on me. My dad's human body died. We buried it years ago. How did the demons settle their break of the deal?

"He's a demon," Daniel answers my unspoken question.

"I won't hurt you," my dad promises and I believe him after all he's done for my life.

I glance at Kade who doesn't look too sure of this. "What kind of demon?" he asks my father.

My dad glances to me and Daniel who are still embracing. "A Scaraut, so I will be no harm to any of you."

Daniel hastily translates for me. "A very weak type of demon, about as weak as a human, no powers except immortality, usually used as slaves in the demon world. They live off of suffering but don't need much, watching the news or Kade's thirst will be more than enough."

I'm not sure what to think of all this.

"We have everything packed up and ready to go," Kai tells me. "We have to get out of here and go somewhere new. The demons found you here, they could come back here."

I nod, not wanting to risk it. If I can help it, I will never be taken again. I'm hell bent in ensuring as much no matter what it takes. I think about Cerisse and her family, their fates. I think about the way I was treated at Madeya's. I think about Madeya, her stringy, messy hair and her scarred face, her shrill voice. I recall the intense darkness of her home. I recall the sickening feeling in my gut the entire time I was there. Lastly, I recall my fear. I won't *ever* go back there. I will fight even if I am weak and brittle.

My life is my own. The whole ordeal feels like a dream, a nightmare, but deep down I know just how real it was and just how close I was to meeting my demise. I will learn how to fight back. That is a promise.



Epilogue



Devon watched the human girl from a distance as she fed her three chickens and talked to them as if they were intelligent beings. He wasn't sure what it was about her that drew him in. Could it be her blood? He didn't think so, he was sure it was something more. Her innocence?

He watched her for hours and it wasn't the first time he'd done so since he'd left Madeya's home. Most of Madeya's people thought he was enslaved to her like they were, but the truth was that he was her grandson and he was free to leave whenever he chose to and do as he pleased. His mother was no more enslaved than he, but like him, she had nowhere to go, the Bryxx would find and kill her if she left Madeya's, kill them both. They'd both chosen to live with Madeya over the last two millennia. Devon had never had an interest in leaving permanently, especially in going above ground to the human's domain where the light was bright and he had to hide what he was, but after his grandmother had asked him to fetch the human girl, he'd found himself more interested in her than he'd ever been interested in anything before.

He'd masqueraded as one of the guards and escorted her and her buyer out to the human domain. He lost track of her at the airport once plane took off but was able to call in a favor with someone who worked at the airport for Madeya. The man had tracked the plane to Saskatchewan, Canada for him, and that's when Devon knew exactly where they were headed. Madeya had made her money by selling the human back to her protector. Not that she'd care much; she'd gotten what she'd wanted. The only thing that would stop her from trying take her back and sell her again would be the contract she signs with all clients stating that she will not attempt to steal sold items back for resale. The girl was an easy grab and an easy sale.

Devon continued to watch her as her vampire master lifted her up and kissed her on the lips. From their conversation, Devon knew that they were lovers. The vampire he assumed had marked her as his or would soon enough. He'd never seen a vampire in love with a human. He'd never seen a vampire able to stand near a human with blood like hers without attempting to kill her on the spot. At the auction they'd needed to ramp of security tenfold to keep the vampires away from her.

The vampire kissed her again and Devon felt like killing him. What was it about the vampire than made him so damn angry?

Devon watched intently as the two walked back to their new home and closed the door behind them. Then, without even thinking it through, Devon made a rash decision. He walked towards their home, through the demon wards that were useless against him, and changed his appearance into that of her brother's lover, whom he found near the barn, raking a hay bed for the cows. He grabbed him and turned him to face him.

Devon pressed two fingers to Kai's forehead before he could make a sound of protest. Kai then collapsed. Devon threw his arms out to catch him, not wanting to alert the others that something was off by making a sound. He then pressed two fingers to his forehead again, borrowing his memories. Then he took the limp man to the slough just off the property and dropped him down into it.

Devon trotted back to the hay where he finished Kai's job of raking the as quickly as possible. God, other immortals were deaf. He'd been alive long enough to master silence in his every move. Hell, he'd been alive long enough to trick even Madeya into thinking he was someone else. He was strong, one of the strongest immortals in existence.

He approached the house, imitating the goofy smile that Kai always had on his handsome face, and threw the door open. He used Kai's memories to pluck out the layout of the house. "What's for supper?" he asked and entered the kitchen where Daniel slaved over the hot stove. As a demon, Devon wasn't used to eating but since he was for all intents and purposes Bryxx for the time being, he'd need to get used to it.

"Roast beef and mashed potatoes," Daniel replied before turning, grinning and pecking a kiss on who he thought was his boyfriend. If only he knew.

Devon didn't mind the affection as he'd never been objected towards homosexuality. In fact he didn't prefer one sex over the other at all.

Then May came into the room and he tried not to stare too much, he didn't want to cause suspicion.

"Hey, Kai, get the bedding situation figured?" she asked.

Devon grinned inside, but on the outside, he put on a face of annoyance. "Why do we have to have those stupid cows anyway? All they do is sleep, eat, and shit." A classic Kai response.

May rolled her eyes and began setting the table. "I hope you're hungry because I sure peeled a lot of potatoes."

Don't miss out!

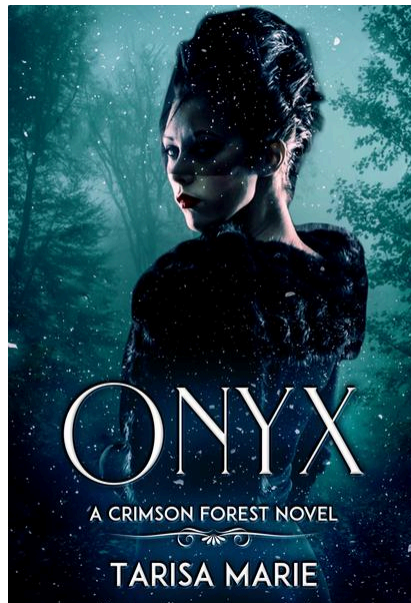
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From the best-selling author of "Bryxx" comes the second instalment in the riveting Crimson Forest series.

Being human is tough in a world full of immortals. Every single second of my life I'm in danger. My boyfriend isn't even human for heaven sakes. Kade is a demon, one who can't stop thinking about killing me each and every second he's around me. One day he'll slip, that's not just an unlikely possibility, it's a fact. It's only a matter of time really, and what happens when he does? What happens when the love of my life finally gives into his primal urges and *kills* me? Only time will tell.

Also by Tarisa Marie

Black Petals

Halfling
Changeling
Pure Blood

Crimson Forest

Bryxx
Onyx
Tempted
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Tainted

Tainted Crimson
Tainted Heart
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Tainted World

About the Author

Tarisa Marie loves interacting with fans on her Instagram account @TarisaMarie_Author and encourages them to send her selfies with her books. You will be her favorite person if you review one of her books, she reads every single one and appreciates them all.