

# PARADOX



J A M I E R I P P

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ISBN: 978-1-7336261-0-1 (ebook)  
978-1-7336261-1-8 (paperback)

Published by Ink Street Press  
support@inkstreetpress.com

Edited by Alan Brown  
Cover Design by Jane Dixon-Smith  
Formatted by Jane Dixon-Smith

*Dedicated to my family*

*My husband, and my beautiful children,  
My mom and dad, and my sister and brothers,  
My grandmother, and my Editor,  
Whose enthusiasm of my story encouraged me to  
write and inspired me to finish.*



## PROLOGUE



The dark ages were a time of raiding parties, conquest, and strange occurrences. Vikings were the first to start the reign of vampires. Savage and brutal, they would cut out the hearts of the leaders of any village or tribe. Eating the heart was thought to prolong their life. They did this to every town, tribe, or group that they sadly wandered upon.

I always thought these stories were hogwash. Whoever heard of men eating men? This was not generally brought up in civilized conversation. I dragged myself out of bed early in the morning as the roosters crowed and the animals started to stir. This morning felt different to me. It was still cold out, although summer was on the brink. I bundled up and started out to finish my chores before breakfast. I gathered the eggs, milked the cows, slopped the pigs, and fed the livestock all before sun up. When I slumped into the old wooden chair for breakfast, my wife was finishing the final touches on the meal while my two children played loudly on the floor. I was too tired for all the clatter. I yelled at them to stop and told them to sit down and eat their breakfast. I didn't yell often, but there was something off about today that caused me to be a little irritable. My kids, on the verge of tears, quietly sat down, and were careful not to make eye contact with me. My heart sunk. I apologized,

hugged them, and started out to finish my daily work. I wanted to get an early start before the sun came up and it started to get too warm. I sometimes envied those in the village, who had the effortless responsibilities, and I was out in the field, day in, and day-out, working for the food they ate. My kids, running at my feet, asking if they could work in the field with me, were disappointed when I told them no. The looks on their faces broke my heart, but the fields were no place for a four and six-year-old. The air was cold, and the soil was warm, making a cloud form over the ground. It was hard to see the plow. Plowing the fields was tedious work. It was no wonder when all you did is follow a horse and keep the furrows straight.

Half asleep and tired, I was suddenly awakened when I heard screams off in the distance. I turned to see my home and village burning, and large billows of smoke engulfing the village. The horse reared and pranced. It knew something was wrong. I untangled myself quickly from the reins. I ran as fast as I could, and as hard as I could, but no matter how hard and how fast I ran, it was not good enough. All I could think about was my wife and children stuck in a burning house, and I wasn't there to help them. The kids must be so scared, and my wife so helpless. Running through the chaos, I came to my home, practically in rubble. I approached knowing what I might find. I pulled the wreckage away, piece by piece, exposing the bed that was shared by my kids. I hesitated for only a second, afraid of what I might see. I pulled back the wood, and to my heart's relief, there was nothing there.

I raced through the rest of the house, looking for any signs of my family, but there was none. Panicked as to where they might be, I heard a small whimper. Looking just outside where the window would have been, I saw my wife and kids huddled in a ball of fear. I knew there was something wrong, it was not natural for them to be this way. I ran to them and

scooped them up in my arms. My wife laid there lifeless and stained with her own blood. My son and daughter were struggling for air and fighting for their lives. As the tears started to run down my face, my daughter opened her eyes. I could see the agony as she smiled at me, and then, as fast as lightning, she was gone. Her beautiful hazel eyes were now dull and bleak. Her red hair was pasted against her head with blood. My son, with short, shallow breaths, grabbed my hands, and then slowly met the same fate as his mother and sister. I screamed in horror as I realized I had just lost everything. My children didn't even have a fair chance at life. I was to blame. I knew there was something wrong with today. I didn't listen to my gut, and now my family was gone. I pulled them closer, holding them as tight as I could, praying that this was all a nightmare, and I would wake up any second. The smoke was dying down, and the scattered screams and yells faded into the distance, while I held them just one last time. Everything was blurry and wavy as I cried uncontrollably. Their fate was my fault, and I knew I would never forgive myself. My heart ached, as I reluctantly pulled away, and with one last look at my family, anger for their deaths rose inside me, and I now wanted justice. My sorrow was accompanied by rage. The chase was on. I was going to get revenge for what they had done. I was their protector in life and death. I failed them in life, but I wouldn't make that same mistake in death.

Friends and neighbors lay about, most of them in their own blood. They were not just killed; they were brutally attacked and savagely ripped apart. The end came when I realized I was the only one standing. My entire village lay there, and I was somehow spared. The grief consumed me, and I vowed I would have my revenge. I wandered the streets of distant cities, just daring anyone to taunt me, or otherwise, engage me.

Complete with rage and sorrow of losing his wife and

kids, Nicholas hunted the Vikings to settle the score. When he found them, he noticed they were not like ordinary people. They were fair-skinned, thin, and sickly looking; their mouths were permanently stained with blood. Their teeth were sharp and jagged. Trying to sneak closer, while the unholy tribe sat around the campfire and swapped stories, Nicholas, thinking he had the upper hand, was surprised from behind, when a man held him fast and brought him to the others. Adrenalin running through his veins, Nicholas was able to fight free for only a second. The leader of the Viking clan, with stature and authority, yelled at the clan for teasing the food. He walked toward Nicholas and placed his hand on his shoulder, bent down and roughly bit his neck. With a sharp stabbing pain, Nicholas quickly lost consciousness and fell limp. This was not the end of Nicholas. The leader, thinking him too weak to kill, left him for dead, bleeding, to see his own life dwindling away. Nicholas had too much anger to die. He watched the clan until morning when they packed up and left for another village to annihilate. The way these creatures disregarded life like it was no more than a plant beneath their feet, infuriated Nicholas. As he grew stronger and stronger every day, he became aware of his abilities. Nicholas mastered the art of their use. With each passing night, Nicholas regained his strength, and then some. Unaware of the repercussions of biting Nicholas, and not finishing him off; the venom or poison left behind mutated Nicholas into one of them, leaving him with an unsatisfied thirst for blood. Half of the desire was created by his obsession to settle the score, and the other half was from the bite, giving Nicholas his maker's thirst for blood and power.

After what seemed like a hundred years, Nicholas found his abilities were too strong to be human, and his prolonged life-span left him to conclude that he would never die. With a scorned heart, he continued to hunt the clan of Vikings



down, finally meeting his maker face to face. His opponent looked as if he had aged and grown weaker; the once brave powerful face was now saggy and feeble. Nicholas took advantage of his frail state and finally gained his revenge. With his maker's final breaths, he spoke to Nicholas in no more than a whisper. "I have been waiting for you. I saw you coming the day I left you for dead, a mistake I admit. One I never should have made. You have gained power with my death, but you will lose yours when one of us not governed by our rules, who shares our same fate, will destroy the power you have created."

He died before Nicholas could ask him what it meant. Nicholas was disturbed by his words and vowed to remember them to keep himself from losing the power he had assumed, and with it the ability to overtake the rest of the clan. Weighing the odds, the clan bowed at his feet, remaining faithful and serving him for years to come. Unlike his maker Nicholas never aged. His face remained thin and distinguished, his hair stayed white, but his eyes, once a beautiful blue turned dark with the fury and pain he was consumed by, and the grey bags from the never-ending weight he carried lined them. His thin and muscular body stood tall, and he carried himself well. Projecting power and authority when he spoke, whether or not you wanted to, you listened in fear. In fact, no one changed. Every one of his subjects stayed precisely as they did when he attained power. Believing that no one was equal to himself, Nicholas was not unlike his maker. He was just as brutal and merciless. Making sure that everyone felt the loss he did, he savagely killed anyone who crossed him. Nicholas hunted the streets by night to keep anyone from seeing the pain and hatred on his face. He became sensitive to the sun, and the sun burned every time he faced it, adding to his never-ending life of frustration and sorrow.

The clan moved from nation to nation, leaving their

mark of terror on the places they came upon. No one dared to cross Nicholas, especially those who served under him. A few would walk the line, but they were also brutally corrected as Nicholas showed no mercy. Steven, a smart and unsuspected threat to Nicholas, broke the rules and fell in love with a human, with whom he came upon in one of the villages. He fell in love with her at first sight, hid the girl in the floorboards and fought around her to keep her safe. Having never felt this way before, he didn't want to show weakness to Nicholas and held her secret until the time came when he was able to map out an escape. Time had passed, and Nicholas grew more and more powerful. Steven finally found the perfect opportunity, to leave with her. Nicholas, noticing a change in Steven, watched him even more closely than usual, found he had not only fallen for the girl, but they were also expecting a child.

Ordering his death, Steven and Ava fled with their child in arm. Running down the streets of London fleeing from Nicholas and his men, Steven and Ava ran for their lives. Knowing Nicholas ruled with death and fear, Steven understood the importance of getting away. Steven knew what Nicholas was capable of doing. He had seen Nicholas demolish defenseless villages, burn his fellow vampires alive, and kill anyone who got in his way, leaving death in his wake. Steven knew he would have to disappear and never be found again. He was Nicholas' right-hand man and knew of his foul temper and inability to let things go.

The cobblestone streets were barely visible through the dim mist that hung over the city before daylight. Steven knew the streets better than anyone. He hunted among them at night and walked them during the day. Steven and Ava outdistanced their pursuers. They turned down a street that came to a dead end. Steven forgot Ava did not possess the

ability to climb the wall. He grabbed the two most precious things in his life, the girl he had unconditional love for, and the baby he knew was unique, and leaped over the wall landing in the water on the other side. Steven grabbed the baby and swam to shore but his one true love drowned in the water's deadly temperatures. Hoping to save Ava, he quickly bit her in hopes that his venomous bite would bring her back to life. To his surprise, it worked. The chase was not over. Steven and Ava knew they would be hunted for the rest of their lives. Nicholas had made a promise to himself and every vampire, that any child born or turned would be his to stop the prophecy from happening. Happy that they had managed to make it this far, Steven and Ava vowed to keep their daughter from ever knowing their secret as vampires and bringing her up as a human in hopes that Nicholas would never gain control of their daughter. Assuming the identity of Roger and Emily Stone, they made their lives around their daughter making sure she would be safe.

## CHAPTER ONE



I splashed through the glossy, rain-soaked, cobblestone streets. I ran as fast as I could along the misty, dark alley. The moon cast shadows danced and played as I felt fearful of being followed. I could hear their soft-thudding footsteps closing in, and the sounds of exchanging orders. The terror of being captured taunted my thoughts. I could feel the cool breeze against my skin as the storm front threatened to deter my escape. I hid behind a barrel on the waterfront dock in the harbor, and I could hear a cold-hearted laugh from a man who approached my hiding spot. I hoped and prayed that the man would not find me. When out of nowhere, I was grabbed from behind. The grip on my wrist was firm but not crushing. The moment I realized I was caught I was swung around to come face to face with...

This is 95.5 KWNR... Good Morning Las Vegas!

The interruption of my alarm woke me from my sleep. I placed my hands against my thundering heart and looked around. Relieved to see I was still in bed, I breathed a sigh of relief. A cold sweat dripped down my temple, and a shiver ran up my spine. Looking down at my wrists where the unknown assailant had grabbed me. I still felt the pressure of his grip on my skin.

“These boots were made for walkin, and that’s just what

they'll do," Turning over, I hit the snooze button. No doubt, another song I will be humming all day. Grudgingly, I rolled out of bed and opened the blinds of my window. Traffic was backed up as everyone rushed to work leaving their houses five minutes too late, no doubt, and trying to make it up on the road. The honking horns and obscene yelling coming from the endless row of cars on the freeway made it just another hot day in Las Vegas.

As I rounded the corner to the kitchen for breakfast, Mom was flipping pancakes. Mom's red, shoulder-length hair was neatly pinned up and ready for the corporate world. My mom, Emily, was dazzling. She was the epitome of perfection. If I looked long enough, I would find myself getting lost in her blue and opalescent eyes as they mirrored my emotions like a siren to a sailor. She had the supermodel look, down to a tee, without the attitude. Her face was thin and elf-ish, but she held herself with stature and poise. As her daughter, I always felt overshadowed. I had always been jealous of my mom and her looks, hoping that I could one day be like her.

After pouring some milk, I was just about ready to sit down when my dad walked in. He poured some coffee in his mug, then sat down, and placed a black bag at his feet. Dad was in his travel clothes, a simple pair of slacks and a long-sleeved, buttoned-down shirt. His carefully styled, disheveled hair finished his ensemble.

"Good Morning dear, how did you sleep?" Mom's tiny, petite voice swept through the kitchen.

"Fine thanks, where are you going?" I asked my dad, pointing to the bag at his feet.

"I'm headed off to Washington for a few days." Dad was a man of few words, but those small and minute words carried meaning and force. My dad, Roger, was an engineer for the government. He was tall. Although he tried to fit in, he was far from average. His deep, brown eyes were dark, wise,

and burnished, which hid his every thought and emotion like a stone wall. His hair was tousled, and he took pride in himself and always dressed to impress.

“Oh, okay,” I said, knowing it wasn’t unusual for him to sporadically leave on last-minute business trips. Turning back to Mom I smiled. “Hey Mom, Mark is picking me up from work and taking me to the movies. Can you drop me off so we won’t have to swing back and pick up my car?”

“Yes,” Dad said, piping in before Mom could answer. “You need a new car. It’d be better if you took that beat-up old car to the dump.” His words spoke volumes.

“Your father is right, dear. I don’t understand why you won’t let us buy you a new car.”

“I just don’t think I need one. She manages to get me where I need to go with little problem.” I said, digging into a small stack of pancakes.

Dad sighed and shook his head. Although he and I always disagreed, I was almost just as, if not more so, stubborn than he was.

“Alright dear, if I’m going to take you, we better be off then.” Mom turned off the stove and griddle while I grabbed my purse before leaving the house.

Once in the car, I immediately saw my work schedule sticking out of Mom’s briefcase. Closing my eyes and shaking my head, I chuckled. As I looked out of the window, my mom weaved in and out of traffic like Mario Andretti.

Absently, I thought back to how I ended up working at the credit union. It was easy really, Mom was the CEO, and although, I had a choice of anything I wanted to do, the credit union sucked me in like a black hole. Any and all my dreams of moving away from home were squished like a spider under a shoe, just like that.

As we pulled up to the credit union, Mom waited for me to walk in before leaving.

As I entered, I was greeted by Catherine.

Catherine was my manager. She was a tiny, petite lady, about 5'4", and wore glasses that usually hung low, near the end of her nose. She looked mouse-like, but her looks were deceiving. She projected power and confidence. She, like my parents, had the same flawless composure. Her eyes were brown and lively, and although, she was strict and professional, you could see there was another side to her; a side that was fearless and adventurous. She dressed in suits and dresses, accentuating her figure. She was my mom's best friend.

"Good morning Catherine," I said, as I greeted her on my way in. Today, Catherine was wearing a yellow dress with a large, pale-blue print that looked like it was designed just for her. Her high heels gave her a few added inches. I clocked in and took my drawer out from the vault.

"Good morning Arri," she replied, in her normal high-pitched, squeaky voice.

I liked Catherine. I have been working here for three years, and not once had she mixed her business with her personal life. I finished counting my till and headed to my assigned desk to log in.

When I sat down, I noticed there was something a little different about my desk, but I paid no attention to it. I cleared my workspace and set up for the day.

"Who are they from Arri?" Catherine asked. I jumped in my seat.

"You startled me," I said, readjusting myself. "Who is what from?" I asked.

"The flowers, silly! How did you move them and not see them? I swear child, how is it you have the memory of an elephant, but can't see what is right in front of your nose?"

She was right. There could be a storm going on around me, and unless I was looking for it, I would miss it. I was usually oblivious to things that went on around me, and I never really cared about them, unless they directly involved

me. I didn't even notice the flowers on my desk. I merely moved them out of my way and began the day.

"I don't know. I guess I wasn't paying attention."

I took the card out, and read it out loud. "I look forward to making your acquaintance," was all it said.

"Does it say who they're from?" Catherine's voice was noticeably edgy.

"I don't know. It doesn't say. Even so, the card makes no sense. Who am I supposed to see? It must be a mistake." Catherine reached out for the card.

"The handwriting looks familiar," she muttered to herself, then furrowed her eyebrows.

"What is it, Catherine?"

"Nothing dear, just a little *déjà vu*," she said, smiling back at me. Then with a wave of her hand, she entered her office, closing the door behind her.

I hated it when people hid things from me, especially my parents and their friends, and it was getting to be quite a little habit of theirs. Shaking my head, I headed off to Catherine's office and entered without knocking. As I barged through her door, I heard the end of her phone call.

"I know his handwriting; it is definitely Nicholas. Emily, I am telling you; he sent the flowers to her just to toy with us. He knows where she is, and this statement proves it!" There was panic in her voice. As soon as she saw me, she hung up the phone and faced me. "Can I help you, Arri?"

"Yeah, what's going on? I have seen this look on your face before, and I know it means something.

"It's not important, Arri. You have nothing to worry about."

"I didn't ask if there was anything to worry about, Catherine. I asked, what's going on?"

"In due time, dear, in due time..."

I realized I wasn't going to get anything out of her. I thought about standing my ground and demanding an



answer, but it had never worked in the past, so commanding it now was no use. After I left her office, the day went by quickly, as I buried myself in my work.

## CHAPTER TWO



After the last customer left, I managed my drawer, clocked out, and texted Mark.

Me: I'm off and ready. What is your ETA?

Mark: I'll be there in 2, just turning onto Sahara now.

As I waited by the back door, Catherine approached me.

"Hey there, you okay?" Catherine placed her arm around my shoulder.

"Yep, just waiting for my ride," I said, not really turning to her.

"Who's coming?"

"Mark, we're going to the movies. Apparently, there's a new film he wants to see," I said, without enthusiasm.

"Oh, and why do you sound more like you would rather have a bone marrow transplant than see the movie?" she giggled.

"No offense, it's probably a great movie, but Mark has been acting a little weird lately, and honestly, I was going to call it off after the movie. I'm not really looking forward to his temper."

"Mark has a temper?" Catherine cocked her head.

"You, Mom, and Dad set us up. I would have thought you guys would have known everything about him, including his DNA sequencing."

“Yes, but he never seemed angry.” Catherine slowly shook her head.

Just as she opened her mouth to speak, a honk came from just outside the door.

“Well, there’s my ride. See you tomorrow.” I called to her as I bolted for the door. I didn’t know what was worse, hanging out with Mark, or telling Catherine my personal life.

When I got in Mark’s car, I let out a small sigh as I took in his scent. His over-doused cologne, mixed with the smell of the leather cleaner, was enough to make a person gag. I crinkled my nose but smoothed out my expression before facing him.

“Hi there, babe.” He greeted me as he leaned over the middle console to kiss my cheek. Mark and I had been dating for a little over three months, and it was three months too many. I fought the urge to roll my eyes and offered him a small but polite smile instead.

“Hi.”

“Are you ready? I have invited a few friends to come along if that’s okay?”

“Yeah, of course. Anyone I know?” I asked, knowing I had never met any of his friends.

“No, not really.”

The rest of the car ride was vibrating with awkward silence until we approached the movie theater. I had the feeling that tonight was not going to be the quiet night I was hoping for. It was going to be even harder for me to dump him with all his friends around.

After we found a close parking spot, Mark took my hand as we approached the ticket window.

“Yes, two adults, please.” The woman behind the ticket counter glared at me, and then, looked at Mark as if he was the king of Versailles. Mark’s light, almost platinum, blond-hair was a good, but odd contrast to his tanned-skin and light-brown eyes.

The woman took his card, and then, gave him our tickets, making sure she brushed her fingers against his skin as he took the tickets from her. At her touch, Mark looked up, smiled, and winked.

In normal circumstances, this would have upset me, but this was a long time coming. Mark was a womanizer.

After popcorn and drinks, we sat in the tiny theater. The lights went out, and the theater was dark with only the illumination from the screen.

“I just got a text from my friends. They’re here!” Mark said, turning around, just as the doors to the theater opened, and the blinding light from the hallway blasted into the room. All I could see were the outlined shadows of six football-player-sized men. Trying to paste a polite smile on my face, I rose to meet them.

“Arri, these are my friends,” as he rattled off their names like I had any chance of remembering who was whom. “Guys, this is Arri. She is the one you have all been giving me crap over.” He said, smiling at me. The guys whistled and nodded as they looked me up and down. I couldn’t tell if they were sizing me up or checking me out.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you. I was starting to wonder if Mark had any friends.” I said, joking with them.

“Ha, ha, Arri, very funny,” Mark said, with little to no humor in his voice.

“The same here. I was wondering if you even existed. Our man, Mark here, has kept you all to himself.” The tallest of the men said, and then, added, “and I can see why,” as he reached out and ran his finger down my arm.

Trying to keep my temper, I balled up my fists and shook him off my shoulder.

“Oh, you better watch out Mark, this one is feisty.”

“Nah, she’s as docile as a house cat.” He said, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear.

“Yeah, well,” I started to say, but then the screen came

on, and the previews started, “oh look! The movie!” I said, turning around and opening my red vines.

“Here, I’ll go get you guys some snacks, while you keep Arri company,” Mark said, as he squeezed my hand.

Just as the theater doors closed, the guys started to take their seats. Two sat in front of me, two sat behind me, and one on either side of me. The opening credits ended, and the screen went blank. It took me a moment to realize something was wrong. Instantly, there were two sets of hands on my arms, hoisting me up.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, as I started to flail my arms and legs, hoping to get them to release me.

“Not on your life, sweetheart. You are coming with us. So you can stop your fighting because it’s useless.” Their grip tightened, sending pain up my arms.

“Ouch,” I yelled frantically, kicking harder. I opened my mouth to scream when a heavy, coarse, calloused hand covered my mouth. I flinched at the pain. Wondering where Mark was, I saw the emergency exit door open. Mark was in the doorway motioning to his friends.

“Come on guys! Let’s get her out of here before someone sees us.” His usually polite and bashful expression was replaced by an angry and desperate look.

“She’s not going anywhere!” I heard a deep, husky voice say. As I turned to see who it was, a good handful of men stood just inside the theater doors. The heavy-handed man tightened his grip, but the men holding my legs, let go.

“Just go on your way, buddy. This is none of your business.” The grip on my arms loosened as I stopped fighting so I could listen to what they were saying.

“Oh really, then why does it look like you are trying to take this young lady against her will?” The husky voice retorted.

“Again, I say it’s none of your business. Now, leave us!” One of Mark’s friends said.

The husky-voiced man at the door laughed.

The tall, lean and bald, man that held me retorted “I’m pretty sure you have no idea who I am.”

“I know who you are, and what you are, but do you know me?” said the interloper’s leader.

“Does it look like I care, chump?”

“No, but you should.”

“And why is that?” acid dripped from his words.

“Because if you did know me, then you would have already guessed that there is no way you’re leaving here with her.” The husky voice drawled, as he shook his head. Then without hesitation, he and his men confronted my captors head on.

As the fight continued on, time seemed to slow, frame by frame, like a flashing strobe light.

Returning to my kicking and fighting, I used the seats to my advantage, and kicked off them and fell back onto the men holding my arms. With much effort, I pulled free from them in the struggle and headed for the doors behind me. I heard Mark yelling through the fight.

“I’m not done with you yet, Arri! I will get you when you least expect it! I promise!” As the last word left his mouth, I heard a loud grunting exhale. Looking over my shoulder, I saw a few motionless bodies peppering the floor, and five people standing in the middle of the aisle, staring at me. I left the theater running. There was something definitely going on, but I wasn’t going to stick around to find out. As I passed the ticket booth, I noticed ‘little miss flirt’ was not there. Shaking my head, I ran from the theater. Reaching into my back pocket, I froze. My cell phone was gone. Replacing the phone was a small pink slip of paper.

There is no running from fate!

‘N’

It felt like my heart was lodged in my throat, and I gasped for air. Tears started to streak my face. Looking back, I saw a black Cadillac Escalade following me. Taking off in a full run, I headed into the store as the SUV slowed and crept by me. I couldn't see through the tinted windows, but a sinking feeling pooled in my stomach. I looked for a pay phone and called my parents.

"Hello," as I heard my dad's voice, I started to sob.

"Hi, Dad?"

"Arri, honey, where are you, what's wrong?" Hearing my dad's frantic voice made me cry even harder.

"I... movies... Mark..." is all I was able to sputter out.

"Stay right there, I am on my way."

I nodded, not finding the words to speak, I hung up the phone. As I turned to face the doors and watch for my dad, I saw the black Cadillac Escalade parked next to the gas pump.

It seemed like forever, but only ten minutes passed when my dad pulled up. I ran and threw my arms around him. After I stopped trembling, he placed his hands on my shoulders, and pulled me away and looked in my eyes.

"Are you hurt?" His stern, but compassionate voice asked.

"No, I don't think so." I looked down and started to cry again. Dad walked me to the passenger side and buckled me in, and then, turned to the SUV and nodded.

## CHAPTER THREE



When we got home, Mom came running outside. Pulling me from the car, she cradled me as she wiped the tears from my cheeks. Dad was right on our heels as we entered the house.

“So, what happened?” Mom asked.

Looking between the two of them I told them of Mark, his friends, and the fight that broke out. The people that walked in and saved me, and the SUV that followed me to the store. As I recited the events of the evening, Mom looked dumbfounded, and Dad’s usually blocked, and expressionless eyes shadowed hatred and anger.

“I thought you just broke up.” Mom said.

Dad stood up and started to pace the floor.

“Did you see who else was there? Any faces or names?” Dad asked, kneeling in front of me. He looked so frantic and angry. I closed my eyes and nodded.

“Who?”

“Tomas and Drake. They were friends of Mark’s.” At the mention of their names, Dad pounded his fist on the coffee table and hoisted himself up, breaking the table into shards of wood. His actions made me jump.

“Roger!” Mom’s stern voice reverberated through the house. “Watch your temper,” she scowled.



Dad looked at the table, then back to me, and then, grabbed his jacket off of the coatrack and left the house. Mom's voice cut through the silence.

"No worries dear, he'll be back; he just needs to blow off some steam." Shaking her head, she stood up and took me upstairs. I was still in shock, and I felt like I was watching me from the outside, looking in. I had no emotions, nothing. I felt empty, like a hollow shell of myself.

"Let's get you in the bath," Mom said, as she started the water, checking its temperature.

"No thanks Mom, I just want to go to bed."

Mom didn't say anything, she just watched as I crawled into bed without changing my clothes or taking off my shoes. Clenching the stuffed animal I named Scratch, I pulled the covers over my shaking body and stared at the wall praying for sleep.

When I woke the next morning, I felt tense and stiff. Looking at my alarm clock, I noticed the time. Startled, I shouted "ten-thirty?" I sprang up and rushed to the bathroom to get ready. I was officially one-hour late for work. After a shower and fixing my hair, I left the bathroom and came to a complete halt.

My mom's tall, skinny, petite silhouette shadowed the doorway. She had unintentionally posed, like one of those models you would see on a runway. Her red hair flowed over her shoulders and outlined her slender, elfish face.

"You let me sleep in!" I yelled, as I scampered around my room looking for my clothes.

"I called Catherine this morning; I didn't think you would be up for working after what happened last night." My mom looked at me with concern.

All night I was haunted by the words Mark said and the note signed by the mysterious "N."

"Are you okay?" her voice shook me from my thoughts. I hung my head and raked my hands through my un-kept hair

before I finally broke down and accepted what happened. Up until now, I had cried, but I couldn't believe Mark did what he did. Part of me hoped it was a dream.

"Why would Mark kidnap me?" my voice shook as I was on the verge of crying. I stared at my mom's worried eyes, and just like that, it hit me. "The flowers, Mark and his friends," I started to sort out loud. "They are all connected. Mark was going to take me to see the one who sent the flowers." I looked up at Mom. Just like I felt, Mom's expression looked shocked and deep in thought. I managed to catch a glimpse before she tried to hide her trepidation and fear.

"What was Mark was thinking? He knew a stunt like this would start a war." She said to herself frowning just slightly. As soon as she saw me staring at her, she sucked in a deep breath and steadied her composure.

"What stunt? What war?"

"Oh, sorry dear. Look, we're going to handle this, you're safe now. Just you never mind what I said. You need to concentrate on recovering from last night, and leave everything else to your father and me."

"Leave what to you and Dad?"

"Nothing, just you rest now."

"I'm so tired of you guys hiding things from me. Mark tried to kidnap me and all you can say is 'nothing.' My life has been full of secrets, and quite frankly, I'm tired of it. Every time something happens, you all flip out, but have nothing to say when I am nearly abducted."

However, I should have known, it would only fall on deaf ears. I stood and started to pace the floor as Mom sat quietly, watching me.

"You've been bent on protecting, denying, and keeping me from anything that might hurt me. I just wish you felt that same need to help me understand things rather than shelter me from them."

“Honey, I don’t know what brought on this attitude, but it’s not necessary...”

“Have you been listening?” I interrupted, completely taken aback, and without even the slightest hint of emotion, Mom just stared at me. Frustrated, I threw my hands in the air.

After grabbing my purse, I ran downstairs. The intensity of my anger scared me. I grabbed my coat off the rack, and without even looking back, I walked out of the front door. I faintly heard my mom calling out behind me, asking, where was I going? I didn’t care. I was exhilarated by my final stand, even if it was only going to last just a few moments. I turned the key to my car and nothing. Knowing my mom was just a few seconds behind me, I decided to try again, and this time, it tried to turn over, and finally, on the third try, the engine started.

I didn’t know where I was going, but I didn’t get far when I saw my mom’s car behind me. After the attack last night, I really should have thought this through a little better.

I pulled into the closest restaurant, knowing she would never follow me in. After being sat next to the window, I could see her sitting in the car waiting for me, her face was annoyed and irked, but I didn’t care. I had to admit, I did feel satisfied with my false sense of victory. I ate slowly, reading my book, and enjoyed every moment. When I was done, hours must have passed before I finally gave in to the inevitable.

I pulled into the drive, and Mom parked right behind me.

“What was the meaning of that?” Emily said, in her most excited tone, which was still mostly calm, as she exited the car. “You are under no circumstances to ever leave like that again! Am I clear?”

“Do you hear yourself, Mom? I am nearly nineteen, and you are telling me, I am grounded. You are telling me, yet

again, that I am a prisoner in my own home.” I was not done, but she raised her hand to stop me. She closed her eyes to steady her temper.

“This...” She started to say, but stopped, and took a deep breath, “I’m sorry. You’re right. We do need to give you more leeway.” I could see that she was trying hard to sound half-sincere. Knowing it was a false attempt at a promise we headed into the house, but at least we agreed to disagree, for now.

We walked into the living room to find Roger and a young man seated on the sofa, a colleague, by the sound of the conversation. They were talking business. They both stood up when they saw the two of us walk in. Roger held out his arm to me, as he introduced me, then to Emily, as he introduced her. The gentleman bowed to both of us.

“This is...”

“Erik,” The gentleman finished Dad’s words, and then, waited for us to be seated before seating himself. His voice was smooth and arrogant. He had blond, shoulder-length hair and gentleness to his face. It didn’t take long for me to realize that my presence here was useless. Thirty seconds into the conversation I was lost. Emily and Roger had a tendency of talking over my head with subjects I had never been able to follow. I looked up just as Erik addressed Dad.

“I will be leading the watch in the northern territory, to keep the rebels at bay. We can’t afford the interruption and need to show everyone we can keep the peace. I highly doubt they will present a problem, but I want to be safe.”

“Do you think you can handle it?” Roger replied.

“Of course, my lord,” Erik answered without hesitation.

“I have already sent a team down that way.” Dad’s stern and demanding voice gave no invitation for dispute. “They will meet up with you and your men tomorrow.” I looked over at Dad puzzled.

“Did he just say, My Lord?” I asked. The words took

me by surprise; it was not often it came up in general conversation.

“Yes dear,” Roger never embellished or said more than he had to.

“Well, it was a pleasure to meet you, Erik,” I said, after finishing dinner. “I need to get going.” I stood up to leave the table, and Erik, along with my dad, stood as I left. Smiling I headed off to bed.

## CHAPTER FOUR



That night, my dreams were a little weird. I dreamt I was in a small town, a place I had never been, but it still had a sense of purpose or importance. Shortly after arriving, I was always running for my life.

“How did you sleep, Arri? You look exhausted.” Emily’s voice came from behind me as I sat down for breakfast.

“I didn’t sleep at all,” I told her about my dream, then shook my head and laughed.

“That’s what you get when you read all those paranormal books. Do you think it meant anything?” My mom was usually a firm believer that all dreams had a sense of truth or meaning.

“No, just a weird dream that ruined a perfectly good night’s sleep.” I yawned and stretched my neck.

“Arri,” My mom paused for a moment, “I want to remind you that we are having dinner with Catherine and her husband.” Emily knew I hated to go out with them and their friends. It was bad enough I was constantly subjected to the company that bombarded our home, let alone them taking me out and torturing me that way.

“Really, do I have to?” I whined.

“Don’t whine dear, it’s unbecoming of a lady. And yes, you have to go.” With her final words, I scowled at her before finishing breakfast.

After work, and a long, lifeless dinner, we finally pulled into the drive. Just as I was getting out of the car, I could see the shadow of a rather tall, broad figure in the night's shadows. I spun around to see who it was when it disappeared.

"Arri dear, what's wrong?" Roger asked with concern.

"Nothing. I thought I saw someone, but..." I cut myself off and shook my head. "Sorry, I'm just tired; my mind was playing tricks."

My parents exchanged what appeared to be concerned looks, but it was gone before I could really be sure. The last few days have been more than stressful, so we finished the evening with some ice cream, and I went straight to my room.

I was getting changed for bed when I swore I saw another shadow out on the back lawn. This one was a little more prominent and didn't disappear quite as fast. I managed to take a second look before it was gone.

On Friday morning, I left my room with a book and sat on the back patio in the fall's sun. It was getting a little chilly, and I loved the change in temperature. I was lost in the pages of my book when Roger came out and joined me. Roger's brown hair was out of control as usual. Dad was never really around but always had a presence. He never yelled, but just the fact that he got involved, scared me.

After what seemed like a staring contest, I finally broke the silence.

"What's up?"

"Emily and I are going to London to see an old friend. If there are any problems or anything out of the ordinary, call Catherine. She will be here if you need her."

My parents always traveled to places; I only wished that I could go. Paris, Africa, and Jamaica were a few of the places they went, and that was just in the last six months.

Saying goodbye, they left shortly after, leaving me alone again, or at least an artificial perception of alone. I was never

really by myself. Catherine would come over every few hours in the evening to see if I was okay, which was fine because I still saw shadows and figures in the dark. I felt watched, as they sporadically appeared and disappeared into thin air.

On Monday I came home from work, and as usual, my house was dark. I noticed the front window was ajar, and the house was freezing. I checked around, but nothing else was out of the ordinary. The eerie feeling of the kidnapping still lingered. The thought of how far Mark would go scared me.

That night, I was startled awake, with the feeling that someone was watching me. I sat up and saw a shadow in the corner of the room. I screamed as I switched on the light, but nothing was there.

Work was beginning to feel like a break from home. I wished my parents would come home.

I set the alarm every night, and just like every other morning, for the last four days, it was turned off, yet again. I was deciding whether or not to call Catherine when my parents drove up.

They had a new sense of stress about them as they walked through the door.

“The meeting went that well, huh?” I asked.

“Yes. Well, it looks like our plans have been sped up a little, giving us no time to react or prepare,” Roger said, as he poured himself a tall glass of thick maroon liquid out of the fridge beneath the bar. He looked a little pale and on edge. I thought nothing could upset him, mainly because nothing ever had. It was strange to see this side of him.

“Oh, don’t mind him. What have you been up to?” Emily said, as she walked in behind him, and poured herself a drink.

“Nothing really, I picked up a new book on vampires and Celtic folklore.” I chimed in happily. I loved to read



about the unnatural. It was an escape from my usual normal mundane life.

“I don’t know why you read all that nonsense. No wonder you have all those crazy dreams.” Emily’s voice was disapproving; she hated me reading so much. She would have preferred me to expand my interests. “We need to find you a hobby. Obviously, you have too much time on your hands.”

Mom shook her head, and the two of them headed off to their room to get unpacked as I wandered off to work. As usual, they didn’t elaborate on their trip any more than to say that they were not too pleased with the outcome.

That night, my parents took turns standing guard outside my door. While they were gone, something must have happened. Something was definitely wrong. I could feel it. It was just a matter of mastering the skill of retrieving information from them. Life was too stressful now. I had gone from bored to paranoid almost overnight. I guess that is why they say, careful what you wish for.

My weird dreams returned. This time, I was dying, and my throat stung as something warm burned its way down. I was twitching, trying to escape the torture but I was too weak to fight. It felt like my life was ending just as I stopped breathing. It was like an embedded memory that was deeply suppressed, but it felt so real, and scary. I panicked and tried to wake up. When I finally did, I took a deep relieving breath, knowing the nightmare was not real, and I was still tucked safely in bed. Laying back down, I was about to close my eyes when I heard my parents talking in the hallway.

Emily whispered, “Are you sure Nicholas has sent them to spy on her?”

“Yes Emily, she is almost nineteen, she has stopped growing, and her features are frozen in time. If there is a chance she is one of us, now is when she will show her true colors.

“She is one of us.” Emily’s voice filtered through the door.

With the louder and softer quality of Roger’s voice, I could tell he was pacing outside my room.

“I can’t lose her, Roger. I won’t allow my little girl to be enslaved or... whatever else he would want her for. I won’t allow him to have her.” Emily was crying now.

“Her obstinacy and temper show she is changing.” Roger took a deep breath steadying his nerves; I could feel the tension and stress seeping through the door. “Look, Emily,” Roger said, “I understand what you are feeling, but we already know what he wants for her. He wants to make sure that she poses no threat to his position of power. He knows that she is special and that she can put our world back in its place, and now we know he is after her.”

There was a long pause. “Emily, do you remember what I told you when we first left him? When we held her in our arms, scared because we had nowhere else to run, and the footsteps behind us were getting closer. As I told you, I would never let anything happen to our little baby even if I had to die for her. I promised you that she would be safe. Again, I am making that promise.” Roger’s voice faded. “This can wait ’til morning; we need to contact her guardian now,” Roger said, as I heard them both descending the stairs.

## CHAPTER FIVE



I sat on my bed with the latest science fiction novel in my hands. My eyes skimmed over the page but I couldn't concentrate on anything. All I could do was contemplate on the weird things happening. My parents' nervousness filled the air like a fog in from the ocean. It was so thick you needed a machete to break through it. What could they have possibly meant by 'one of us'? Ideas and frivolous thoughts about them being aliens, mythical creatures, or even FBI agents, filled my head, and the shadows were just people stalking them to find my parents' Achilles tendon. But I knew my parents, and they were way too dull for any of that, which brought me back to my original question.

Work wasn't making this week any easier on me. The day had been packed with people, and the teller-line felt like it never shrank. I felt like an automated ATM machine. "Account number? Withdrawal or deposit? Would that be everything? Have a nice day." I noticed as the day dragged on, my voice became monotone, and I was the equivalent of a drone. Every so often, I glanced up to see if there was any change in the line length when my heart sank, and my eyes narrowed. I could feel my cold and furious anger rise as my blood pressure reached its max. There he was, Mr. Inquisitive, the man I had been hoping all day would forget

to come and give up on this game of twenty questions, but I was out of luck. Carefully I looked around for anything to excuse myself, snapping my fingers, I had an idea. Finishing the transaction and sending my current member on his way, I grabbed the paper roll out of the receipt machine and ran to Catherine's office to hide. Carefully I closed the door behind me. I didn't even look to see if Catherine was there. I was too busy concentrating on getting away from him.

"Can I help you?" Catherine's voice sounded irritated behind me, as I peered through her office blinds.

"Oh! I'm sorry Catherine," I said, as I spun around. Catherine had a large, dark-oak, rectangular desk. On top of her desk sat a gold embroidered nameplate in which the name, Catherine White, was engraved. The desk was of normal height to most people, but to me at five-feet in height, it was huge. "I was trying to hide for a moment, do you mind?" I stammered.

"Trying to hide from whom?" Her voice was intrigued; I think she thought that it was a guy I might have liked. I pointed, to the second person in line, and gave a shiver.

"See that man there, second in line? He has been hounding me all week." I threw my hands in the air. "If I have to help him one more time, I just might hurt him. I swear he is intentionally trying to upset me, pushing every little button he can, and as soon as he thinks I'm getting even the slightest bit frustrated, he pushes even harder. It's getting ridiculous. I mean I'm not saying, I have the patience of Job, but I am a pretty patient person, and I am about to lose it." I could feel my temper rising, and toward the end of my tantrum, I didn't realize I was raising my voice.

"I would calm down and lower your voice unless you want him to hear you," Catherine said calmly, as she sat me down. I hardly realized that as I talked, I was pacing. "You definitely are your mother's daughter! You would get excited about the price change of milk. Look, I really wish

you would have told me about him sooner.” She sighed, and then smiled at me, “Is there anything specific, he is asking for?”

I tried to think as I lowered my eyes and shook my head, then it all hit me at once, I gasped for air.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” I replied, looking back up at her and meeting her slightly panicked stare. “It just dawned on me, the questions he was asking me were not to get me mad, it was to get information from me about the branch, the security systems, and schedules.” I gasped for air again, as I forgot to breathe during my exhale of information. “He was asking me when I worked, if I opened alone, and if we all arrived at different times!” I was yelling now. I shook my head again; “I can’t believe I missed it. I feel like such an idiot. I had paid so much attention to the fact that he was annoying me. I didn’t see the obvious.” I covered my face with my hands.

I had worked for Catherine for almost three years and had never been promoted. I didn’t have any intention of moving up, or in any other direction. Catherine was happy. I could count, and she always trusted me to open and close. Although I did not hold a managerial position, I still had all the codes and combinations to the vault, computers, and even the alarm system. Catherine looked out of her office window to see if he was still there, but he was long gone.

“Arri, go home,” her voice was stern.

Although she was talking to me, her thoughts were elsewhere. Catherine was practically shoving me out the door.

“Oh, and be careful!” She yelled after me. She closed the door behind me, and instantly she was on the phone.

“Emily! We have a problem. Either it is a coincidence, or he’s up to something.” She was silent for a minute. “I’m sending her home now.”

I heard her hang up the phone.

Catherine made sure that for the next few days I was not

on the schedule. I knew Emily and Catherine were up to something. Getting tired of all their games, I took it upon myself to go to work. I was fifteen minutes early as usual when I called Catherine and told her I was there. Andrea was already there, reading the office manual, waiting for someone with a key to open up. Andrea was just out of high school, and still a drama queen. She seemed to blend in well with the other young, snobby girls. She had brown hair and brown eyes. Her clothes were of the latest style, and there was no doubt she flaunted that money was not an issue. She only had to work because her parents thought it built character. She was new and scared to death of the new computer system. She tried to hide it, but I saw it the moment we started training.

I knocked on her car window and accidentally frightened her. Her manual flew out of her hands as she gave out a small squeal.

“Are you ready?” I asked, through her window.

She put the manual down, grabbed her purse, and we walked to the back door together. It was protocol to open and close in pairs. If we were going to be robbed, it was just as easy to rob two as it was to rob one. Especially if we were girls, not saying we’re weak, just more vulnerable. The next shift, not starting for another hour, gave any robber more than enough time.

I unlocked the door, turned off the alarm, and locked the door behind us. The morning routine was the same every time, kind of monotonous. After I turned on all the computers, opened the vault, and finally got out my drawer, I stationed us at our assigned teller stations. The only difference today was someone was pressing their face up against the door window. A gentleman, hiding behind a long trench coat, was knocking. Although I thought I was crazy, I swear I knew him from somewhere. His build and the small amount of facial hair reminded me of someone.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I knew something was amiss. Remembering the first rule of banking was never to let anyone in but your coworkers. I pointed to my watch and held up my fingers to indicate that we opened at ten. The man kept tapping on the window, insisting on coming in. I was smart enough not to approach the door, so I continued on with my work and tried to ignore him. I was in the middle of counting out my change when I heard a soft knock coming from the back door. Megan and Sally, other tellers at the credit union, stood at the door waving. Just as I started to walk towards them, the man in front stopped tapping and disappeared. I quickly hurried them in and watched each of them carefully. Megan was the last to walk in the door. Just as Megan passed me, I paused for a moment and saw a man emerge from behind my car. At first sight, his mouth turned into an evil, mischievous smile that ran goosebumps down my spine, and then, with a simple shake of his head he disappeared. As the girls and I counted and set up, I saw the man reappear at the front doors. This time he wasn't alone. He had two other men with him. He signaled to the first who gave him a curt nod then disappeared. The second was given an order, and he too left but quickly returned with a cell phone in hand. I turned to the girls.

“Hey guys, is there any chance one of you know who is at the door? He seems pretty determined to come in.”

The girls looked at the door then shook their head and returned to their discussion back to the magazine and on the hottest guy in Hollywood. Their notorious, shallow and superficial way of judging people, irritated me. They were so wrapped up in their conversation that they didn't notice that the beating on the door got louder and as I turned my attention to the front doors the back door shook as the third party pulled and tugged until I hit the panic button under my desk.

The alarms blared and screeched as the back door shook a few more times until it finally shattered. The men in the front started to pull and bang the doors eventually setting off the door alarms as well. The men instantly ran as the lights went out and the alarm lights were the only source of the flashing illumination.

The girls seemed oblivious to the source of the alarms, but they all screamed and ducked with their hands over their ears.

I called out to all the girls to go into the vault, and followed the last girl in, locking the door behind us.

“What’s the big idea?” Sally said, slightly losing her temper, and hitting the vault door with her fist. “You realize; we are now locked in here!” She turned to face me.

Sally was blond. Her hair came to her elbow, and she was like a young twenty-year-old Barbie who thought she was better than everyone else.

“Really!” I yelled back. “Did you not see or hear the pounding on the doors! The shattering glass, anything?”

There was a light thudding on the other side of the door. But no one heard it; they just looked at me like I was crazy.

“What are you talking about?” One of the girls said.

“Was it necessary to lock us in here because someone was hitting the door? I don’t think he meant to break it.” Megan’s response was just as air-headed as she was. She was the epitome of a blond stereotype. “Now the vault door is locked, in which I would like to point out; we are on the wrong side of!”

I rolled my eyes as the girls hit me with every possible question as to why we were in the vault. I had no answers, at least none that any one of them would understand.

In record time the police came, and Catherine let us out. The worry and confusion on her face was a strange but relieving sight. I could hear the cops explain to Catherine that there was no one in the bank except for the ones in



the vault, and the money had remained untouched; which confused the police. They did another thorough check of the credit union and viewed the video surveillance records.

“Oh, excuse me, ma’am,” a tall and thin police officer approached Catherine, “I was going through the security videos, and I did notice that there was a slight glitch in your camera system. It recorded four people entering before it went blank. I would have a technician look at it to eliminate any future problems.”

Catherine nodded in acknowledgment, then glanced over to me, and gave me a slight hint of a smile.

After the police left, Catherine pulled me into her office to hear my side of the story. She had already called the other girls in, and now it was my turn. I was debating whether or not the girls really were that oblivious to the banging or if I was the only one scared. Catherine was aware of every aspect of my life, and I was sure my mom had kept her updated.

“So, care to tell me your side?” Catherine’s curious tone made me feel unnerved.

“Well, I would say that it was an attempted burglary, but the untouched money would argue with me.” I chanced a glance at her then quickly returned my gaze to my fidgeting hands in my lap. The hem of my shirt looked like it had seen better days and I plucked and scratched at stray strings.

“Oh, I would have to agree with you. I don’t think they were after the money. I think they were after something even more valuable,” Catherine’s voice took a curious tone. My head shot up.

“Excuse me?”

For a brief moment, I saw the worry on her face. As she looked up, her face changed from fear and concern to understanding, as if she had known something I had not.

“You said it yourself. They’re not after money.” She looked at me quizzically.

“What are you trying to say, Catherine?” My mind instantly thought of Mark, and a cold shiver ran down my spine.

“You have had quite a morning. Why don’t you go home? I will see you first thing in the morning after the door’s fixed.” She gave me a look that gave no room for arguments.

Complying with her demand, I left her office and walked back to put my drawer into the vault. I glanced behind me to see if Catherine was watching, and she was. As I was leaving, I heard Megan, Sally, and Andrea talking about me.

“She is so weird, I don’t think he meant to break the door,” Sally said pointing a glare in my direction.

“You heard the police! Even the alarm and video surveillance showed nothing.”

“Catherine has sent her home early quite a few times in the last few weeks,” Megan interrupted.

“I think she is getting fired, and Catherine is only using her until she can fill her position,” Andrea followed. They all glared at me as I left.

Knowing I was just stalling the inevitable of telling Emily about today, I stopped on the way home and bought lunch. By the time I pulled into the driveway, Emily was on the porch waiting for me.

“Mom,” I said, as I threw myself in her arms, finally breaking down, and letting myself cry.

“Catherine called me on my way home. Are you ok?” Emily asked, truly upset.

“I’m fine.”

We sat in the living room and talked for a while. After I calmed down, I told Emily everything that went on this morning; about the man at the window, the broken door, and the girls thinking I was getting fired. In the back of my mind, I was still thinking of the video surveillance. After we went over everything twice, Emily let me go quietly without hesitation.

After I changed, I grabbed a book and started to read to try to escape my own mind. I was trying to concentrate on the book, but the lingering question if someone was after me, and why, kept repeating itself in my head. I was saved from my own thoughts when Emily knocked on my door.

“Can I come in?” Emily said, tentatively.

“Sure,” I said, knowing the previous conversation wasn’t over. To my surprise, I was more than wrong, I was utterly wrong.

“Where is my little girl?” Emily started, “I miss her; you know the little bubbly girl that I once knew. She somehow has turned into a little hermit that stays in her room and cuts everyone out of her life. There is more to life than burying yourself in a book.” She took a deep sigh, “Is this about mark?” For a moment I was perplexed.

“Yeah, well, that and everything that has happened in the last month. It is like a chapter out of a mystery novel. All the events that come together before the final revealing, but this time, there is no revealing.”

Emily looked confused for a moment.

“I mean, the shadows I have been seeing, and the men at the door, looked awfully familiar to be a coincidence, and they weren’t there for the money, not a penny was taken. They were after something else, but why did they leave without it?”

I looked at Mom for a long moment before I lowered my eyes and looked at the empty words in the book.

“Oh Honey, I know it seems that everything is falling apart, and you are caught in the middle, but I promise your dad, and I are handling it. I know it’s hard, but I need you to let it go.”

I looked at my mom. Shaking my head and laughing at the unbelievable thought that she actually believed I would let it go and that was it.

Emily let out a little laugh that sounded like music and reached out for my hand.

“Let’s go all girly, and get some ice cream, go shopping, and maybe catch a movie.”

Before I had a chance to think, Emily kidnapped me for the day. She took me to the movies and dinner. We had our nails done, and then, we finished the night with the ice cream that she had promised me.

Mom and I stayed up all night catching up, and talking about all I had been going through. I recently became aware that I was able to hear things that other people couldn’t. I almost told her that I was able to hear the conversations between her and Dad when they thought I couldn’t, but the advantage of this was far too high to tell anyone.

## CHAPTER SIX



“Raindrops keep falling on my head.” Lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, my head rang in protest to wake-up. Ignoring the numbing headache, I thought back to the last time Mom and I had been out. It had been so long since Emily and I had so much fun that I had forgotten what it felt like. My sugar consumption from last night alone was enough to bring down a horse. As I stood in the bathroom, pondering how important it really was for me to get ready, I looked in the mirror and saw Medusa staring back at me with my long, brown, hair out of control like a bird’s nest. My storm-gray eyes faded into a blur ’til all I saw was a Picasso of me.

I took a deep breath, managed to tame the disaster I was wearing, and then headed downstairs for breakfast. As I turned the corner, I heard some mumbling coming from the kitchen. With each passing step, my parents’ voices grew. My parents were in a heated discussion. I waited in the hall, just outside the kitchen, to listen in on the conversation.

Apparently, my mom was upset. “I don’t think she’s ready! She can’t face him now. She may be strong and stubborn, but she is still a child. She wouldn’t have a chance against him! Are you sure he wants her?” Emily’s voice was sounding a little shaky.

“We’ll finish this conversation later. I need to talk to Alex now, but yes, he wants her.” Roger’s voice was strong and firm.

“Hi, Mom, what’s for breakfast?” I said, in a rather chipper voice, contrary to how I really felt as I entered the kitchen. The tension was so thick you couldn’t cut it with a knife. “Is everything ok?” I asked, when I noticed Mom’s flustered face.

“I’m fine dear. How about pancakes?” Her voice was weak and iffy. Usually, Mom was stable and collected, but this was a side of her I rarely saw.

“Sure, pancakes are fine.”

Roger was already gone by the time I finished breakfast, and by the looks of the suitcase he was carrying, he would be out of town for a while. I was running a little late and got into my old, beat-up CRX. As I turned the key, I was startled with a loud bang from the rear of my car. My heart gave a jolt and lodged in my throat, as it turned over in protest. I had been having trouble with the car for almost six months, and desperately needed a new car. I turned the key one more time, and she started right up. I made it safely to work, with it only stalling once on the way.

I arrived at work and started my new tasks immediately. I noticed that Sally, Megan, and Andrea were about five teller stations away, and it looked as if they were still angry with me, and taking bets on how long it would be until Catherine fired me. The rest of the branch had already forgotten about it and continued to talk about the new branch openings. The credit union updated the new postings every month, and it seemed to cause a lot of excitement. Everyone seemed a little more riled up than usual. I logged on and pulled up the postings to see if there was anything unusual, just a teller position in our branch, and few listings in other states. I stopped, a teller position, here? Because of my mom and Catherine, I usually knew the inner workings of the branch

before anyone else. Were they letting me go? I knew these last few weeks were a little different, but Catherine seemed to understand better than anyone. I scrolled down, glanced at the other positions, and came across a name that looked familiar, almost like I had seen it before. I clicked on the assistant manager position, just to see if there was a picture. The job would be available in three weeks. A picture in the middle of the page caught my eye; a small quiet town stared back at me. Something was hypnotizing about the photo; it was like *déjà vu*.

Throughout the rest of the day, I would periodically glance at the picture. I have always wanted to move. I didn't mind my simple life. Well, the simple life I had until recently. I have always hated this lifeless, desolate desert in which, unfortunately, I resided. I wanted to move, more than anything.

Catherine called me in her office. As I crossed the foyer, every teller in the branch stared at me. My heart stopped, and every breath became an effort. I have never been fired before, and I was scared stiff. When I reached the office, Catherine gestured to the chair nearest me and closed the door behind me. She walked over and sat down at her oversized desk. What was only a few seconds, seemed like a lifetime. Her face was almost impassive, as I waited for her verdict. She noticed my anxious feelings, and then, smiled.

"Are you nervous? Out of all the times you have been in my office, have I ever reprimanded you?"

"No," I replied

"Ok, then relax. I was curious on how you were holding up in the loan department?" I took a deep breath. I let out a sigh of relief, and my heart resumed its regular beat.

"Fine I guess, I haven't run into any snags yet, why?"

"Well, as you might have heard, there is a teller position available in our branch."

"Yes, I saw. I guess the consensus amongst the girls is

that I'm going to be let go." I had barely finished when Catherine burst out in laughter. I never heard her laugh before. It actually scared me at first. Her laugh was high-pitched, just like her voice. It sounded like several chimes in perfect harmony. I looked around, to see if anyone else heard the music; I was right. They did. All the employees and members heard this and looked through Catherine's window. Catherine realized as I did that everyone was staring at her. Quickly, she closed the blinds, sat back down, and faced me.

"Arri, my dear, I'd never fire you, I was going to give you a new position actually. Karen quit this morning. If I promote you, then your teller position will be open, won't it?" I stared at her for a moment.

"A promotion?" I asked.

"Yes, if you will accept it," she responded with a smile, knowing well I would not turn it down.

"Yes, Yes, Yes," I repeatedly said. My original fear turned into excitement. Catherine let out a small enthusiastic scream.

"I heard about the girls' bet. Let's have some fun, and make them sweat." I never took Catherine as the devious type, but I liked this side of her. It made her a little more likable. Catherine and I walked out of her office. Andrea, Sally, and Megan were all watching me like hawks stalking their prey. I walked over to my teller station and slowly placed my personal items in a box. Their eyes gleamed with satisfaction. I looked a little sad, trying my best to play it up. Halfway through cleaning out my station, Catherine stopped me and cleared her throat loud enough to get their attention.

"I have an announcement to make..."

I could see the three girls exchange a look of reassured gratification.

"As you have seen," Catherine continued, "there is going



to be a new teller position open. I am pleased to announce that it's Arri's. I have finally decided it was time to let her go..." Catherine paused for a moment to catch her breath, and let the girls simmer. The three smiled at each other in triumph. "...as a teller and promote her to a loan officer." Catherine hugged me and gave me a nameplate with my name italicized in delicate cursive writing. Now normally, Catherine would never do this. She was trying to prove a point to the three girls that have been giving me trouble. I thought this was a little much, but I felt they deserved it. I couldn't help but throw them a, I told you so, look and unpacked my things at my new desk.

Even though Sally, Megan, and Andrea seemed unaffected by the string of events today, I could hear them tell each other how unfair it was to promote me after everything I had done, and all the chaos I had caused in the last few weeks. The day went by so fast. I hadn't looked at the clock 'til I noticed all the other tellers getting ready to leave. Catherine locked the door and announced closing as usual. The great thing, about being a loan officer, was there was no cash-drawer. If there was any reason I needed to take cash, I took it to a teller, and they would deal with the transaction, leaving me cashless. I thought the most tedious job of being a teller was the counting of my drawer, but the brainless work involved in counting all day made up for it. Now all I had to do was grab my purse, log off of my computer, and go. As I did, I smiled and shrugged my shoulders in excitement about my new position and the gratification I felt.

Andrea was my leaving buddy. We were the last to leave, and as much as I really didn't like her, I wasn't going to let myself get all worked up about it. As I locked the door behind me, the parking lot felt eerie and ghostly. Andrea gasped, and I spun around to see why. Three men walked out from behind my car. We froze. Catherine was frantic about our safety since we were almost robbed, so I carried

my cell phone at all times. I reached for the phone in my pocket, manipulating it with my hand. I was hoping more than anything that they would just keep walking, and leave us alone, but I lost hope when they stopped and gave us a menacing grin. Their faces looked perfect, except for their crooked smiles. My heart started to pound, and my legs were dancing on the inside, asking me to run, but I couldn't move. I was stuck with fright. Andrea, apparently not thinking, screamed, then started to run. One of the men went after her, but stopped in his tracks, when another said,

“Leave it; we're not here for her.” His voice was raspy and deep. He slowly walked toward me. I thought about running like Andrea, but two things were stopping me. One, my legs wouldn't move, and two, the man admitted that they were here for me. Giving up the attempt to run for help I stood there waiting for them to make their move. One was about fifteen feet from me when I heard a low rumble coming from behind me. I was still frozen in terror. My heart gave a painful jolt, and all I wanted to do was just give up and cry. Even if I tried to move, my feet were planted and weren't going to take me anywhere.

I turned slightly, trying to see what was making that noise, without taking my eyes too far off my pursuers, I assumed it was more of them. I didn't have enough time to react. To the side of me, a shadow of an enormous dog appeared on the parking lot wall. I didn't think it was possible, but I could swear my heartbeat tripled, hurting my chest. My knees were getting weak, as I shook in fright.

The two men that stayed back were now advancing, flanking their friend. The man in front curled his lips again, allowing his teeth to shine in the light, and let out a small grumbling growl. The two other men followed his example. I could hear more growling coming from behind me, all humming in unison. The rumbling was so deep it sent vibrations throughout my body. I didn't know if the

men and the dogs were on the same side, or if they were on opposing teams.

Under my fingers, I felt something cold and wet nudging me. I looked to both my sides, I saw two enormous dogs standing beside me, crouched down, bracing for an attack. My voice finally let out a scream, when I saw four more dogs come around on each side of me, enclosing us. The moment was tense, as I waited to see who was who and whose team I was on.

“Now wait a minute, ...” The leader of the men said, “we are not here to quarrel. We just came for the girl.” I knew he was not talking to me, but there was no one else here except the dogs, and they don’t exactly speak. I started to cry. The white dog to my left side started barking, putting himself between the men and me. The black dog to my right did the same, and the rest of the dogs began to make a low rumbling sound. The reverberation was more threatening, and this time sent a shiver up my spine. Out of nowhere, the man in front leaped across the gap between us and tried to grab me.

Just as he was fingertips away, I saw a flash of black streak in front of me. I stumbled back. Suddenly the two other men leaped out and tried to grab me as well. Three of the dogs jumped out before they reached me, and tackled them to the ground. The white dog next to me started to nudge me toward my car.

“I will get you,” I could hear one of the men say, as I got in my car. The ignition started on the first turn like it knew I was in trouble, and I had no time to play games. I sped off at full speed.

Just as I was turning the corner, I looked back, and the fight seemed to be dissipating. Two lumps in the parking lot, I assumed they were the wingmen, laid there motionless. One was still fighting. The black dog looked up at my car making sure I was safe. The man took that opportunity; he jumped out from under the dog and made his way to me.

I was not about to take any chances. I gunned it, cutting people off, running stop signs, and red lights. I was horrified to see him running after a moving vehicle, and still be gaining. I pushed the gas even harder, now flooring it. I was thoughtfully willing my old car not to give up, and hoping it could go faster. The man seemed to slow, and then, darted out from behind me. I wanted to look back, but at this speed, I would have hit someone. I was a great driver, but I didn't drive in the Indie 500 either. The ramp to the freeway was backed up, and I was not about to stop. If I did, the man would definitely get me. I needed to make a quick decision. The exit was coming up fast, so I decided I had no other choice but to use the shoulder. I was almost to the end of the ramp when I noticed the freeway was backed up as well, for at least a few exits. I was stuck, there was nowhere for me to go, but I couldn't stop now. If I did, I would be a sitting duck. I passed a cop waiting in the traffic, and instantly, I saw his lights behind me. Shaking my head I thought, this couldn't get any worse.

Seeing there was no winning way, whether I pulled over or not, I decided getting in trouble was better than losing my life. I wondered how I was going to explain this to my parents; what really happened before the police hauled me off to jail. I passed the accident that seemed to be slowing traffic and moved over to use a lane instead of the shoulder. I was driving in and out of the vehicles, trying to get home as fast as I could, when the cop came up beside me and indicated he wanted me to pull over. He swerved over, closing the gap between us, signaling me once again to pull over when his car disappeared, and all I heard was a loud crash behind me, as my rearview mirror reflected with smoke and fire. Too scared to see what happened, I kept driving as fast as I could. It seemed like the faster I went, the longer it took to get home. I was about two exits away from home when out of nowhere, my car was flung to the left, throwing

me into the guard rail. I looked over and saw the leader attached to the outside of my car, punching through, and breaking my driver's side window.

My car was out of control, as I swerved in and out of lanes, hitting several vehicles, and causing accidents as I tried to correct myself. He was almost within reaching distance when I saw a streak of white right in front of my window. I raised my hands blocking what should have been broken glass from hitting whatever it was, but there was nothing, just growling. The white dog was attached to the man. I grabbed the steering wheel, again gaining control when I swerved, and the white dog tore into the man; he yelled in pain! They were pulling my car from side to side as they fought 'til finally the man lost his grip and let go, and they fell from my car, hitting the concrete, rolling off onto the shoulder. After they disappeared into the night, I regained control, sped up, and finally made it home.

Stunned from the evening's events, I sat in the driveway for a second, 'til I realized how unsafe it was, and darted into the house.

I slammed the door behind me, backed up, and stared at it, waiting for something else to happen. I heard a slight noise behind me, and as edgy as I was, I spun around, ready to defend myself. It took me a moment to realize who it was. I saw my mom and dad staring at me, confused. With one look at my mom's face, I ran and threw my arms around her, and closed my eyes. I finally felt some sense of relief. After a moment, she pulled away and asked what had happened. I was reluctant to let go, but she overpowered me, and I was forced to face her.

"Arri?" Roger said questioningly.

Instantly, my eyes filled with tears, and I fell to my knees. Kneeling on the floor, I began crying. I was barely able to catch my breath when my parents bombarded me with questions.

"What happened? Why are you shaking? Is everything

ok?” Dad was relentless and was getting a little frustrated with my silence as I sobbed.

“There... I was... Andrea... dogs... my car.” I sputtered and mumbled.

He never was the most patient man. Emily got me a soda from the fridge, then sat patiently and waited for me to steady myself.

“Arri,” Dad yelled as he pounded his fists on the new coffee table. His reaction earned a scowl from Emily as I tried to explain what was going on, but it all seemed to be coming out in gibberish. Confused, my parents stared at me.

“Arri, Arri, Arri, slow down, you are not making any sense. What’s this about dogs on the freeway? Let’s slow it down, and start again,” Emily said, as she put her arm around me.

I reviewed the events of the night. I told them of the men, the dogs, and the fight. My head spun, as I told my story, once again my eyes welled up with tears. Roger, unusually huffy and touchy, stormed outside. When he came back in, Roger slammed the door behind him, as he yelled into his cell phone.

“I don’t care what happened,” there was a long pause, “At least she’s safe, for now.” Throwing his cell phone down on the tiled entryway, it shattered into several pieces. Emily shot him a glare, “Roger is that really necessary?”

“There... he... I...,” He started, but never finished. He just threw up his hands and went upstairs.

“Where are you going?” Emily insisted.

“To make another call,” he said, as he disappeared down the hall. I looked at Emily confused.

“What?”

Emily took a deep breath, “Nothing dear.”

“What was all that? Why would they be after me?” I looked at Mom in panic, “Oh crap, do you think the police

are looking for me? How am I going to explain all this?" I shuddered. "Oh, this is bad."

"Arri stop!" Mom's sharp tone brought me from the panic. "Your dad and I will figure this out. Was there anything specific you can remember? Anything about the guys that seemed different?"

"He yelled 'I will get you,' and when Andrea ran, one of them ran after her and the other said they weren't here for her and to keep their eyes on the job? Does that help? What do you think he wanted? Why me?" Emily's face fell, and her concern turned to anger.

"I don't know dear. Maybe they wanted you because they thought you had codes or keys to the vault. The most important thing is you're okay," Her words sounded sincere, but I felt her guilt.

"Oh Mom, what am I going to do? I'll need to tell the police something. That cop chased me forever." My stomach turned as the thought that I caused so much chaos hit me.

"You'll tell them nothing." Mom's lip twitched as she ran her hands through my hair. "I don't know what they wanted, but the District will fix it."

We sat in silence for a moment while Mom thought, then she finally broke the silence.

"Well, why don't you go upstairs and wash the make-up off your cheeks and I'll get dinner ready." She kissed me on the forehead as I rose to leave. The phone rang.

"Hello." I could hear Emily answer the phone in the kitchen.

"Arri" Emily called out,

"Yes, Mom!" I replied, already halfway up the stairs.

"The phone is for you. It's Catherine." I came back down and picked up the phone in the living room. "He..." Before I could finish, Catherine's voice came from the other end.

"Arri," she said in a panicked tone, "Are you ok? Andrea called and told me about the incident. I went back to the

bank, but when I got there, there was no sign of anything, but Andrea's car was missing. I was hoping you got away, but who took her car? You know what," she continued to say, without taking a breath or even stopping, "I'm coming over and then, we'll talk." Before I had a chance to put a word in otherwise, Catherine had already hung up.

"Mom," I yelled.

"There is no need to yell. I'm standing right here," Emily said, as she magically appeared at my side.

"Catherine is on her way over. Sorry, but I couldn't stop her."

"That's alright dear. Don't worry about Catherine; I'll take care of her."

When I reached the top of the stairs, Dad came running out of his room. At the sight of me, he stopped. His hand reached up and cupped my face, a tinge of concern in his eyes hardened as he pulled his hand back from my cheek.

"Arri," he said in a whisper, much like a faint sigh escaping his lips. He opened his mouth again and then, shook his head. Without another word, he kissed me on the forehead and rushed out. I heard his car start, and then, the sound of screeching tires.

Just as I stepped out of the shower, and into my favorite pair of yoga pants and a small tank-top, the smell of dinner wafted through my open door. Dinner was ready.

As I entered the dining room, I heard Emily and Catherine talking.

"Emily, I don't think it's safe here anymore. They've obviously found her. I think we need to get her out of here." At my mom's almost interruption, Catherine added, "til we figure things out. We know Nicholas is after her. You know what he is capable of, and how far he is willing to go. He already compromised Mark!" Catherine's voice was pleading.

I froze. This was the second time I heard the name Nicholas. Who was he? Why was he after me? I paused to listen.



“I’m not sending her anywhere. If they found her here, it is only a matter of time, before they find her somewhere else. Arri is my daughter first. Then, after I know she is safe, she can be whatever it is you think she is destined for.” Emily was not happy with Catherine’s request, and it showed in her voice.

“What if we sent her to Jessie in London? He is a prominent figure in our community. We can keep Nicholas’s men occupied here, for at least a little while. I fear she’ll get caught unless we do something, Emily. Nicholas’s men already know where she works, lives, even her favorite bookstore. The best we can do is get her to where she will be safe. This isn’t about us, Emily; it’s about what’s best for her.”

“Yes, I know Catherine, but Jessie?”

“Why not him?” Catherine said, with a curt edge to her voice.

“Well, do I really want to trust him with... her?”

“Emily, please. I am begging you.”

Catherine’s voice lingered as her plea was left unanswered. I tried to grasp the realization of their conversation as I walked in the kitchen and went straight to the stove, grabbing a plate, and scooping my food.

“Hi Catherine,” I said, in a voice not much more than a strangled sigh.

“Arri,” Catherine let out in a high-pitch squeal. “How do you feel?” She flew from her chair and took me in her arms then pulled me out to assess the damages. “You look tired.” Her assessment was accurate.

“I’m okay now, now that I have calmed down.”

It seemed so surreal. There were no further conversations about London, Nicholas, or the evening’s events at least in my presence. After I left the kitchen, Emily and Catherine were already devising a plan to get me to London. The cool thing was I already had the upper hand. I had information I was not supposed to have.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



With the events still fresh in my head, and the thought that there was someone after me, my dreams were more freakish than usual.

In my dream, I was running away from three men to a mansion. The men's faces were familiar. It was like a painted doll's face with no creases or flaws. Their teeth were straight and white, making their mask complete. When I got to the mansion doors, I reached for the handle, and just as I could feel it with my fingertips, one of the men caught the back of my shirt, making me trip, and pulled me to the ground. I tried to get up, but couldn't. My fighting was useless against his brute strength. The man had pinned me down, and his evil smile turned into a wicked snarl. There was a frightening look of excitement in his eyes. I could hear the other men laughing and bawling with encouragement. They paced back and forth like hungry wolves waiting for the hunt, then, when he leaned in toward me, I felt his warm, crazed breath against my neck. My heart pounded, and chills ran down my spine. His lips parted, and his teeth grazed my skin. The pressure on my neck increased. Right when I thought his teeth were going to break my skin, the mansion door flew open. All the men backed away and tried to drag me along with them. A hand reached out from behind the mansion

door and grabbed me. There was a tug-of-war until finally the men were overpowered and released me.

The stranger pulled me into his arms and saved me from the men. With my heart relieved, I felt strangely comfortable to be in his warm embrace. "I can't hold them off for long. Why are they after you?" His voice was seductive, refined, and like velvet to my ears. I might have melted into his alluringly irresistible grip, but his question held me at bay. My mind was blank. I have nothing to offer anyone.

Suddenly, my alarm sounded with a deafening blare of music, and I was freed from my own nightmare. I looked at the clock. It showed 6:00 A.M., and the sun was just rising over the mountains. Lying in bed, I pondered the dream and the chase from last night. There was no way I was going to return to the place I was attacked and chased, barely escaping with my life. My car was destroyed. I couldn't explain what happened, and even if I did, no one would believe me.

After getting dressed, I went downstairs for breakfast. When I entered the kitchen my mom was in her usual position, as always, she was on the phone, and today was no different. When she saw me, her voice suddenly changed to an officious tone.

"I understand, but I still don't think she's ready." There was a long pause, and her demeanor and expression changed. "Are you sure?" There was another pause. This time shorter. "I'll see what I can do." She hung up and then looked at me with a sullen face.

As Emily placed my food in front of me, I asked,

"What's going on?" Clearly showing my concern, my parents exchanged a brief uneasy glance. Initially, I didn't see my dad sitting across from me. I must have been pre-occupied with my mom and over-looked him. After last night, I thought my dad would have been gone longer.

"Oh nothing dear, just District stuff." I could see the

forced smile on her face and the burden behind her eyes.

“Well, you made the front page of the newspaper,” Dad’s obvious amusement was apparent in his voice. He carefully threw the paper in front of me with a headline that read,

‘High-speed pursuit ends with police officer’s death.’ Under the headline was a picture of the charred and mangled police car on the freeway. The flipped and torn vehicle was gut-wrenching as I thought of the possibilities of it being me. I read the beginning of the caption beneath the photo.

At six eighteen pm on October 4th. A car chase began as a woman in a late model CRX was clocked at ninety mph on the shoulder on the 215 between Tropicana and Russell. Officer Law Concade engaged in the high-speed pursuit. Officer Law Concade reportedly lost control, Officials say, after the late model CRX allegedly swerved to hit the officer causing him to lose control ending the high-speed pursuit in a fiery crash resulting in the officer’s death. The unidentified woman is still at large. Police are seeking public help. If you have any information on the where-a-bouts of this woman, please contact the police immediately.’

“This is bad, right? How am I supposed to go to work now? It’s obvious. It was me! One look at my car and all the damage and it would be like me flagging down the police at every turn.” I looked at my parents in horror.

“Don’t worry; we pulled your car into the garage this morning so nobody will suspect you. You’ll just have to take my car in the meantime.” Mom’s balanced and logical voice sauntered through the air as I panicked.

“Mom, I can’t go back there, that’s crazy.”

“Yes honey, but if you don’t, it will look even more suspicious. The District has taken care of the police, but you still need to go. Act like nothing happened!”

“Are you kidding me, I almost died. A man, no less, chases me at ninety miles-per-hour, and you think I should go back to the scene of the crime? How does that make any sense?”

There was a slight silence when my dad finally rose from his chair as it scratched along the tiled floor. “Your mother’s right. You go back to work and let the two of us worry about whom, and what they wanted.” With that, he left the kitchen leaving no room for argument.

After breakfast, I called Catherine immediately.

“Hi, Catherine? Do you think you can find someone to cover my shift? I’m not ready to come back yet.” I was hoping she would magically be on my side.

My heart stilled, waiting for her response.

“No, dear I’m sorry. I would have to agree with your parents on this one.” Scowling at the phone, I hung up.

I went into the garage to view the full extent of the damage. Standing in the garage and looking over the bent and tangled metal that used to be my car, I saw the real damage that was done the night before. I saw the actual handprint of my attacker indented in the roof. The shattered window stirred the dread in my stomach as I saw the broken glass peppering the seats and the floor. My dad would undoubtedly use this to convince me to get a new car. I walked back in the house just as he was walking out. My dad looked at me with loving eyes, and then, to my car. The regret and sorrow I saw in his eyes the night before returned. Smiling at him and thanking him again, we both went our separate ways.

After giving into my parents’ coercion that it would look too suspicious not returning to work, I borrowed my mom’s extra car for the time being. As I drove to work, my thoughts kept returning to the conversation between Mom and Catherine the night before. They were willing to ship me off, as they put it, without my regard. As I drove in silence, looking in my rearview mirror more often than needed, and gripping the steering wheel like it was my last life-line, I slipped into the parking lot of the branch. After parking, I sat there for a moment as my heart raced and pounded in my ears. The fear practically consumed me. With caution

and great effort, I got out of the car and darted to the back door.

When I entered the branch, there was a nervous buzz about the place, as everyone talked and gossiped. Each one giving their interpretation of what might have happened last night, and who the men were. The moment they noticed me, they were instantly quiet. I could have heard a pin drop, as everyone watched me meticulously, with each step I took toward Catherine's office. Andrea ran up to me.

"Sorry, Arri. I'm not sure what came over me. I ran as fast as I could and didn't stop until I was several blocks away. I called Catherine from a pay-phone and told her you were in trouble. Arri, I'm so sorry." When she finally stopped, she was out of breath. She sounded truly repentant.

"Well," I replied, "it definitely was an exciting evening," I said, trying to make light of the conversation and not giving into suspicion. I smiled, and gave Andrea a hug, telling her it was ok. I really wasn't angry with her. I would have done the same thing if my legs had moved. As I walked away, she turned back to me and asked after me,

"How did you get away? What did they want?" I closed my eyes and kept on walking and acted like I hadn't heard anything.

When I finally came to Catherine's office, she opened her door, and without a word waved me in. I sat down at her desk and waited impatiently. She closed the door and turned to me with a concerned look.

"How are you?"

"I'm okay, I guess. I don't understand what I'm doing here though."

"Yes, I know, but it was necessary." Her words were cut short when there was a knock on the door.

The door slowly opened. Courtney poked her head in. Her red hair was pinned up nicely in a bun, took in Catherine and I talking and grimaced.

“Sorry to interrupt, but there is a man by the name of Colton here to see you.”

“Yes, thank you, Courtney.” Catherine shook her head as the door clicked shut. “It must be my ten o’clock interview.” Her words were quiet and to herself.

“Oh Catherine, when you have a moment I would like to talk to you about a position in Utah.” Catherine turned around; interested in what I had to say.

“Yes, what about it?” She couldn’t hide her intrigued curiosity.

“Well,” I took a deep breath, “With all the trouble going on here wouldn’t it be better if I left. Maybe a change of pace?”

“You know, it might be a good idea.”

“Yeah, well, with what happened last night, I need to get out of here.” Hopefully, I’ll get the position, and maybe if I left I wouldn’t have to go to London, I thought to myself.

“Arri, I have absolutely no question you will get the position.”

I have been through enough in the last few days to occupy a therapist for years. I thought about it throughout the day, and I was certain this is what I wanted to do. I have been dying to get out of Las Vegas for as long as I could remember, and with everything that happened, now would be a perfect time.

Usually, I was pretty confident until I had to face my parents. After a full day of nerve-wracking stress, I met my parents at Tony’s Bar and Grill. I was fidgety and unsure how I was going to do this. I mustered up the courage that hit me before, and I entered the restaurant with a new found self-confidence. Emily and Roger were already seated and ordered some appetizers and drinks. I sat down next to them, and to my surprise, they were in a fantastic mood. Dad had even turned off his cell phone. Before I knew it, dinner was winding down.

“Arri? You have been awfully quiet. Is everything ok?” Roger asked. “What are you thinking?” My parents knew me better than I did. As Emily would say, I held my emotions on my sleeve. I took a deep breath, and laughed nervously, as I exhaled.

“Do you think you could keep an open mind?” I said, not sounding too confident.

“Sure hon,” Roger said, as he looked at me curiously and skeptically, and Emily nodded. This was it. This was my chance to tell them I was applying for the job and if all went well, moving. No pressure, I just needed to do it in the right way.

“Well,” Emily said, “what exactly did you have in mind?” Emily and Roger exchanged looks. They focused their attention back on me.

“I was thinking of taking a new position at work.” I stopped it there, waiting for their reaction. It dawned on me that my mom was the CEO of the credit union, and if she didn’t approve, she could smash my hopes in just seconds.

“And what position is this?” Emily asked. “Weren’t you were just promoted?”

“It’s a new assistant manager position, the only thing is,” I took a deep breath; “it opens in three weeks,” I said, then bit my lip as I cringed.

“Arri, I don’t know of any assistant manager positions opening here,” Emily remarked.

“Well,” I paused, “it’s in Utah.” I held my breath and waited for the rain to come. I had expected them to put up a fight.

After a long tormenting moment, I hung my head and accepted my defeat.

“Arri, why are you so upset?” Roger’s voice was soft and sympathetic.

“I don’t know.” I faltered for a moment before adding, “Please, I am begging you to at least consider the possibilities this could have for me.” I gave them a half-smile.



Roger signaled the waiter, and we left the restaurant without another word.

I could sense that Roger was still pondering our discussion. It wasn't his usual silence, but his casualness and the distant look on his face was what gave it away. Emily had already logged it away and didn't think about it again. When we approached the cars, Roger placed his hand on my shoulder and gave it a small squeeze.

"Emily," he called, "I'll drive Arri home. I don't like her being alone." He gave me a wink and opened the driver's side door.

Emily looked at Roger suspiciously, like she didn't trust him. He looked like he had something to get off his chest. We were on our way out of the parking lot when Roger directed me to go left. He gave a few more directions, and we ended up in the Target parking lot.

"Uh, Dad?" I asked. "What are we doing here?"

He didn't say anything as he got out, traded places with me, and raced off. As we drove, Dad started to talk, but he never made eye contact. He merely swerved in and out of traffic like a NASCAR pro.

"How important is this position to you?" He asked. There was no emotion in his voice.

"Extremely important, Dad, I was almost killed the other night. I don't know if you realize I am nearly nineteen, and in all fairness, I think you and Mom are way too protective. But with everything going on, even you can't protect me. It's getting to the point where I feel like a prisoner in my own home." I rubbed my face. "Dad, the man that ruined my car is not going to give up. Why did he attack me? Let's not even mention the dogs, I mean really?" I paused to look at my dad, and his eyes showed nothing. "That's not all. I can see and hear the fear and worry the two of you carry around with you. I can feel it too. Literally! I know there is more going on than either of you are telling me." I exhaled.

Finally, I was able to talk, and not be ignored. Roger looked at me and smiled.

“You know, in this case, you’re right and quite perceptive. Arri, there is something you have to know; your mother and I feel extremely guilty. We thought it was best to protect you from our way of life, but regardless of our efforts, it’s caught up with you.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dad adjusted his seating and turned to face me. “Arri, there’s a lot you don’t know.”

“What?” I interrupted.

“Arri, you are a part of something big, and these attacks are a result of Emily and me not telling you. We aren’t exactly your average Joe’s. We are very different from other people.”

I interrupted again. “Will the attacks ever stop?”

“No, I’m sorry.” His expression fell, and I could feel the sadness in his heart. “I know your mom will want to send you somewhere else, but I will be on your side. I have seen you change right in front of my eyes, and I see great potential in you. You are stronger than we ever could have expected, both mentally and physically. You may even be the key, we have all been hoping for.” He paused for a moment, and I could see he was deciding whether or not to tell me what he was thinking. “Your mother and I are very different, and I think you are too.”

Roger started the car, and we drove home in unbroken silence. When we reached our street, I looked over to Dad and asked.

“Like what world would this be?” Roger laughed slightly.

“It means...,” he struggled with his words, “you are part of an elite society.” Then, he winked.

I felt like I was a part of the Twilight Zone and my parents were secret operatives of the CIA, and I got caught in the middle. I wanted to know more.

I was sad to see the ride ending, as we pulled in our drive. Roger and I have never been able to talk so freely.

“Remember, not a word,” Roger said in a whisper.

Emily came out immediately and gave Roger an angry glance. Putting her arm around me, she asked me where we went.

“To get some ice cream.” I said, in a deceptive voice.

As night fell, I went to bed, closed my eyes and quickly fell asleep.

I was in the middle of a large grassy area waiting for someone. When a few men came out from the woods, I could hear them exchanging laughs as one of them said.

“Is that it? Just that one little girl? This will be a snap.”

Staring at them, I felt no fear, anxiety, or worry, just the anticipation of getting it over with. The men start advancing, and just as they reach me...

I was jarred awake when my alarm woke me up. Emily and Roger were already in the kitchen when I came downstairs.

“I still think we should let her go.” Dad’s voice was low and gruff.

“No.” Mom hissed.

“Come on Em, we can’t keep her here forever. You are only postponing the inevitable. She’ll be nineteen in a few days, she’s not eight.”

“Yeah, but she is not like other’s her age. She is in far more danger than the average nineteen-year-old,” she spat.

“All the more reason for us to let her go, we can give her a head start by leading the hunters off her trail. It is the last thing they would expect.”

“Rog, I can’t let my little girl go. She needs protection.”

“Yeah, but who better than her guardian?”

“Me, that’s who,” Mom’s voice was angry and cold.

“Nicholas is not stupid; he would not expect her to leave without us. This is the perfect opportunity, Em. We need to

think about her and not our selfishness. It would be easier for her guardian to protect her while we find out how to stop this. Besides, she knows something's up. We can't keep pretending nothing is wrong. She will be the one to pay the price."

"Oh really, Roger?"

"Yes really, did you have a better plan? You know she is stronger than you give her credit for. Just think about it."

"Were you talking about me?" I asked, as I entered the kitchen and grabbed a bowl and a box of cereal. I sat down and poured my breakfast.

"You are in a good mood," Emily said, as she flashed a skeptical look at Roger. "Besides, what makes you think we were talking about you?"

"I heard the two of you chatting."

"Honey, I think you are hearing things. We were just sitting here waiting for you," Emily said. Roger smirked, and then, winked at me.

"Well, I had better get going if I am going to make my meeting," Emily said, "do you need a ride to work, Arri?"

"No thank you, I'm good." Mom shook her head and mumbled something incoherent to Roger, then left the room.

Roger laughed at Mom as he shook his head before he stood to leave for work.

"Dad?" I asked after him.

"Yes, dear."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Supporting me." I smiled, and Roger flashed me a suspicious grin before leaving.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



Two days ago I brought up the assistant manager position and one day since the awkward conversation between my parents in the kitchen. The air between my parents was beyond tense. Rounding the corner of the kitchen, I was surprised to see that my dad was the only one home.

“Arri?” Roger asked “I...,” he stammered as he looked at me with doubtful eyes, “how did you know I supported you yesterday?”

I paused and bit my bottom lip thinking.

“Are you going to tell me?”

“Yes, sorry,” I took a deep breath, just hoping Roger would understand. I looked around the room searching for Mom, but when she was not there, I decided it was safe to continue.

“I heard the two of you arguing over me going away. You said, ‘who better than her guardian.’” I stopped and looked at his surprised expression. I gave him a weak smile. “Do you have to work today?” I asked?

“Yes, why?” Roger looked at me curiously.

“Well, do you think you can call in, and you and I could go out?”

“Sure, I’ll call and see what I can do,” he looked intrigued then took out his cell phone and made a quick call.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Smiling, Roger opened the front door and held it for me.

We drove to a nearby restaurant. As usual, Roger asked that we are seated away from everyone else. I could sense a small amount of tension in him.

“Dad?” I waited for him to respond.

“Yes dear,” he replied, but not really paying attention as he eyed our surroundings. I closed my eyes for a moment and focused on the emotions I was feeling. They weren’t mine. They were his. Although his physical expression and demeanor expressed a nonchalant nature, there was a whirlwind of masked emotions exploding under the surface. The changes were as erratic as the waves of the tide. Finally, with a small sigh, I opened my eyes, and Roger turned his attention to me; his eyes shadowed curiosity.

As I stared at him, there was a small change in his disposition, the tension I had felt melted away, and he was worried. It was confusing. I was able to feel what he was feeling.

“Dad? When you said, ‘I was different,’ what exactly did you mean?” I waited for what felt like a lifetime when Roger finally answered.

“That’s a hard question,” he openly admitted.

I interrupted, “Well, I’ve noticed a few things, nothing spectacular but, I guess I sort of heard you and Mom yesterday when you told her you thought I should go.” I was hoping to get some sort of sign that indicated I was on the right track. I sensed Roger’s heart leap. I guess this was the sign I was looking for. I wanted to just jump right in and blurt everything out, but I had to choose my words wisely.

“Go ahead,” Roger finally said.

“Well, this isn’t easy for me,” I started digging deep, looking for the part of me that said this was a good idea.

“Why don’t you go ahead and tell me whatever it is you wanted to tell me,” he held up his hands in surrender, “no

judgments, I promise,” trying to encourage me to continue.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said, absently rubbing my legs. “I noticed it a few weeks ago. It was small but sudden.” I paused, Roger patiently looked at me and waited for me to finish. “It was most noticeable when I heard Catherine and Mom talking about sending me to London.” My voice faltered a bit, and I paused. I was still hurt. Regrouping, I took a deep, shaky breath, and continued. “Did I actually hear this?” As I asked, Roger gave a shameful nod. I knew I was ruining my chances of eavesdropping on my parents again. I expected to get scolded for listening in on their conversations, but instead, I sensed he felt proud of me, even though he physically showed no reactions. “Then there is all the whispering around the credit union that Catherine didn’t expect me to hear, through closed doors.” I looked at Roger for any reaction at all, but there was nothing. “Do I sound silly?” I asked.

“No dear, have you told this to anyone else?” He seemed a little nervous.

“No,” I said shaking my head.

“Good.” He said, slightly laughing.

I was relieved to hear that Roger understood me. Although it was kind of hard to concentrate because of my own hap-hazard emotional turmoil, I noticed his emotions were just as erratic as mine. It was like riding an emotional roller coaster. I knew it was him because it was coming directly from him. I was getting a little nauseous with the constant emotional changes. It seemed every time I answered him, it reflected a different feeling.

If I had only paid attention earlier and not been so clueless, I would have seen that my life was not so boring after all.

“Well,” Roger said, interrupting my thought. “It looks like you have been doing just fine. You are coming along nicely. I almost gave up hope, but you have surprised me yet again.” Roger had the typical proud-dad look on his face.

“Dad, exactly how different are we?” The words came out before I was able to stop them.

Roger’s face turned placid. I couldn’t see what he was feeling, but I could feel it. He was indecisive. Finally, Roger broke the deafening silence.

“I must be honest. I am having a time deciding how much I can tell you. You need to understand, it’s not because I can’t tell you; but I fear the more you know, the more danger you will be in. Giving you too much information is just as dangerous as not giving you enough. Your mom and I were hoping if you knew nothing, you would be safe, but I now know this is not the case.”

Roger ran his hand through his untidy hair. “I am truly sorry you have been put in this situation. I will help you the best I can.” Roger said, with significant meaning and thought.

There was no real answer, just another riddle.



## CHAPTER NINE



The next day, I felt confident. Just before lunch I had told Catherine I was applying for the position. At the end of my shift, I logged off and clocked out as usual. I was just leaving, when Catherine pulled me into her office. After I sat down, Catherine made me wait while she finished signing some papers. My stomach was in knots, and my insides cringed just waiting for the shoe to drop.

“So Arri,” she began in her usual high-pitched voice looking up from her desk, “I was talking with your mother today while we were having lunch. You told her you were applying today.” I didn’t know whether she was stating a fact or asking a question.

“Yes,” I answered in response, “It’s quite a drastic move, but I’m hopeful. Dad seems to be ok with it.” I left Mom out on purpose. I knew she did not share my same enthusiasm about me moving next door, let alone three hundred miles away. I could hear the unsteady rap of my voice as I spoke.

Catherine’s face went from stern to gentle when she saw my distress. She had always tried to keep business, business, and friendship, friendship, but this was bordering the line of both. It was mixing the business decision of taking a job, and the emotional side of dealing with friendly advice from someone that you had known for a long time. Catherine

took my hands from across her desk and looked straight into my eyes. Her voice was kind and steady.

“As a friend, I can’t tell you what to do, but Emily and I had a good talk today, and after heavy persuasion on my side, we’ve taken the opportunity of submitting a personal recommendation from the both of us.” She paused and looked at me for a response.

“And?” I asked, impatiently.

“You have been offered the position. If you accept it, call Mary,” she pushed a piece of paper toward me, “the office manager, and you will have two weeks to move; if not, you may decline. No pressure either way.”

Her expression was unusually upbeat, as she waited for my reaction. I was stunned. I was not expecting this when she called me in her office. When I didn’t immediately react, Catherine asked if everything was ok.

“Yes, I’m just surprised.” I took a deep breath smiling but was otherwise speechless.

“So I have two weeks?” I said, a little less shocked and a little more like a screeching squeal.

“Yes, I know it’s sudden, but what do you think?”

“Well, I think I’ll take it!” I let out an excited squeal.

I had considered myself someone who never really took chances, but now, I was going for it. It scared me to think I had to move away to not only gain my independence and freedom but also to find out who I really was. Before I knew it, I was almost home.

I pulled into the drive and sat in my car for a moment. Was moving really going to solve my problems? My head was spinning. When I was done arguing with myself, I walked in the door and went straight upstairs. Just as I set my purse down and took off my shoes, Emily walked in.

“Are you busy?”

“No,” I moved over, and she took a seat next to me at the foot of the bed. There were so many things I wanted to

discuss, but the most pressing was for me to find out exactly why she didn't want me to take the job. She was not only my mom; she was also my best friend and my role model. She was everything I wanted and hoped to be. So as dumb as it sounds, I would never dream of going up against her, I would never want to lose her as a mom or a friend.

"Catherine called me into her office this afternoon. She said the two of you had lunch." Emily smiled, and broke my concentration.

"Yes, Catherine mentioned that you have been a little distracted lately. And that you two have been discussing the position on and off, but nothing official."

I was relieved that she had started the conversation. I was afraid she would not be open to discussion, and I would definitely need more than her approval. I would need her support and help.

"I have decided your dad and Catherine were right. I can't keep you all to myself, not forever. You are a grown woman now, and I need to start treating you that way. I am so proud of you Arri. You have been so patient with your over-bearing mother, and still managed to grow up into a responsible young lady." Emily had tears in her eyes. Their presence showed she meant every word.

"Mom? Why didn't you agree with me leaving in the first place?" My heart wrenched with the thought. I was on the verge of crying. Emily's voice was calm and soothing, but I could see the heartache in her eyes.

She let out a deep sigh. "I just figured if I held on to you as long as I could, I would never lose you." She looked down and took another slow, deep breath. "I promised your father we wouldn't tell you, so let's keep it between us but..." Being in the middle would really make it hard to keep my stories straight. "Your father and I were going to let nature take its course, and you would find out a few things on your own, but if you are to be on your own, your father and I would not be around to help you through it all..."

Mom was babbling. I cocked my head to the side.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well, needless to say, your father and I are a little different than the average parents. Only a specific type of person is allowed in our community, and you are one of them. It is not easy to tell you what I would like, so please bear with me if I stumble over my own words.” Apologetically, she smiled at me. “Arri, I know most parents tell their children they are special, but Arri you really are special. You are destined to do great things, and if the pressure was not great enough, you might have abilities others don’t. You are the first, so you are alone.” I leaned over and hugged her.

“I understand part of what you are telling me.” Maybe it was time to tell my mom I knew. “I have noticed a few things lately, but I wasn’t sure what they were. When you and Catherine were in the kitchen talking about shipping me off to London; I heard it. I didn’t hear the whole conversation, but I heard it from the stairs. I understand that I was not supposed to hear it, but why were you going to ship me off to London?” Emily’s face was remorseful and shocked.

“It’s not that we wanted to, but since the attacks, I thought if you went away ’til they stopped or forgot about you; then your troubles would be over, and you could return home.” Mom hung her head and fiddled with the hem of her shirt. “Honey, I never really wanted to send you to London, but since you’re moving, and throwing them off your scent, we won’t need to send you anywhere.”

“I know Mom, I know you never really wanted to send me away, but you’re right. I’m moving now, making a new start for myself, and hopefully even have a friend or two.” I smiled as the conversation lightened up.

“I was hoping you would be okay with the move because I have a rather large favor to ask.” I paused to see her reaction. “I would like some help moving if you are up to it.”

Emily's face lit up, and we were back to normal. The conversation bounced around in my head for a moment until she threw her arms around me and hugged me tightly.

"Anything," she squealed, "your wish is my command." She smiled, and pretended to take out a fake paper and pencil.

"Well, since I hadn't moved an inch, I was hoping you would be able to help me find a small place to stay; a decent apartment, a small house, or even rented space." I shrugged my shoulders.

"Are you kidding? There is more to moving than just a place to stay sweetheart." Her voice was disbelieving. "There is the new wardrobe, the new car, and the new laptop, not to mention the furniture you need." I had to stop her before she got too far.

"Mom, wait a minute, you're moving too fast. I have a budget to stick to. I can't be spending money I don't have on things I don't absolutely need." She wasn't listening to a word I said. She was busy listing all the things she wanted me to have.

"No worries dear, I've got this." I was relieved to see she was ok with me moving, but I was nervous about what she was capable of. Money was dangerous in Emily's hands. She was never one to say no, or stop when the deal was right. Our house was full of little trinkets from garage sales to Saks Fifth Avenue. Some of the prices on these items were in the six digits. Just for a small wooden box, it was around seven thousand dollars, and the box was empty. Emily was crazy when it came to money. To make someone happy, money was never an issue.

The two weeks went by quickly. Periodically, I heard my mom setting up a few things like power and water, but I wasn't entirely sure where I was going to live. My mom said the place was a little small, but I would love it. She gave me no other hints.

With only a few days left, I asked Catherine for a couple days off to pack and get ready for the move. Dad picked Emily and me up at the mall, from what Mom called necessary shopping. She bought me clothes, I didn't think I needed, and enough shoes to wear one pair a day for a year.

When we arrived back at the house after hours of mind-numbing shopping, a familiar looking man was waiting on our front doorstep. Roger handed me the keys, and Emily escorted me into the house and to my room. Typically there was a formal introduction with wine and all. We had more wine in our cellar than the rest of Nevada put together; it seemed to be all my parents ever drank. This guest was different though. He felt nervous and knowingly unwelcome. After several minutes of hushed whispers and forced conversation, the man left the house with a huff. After the front door slammed, I watched him stalk away in a fury. When he reached his car, he turned and gave me a pointed glare. His eyes narrowed, and I could have sworn that the air cooled a few degrees. Shivers ran down my spine as I stepped away from the window, tripping over a packed box and I toppled to the floor.

"What was all that?" I asked pushing myself off the floor when Mom opened the door to my room. Mom's panicked and fearful heart jolted at my query.

"Well, in short, he broke tradition." My parents put tradition on a pedestal. To make sure I was holding the proper protocol in any and all situations, I was taught time-honored traditions from China to England and from the twelfth century to now.

"What did he do wrong?" I asked, as we sat down for dinner. I tried to remember the man. He looked familiar for one reason or another, but his face seemed like it should have been more shadowed and mischievous.

"Well, he sort of broke the rules, both by showing up unannounced and by not asking for permission from his

elders.” Rogers tone was flat and emotionless. His features were tight with frustration, but other than his slight and minimal reactions, he was expressionless.

It seemed like there was a secret war, and I was the center of attention. I only thought this because I would hear my name being mentioned while my parents were on the phone. This was not all that strange, but when it involved me not being ready, or not being strong enough to face him, I could only assume. I took these conversations and add them to all the things that I have experienced lately, and I could only wonder what else it could be.

## CHAPTER TEN



The day before I moved, my parents were on edge. It was like living in a small pressure cooker, just waiting for someone to break. From the small empty confines of my room, I could hear my mom talking on the phone downstairs. I assumed it was Catherine. Emily was giving this person a play by play of my travels. I was able to tap into my hearing abilities quite quickly now. I used them when I thought it would be to my advantage to hear what was going on around me, but I needed to be careful. I was not yet able to distinguish one conversation from another, so I ended up hearing everything at once, resulting in a headache.

All my things were boxed and ready to go. It was a little depressing to see everything I owned in boxes. Not just the symbolism or idea, but the fact that it was really going to happen hit me like lightning, but also the fact that everything I owned fit into no more than a hand full of boxes.

I was sad when I found out how much I didn't own. I walked downstairs and went into the kitchen for a snack. When I reached the kitchen, my suspicions were correct. I heard Catherine's voice on the other end of the phone. Emily's tone was light and frivolous. Her body language changed quickly when Catherine said they had an assignment. Emily hung up and called for Roger. Roger was there



in a flash. It still amazed me how fast they were. There was some truth to the saying, “lightning speed.”

“Yes Emily,” Roger answered. Emily’s voice was unsteady, almost nervous. I could sense her excitement and anxiety.

“We have an assignment.” Roger’s mouth dropped slightly,

“When?”

“A week from tomorrow! Catherine said, ‘she and Phillip were on the assignment as well, and they leave tomorrow.’” I was a little unsure why I was able to hear this conversation, opposed to all the others. Emily turned to me and smiled.

“Where are you going?” I asked, not knowing if they were actually going to tell me.

“Egypt. It has been ages since your father and I have been there. I am very excited to go.” Emily would be jumping up and down if it weren’t for her total self-control. I was a little jealous. I’ve always wanted to go with them, but I was told it was District business.

“Why did you sound nervous if you’re excited?” I asked. Emily smiled slightly, and then, answered.

“Because the assignment is..., well let’s just say the reason for the assignment is a little disturbing, and I would rather go there on vacation than why we are going. Your dad and I used to visit there often, and it would be nice to go for pleasure instead.” She said this in a matter-of-fact way like I should have picked up on it or something.

A half-smile flickered across Roger’s face as he said, “I’m hungry. I could use a little break, and I believe you need to pick up your last check from Catherine before you leave tomorrow.” He and my mom exchanged a look of acknowledgment and then, he turned to face me. “Why don’t we all go to lunch, stop by the credit union, and on the way home I have a little surprise for the both of you.”

Emily’s car was getting the windows tinted to a level dangerously below legal, and my car, well, to say the least, it

was a total loss. I finally came to terms that I had to junk it. Getting into Roger's car, I placed my hands in my lap. My parents had extravagant taste and changed cars like people changed their socks. Roger's Ferrari Enzo and Emily's Mercedes GTR were the two flavors of the month. These were two cars that I thought were just for showing off, but in my parents' minds, they were necessary.

We went to one of my favorite places, the Olive Garden. I had my usual tour of Italy and finished the whole plate. We were done with lunch and were waiting for dessert when a herd of people stopped by the table. As they approached, there was a sense of nervousness vibrating from them. It wasn't uncommon for people to be nervous around my dad, but this was taking it to a new level. When they finally reached us and gained their sense of confidence, they sang happy birthday in unison and set a slice of German chocolate cake in front of me; it was my favorite. With all that had been going on, and trying to get ready for the move, I had completely forgotten it was my birthday. I was nineteen and didn't even feel a day older than yesterday. I had always placed age as nothing except a number, but it was still fun to have a birthday. I was shocked that I had forgotten entirely. I thought forgetfulness was reserved for the elderly, but I guess nobody is immune to it, not even me. My parents were much too happy to capitalize on my forgetting, but it was fun to be surprised like this.

"I was wondering if you were ever going to remember it was your birthday," Emily said, as I stuffed my face with the slice of cake. I was having too much fun with my parents. They were actually acting normal for once; no paranoid, edgy, or tense emotions. We were just a casual family enjoying the day together. I finished the cake, and we went to pick up my last check.

We walked into the credit union, and I was blown back with all the decorations. There was a mixture of farewell,

happy birthday banners, and decorations scattered throughout the whole place. Catherine was expecting me. She was front and center waiting for my reaction.

When I walked in, she yelled, "Happy birthday!"

Catherine was not concerned about what the members or other employees thought. To Catherine, I was almost as much her daughter as I was Emily's. Catherine had been there for me as much as my mom, almost every memory I had, she was in it. I looked around to see all the adornment, and couldn't help but see Sally, Megan, and Andrea sitting behind their stations with smug looks on their faces. It didn't take Andrea long to fall back into the wrong side of the credit union girls. Catherine leaned in toward me, ever so softly she said,

"I told the girls you were no longer working here, and when I saw how happy they looked, I left out the reason you were leaving."

I was happy to hear this news. I guess they expected a show from one of us. When they didn't get it, they retreated to the break room, and I was right behind them. Just before I entered, I could hear them discussing who won the bet. Sally was the winner. But before she was too confident in her winnings, I needed to smash the pedestal she thought she stood on. Typically, I was not vindictive in any way, shape, or form, but there was something about these girls that told me I was not too out of place. I could feel the satisfaction of the three knowing I was leaving. I walked in looking for a mug I had left.

"I'm sorry you're leaving us," Sally said in a bad impersonation of being upset.

"Yes, me too," Megan added. I could feel that both of them were laughing on the inside.

"Me too," I said. "I loved this place. It has been my second home for a few years now. I was surprised when Catherine pulled me into her office the other day."

“Did you find another job?” Andrea asked, knowing she had already assumed the answer was no.

“Oh, I don’t need to find a new job; I’m being promoted to assistant manager, and transferred to Utah. Did you think I was fired?” Sally’s face was shocked. She couldn’t grasp the fact that she might have been wrong. “You didn’t win the bet Sally; I did.”

She was wrong, and I wanted her to know it. There was nothing else I could say. I left the break room feeling proud of myself and left them with their mouths wide open and thoroughly humbled. Emily spotted me from across the room and shook her head knowing what I had just done. It was not right for me to be so arrogant myself, but I felt better knowing I beat them at their own game.

After joining my parents and Catherine in the main lobby, we adjourned to her office where she had a few wrapped gifts sitting on her desk. Opening the first gift, I slipped my fingers under the farewell gift paper and gasped. I was surprised to find an iPad and a gift card for app downloads looking back at me. Immediately, I opened the second one wrapped in birthday paper, and this time to see a two-thousand-dollar visa gift card neatly tucked in a black velvet bag. The gifts were way too much, but I was grateful for the thought that came with them.

Catherine was a friend, and to leave her was heart-breaking. She was a great listener; and although she didn’t mean to be, she was my key to knowing when something was really wrong. I would miss her very much, and tears started to roll down my face as we said our last goodbyes, and I gathered my gifts. As we left, I took one last look at the building and sorrow hit me full force. Tears filled my eyes, and we got into the car. I hung my head as the repercussions of my decisions hit me like a ton of bricks.

Roger and Emily were having no trouble with the emotional downpour that I was in the middle of. They weren’t

leaving, I was, and they, in general, didn't show as much emotion as I did. I didn't know if they felt the full rainbow of emotions anyway.

"Would it be ok if we picked something up from Tony?" My dad asked. Tony was the one they always bought their cars from. He had a back-east accent and a New York attitude. He was friendly though. I only spoke to him on the phone, and he was never rude.

"Yo, Roger, my man." I could only assume it was Tony saying this as we pulled into the dealership.

"Hi there Tony." Roger greeted his friend.

The difference in the way they spoke was amazing. It was da'-Bronx verses proper English.

Emily got out of the car, and I don't think there was even one man, who didn't stop whatever it was they were doing, tripping over things, just to look at her. I always thought my mom was beautiful, but there was no mistaking it when she was in a crowd. Her red hair, long legs, and obviously confident stance made her the perfect model and the ideal woman. Men would kiss the ground she walked on if she would only acknowledge them.

"Yo Emily," Tony said, "a pleasure as always. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Yes wine, if you have it." I thought Emily was crazy. A dealership isn't going to have wine, but I was dead wrong when Tony nodded and asked Roger the same question.

"The same please," he said, "and a Coke or Pepsi for Arri." Roger indicated to the back seat, where I was still sitting. I didn't know we were going to be here for a while, but since we were ordering drinks, I figured I should get out of the car as well. Once I was out, Tony snapped his fingers, and a tall, skinny man appeared out of nowhere and took the car keys from my dad. He got in the car and pulled it around back.

"Thank you, Tony," Roger said, as he took his glass of wine that Tony had been magically produced.

“Thank you,” I said, as he handed me my coke.

Tony was staring at me. His eyes were glossed over, and I’m pretty sure he heard nothing as my parents spoke. I never considered myself too much to look at. I had heard several times that I mimicked my mom with her breathtaking looks and her perfect body, but there were also things that I thought complimented my mom that didn’t compliment me. She had red hair and self-confidence, and I had brownish-red wavy hair and no confidence. No matter how hard I tried, I always thought she was much prettier than I could ever be. As soon as I looked back at Tony, he blushed and looked down. My parent’s friends were so peculiar; I was used to their odd behavior. Ignoring the men that were now tripping over things to get a closer look and the stares that were now directed toward me, I could feel Tony’s embarrassment.

“So are we all set then?” Roger asked. Tony snapped out of his trance and focused on the task at hand.

I could feel that there was something I was missing; something between the three of them that they were hiding from me.

I peered around the lot looking at all the new fancy cars that were for sale. I couldn’t help but wish I had one of them. Out of all the fancy and overpriced expensive, luxurious vehicles on the lot, I spotted a new Toyota Highlander. It looked a little out of place between the cherry-red Corvette and the neon-yellow Lamborghini. If I was picking out a car for me, the Highlander was perfect, but the simplicity of it didn’t fit my parents.

While Tony and my parents talked about the old days and things I really didn’t care for, I didn’t see a problem if I was to just go take a look at the cars. In all reality, I needed one. I opened the door to the Highlander and sat in the driver’s seat. It was much larger than my CRX and much higher. The seats adjusted just right, and it was screaming

for me to take it. I was falling in love; looking around the vehicle, I imagined myself owning it. I knew I would never buy the car, but it sure was fun pretending that I did.

“Are you planning on buying this?” Tony’s voice was disgusted. I turned to him sharply and glared.

“Is there something wrong with this particular vehicle?” My voice was acidic. I may not have the same taste as my parents, but there was nothing wrong with this SUV. Granted, it was much newer than I ever would have looked at, but it was still a good-looking car.

“No, not at all my little bambino!” Tony exclaimed. “Hey, no bling, no glitz, whatcha doin?” I understood his thought process. My parents’ tastes were a little extravagant, and since he had never met me or really talked to me, he could only assume my inclination would be like that of my parents.

“Sorry Tony, I had no reason to lash out at you like that. I guess my taste is rather different from my parents. I actually love this vehicle. If I could buy a new car, I would definitely buy this one.” Tony’s face was puzzled.

We got out of the Highlander, and my parents and I looked over the exterior. Tony disappeared for a moment, and then, returned with a little black box.

“Is this what you were here for?” he asked, as we walked to our car that was now fully detailed.

“Yes, I think so; so you’ll take care of the paperwork?” Roger was acting somewhat evasive.

“I am afraid we needed to replace one of Emily’s windows, an expense we will cover. There was a little scratch on the film so it will be ready a little later today.” Tony would have been shaking from head to toe if it wasn’t for the fact that his eyes were planted on me. He was probably trying to save face or hiding from having to look my dad in the eyes.

“No problem, you will deliver it then?” There was no doubt in his voice that it would be done. We returned home, and finally, the day was over.

I couldn't believe I would be moving in the morning. I didn't know how I was going to get there, but I was going to get there and start a new life for myself.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN



I woke up to a brand-new morning. When I opened my blinds, I could see the early traffic through the window. So far there was no congestion, but I knew it would steadily pick up speed as the sun rose. One by one, the hustle and bustle would start another unyielding day.

I looked around my bare, empty room where I had collected all my memories. I had grown up here, and all of my hopes and dreams were made here, in this house. Even the drawn and dated mark on the door-jamb showed how much I had grown from one year to the next, reminded me of how much I would miss this place. I was emotionally attached to every object. The mere thought of leaving the only home I had ever known made my eyes tear up. Emily had come in just in time to interrupt my soon to be emotional breakdown.

“Oh good, you’re up,” Emily said, as she bounced in. She was usually up before dawn, and couldn’t understand why I needed sleep at all, let alone more than four or five hours a night.

I looked up just then and saw my mom staring back at me. My unstable and emotionally compromised heart wept. I was not ready to let go. I was prepared to face the world ahead of me, but I didn’t realize the cost of my decision. Emily was more than my mom, she was my best friend, my

moral compass, but most of all she was my, everything. I was already missing her.

“Oh honey, don’t cry.” Emily came over and hugged me, and then wiped the single tear that fell from my cheek. She smoothly and effortlessly glided as she moved. All the little things I overlooked before seemed to stand out now. “You’re not gone yet. Get ready and come downstairs. Your father and I are taking you to breakfast.”

Her voice was shaky and upset; I could tell she was trying not to cry. The fact that she was sad broke my heart. Taking a deep breath I showered, brushed my teeth and hair, and then, packed everything I had just used. Leaving my room, I turned at the door for one last look. The room looked sad and lonely. I teared up again as I left it behind saying,

“I’m sorry,” and closed the door. My heart pounded and ached like I had just lost my best friend. My heart and soul protested with every beat, making it hard to breathe. My breathing became erratic as I tried not to cry. Descending the stairs, I saw flashbacks of my childhood with each step I took. When I reached the bottom, Roger and Emily were waiting. I looked up and tried to smile. My smile was broken. All I was able to manage was a little grin and a sad attempt at that.

“Are you ready?” Roger had a slight hint of excitement in his voice, like he was excited for me to leave. I knew I was just irrational, and I marked it off as nervousness and grabbed my purse.

“Sure, why not.” My voice was monotone and grim. They were acting like today was no different than any other.

“Are you going to be like this the whole morning?” Emily asked. Her voice was a little joking, but I could feel she was just as sad as I was. I didn’t want to be Johnny-rain-cloud all day. I needed to suck it up and play nice ’til I was gone; when I could let the waterworks flow.

“No. I’m over it now. Where are we going?” I mustered up as much enthusiasm as I could.

“Great. Why don’t you drive?” Roger handed me the keys.

“Okay,” I said, opening the door, and walking to where I had parked Emily’s spare car. Looking for the black hunk of expensive metal in the driveway, I was stumped. Instead of the Rolls-Royce, there in its spot, was the pearl-colored Highlander I was sitting in last night. I spun to face my parents’ confused and bewildered expression. For a moment, my mind was blank. I didn’t understand. Then, it dawned on me. I looked down at the keys and noticed that they didn’t belong to the Rolls-Royce. They belonged to a Hyundai. Emily must have had a hand in the surprise because on the ring was a little bow tied in ribbon. A detail I’m sure Roger thought was ridiculous.

“Are you serious?” I screamed! Their facial expression changed tune when I yelled and started to hug them. My dad had been complaining about my eyesore since I got it, and when it began to backfire, he had begged me to get a new car. I knew he hated it, but I had bought it on my own, and it was my first official act of independence.

“So do you like it?” Emily asked.

“Are you kidding; I love it. Is that what the whole Tony visit was about? You were trying to see what car I would choose?” I knew the answer, but Roger answered anyway.

“Well, you know how much I hated the CRX, and when it was totaled, it was a dream come true.” His shoulders shook as he laughed. Roger showed no remorse, but I knew he was right. Roger continued, “So your mother and I thought it only appropriate that you had a decent vehicle for your travels, and a vehicle suitable for all seasons.” I clicked the beeper thing, unlocked the car, and jumped in.

“Are you coming?” I yelled from the driver’s seat and started the engine. I pushed the little button on the ceiling, and the sunroof opened. I could feel the crisp autumn air fall in my lap. The silent humming of the engine purred.

Pulling into one of our favorite diners, I gently pushed my car into park and squealed out in excitement. We had been going there for what seemed like forever. We knew the manager and most of the waitresses.

“Good morning!” Janet, an older, kind-faced waitress, greeted us. She was tall and rather thin, but her friendly look was just a cover, beneath the surface she was a tough, old lady. She pulsed with a no-nonsense persona that demanded respect. “Mr. and Mrs. Stone, Arri, will it just be the three of you this morning or are you waiting for the Whites?” she asked.

“Just us, thank you. How are you this morning Janet?” Mom asked, as Janet retrieved three of the menus. We were escorted to our regular table, in the far reaches of the dimly lit corner.

“Fine thanks, Jeremy graduates in June, and he’s my last,” Janet replied placing the menus before us.

“That’s great,” Emily said, as she and Roger looked around and surveyed their surroundings.

As we ate our breakfast in relative silence, I was furious with time. Wanting nothing more than to be with my parents a few moments more, I wanted to rewind time. Unfortunately, we finished our food and left with our stomachs full and satisfied, but my heart was still empty and depressed.

“Now what?” I asked, as we hopped into my new car. My insides giggled, and my shoulders shrugged as I tried to contain my excitement.

“Well, I thought we would get you packed and on your way. I don’t want you driving in the dark.” I looked at the clock in the dash and saw it was only eight o’clock. It felt like Roger was pushing me out the door. I had plenty of time to get there, and what were a few more minutes?

“Doesn’t it only take like four hours to get there?” I was curious why he was pushing me to leave so fast.

“It is six actually, and you have never been there before. What if you miss a turn or get lost?” Roger asked.

He had a point, but still, I had at least four hours before I needed to leave and still be there before dark. Not wanting to argue and ruin our perfect family time, I lost the battle and Roger demanded we go home.

Roger had packed my new car, and I was all set to go. He should have been a Tetris pro; you couldn't fit the blade of a knife anywhere. Up until now, I was nervous about the move. The feeling of freedom and adventure loomed on the horizon. When it all came down to it, I was as scared as ever. I felt alone and vulnerable, and I was not even out of the driveway yet. My mom smothered me as I said my last goodbyes and my dad smiled from the driver's side door, as he held it open for me. My eyes welled up with tears. I held on to my mom as I found myself wanting to stay and be closer to her. Emily and I had bonded in such a way that we were closer than any family. The thought of leaving the only friend I had, made me feel more than sad, I felt devastated.

I hugged my dad goodbye. Roger was not the cuddly type, nor was he ever really affectionate, but as he hugged me, Roger gently whispered in my ear.

"Even if I never really told you, I love you. You are my pride and joy; you have made me so proud." He pulled away and stepped back.

Reluctantly, I got in the car and started the engine. Slowly, I backed out of the drive, and cried, as I watched my parents' wave goodbye. I took one last look in the rear-view mirror and made a mental snapshot. The house I grew up in was looking smaller and smaller 'til it disappeared as I turned the corner.

It was official. I was on my own and had no ties to the past. My parents would be off to Egypt shortly, and I would not see them 'til the summer.

This was it. I was finally leaving the place I hated more than anything, Las Vegas. It wasn't the city itself, but the attitude behind it. Only six hours to go and I would be in

my new home. I hoped the trouble won't follow me. I took a deep breath and plunged into my new adventure via the freeway. I was out of Vegas, and crossing the desert, which some say grew in length every time they drove it. I had my new phone plugged in and was listening to my favorite songs. Although I had heard these songs a thousand times before, today they took a new meaning as I drove to freedom and adventure. In the midst of a rockin hit song, my cell phone started to ring. I picked it up and home displayed on the screen.

"Hello," I said, answering the phone.

"Hey sweetheart," he took a deep breath, and for once, he choked on his own words. Dad's quiet and authoritative voice came from the other end, "Your new address is programmed in your Maps app on your phone. Your exit is Elsinore. I know you are working in Richfield, but Elsinore is much smaller and only seven miles away from your new job."

I heard something in his voice that I had never heard before. It almost sounded like he was honestly sad I was gone.

"Thanks, Dad." I knew this was just as hard on him as it was on me. Although Dad was quiet and conservative, his control ran deep, and I was his only exception. He may not have shown affection, but since my new ability, I could feel the turmoil of emotions he guarded every day.

"Sure sweetie."

His voice was sorrowful and heavyhearted. I closed my eyes momentarily as I fought not turning back. Finally, with a low-spirited mutter, we said our goodbyes, and I continued on my way to my soon-to-be new home.

As I neared Beaver, the trip had gone without a hitch. Pulling off the road and into the nearest gas station, I filled up and bought some snacks. On my way in, I had made a mental snapshot of my nearby surroundings. The pet area

off to the left had a few dogs and one owner making a pit-stop, and the actual pumps only had a small Honda and a decent-sized Ford truck parked at the far end of the stalls. I had parked at the first available pump near the dumpsters.

When I came back out of the shop with my bags in hand, I noted right off that the stalls were empty and the dogs and their owner were gone. The parking lot looked empty and deserted. It felt like a cool, and heavy-handed fist gripped my chest. Without a second glance, I ran the last few steps to my car and locked myself in. Putting my SUV in reverse, I started to back out. My rear alarm started beeping, and just as I cleared the dumpsters, my heart stopped, and I froze. Right behind my car was a man towering behind me. Standing only inches from the rear end of my car, the hooded man approached my car slowly and ran his finger along the length of my car as he came to a stop at my window. The shadowed figure's mouth turned up at the ends, and a knowing smile crept across his face. I gripped the steering wheel, letting my knuckles turn white and the pads of my fingers melt into the gel cover. With small, slow movements, he reached for the door handle and gave it a quick tug. The door was locked, and his efforts were pointless, but when his eyebrows shot up, and a look of intrigue lit his face, his smile changed into a warped grin, and his eyes sparked with challenge. My panicked heart tripled its beat, and without warning or thought, I slammed on the gas and screeched out of the parking lot nipping the man in the hip with a loud thud.

Fighting the urge to cry, I quickly turned and saw the man was gone, and there was no sign of him anywhere. With my heart pounding in my ears, my breathing coming out in small, short spurts. A sigh infused with defeat and fear escaped my lips, and then, I held my breath. My heart's frantic thudding finally lulled as I cleared my thoughts, forcing, and talking myself into thinking it was just random.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



As I calmed down and drove for the next hour, I was amazed by the beauty of the scenery. The color of the trees leaves changed showing the break from summer to autumn. The array of colors splashed the mountains as fall hung in the air. Reds, greens, browns, yellows, and oranges painted the hills in a way that only Mother Nature could arrange.

In all the years I had lived in Las Vegas, there were no real seasons; it went from blazing hot summers of one-hundred-five-degrees and above to semi-mild winters that only teased us with crisp and chilling temperatures. Here, even the trees looked happy and peaceful. The fantastic, stunning colors were so captivating. I would have gone off the road and down the side of the mountain if the vibrating bumps hadn't warned me I was on the shoulder. Slowly, I corrected myself and felt my heart in my throat. Instantly, I completely forgot about the beauty that furtively surrounded me, and figured I needed to stop driving Braille and pay attention.

Like so many I've seen since I left Las Vegas, a hitchhiker stood on the shoulder of the freeway. As I passed, I felt a drain in my happiness. His steeled anger seeped through the metal frame of my car and somehow lodged in my heart. He stared at me with an ironed force of fury. Not wanting to make eye contact and show my fear, I turned away as I



passed him, and kept on going. His hooded face and lanky body sent shivers down my spine that raised the hair on the back of my neck. He gave me the creeps; I couldn't help but feel he would somehow haunt my future.

I passed a few little towns on the way, and finally, to my relief, I saw a sign that said, 'Elsinore one mile'. My insides giggled, and even though nobody could see or hear me, I squealed and smiled to myself. The journey to my new adventure was finally here.

At the bottom of the ramp, a small, older store stood alone in the center of a gravel parking lot. As I walked into the store, everyone stopped and looked at me as if I was the only outsider they've seen in a while. Their stares were mixed with awe and confusion. If it was a bar, I could imagine the talking coming to a halt and the sound of the record stopping mid-song. The cashier was a blond-headed teenager that looked too young to be working, but if I hadn't heard her tell the customer in front of me that she had two kids, I would have never known she was over fifteen. As her conversation with the young man about horses and cattle ended, the man sent me an appreciative look then left waving to the cashier,

"See you tomorrow darlin." His baritone voice bellowed over the silence. The cashier looked at me then, curved her lips into a half-forced smile and half-smirk as she eyed me skeptically. Her demeanor was timid and standoffish. As I placed my coke on the counter and thought about asking her for directions, the look on her face told me I was better off finding it on my own.

After I paid for my stuff and walked out, a man with snow-white hair walked in. I nodded in acknowledgment and thanked him, as he held the door open for me. As I got in my car and looked for the address my dad programmed for me, the man made a quick exit as he spotted an elderly woman struggling to get out of her car near the store doors.

I watched him help her out, and slowly, they walked into the store. The older woman had a kind face and looked frail and helpless. Her clothes were freshly ironed, and like many her age, she was all dolled up to make a five-minute trip to the corner market. She stood by the register holding onto the counter for support as he gathered a few things and helped her pay for them. When they left the store, he helped her in her car and loaded all the groceries in the back seat, and then, said his goodbyes.

I pulled out of the gas station and looked at the directions. By the looks of it, the house is just around the corner.

When I drove up, I was speechless. The house was beautiful; it had a white-picket fence that separated the only two neighbors I had from my corner lot. I could see a small anteroom right behind the front door. It was lined with plant boxes in the front windows that looked like there were once beautiful flowers. All I wanted was a small, simple place to stay. This was way too much. Mom had overdone it. Pulling around back, I opened the gate and drove in, parking by the back door. There on the door was a note that read.

Dear Tenant,

I hope you like your stay here. I have always enjoyed this home and hope you will as well. It has not been lived in for quite some time and may need some tender loving care. I take it your Mother and Father have secured this house for you and have everything in your name, if there is any way I can make your stay here more comfortable, please let me know. I have compiled a list of neighbors that can help you if you ever need anything. Their names and numbers are on the counter. Again, I hope you like it here.

Sincerely, M.

The handwriting was Old-school Palmer Method, and unfamiliar.

I reached in my pocket and grabbed the tissue wrapped key my mom had given me. I slowly opened the back door and stepped into a quaint, confined mudroom. The little house was charming. It was a small two-bedroom cottage. The closing door creaked behind me as the old-wooden floor protested with my every step. Looking outside, the age-warped windows gave the appearance of peering through hot fumes of a fire.

I walked through the house. There was something about this intimate abode that said, home. The kitchen was loaded. The cupboards were stocked, and the dining table was set for a banquet. As I continued through the house, I found the master bedroom furnished with a king-sized bed, dresser, and a nightstand. Running my fingers along the nightstand, I paused. I had almost missed it, but there on the nightstand was another note. It was written on pink floral paper and smelled of perfume and lilac lotion. When I opened the folded paper, the writing was familiar and feminine.

Arri,

I am hoping you like my decorating. I was having a hard time with the design. I realized as I was picking out your curtains, decorations, and furniture, we did not have the same taste. I tried to keep it simple, but there were a few things I could not resist. I love you my dear child, and please remember to stay in touch.

Mom

The rest of the house was beautiful. I couldn't help but wonder when Emily had time to do all this. I marveled at her ability to do such work from far away.

Just as I was getting acquainted with my new surroundings, I heard a soft knock at the back door.

"Hello?" A man's voice called, I walked back through the house and stopped at the open back door.

"Oh hi, sorry about that, I didn't realize I had left the door open, please come in." To my surprise, the white-haired man from the store walked in. He looked to be in his mid-twenties. My heart skipped a beat when I saw him.

"I apologize for my unannounced visit. I am Alex, and this is my brother Jonathan, and my sister Sarah. We live across the street." Jonathan looked slightly younger, but Sarah looked to be the same age as Alex. I welcomed them in and introduced myself. As our conversation started off, it was apparent that Alex was the comedian of the family, and Jonathan was quiet but polite. Sarah was still a mystery; she gave off mixed feelings and masked her true facial expressions well.

After our little chat, Alex and his family stood to leave. I followed them back outside.

"So, I'll see you around?" Sarah asked questionably.

"Yes, definitely, we'll have to do lunch or a barbecue," I said looking at the back of my truck, "well, when I get settled, of course." I stared at the over-packed boxes overwhelming the back of the Highlander and wished they would move themselves.

"Is this all you have or are the moving trucks on their way?" Alex asked opening the back of the truck.

"No this is it," I said. I knew there wasn't much.

"Here, let me give you a hand." Alex picked up the first of the boxes.

"If this is how they all are, then we are in luck." He teased and disappeared into the house. Jonathan pitched

in as he started to pick up a few of the boxes himself and brought them into the house. But Sarah was a different story. She grimaced with disgust and made no move to help. She was unlike her siblings in many ways. Her short skirt, tight mini-top, and the mile-high, heeled shoes she was wearing set her far apart from the other two. Sarah seemed dangerous. I would have a hard time keeping any guy that got near her. Alex was carefree, and Jonathan was relaxed but controlled, Sarah sent off a different vibe. She was shielded physically; her expressions were calculated, her steps were measured, and her entire persona was controlled and guarded. Just as a glint of amusement sparked in her eyes, she brought her hands to her mouth as she tried to quell a smile, but failed miserably. Then, with a deliberate and distant voice, she excused herself and went home.

Something was definitely odd with her, but who was I to judge. I have never been close enough to have a friend, let alone, know how they were supposed to act.

As I returned my attention back to the unloading, Alex toyed and teased me as he acted as if a few of the boxes were too heavy, and made faces and grunted as he tried to pick them up. One time, he pretended to lift a larger box and groaned and moaned, and then, standing up and rubbing his hands together he backed up and puffed up his chest and tried again. This time he effortlessly lifted the box and held it with one arm, laughing his way into the house. He was funny and made moving easy as he made me laugh.

“This was the easiest move I’ve ever helped with.” Alex let out a laugh and gently nudged me.

“Well, it’s pretty easy when you own practically nothing.” I smiled and tossed them a coke, “Thanks for helping.”

“No problem, it was easy.” Alex smiled.

“Why is that?” Jonathan spoke up for the first time.

“Why is what?” I asked.

“You own nothing? All we unpacked were a few boxes of

books, clothes, and miscellaneous things. Usually, a girl has much more.” Jonathan sat down on a rock nearby.

“Well, I’ve lived with my parents, ‘til now, I didn’t have a reason to have more. Everything was provided for me.”

“So this is your first time on your own?” Jonathan said disbelievingly.

“Yeah, it is.”

“So what do you think so far?” Alex asked.

“I don’t really know yet, I just got here, how about you?”

I looked over at my new neighbors and saw the smiles on their faces. Instead of an answer, Alex cocked his head to the side. He ran his left hand through his white hair and shook his head. Carefully debating his words, he asked,

“Arri, have you ever been to a Harvest Festival?” I thought back. I had never been to a festival of any kind.

I plainly replied “No.”

“Well, there is a Harvest Festival in the park tomorrow afternoon, and at least four towns will be there. It might be fun. Maybe, a little break from the old-city life would do you some good. Would you like to come with us?”

Alex was sweet. He didn’t have to invite me, but the gesture of a new friendship was irresistible.

“Sure, that would be great!” I replied.

“Great, so we will come by and pick you up tomorrow morning around elevenish.” Alex’s face lit up with my announcement.

I couldn’t place it, but this place sparked a fire in me that I’ve never felt before. Finally, I finished putting the majority of my things away, and the house reflected me, a book-reading and plain-living hermit. I put on a sweater, grabbed a cup of hot chocolate and sat on the front steps looking at the field across the street. The brisk air bit at my nose, but I never felt so warm and at home. Dirty-white sheep huddled in the corner of the large pasture. I looked up at the night sky hoping I could see the big dipper. I didn’t know the night

sky held so many stars. The never-ending span of space was hypnotizing, and tonight was beautiful. The breeze rustled through my hair, and the tree leaves sang as the music of the wind tickled the swaying branches. Reluctantly, I realized the time and headed to bed. As I put my head on the pillow, I smiled, and my heart giggled. Knowing I had done it. Finally, I had reached a place in my life where I could feel proud of myself and the accomplishments I made.

For a majority of the next morning, I walked around the house loving the thought of a place of my own, no curfew, no parents looking over my shoulder all the time, and no rules but my own. My music was blaring loudly, and I proudly strutted back and forth.

“Ahem,” I heard a loud noise coming from the back door. Spinning around I came face to face with Alex, Sarah, and Jonathan, standing in the doorway.

“Oh, hi.” My cheeks blushed and burned. “I was just...” There was no excuse for my strutting that I could give them.

“No, that’s ok,” Alex said. “It was funny,” he tried stifling a laugh, “but if we are going to make it to the festival before all the good food is gone, we need to go.” I gathered my things, and we left. Jonathan was making fun of me and walked like a rooster flapping his arms about and strutting, every so often letting out a mocking cock-a-doodle-doo.

Main Street was decorated in fall attire. The street poles had large leaves starting at the top winding down the pole like a vine. The park looked lively, like bees gathering to a beehive. There was upbeat country music playing in the background, and the fantastic festive colors surrounded the park. On one side there was cowboy poetry, and on the other, there was a country band playing on stage. Several stands were selling all types of food and drink that would tickle the growing crowd’s fancy. Other booths were scattered about selling bought and homemade gifts and crafts. I have never seen so many people packed in such a small place, except for

New Year's Eve in Las Vegas on the strip. I was having so much fun looking at the merchandise and listening to the music. As I wandered about, and night fell, I was separated from Alex and his family.

Even with the fascination of all the trinkets, my thoughts kept returning to the one man who kept reappearing. His face was sweet and angelic. His emerald green eyes were soft and seductive. Everything about him beckoned me. My heart raced as I fought his tempting allure. I didn't know if he was following me, or if it was just a coincidence. I took a quick right at the taco stand and moved to the handmade doilies. Suddenly, just as I thought I lost him, he was standing next to me, looking at a doily. Nervously, I looked for Alex as I tried to dodge my eye candy.

It was starting to get late, so I decided to walk home by myself. The festival was only a few blocks away from home, and I could see that street lights lit most of the way. As I walked, I noticed a vandalized, old machine shop which seemed to house a thousand birds. The old and dilapidated roofing, non-existent windows, and the torn and missing shingles, gave it an ominous appearance in the moonlight. Right in front of the old building, two street lights were broken leaving me vulnerable for a block or two. I sensed someone following me. They weren't obvious, but I recognized the feeling from the shadows I saw in Vegas. The eerie prickling on the back of my neck and the sudden chills warned me that things were amiss.

Only two things followed in the shadows, danger, and trouble. I ran to the machine shop hoping that I could avoid them. Fear instilled in my heart when the shaded figure turned the corner. There was a masculine swagger in the shadows walk as he closed in on me. His speed made it impossible for me to escape. Every direction I went, as I tried to evade him, he was there in front of me; waiting for me, beckoning and inviting me. After a few moments of cat



and mouse, he gradually and menacingly moved in, closing the gap between us.

My heart pounded. It was getting harder to breathe. I tried to remember what I learned in self-defense class, but somehow, I knew none of that would matter. I took a few steps back until I bumped into a hard, rough wall. My heart sank when I saw my attacker move in from the shadows. That sweet angelic face from the park was now grimacing with intense, dark desires. He was only a few steps away when he reached out and took my hands, pinning them above my head to the wall behind me. I felt so helpless without the strength to fight back. My attacker's face was only inches from mine. The moon's light illuminated his ashen skin, and his eyes studied me. The depth and beauty of his green eyes became bleak and scornful. Moving closer and leaning toward me, he smelled my cheek then moved to my neck. I began to shake as my breath became erratic. His lips caressed my neck; his touch was so soft and gentle, taking his time breathing in slowly. When I felt him open his mouth ever so slightly I flinched, and took in a deep breath. My emotions were confused. I was terrified. Yet part of me wanted him to stay there with his body pressed against mine, and his soft breath kissing my skin. But when I flinched, his face moved back. Looking at my eyes intently, his grip on my hands loosened. Just as I started to fight back, his grip tightened again; this time harder than before.

Then just as if lightning struck, acknowledgment shone in his eyes. His voice took a seductive turn. "It's unlike a guardian to leave his post," he said under his breath.

"No." My words barely managed to escape my lips. "Please, what do you want?" I said, just louder than a whisper.

"Is it not already obvious to you," he said with his head cocked to one side. His face looked amused, yet curious. I bowed my head. My arms went limp in his tight grip, and my knees buckled as I submitted. It was useless for me to fight. His head darted to the right.

“They’re looking for you,” he said rather harshly, then disappeared. Just as I regained my balance, I heard Alex’s voice,

“Arri?” I knew then I was safe.

Alex suspected something was wrong, but I was too embarrassed to tell him.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I've been here for about three days, and all my clothes were put away, my books were on the shelves, and everything was in its place. The great thing about not having too much is there was not much to put away.

I start work tomorrow, and I am so nervous. The other employees have been there for years. And for some unknown reason, not knowing anyone, made me feel uneasy. It was going to be a rough beginning, but hopefully, I would integrate easily.

The same dream scenarios followed me almost every night since I moved in. I could feel my heart pounding, the adrenalin pumping, and then I got tangled in the sheets. My nightmares all started the same, with me running to a large castle-like house buried deep in the mountains. The men that pursued me seemed to be after me for something I didn't know I had. I looked down at my hands searching for something. I held nothing; no money, no objects, just the dirt smudges I got from falling. I waited impatiently for the door to open, and when it did, a faceless man appeared. Immediately, I was drawn to him. There was something about him that spoke to my soul. He would always reach out for my hand. I would take it and feel his skin against mine, feel the comfort and safety I only could assume it would bring.

I awake, just inches from his welcoming embrace, with my heart pounding.

These dreams were beginning to reoccur more frequency and with increased detail. I didn't know what they meant, but every night they were more intense, more passionate and forceful than the last.

Like every other morning I awoke suddenly, a large cup of coffee would be in order if I drank it, but I would have to settle for a refreshing glass of chocolate milk instead. Getting up and dressed, I sat down at the large kitchen table and added to the enormous list of things I needed from the store. Each morning the list grew longer and eventually, I would actually have to leave the house and chance a day in the outside world. The last time I tried that, I was pinned to a wall and ended up feeling more breathless and enticed by the man, than scared.

When I got to work, I walked in ever so slowly. There were six teller stations off to my left, and only four loan or information desks in their own little cubicles to my right. A small nook in the far left corner housed a small chest of toys and a small table where kids could play while their parents banked. As I walked in and studied the layout, a few of the tellers stood up straight, waiting to see which station I would approach. I had only made it half-way across the floor when a nicely dressed lady approached me.

"Hello, I'm Mary, the branch manager, how may I assist you?" In actuality, she had the whole Liberian look down pat. Her five-foot-six height was accompanied by small, short, plain-black heeled shoes adding only an inch and a half or so. Her long brunette hair was pulled back and pinned up with two pencils into a makeshift bun, with a few homeless strands of hair falling into her flustered and worried face. Even her ironed, starched, white blouse and charcoal-grey pencil skirt stopping just above the knees, screamed bibliognost.

“Hello, I’m Arri.” We sat there for a while in unspoken silence ’til finally Mary smiled then looked around.

“Why don’t we take this in my office?” I wasn’t expecting to be a secret; I thought I would have been expected. As I followed her into her office, I froze in horrified panic. There were papers everywhere. The wastebasket was overflowing, and there were files on the floor. A hurricane had nothing on this office.

After closing the door behind us, Mary walked over to her chair brushing off a few stray papers which landed in the massive pile already formed on the floor.

“Oh, just push those off and take a seat,” she said, airbrushing the air. Tentatively, I did as asked and seated myself, nearly felling right over. The chair had a bum wheel, which almost dumped me on my rear if I had not caught myself by grabbing on to the desk for dear life.

“Thank goodness you are here. I have been expecting you all week. I couldn’t remember when I had told Catherine you were to start. I thought about calling her and asking, but I didn’t want to sound unorganized.”

“Unorganized?” I thought. All it would take is a surprise visit from corporate to have her fired. I practically grew up in the bank and knew enough to know that corporate would never allow a mess like this.

This was crazy. Mary didn’t need me. She needed the man from Clean Sweeps. He would be the only man that could conquer this disaster.

“I requested to have someone sent a month ago,” she continued, bringing me back to the conversation, “but the HR representative messed up the date on the position, and I didn’t get you ’til today. As you can see, I need a little help keeping myself organized. There are records here from when I first started over five years ago. My last assistant was not too good at keeping me organized, but she had a way with the employees.” She paused for only a half-a-second

to take a much-needed breath, “It was too bad she left. She might have been a great manager one day, but what’s done is done. I hope you are up for a challenge. There are so many of the girls that wanted to be promoted, but I couldn’t promote any of them.” She leaned forward and in a hushed tone continued. “They lack the leadership skills required to fill this position,” she said, as she cupped her hands around her mouth to cover her words as if any of the girls dared to come down the hall for fear of being swallowed by her mess.

“Just on a side note, they have you leaving before the month is out. Now is that the kind of leadership I need? No! I need someone who is trustworthy and not so caddy.” Mary stopped, and took what seemed like her only real good breath during this whole conversation.

“I think I follow you so far,” I said, “but what’s with the secrets.” Mary took a deep breath; I thought she was going to go off again on another one of her really long explanations.

“No,” she replied, “I didn’t have the heart to tell them I had already hired an outsider. Anna was more than an assistant manager to them, she was a friend.”

“And she just up and disappeared?”

“Well, kind of.” Mary’s eyes darted to the door a few times, then back at me.

“I’m sorry, but if Anna was their friend, then wouldn’t you think they would have already figured out she was no longer here?”

“You would think so, but it turns out she said she was going on a vacation during this month. Honestly, she didn’t bother telling me she was leaving, nor did she tell anyone where she was going. No one has seen her for almost two months now.”

“So why hire me if she is on vacation?” I had to know.

“Initially it was going to be temporary, but as you might have figured out, this is no longer a temporary position.”

I thought it extremely odd for an assistant manager to

just go vanishing, and there be no panic within the Credit Union. A missing employee would undoubtedly scare everyone with the possible robbery or heist, but Mary seemed to be calm and unnerved by the problem.

“The girls have asked me if this was normal vacation time, but I told them not to worry.” Again, my interruption came out before I could stop it.

“Obviously they saw the position posted or they wouldn’t have wanted to be promoted,” I added, but it didn’t faze Mary. She just shook her head. I was really curious why Anna would have left like that, and why the situation seemed so commonplace to Mary. Something is very odd about the whole thing.

“Arri, I understand your confusion, but let me help you here. Every one of these girls had been asking me, that if Anna does not come back, would they be considered for the job. I knew Anna wouldn’t return after the first week. Her house still had power and had not been rented or sold. I could only assume she just walked out and figured she would start new somewhere else. No one has seen or heard from her, but her bills are still being paid. So I placed her position on our website knowing I would have to replace her.”

I thought there was something fishy about this story, but I had nothing to prove that she was lying. The missing Anna was strange, and working for such a secretive manager would keep me on my toes. Not only did I have to be an assistant manager, but I would also need to play spy to know what’s going on.

“Well?” I said, “Where do we go from here?” Mary looked at me and smiled,

“We face the troops.” Mary was long-winded, but she also had a good sense of humor. She showed me our lockers, the vault, and gave me the grand tour. We walked behind the teller stations, and she started to introduce me to the

girls. There was an increasing amount of tension with each girl I met. Finally, Mary waited 'til closing time to tell the girls. She asked them all to see her about ten minutes before leaving, and when they were all around her desk, she called me over. I felt like I was facing the firing squad. If looks could kill, I would be dead. Anyone of them would gladly volunteer, as she told them Anna was gone, and I was to replace her. The daggers they sent my way were murderous. Who would have thought they would hate me so much?

After work, and finding out I was not welcome, Mary sent me home and left the girls to close up. I was only a few steps outside the bank when I suddenly felt uncomfortable, almost vile. This was not me. Something else felt this, and I was unintentionally picking up on it. They had to be close. I looked to see if there was anyone around. No one! There were just a few empty vehicles and me. I quickly got in my car and went to the store as I had planned, then, to the corner mart for a coke. I was surprised to see Alex was already there and in line, waiting to buy a drink.

“Hi there,” I said.

“Oh hi, Arri.” He stepped back and let the man between us go. “Are you just coming home from work?” Alex asked.

“Yes.” I said, “It was awful.” Alex’s face looked amused. I waited for the cashier to ring up my drink, but all she did was stare at Alex. “How much?” I asked her, finally getting tired of waiting.

“He already paid for it.” She said, rather sharply. Alex smiled and held the door open for me. I looked around the parking lot to see where he had parked. There were only two cars, mine and the man pumping gas.

“Thank you for the drink. How much do I owe you?” I asked.

“Nothing, I’m not really concerned over fifty cents,” Alex replied.

“Do you want a ride home?” I asked.



“Would you mind?”

“No, not at all, please.”

Alex was silent for the whole ride. It was very uncomfortable. I pulled between the two houses and asked if he wanted me to let him out here. He declined. After opening the gate, he walked me to the door. As we approached the door, I turned around. Chills ran down the back of my neck. I could feel the anger and artful rage coming from somewhere behind Alex, but Alex didn't seem angry.

“What's wrong?” Alex asked. He looked alert, and as if he was waiting for a fight.

“Nothing, just an odd feeling,” I squinted as if it would improve my sight. “Would you like to come in?” Alex hesitated for a few seconds, and then, accepted.

Being home alone was a little scary, so when Alex came in, I felt a bit more comfortable. I was just about to ask him if he wanted to stay for dinner when there was a knock at my door. It was Sarah and Jonathan.

“Oh, hello Arri!” Sarah's voice was silky and smooth as she pushed past me with her nose in the air, not waiting for an invitation. Her high-pitched voice sounded like wind chimes as she spoke.

“I saw Alex come in, so I thought I would invite myself. Jonathan was the only one left at home, so I pulled him along.” Jonathan was a quiet person, only speaking when spoken to, and he kept his answers as brief as possible.

“So who's hungry?” I asked, trying to converse. Sarah glanced at Alex, then toward the back door. She wanted him to follow. It was apparent there was something they needed to talk about.

“Excuse us for a moment; I just want to talk to Sarah for a second.” They left, and I was alone with Jonathan.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. To my surprise, he smiled.

“Yes, actually I am starving, but I think Sarah already ordered pizza, and it should be here in about three minutes.

“Don’t you need to be home to get it?”

“Nah, it’s on its way here.” Jonathan smiled, then plopped himself on the couch, and turned on my TV.

“Sorry about that,” Alex said, as he and Sarah walked back in.

Sarah glared at his back, then took a few deep breaths and curled her lips into a straight, thin line. She looked absolutely livid. I hope I never get on her bad side. She looks like she is ready to kill. Shaking off her piercing stare, she turned to look at me. Just as she was about to see me watching her, Alex broke my attention.

“Now I believe you were asking if we were hungry?” Alex asked.

“Yes I was....” but before I could answer, the doorbell rang, and Sarah ran to the door.

“I’ve got it!” I felt as if I had been quickly adopted into this little family.

The next few days were the same. I would go to is work, and lose myself in all the paperwork that Mary needed to be sorted and filed. I only briefly interacted with the employees. I knew through a few of the conversations that I was envied by most of the other girls. Many of them thought they should have had my position. I heard one of the girls mention, Anna, and how they knew where she was. This individual was on the phone and talking to another female. I couldn’t hear the other side of the conversation, but I was able to listen to this side. It sounded like Tonya knew where Anna was and thought she might be returning. I was trying focus more closely, but Mary interrupted my concentration. She needed me to do the quarterly worksheets. After working here for only a few weeks, I realized why Anna might have left. Mary was no leader, nor did she have any management skills. Mary was the girls’ friend and not their boss. When I first started, I thought she was going to be great, but I quickly realized

she was not. I was hated by the girls, and Mary played the innocent role saying that I was sent by the board, and how she would have promoted from within.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Things were starting to look sanguine and promising. If I played my cards right, hopefully, my troubles were behind me. Alex and his family were great; they were comfortable enough to come over whenever they wanted, and didn't bother knocking anymore. Like clockwork, I would come home from work, and they would be sprawled out in my living room watching a movie, eating my last stop at the grocery store, and even rearranging my furniture 'til it suited them best. I would have to admit it was nice to have a change of pace. I was content. Most of all, I was happy it was my life.

I would admit that work could be going better. Work was becoming a necessary evil. There was a rumor that Anna was coming back, and Mary was beginning to annoy me. I had found a request for the leave of absence stashed in Mary's office from Anna. When I presented it to Mary, she was caught. I knew Mary was shifty, but at least now, I knew how far she'd go.

Alice, one of the branches most talented tellers, had been calling in sick lately, and I was in her teller position. Alice was one of those organic types; she ate only things that were organic or had come out of her very own garden. Something about her getting sick and calling in so often

seemed a little odd, but I had a feeling that this would be my permanent position, only time would tell. Being a teller again had brought up some old memories, but I was having fun. I remembered how much I loved it. Yes, it was monotonous, soporific, and boring, but it was familiar, and it challenged me. I was on a mission, not only to prove to the girls and Mary that I was unaffected by my current predicament, but I also wanted to prove to myself that I could do both positions without a second thought.

It felt like forever, but the day was only half-over. The girls had been giving me attitude all day, and if any one of them made one more comment, I was going to ring their little necks. It was about ten minutes 'til I was to go to lunch, and the next member in line caught my eye. Everyday this past week he had been in my line. I tried to stall the last transaction as long as I could to pass him off to someone else, but I was it. His debonair smile, the casual but compelling way he sauntered toward me, made me go weak at the knees. I was completely smitten.

“Good afternoon, how may I help you?” I needed to concentrate on every word. I was trying to be sweet, and not let him know I was jittering-June-bug nervous. I made sure I breathed at a reasonable pace, hoping it didn't match the rapid pounding of my accelerating heartbeat. He was gorgeous. He had long-brown, wavy hair, emerald green eyes, and a body that put models to shame. His grace and poise intimidated me. Although I had never said ten words to him, he always smiled and flirted with facial expressions. I never saw him outside of work. Otherwise, I probably would have sounded like a blabbering idiot.

“Good afternoon Arri, I trust you are well?” Most people spoke with some type of slang, no matter how little, but he was well-spoken and sounded well-educated.

“Yes, thank you, and what can I do for you?” I pulled up his account that I had recorded to memory. Michael

London was the name on the account. I had not only memorized his name and account number; I also noticed he came in at about the same time, and ninety percent of the time I was the one who waited on him. I could tell he was hoping to be seen by me, but the movement of the line was even out of his control.

He smiled and said, "A withdrawal and a deposit please."

I smiled back. Mary walked up behind me and told me it was time for lunch. Michael's face lit up slightly. Silently acknowledging Mary's announcement, I continued to count back his withdrawal.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" I asked, looking up at Michael.

Momentarily he hesitated, "um," his eyes implored me. I raised my eyebrows.

"Yes, Michael?"

And with a final resolve, he straightened his shoulders, and then said, "No thank you."

There was something in his voice that told me he was holding back. He made a slight bow with his head and smiled at me with his perfect melting grin one last time before he left. He reminded me of a jaguar with precise and elegant movement. I could feel my face flush as the blood rose to my cheeks. I looked away embarrassed. For a second there, I thought he might have more to say. Secretly, I was hoping he did, just so I could look at him once more. There was something about him, something beyond his good looks that drew me to him. Mary said,

"I can't believe you!"

She was totally aghast. "If you date him you will be envied by every girl in town. He is the most sought-after bachelor. He is rarely seen, no one knows where he lives, or where he comes from. Only now, when you are around, does he mysteriously appear," she said, snapping her fingers. "You are the only one he really wants to see. When you are

not here, he walks in, then walks out. Without even being seen!" She looked at me skeptically like I had something to hide, but the truth was I had no idea who he really was. It's not like we actually talked when I did see him. I blushed again.

As I left, I noticed Michael's car was still in the parking lot. He smiled, waved, and then, drove away. I was plain and simple, and he was immaculate.

I got home from work later that evening. I pulled onto my street. Unlike the happy feeling I usually felt when I drove home, tonight was different. I felt an odd feeling of hatred in the pit of my stomach. I felt nauseous. It had been a while since I felt this way. At least now, I knew it wasn't Alex. Every time he was near I felt happy, and this was not happy. The feelings increased as I got closer to home.

I pulled into the driveway, parked my car, and then, went to close the gate. I was about half-way there when I felt like I should just leave the gate open and head into the house. I was getting used to listening to my intuition. It was not like the gate locked. It was more like a screw that held the gate closed.

I went into the house, put my purse down. Something was not right. I reached over and turned on the lights, and when the lights brightened the dark and empty kitchen, I was appalled. To my horror, it was a mess. There was nothing left standing except the walls. I walked through the rubble that used to be all of my dishes. The glass cracked and crunched under my feet. As I walked through the house, I was confounded. The sound of paper crinkled as I walked over it. Giving the uneven ground a more slippery and unstable base. My books were scattered about with the pages torn out and discarded. My couch, the one thing I looked forward to after a long day at work, had been cut to shreds.

I was shocked. I didn't think I had been here long enough to make an enemy capable of doing this. I went

from room to room; even the bathroom was beyond recognition. The toilet paper was strung off the roll and soaked. The bathroom looked like it had been flooded. The water from the toilet ran over the side of the tank, and the sink was stopped up with the water still running. My heart cried, my emotions were shattered, and I felt betrayed and violated. I went back through the house again getting a full view of the damage. There was so much destruction. What was I going to do? I put down the rest of my things and did what I thought anyone would do. I started to clean. I rolled up my sleeves and grabbed a few towels and rags, then got down on all fours and started at one end of the house. I had just begun picking up all the glass when Alex, Sarah, and Jonathan crept in behind me. Alex let out a slight giggle.

“Wow, I didn’t know you were a party animal.” His voice was playful but sympathetic. I tried to smile, but I couldn’t. Sarah immediately came down to my level and took my hands in hers. I was embarrassed to look at them. My cheeks were stained with tears, and my eyes were red and blotchy. Sarah led me to what was left of my couch and set me down. I stared at the floor. There was nothing left in me. There were no emotions that described how I felt. I was lost. What did I do to deserve this? I thought. My mind was going in a thousand different directions at once. I could hear Alex talking on the phone, but I couldn’t hear what he was saying, just the rumble of his voice as he spoke.

As if lightning struck, I linked it all together. I was reading people’s emotions. This is what I felt when I came home. The feeling that I was being followed and how I thought someone was after me, it was all right here in front of me. I must have had the look of a revelation because Alex and Sarah stared at me totally confused and curious.

“Is everything ok?” Sarah stepped forward cautiously.

“Yes I’m fine,” I smiled faintly. “I wasn’t reading people; I actually felt them. I thought it was just me being nervous



and paranoid, but it was them.” I glanced back and forth between the two of them, expecting them to understand. Alex raised one eyebrow. Sarah looked at me like I had bugs crawling at my ears. They knew nothing of what I was talking about.

“Could you run that by me one more time?” Alex asked, and Sarah nodded in agreement. Just as I started explaining, Jonathan walked in. I told them everything I could think of. I even told them of the three men who attacked me, and how a pack of dogs saved my life. Alex and Jonathan smirked at this. They must have thought I was crazy, but when I finished, none of them looked surprised. Sarah appeared to be in deep thought, with her thin pursed lips, and her eyebrows furrowed. Alex and Jonathan looked furious, and bolted from the house, leaving Sarah and me staring after them. When I looked to Sarah for an explanation, her eyes twinkled with acknowledgment, and her careful and calculated demeanor slipped for a fraction of a second before she snapped out of her all-knowing trance and resumed her posh and opulent pedigreed look.

Alex and Jonathan were gone for about an hour, then returned, and looked straight at Sarah.

“If they were here, they are long gone now. We made a ten-mile sweep. They covered their tracks well. Not a scent of their whereabouts.”

Now I was confused.

“Who?” And as if I had said nothing, the three of them went into the other room and started to discuss what they should do. I could hear every word, so I let them go.

“Well the only solution I can see is to tell him.” Alex suggested in a succinct voice.

“When?” Jonathan sounded like he was planning a military operation. Alex and Jonathan walked back into the room.

“So what did you decide?” I asked. Alex looked a little disappointed.

“Well for starters, you are going to call the police and report the break-in. Then, unfortunately, the three of us have business to take care of, and we will be home in a few days.”

“What business?” I asked. I knew there was more than they were telling me. “Who are you going to tell?” I didn’t mean to, but it came out almost accusatory.

“We aren’t telling anyone anything, at least just yet.”

Alex was a little upset. Jonathan looked at me and then turned back to Alex.

“We need to pack and leave now. We have been held up long enough. The police can take it from here, and there is nothing else we can do.”

Jonathan was not the emotional type. I, nonetheless, was scared to death.

“What happens if they come back? What if they weren’t done...?” I was cut off by Sarah this time.

“Arri stop! You are getting all worked up over nothing.” Her voice took a knowing tone. “No one is coming back. The house was just ransacked. Nothing is missing. Just hang tight, and we’ll be back in a few days.” I knew they were wrong. I knew what they were thinking, and they were not done. The one valuable thing I had that they wanted was me, and I was still here.

“A few days? How can you be so sure they won’t come back for me?”

“You? Why would they want you?” Sarah’s voice was edgy and shaken. Almost as if she was nervous.

“Hey, guys!” I yelled after them, but they had already disappeared. They were like lightning. They were here one second, and then gone the next.

After they left, I looked around at my bare and lonely house. My sanctuary was trashed. Opening my purse and retrieving my cell phone, I called the police.

“They really did a good job on this one.” A short, heavy

officer commented to another, as he held up a notepad with notes etched across the paper. His comment was a little bit of a downer, but he was right. Work like this was only done in the movies.

After hundreds of questions and having a few dozen strange men rummaging through my personal things, they finished their investigation in the early hours of the morning. They gave me their cards and told me if anything else happened, I was to call them immediately.

I watched their tail-lights disappear as they left my driveway. I dropped my head and let out a sigh of defeat as I headed back into the house. As I closed the door, I looked at the mess I had waiting for me. Whoever did this, was not going to give up until they got what they wanted, "me". I just wish I understood why. I mean, I must have or seen something, or why would they follow me all the way from Vegas.

Exhausted and drained, my body hummed with numbing energy as I dropped onto the bed.

My doorbell rang. The sound echoed in my ears, and my roaring headache protested. All I wanted was to be left alone. I was weary, run-down, and looked like I had been through a blender on puree.

I peered through the window, and a brand new, white, pickup truck was parked out front. A few men were sitting in the cab, and a handful stood in the bed of the truck talking. The man at the door had his back to me then turned when a few of the men nodded to me as they noticed my peering through the window. Opening the front door, a gentleman, in painter's overalls, was standing there, happy to see me.

"Are you Arri?" The man asked in a strong, thick Scottish accent. His red hair flamed in the sun, and his pale skin shone which made him look iridescent.

"Yes, can I help you?" I asked, as I began to close the door. I didn't know him, and who was to say that he wasn't the one

who broke in. His face and smile looked friendly enough, but as my parents used to say, "Looks can be deceiving."

"Aye, I'm Scotty. Gota wee call from Alex last night. He wanted me to stop by, and see if you were ok."

He seemed to be legit. Alex had made a few calls last night. I just wish I had paid attention to who he was calling.

"Well I'm here and fine," I said, opening the door a little.

"Well lass, if you don't mind, I'd like to come in and check out the damage."

He glanced to the side as if he were looking behind the door. Strangers made me nervous in the first place, and after last night, I was a little wary about letting anyone in. I tried to tell him I was fine, but he insisted on going through the house to make sure I was alone. Scotty gasped when he saw the sight of the catastrophe just inside the door as he pushed past me.

"Aye, a travesty!" He yelled, his accent making it almost impossible to understand. I looked around with the same thought running through my head.

"Aye, sorry lassie."

"I guess someone decided they didn't like the way my house was decorated; and it looks like they made a few changes," I sighed.

"I liked it better the old way." I smiled at him.

"We best be gettin' on with the job and cleanin' this place up," he said, as he headed for the door.

Confused, I threw my hands up and followed him. I tried to stop him. "Wait, what?" I asked him, but he walked to the door and signaled for the men to come in. I looked through the window, and a half-dozen men were walking to the door.

"Really, I swear, its ok," I tried to say, but as each man came in he gave them assignments, and pointed to the room assigned. I was not going to win, and I didn't have the energy to fight.

“Sorry lass, just followin’ orders, and Alex said we was to clean the place and watch ya till he returns.” Scotty put his arm around my shoulders and led me to my room. “Lassy, why don’t you relax, and I will call you when I need ya.”

I was too exhausted to argue, so I allowed him to escort me to my room. I went back to bed and closed my eyes. Even though the curtains were pulled off the rods, and the sun shone in and warmed the cold and uninviting wreckage, the bed made it a place of temporary comfort.

When I awoke, the sun was setting, and the sky was painted a beautiful orange. The clouds were sporadic and sparse. I went into the living room to see if the men were still here. It looked like Scotty was the only one left. He was on the couch sitting at attention. He looked like he was ready for bear. I looked at the time and noticed it was half-passed-six.

“Scotty, Are you hungry?” I asked. Scotty jerked his head. His movement was rigid and hard.

“No, it’s not necessary lass. Alex and the gang are on their way back. I left some grub for you in the oven; all you need to do is warm it up.” He stood up and pointed to the oven. This time his motions were more fluid and gentle.

“Thank you again,” I started to say, but he held up his hand and stopped me mid-sentence.

“Lassy, it wasn’t a problem, just doing a favor for a friend.” He took a small genteel bow and turned to the door.

I looked around the house, now that I was alone, I uneasily rubbed my arms. The house felt quiet and reticent. Now that I could see everything Scotty had done, I was amazed. I was only asleep for half the day. Work like this should have taken days. After a few days of chaos and heart-wrenching wreckage, I wanted to close my eyes and relax.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I woke up at sunrise. I didn't realize that the break-in had taken so much out of me. Since the house was ransacked, I must have pretty much slept for twenty-four straight hours. It was so unlike me to be so tired. My newly decorated curtains were drawn open, and the light from the bright pink and hazy-orange painted sky lit the living room with a wondrously illuminating glow. My neck was a little kinked from falling asleep on the couch. I groaned when I lifted my head to look around and see if my nightmare was real. Sure enough, it was. Alex was in the new recliner, and I could hear Sarah in my room placing clothes in my closet. The aroma of eggs filled the air. Jonathan's voice came from the kitchen,

"Will someone wake Sleeping Beauty and tell her that her breakfast is ready." At least, I knew I was back in good hands.

Alex looked at me, "You heard the chef, breakfast is ready."

We all sat down and ate like a family. I felt so at home. Yesterday seemed so far away and forgotten as I dined with my new family.

I was grateful for the work that Alex and his friends had done. After a long and relatively stress-free day of friendly

conversation and good company, Alex and his family headed home, and I headed in for the night.

I was just getting ready to turn out the lights and go to bed when I noticed the motion-light outside was on. That thing had a mind of its own since Alex installed it, but I thought after the break-in, it was wise to check it out. Cautiously, I cracked open the door to see what activated it. I was shocked to see a large dog staring at me. This dog was huge. It had a pure, white coat that was flawless and beautiful. It stood tall with pride and majesty. The lone wolf's eyes shone in the light making them look silver and foreboding. Confidently, it looked at me, like I was the one intruding on its territory. The mysterious dog gave me the chills. I thought it best to leave the animal alone. Closing the door, I went to my room.

I was hoping tonight would be a little more settling than the last few. Finally, the moment I was waiting for, I collapsed into bed, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. No matter how hard I tried to sleep, the constant, continuous and nagging feeling that I was being watched haunted my thoughts. It was annoying. I was tired of looking over my shoulder. Sometimes, I wondered if it wasn't my imagination that was making me feel so insecure about my surroundings. Then something would happen, like the break-in that proved my own introspection wrong. This time, it was not going away.

It was about one in the morning when my already unsettling and broken sleep was interrupted. An annoying and alarmingly loud howling woke me. Angrily, I stomped my way to the backdoor and peered through the window. To my amazement, there was nothing there, just the darkened outline of my large, beaten-up old tree. Grumbling and shaking my head, I cursed the infernal dog. The howling continued as I made my way through the house. This time I looked out the front door; the night was atramentous and inky. I searched the bleak and unpopulated scenery for anything,

and in the moonlit shadows of the old barn across the street, I saw some movement. The unrecognizable shadow crept and snaked its way through the night. I turned on the porch light hoping to scare whatever it was away. Uncomfortable and nervous, I climbed back into bed, snuggled under the covers, ignoring the tension that perched on my shoulders, and closed my eyes.

I wasn't in bed for ten minutes when I heard another noise. This time the sound was not a howling dog. This noise was grating, abrasive, and almost raspy. It was coming from the tree outside my window. Closing my eyes, and taking a few deep breaths, I steadied my exposed and terrifying nerves as I threw back the curtains.

Fear-stricken and momentarily paralyzed, my heart stopped beating, and my chest clamped in fear. Two cold and frigid eyes stared back at me. My first reaction was to scream and run, but the determined and surprised look on his face kept me still; I peered in the eyes of evil that stood only inches from the glass. My heart pounded in fear. Finally, finding my voice and mobility, I ran to the living room and screamed. I picked up the phone and dialed 911. I could hear the intruder breaking in my bedroom window. Glass shattered, and wood splintered as the man barged his way into the house. I screamed again knowing the intruder was headed toward my panicking yell.

"Hello, 911 emergency," a woman's voice broke through the other end of the line, but my voice faltered as I felt him grab my shoulders. The heavy, vice-like grip pulled and slammed me to the floor, knocking the phone out of my hand.

"911 emergency," the woman's voice came from the receiver, but the man kicked it away from me. The stranger stood over me smirking at my obvious horror. I screamed again, and his massive, cold hand covered my mouth. With just the one hand, he held me down without effort. I tried



to struggle. I threw my arms at him and kicked, but to no use. My heart raced as I thought of how to free myself. Fighting wasn't working; neither was giving up and hoping his grip would loosen. I could sense his cold, dark frost-bitten heart. His humanity was gone, and hatred and worry filled what little emotions he had left. His dead and heartless smirk promised pain and suffering as his eyes met mine. He laughed at my horror, and his sinister sneer froze me in fear.

I was occupied with my own battle when a loud bang came from the back of the house. The stranger was unaffected with the thundering crash that sent the back door hurling across the mud room. Glass and wood shattered against the wall. I was expecting to see his accomplice, but instead, the huge white dog lunged at him throwing him to the floor. There was something about the dog that looked, seemed, and acted familiar. As the man's hand was torn from my mouth, I struggled to my feet. Before I got far, I felt a crushing pain in my ankle. The agonizing torture was the stranger's death grip; I cried out in total and undeniable torment.

As if to my rescue, the white dog bit his arm harder and harder. His jaws tightening until I heard a crack and the man's arm bent back unnaturally. He let go of me, and I hobbled to the corner and cradled my knees.

I was stunned and in disbelief. Since, when do men and dogs fight like mortal enemies? I knew I was crazy when a pure black dog and a tan dog came in and took over holding the man down. These dogs were not just working together; it was like a strategically designed plan of attack. Just when I thought I was losing it, I was caught off guard. The white dog that only a few moments ago was my knight in shining armor instantly turned into Alex and reached out his hand for mine.

It was hard to accept what I just saw. Am I hurt that bad

that I am hallucinating? Alex stood there waiting for me to grab his hand. I hesitated. Police sirens wailed in the distance as the sound slowly filled the background. Their red and blue lights flashed the living room in blinking colors. Alex looked back, to the two other dogs, and spoke.

“Get him out of here!” He snapped, at the two dogs.

My pain ridden mind fought to stay focused as the pulsing pain demanded my attention, then Alex screamed “NOW!” and the two dogs pulled the man out of the house. Just as they cleared the doorway, the man yelled back at me.

“Nicholas will have you, one way or another!”

Just seconds before the police ran in the front door, the dogs disappeared into the darkness.

Their guns were pulled, and the house was surrounded. They looked and cleared each room before returning to the living room, but there was no one there but Alex and me.

“Where’s the intruder?” one of the police asked. Alex looked at the man, and pointed to the back door, then said,

“He ran through the back. I tried to stop him, but he was too strong.”

“How’s the girl? Does she need an ambulance?” One of the policemen asked. I was so wrapped up in the fact that Alex was a dog, I didn’t hear the question, but I did recognize the familiar voice that came from behind me.

“I’ll take her.” I turned to see who it was, but he was hidden in the shadows. I didn’t recognize him. I looked at Alex, confused. Do I know this strange man?

“It’s ok, I promise,” Alex said, as the man held out his hand for mine. Alex looked directly at the stranger.

“I’ll stay here with the police; you take her, and watch her ankle, I think it’s broken.” I looked down and saw the bottom of my pajama pants soaked in blood and clinging to my leg. As the police left the room to search the grounds, the stranger took my hand and said,

“Come.”

“Why,” I asked? His face was still obscured by the shadow, but I knew him from somewhere.

“No time, come,” he said, in a much softer voice. I was debating the odds of breaking free from his grip when he threw me over his shoulder and started to run out the front door. As we crossed the road and into the fields, I expected a bumpy ride, but his smooth and graceful gait was like floating, rather than running.

“Where are we going?” I tried to yell, but somehow, he moved me from over his shoulder to cradling me in his arms without missing a beat. How did he do that? I thought to myself.

I tried to fight back, but my feeble attempts did nothing to stop him. Without another word, he continued to run for miles through the woods until we entered a large estate. The doors echoed and crashed as they closed behind us. He set me gently on my feet in the middle of a rather large antechamber offering his strong, sturdy frame for support.

“Nana!” He yelled in an annoying tone.

“Where am I? Let me go!” but my demand fell on deaf ears.

“Nana!” He yelled again, this time more forceful than the last, and just as he opened his mouth, a short, skinny old lady came from behind a door on the right.

“What is it, Michael?” She said in a sweet English voice.

“I don’t know, just clean her up and put her in my office.” The flawless voice and the angelic face was none other than Michael. He shook his head, then looked back at me worried and concerned, as he walked up the stairs.

“What do you mean just clean her up and set her in your office” I yelled after him “I have a name!” The elderly lady gently took my hand.

“Come, dear, I’m sure a nice spot of tea will calm your nerves while I call the doctor.”

I turned to Nana and yelled,

“No, I won’t come. I am not a dog.” My voice shook as I rubbed my temples. Gritting my teeth, I turned on my heels. My stubborn side got the best of me as it so often did, and I tried to hobble my way to the door. I could only imagine how childish and foolish I looked when I was suddenly aware of the excruciating pain in my ankle. I fell to the floor, overtaken by tears. As soon as I was able to stop the sobbing and gathered my strength, I started to pull my way to the door. I didn’t know where we were, or how far away I was from home, but I was determined to get there. I was knowingly aware of how idiotic and preposterous I looked, but I was more concerned about leaving than conducting myself appropriately and with self-control.

As I pulled myself along the floor, I felt a familiar touch when someone placed their hand on my shoulder and stopped my attempts.

“This is an uphill battle in which you have no chance on winning.” The voice was not Nana’s. It was Michael, the same Michael that made me go weak at the knees, the one I adored. The man I would dream about. I thought he was one of the best parts of moving here, I turned to face my nemesis, ready to fire at will. But as soon as I saw his charming face and subtle smile, I broke down again, and my strength faded. Looking down and closing my eyes I giggled to myself. What am I fighting for? Even I had to admit, I was enthralled with the thought of being stuck here with him. My ambivalent emotions churned, and a wave of elation and apprehension rushed my heart. The thought that I was unable to leave scared me, but being held here against my will by Michael, brought a bittersweet smile to my tear-stricken face.

Michael simply grinned. The emotionless and heartless Michael faded, and a man with gentle admiration shone through.

“Are you going to run?” he said in a curious tone. I raised

my hand to slap his perfect face, but hesitated when instead of flinching; a mocking smile curved his lips. There was no winning this battle, even I knew that. I stopped fighting and bowed my head, as I had done once before. My strength, now only enough to keep me breathing, let me fall.

“Ahh,” I yelled as my ankle pounded with pain. Michael carefully picked me up and cradled me in his arms. His warmth bled through his clothes and warmed my weak and tired soul. I laid my head against his chest and breathed in his sweet scent.

My heart and leg pounded in synchronized beat as he carried me up the stairs, and into a room. Gently, he set me on the bed. Instantly, Nana was there, placing towels under my ankle, and cutting my pant leg. Michael sat next to the bed and held my hand as I drifted in and out of consciousness. Although, I was in pain and scared, I was comforted by his compassionate, tender touch. The last thing I remembered was the doctor talking to Michael and asking him what had happened.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



My head pounded! My body ached, and I felt stiff. I rubbed my face trying to wake up. I didn't want to face the day. I had the strangest dream and let out a soft laugh when I thought about it. My dream was crazy. I wondered where it came from. Letting out a reluctant sigh, I finally opened my eyes.

I stared in bewilderment, as I looked up and saw a printed canopy hanging above me. Still feeling a little out of it, I thought Sarah had taken the liberty to redecorate. But the more I looked around I knew I wasn't home. The memories of last night, and what seemed like a dream, now felt more like a nightmare. Slightly panicking, I sat up and looked at the room around me. I searched the nightstand next to me, looking for a phone, a note, or anything that would tell me why. I found nothing except a small antique lamp and a yellow vase holding a single, elegant, red rose. A few tears fell from my cheek as I realized the reality of last night. Knowing I couldn't lose it, I took a few deep breaths and gained control of myself. I had to think this through. There was something about last night, something about my dream that seemed a little odd. I remembered being attacked and the fight between my attacker and the dog, or Alex. Then, I remembered Michael bringing me here. I pulled back the

covers, and sure enough, my ankle was wrapped in bandages. I tried to move my toes. The pain wasn't completely agonizing, but bearable. So, my dream was real. I shook my head.

Carefully and slowly, I helped myself up and hobbled my way to the door. I placed my ear against it and listened, but there was nothing. There were no footsteps, mumbling, or distant conversations. I tried the door; the old, cast iron handle was stiff and ancient. Gently, I pulled, and it was locked. I pulled a little harder 'til I was finally yanking, but the door didn't budge. My mind raced, and I became frightened and scared. I didn't like the idea of being locked in a room. Figuring that no one knew I was awake, I started to knock. No one came. The hollowed silence echoed as I became more aware of the situation.

"Hello, hello?" I yelled out, "Please?" I begged, but there was no reply.

Taking a few deep breaths my panic level jumped. I rubbed my face and cupped my mouth; there had to be another way. Looking around the room, I searched for anything that would help me. Frustrated, I screamed. Hysteria and fear took over, and I fell to my knees. I started to shake as tears ran down my face.

Several moments passed, and I was running out of ideas. Looking back at the door, and then to the bed, I noticed the flower in the vase. A thought came to mind. Pushing myself off the floor, I picked up the vase and walked to the window. I looked down at the grounds beneath me, but I was at least four floors up. Even if I managed to break the window, there was no way I would walk away from a jump like that. I folded my arms and mumbled to myself. Angry and furious, I went back to the door and pounded and yelled. My fists began to hurt, and my tired and aching body gave up. Defeated, I started to limp my way back to the chair by the window.

As I waited for both strength and determination to

build, I began to look around the room. The furniture was extravagant but ancient. There was a gold-gilded dark wooden dresser, and ornate tapestries hung from the walls. There were a few little pictures on the walls displaying trees and flowers in different stages of the seasons. A large, young green maple leaf hung next to a maple that was a little older, brown, and with part of its stem and outer shape missing and damaged. It was quite poetic. A few knick-knacks were sparsely displayed here and there. The plain, but gorgeous, white-vaulted ceilings were lined with large, aged, and notched wooden beams. I took a deep breath, and carefully surveyed my room. Three large draped windows lined with the same antique wood as the ceiling above stood tall against one wall. The extended window sill made a for nice bench and a beautiful place to read. The old stone walls were left bare and original. I felt like I was in a modern Cinderella castle.

My head swam, and I began to get tired. My already aching head pounded even harder as I tried to wrap my brain around it all. I let out an annoyed yell. As soon as I did, my door opened, and a white-haired, older lady ran to my side.

“Are you alright, dear?” Nana’s sweet voice asked. Busily, she looked around and noticed that I was fine. I sat there and stared at her for a moment. Nana looked at me and then repeated the question. “Are you alright, my dear?”

“No,” I replied. “I’m not ok!” I was trying to keep my voice down and stay calm, but my insides were screaming.

“What’s the matter, dearie? Do you need more pain medicine?” Her innocent expression and her even tone annoyed me. It was like she saw no problem with the situation.

“No, what am I doing here?” I asked, but Nana was not listening, she turned her attention to the phone she was holding. “Excuse me!” I said, in a slightly louder voice, showing a little of my suppressed aggravation. Nana stopped her texting and looked at me.



“Yes?” she replied.

“What’s going on?” I asked; this time putting a little more attitude in it.

Nana didn’t react to my question. Instead, she simply looked at me, smiled, and excused herself from the room. Just as she left, she turned back to me.

“The doctor will be in soon to check your ankle. If you want to clean up, there is a bathroom through there, and a clean set of clothes on the bench.” Nana smiled at me and indicated the wall next to the bed. I hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a hidden door masked in the wall. As she left, I quickly stood and tried to follow her out, but the door closed before I could catch it. Sighing, I had to admit that if I were ever to be kidnapped or held hostage, this was not a bad place to stay. I banged my fists on the door hoping she would return, but I was alone.

I walked back to the window and stared at the yard. The effulgent light shone through the tall window. The sun’s rays scattered in an array of colors as the light broke through an intricately laced, stained glass window. The colors were bold, and the glass was bubbly. The grounds were beautiful. The lawn was perfectly manicured and trimmed. Pruned trees and bushes outlined the yard with about a dozen men walking around. Undoubtedly on patrol, I thought to myself. I knocked on the window, but none of them turned or acknowledged me. All I could see beyond the expansive yard were trees, trees, and more trees. Beyond the trees, there were mountains in every direction. If I were to run, I would never know which way to go.

I was lost in the moment when a knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. I smiled in relief. I was beginning to think I was forgotten.

“Come in,” I said, in a wary voice just above a whisper. I turned to greet the person walking through the door. I was a little shocked to see a tall, thin man in a white coat

walking toward me. He flipped a chair around and helped me sit down.

“How are you this morning?” His voice was strong and cordial. I tried to contain my anger as I answered back.

“Fine I guess, what am I doing...?” My words were interrupted when Michael slowly walked in and leaned stiffly against one of the bedposts.

“It’s good to hear that, and how about your ankle? Are you in great pain?” The doctor never made eye contact but kept his attention on my ankle.

“No, I’m just a little uncomfortable,” I grumbled, as he gently took the wrapping off and carefully massaged my calf and foot before turning his attention back to my ankle. Although I answered the doctor’s questions, my attention never left Michael. I didn’t know how to act. I was shy and anxious, but my baffled heart fought between the anger of being locked up, and my undeniable attraction to him. It was like I was twelve again and had a crush on the guy sitting next to me in homeroom.

I glanced down for a moment and expected to see scratches, scrapes, or stitches, but my leg was clean. I was astonished.

“So, how is that?” The doctor asked, looking back up at me. It wasn’t as bad as it seemed.

“Mostly sore and a little bruised,” I said, offering a reassuring smile.

“It looks like you are healing rather quickly. If you continue to progress this way, you will be up and about in two days.” Before I could stop myself, I let out a surprised,

“Two days!” The doctor didn’t pay attention to my outburst, but Michael readjusted himself and moved in a smidgen closer. The doctor massaged my ankle before he gingerly wrapped it back up. He bowed his head and bid me a good day. As the doctor walked away, Michael followed as the two of them spoke back and forth.

“So, what do you think?” Michael’s voice was skeptical.

“She seems fine, but there are some...,” The two of them exited the room.

“Excuse me,” I yelled after them. “Hey, wait a minute, hello; will one of you talk to me? I just want to use the phone!” But no one answered. It was as if I didn’t exist. I hobbled toward the door, but as soon as it shut, I heard it lock.

Immediately, I tried the door again. The cold, hard handle didn’t move. I banged and yelled but to no avail. My anger, confusion, and frustration toward Michael built, and I started to limp and pace. Again, I tried the door. My annoyance built until I felt like I no longer was in control. The more I thought about last night, the angrier I got, and a fire inside me grew until my control faded, and my anger took over. I walked over to the bed, and picked up the same yellow vase that held a rose on my nightstand,

“Let me out!” I screamed. Yelling in anger, I threw the vase and watched it shatter against the door. I walked around the room and picked up an antique wooden clock from the old dresser.

“Let me out!” I screeched. “This is ridiculous.” My words were unheard. Narrowing my eyes, I scowled at the door. If I couldn’t get out, then no one was going to come in.

I played with the heavy wooden clock for a moment until I heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said. The door started to open, and before I knew it, I threw the clock at the door, only missing them by inches. The door slammed, and I heard it lock again.

“You can stay in there all day.” I heard Michael yell from the other side of the door.

I was surprised at myself. It was almost as if there was something inside me that was elated to be alive and free.

A little while later, I heard footsteps. I called out for them, but they never answered. This fueled my fury even

more. I didn't know what got into me, but I didn't care. They would try the door periodically. After they tried and failed as I threw new things at the door, part of me giggled inside. It felt sort of like a little game, and I was winning. I was always the one that tried to understand and keep my self-control, but now, I was able to lose my temper and have no one tell me otherwise.

The day was winding down, and the sky was dark. The moon was bright, and the light tinted the tips of the trees silver, but the lustrous, sterling-white light, never quite made it to the ground. It was actually beautiful. I had always lived in the city, and with the urban glare, the stars seemed non-existent. I guess I had just learned to live without beauty, but here, it was impossible to ignore. The estate didn't have any outside lights, and with the darkness swallowing the vast expanse, I continued to gaze into nothingness. It had been a while since anyone had tried the door.

I was pleased that I had effectively locked myself in, but part of me cried as I wanted, and needed, to know someone cared. I glanced around the room; I hadn't realized I had demolished the place. The floor was covered with broken glass, plastic, and some books. I limped around and started to pick up everything I had thrown. I placed the books back on the shelves and did my best at putting away all the things I had tossed and hurled at the door. I tried to pick up all the glass, but if I was anything, I was at least efficient at shattering glass. After giving it a good effort, the room looked semi-decent, except for the tiny shimmer of powered glass that still floured the floor. I stared at the door 'til it looked something like a Picasso, then I must have fallen asleep.

I woke up stiff. The sun was blinding, as the light bounced off all the broken glass, filling the room with hundreds of little shiny objects. I looked around, and the room hadn't changed much. Everything remained the same, except for a

large breakfast tray on the nightstand. A large glass of milk, a warm muffin, a few pastries, and a variety of fruit filled the plate. After a good fill of breakfast, I went to try the door, but as I had suspected, it was still locked. As soon as I let go of the handle, the door flew open, and my arms were pinned to my side as Michael smiled in victory. He scared the life right out of me. My heart stopped, and my breath quivered as I gasped for air. I didn't want to be angry anymore. Being hostage was not at the top of my list of things to do.

"The doctor had tried to come in earlier, but you were not cooperative." Michael used the smile I had become familiar with. Slowly, he let me go.

"Are you going to play nice?" A playful grin teased his lips. I nodded as Michael helped me to a chair.

"If I could just use the phone, I'm sure my parents are worried sick." I begged, but my attention was turned back to the doctor when he removed the wrapping.

"Does this hurt?" he asked, as he poked and turned my ankle in several different directions.

"No, just a little stiff. Why what's wrong?" I started to panic.

"Nothing, can you put some weight on it?" I looked at Michael, then slowly stood and placed my bare foot on the cold, hard, wooden floor. I was a little scared for the pain that might follow, but it was fine. I placed my weight on it, little by little, 'til finally, I was distributing my weight evenly, and bravely took a step. There was no pain. I grinned at the doctor, then at Michael as I deepened my smile. I wanted to jump up and down with my sense of relief.

"Doctor," I asked, "wasn't that supposed to take longer?" I was no physician, but I knew from second-hand experience, that when a cheerleader at school twisted or sprained her ankle; she was on crutches for at least a few weeks. Michael looked at the doctor and answered for him.

"He might have misdiagnosed it." Michael smiled, and

offered his hand to help support me as I tested out my new ankle. Michael and the doctor turned to leave. After escorting the doctor to the door, Michael turned in my direction.

"I'll be right back. Please, no more temper tantrums." He playfully raised his eyebrows at me, and then, closed the door behind him. I was tempted to try the door, but I was not going to cause any problems. Maybe, if I played nice, as Michael put it, he would tell me why I was here and what's going on. You know what they say, "You can get a lot further with honey than you do with vinegar."

I decided to take Nana up on the offer to get cleaned up. My tired and aching muscles melted as the warm water from the shower washed away my stress. The towel was soft, and the bathroom was great. It was better than any five-star hotel. I wrapped the towel around me and went to the dresser in the bedroom. Nana had cleaned and put away all the clothes I managed to throw around. After dressing, I sat on the bed waiting for someone to come in, but no one came. The minutes turned into hours, and Michael still hadn't come back. This whole damsel in distress thing was way over-rated. I positioned the chair to face the window when I thought I heard movement. I was excited to hear voices. I heard them elevate as they grew aggravated.

"I pray you, why did thee call me? Why would thee have me bring her here? The problem is hers. Furthermore, she is human and thus does not belong here. Is the reason you call upon me because you acquire her fancy?" The voice was definitely Michael's, and he was definitely angry. A slight English curve wrapped his words, but I could hear the acid pouring out with every word he spoke.

"NO! I feel nothing for her. I am her guardian and nothing more. Her mother contracted me to safeguard her." I thought it sounded a lot like Alex.

"Alex, you have no thought. I am not a safe house for thee charges, and I'm not a babysitter. What danger precedes her for ye to have her here?"

“This situation is different.” Alex tried to explain. “Arri was assigned to me by...” The conversation paused. I was so captivated; I had almost shouted “who?” but caught myself just in time.

“Alex, I beg of you, tell me who is after thee.”

Michael was not like I thought he would be. Michael was somehow different. Not just by the way he spoke, but I saw someone who was well brought up, carried himself with pride, and treated everyone with respect.

“I’m afraid she might have seen more than I intended her too.” Alex sucked in a breath as if he was bracing himself for impact.

Michael started to talk again, and the voice I once thought was angelic and harmonious sounded annoyed.

“How much does thee know?” he gritted.

“Well,” Alex whispered, “she saw me change from a wolf to a man?” He said nervously.

“What!” Michael yelled back. “She saw you change? Thou shalt be more careful. And what if she remembers?”

“Look, she was being attacked by one of Nicholas’ men. I didn’t have much of an option.” Alex was nervous, but his reply was harsh and stern. I could feel his tension through the door.

“What do thy mean Nicholas? What would thee want with this particular child?” Alex answered so quietly, I found myself pressing my ear against the door to hear.

“There is a lot about this child I hadn’t told you. She is Steven’s daughter.” It almost sounded like Alex winced, and a growl came from the other side of the door.

“I thought thee to be dead,” Michael said through his teeth. “No word for centuries and thee tells me thou knew? Alex!” Michael yelled, but Alex interrupted,

“I’m sorry, but I was sworn to secrecy ’til it was life-threatening, which is why I sought you out.”

“And what of her? When the other guests return?” With

that final word, Michael ended the conversation and opened the door. As the door swung open, I tumbled out and fell to the floor. I looked up at the faces of my ex-friend Alex, and the key-keeper to my prison.

Narrowing my eyes at the two of them, I was hurt. I saw Alex' face, and he had deceived me. I thought he was my friend, but when Michael asked if he liked me, he said he felt nothing for me; not just as friends or anything, just nothing. My eyes welled up with tears. Alex's face fell, as he realized I had heard the whole conversation. I scrambled to my feet, and ran to the bathroom, locking myself inside.

"Arri, please be reasonable," Michael said, obviously perturbed with my behavior.

"Arri?" Alex's voice sounded genuinely concerned. "Why don't you come out, and let us explain." I didn't care what he had to say. I didn't want to hear it. I had heard enough.

"NO!" I yelled back. "You lied to me." I was crying, and my words were muffled by my sobbing. There was a silence, and the door closed. I slowly peeked outside, and I was alone again. I was so upset that the intense anger I felt earlier faded, and I realized the real severity of my situation. I was attacked and kidnapped. I was being held hostage. My parents had no idea where I was, and now, I was lied to by the only friends I had. I was not far outside of the bathroom when I fell to the floor and cradled my knees in my arms.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Loud claps of thunder rumbled and rolled as rain pounded against the window. I found the loud and deafening roar quite tranquil. Warily, I opened my eyes. I stretched my arms and let out a soft moan. I remembered curling up in the corner and feeling sorry for myself, but here I was awake, and lying in bed staring up at the soft-white silk that draped my canopy. Rubbing my face, the vague memory of Michael's cologne clung to my clothes, but wouldn't I have remembered? How could anyone miss his presence awake or asleep? Taking a few deep breaths, I yawned and flung the blankets off.

A sliver of light softly illuminated my room as it peeked through the slit in the thick, heavy curtains. I pulled back the window coverings to see that the clouds had concealed the sun from shining through. I stared out of the window mindlessly and looked at the rain-soaked ground and the puddles below. I didn't know what to think.

After showering and dressing, I returned to the window and watched the storm. I tried to figure out what my next step would be, or even more importantly, what their next step might be. Was I to stay here forever in this room? Would they ever let me out, or would I have to devise another plan to escape on my own? The thoughts drowned

my mind. What did they want me for? What did I have to offer them, and who were they really?

Deep down, I knew I wouldn't be able to get far if I did escape, and who knew if they would ever let me go. I couldn't help but think about my parents, and how worried they must be. Tears fell from my cheek as I realized how much I missed them. My heart sank as I thought back to how anxious I was to leave them, and now, I would do anything to be with them again.

My attention was broken when I heard a hard knock on the door. I squared my shoulders and dried my eyes. Gradually, the doorknob turned, and Alex slowly stepped in. My heart jolted in fear.

"Good Morning, Arri," Alex said in a smooth voice. He walked toward me so slowly he seemed almost immobile. "How do you feel?"

After last night, I didn't know who Alex was. I was nervous. I overheard him say he was a w-w-werewolf? Even my mind couldn't say it. Possibly he was crazy or confused. Either way, I didn't want to be near him in case he was one or the other. Alex started to close the gap between us. Instinctually, I backed up against the corner between the wall and my bed. Not the best move, but it was the only place I could see to get away from him. He saw my reaction, and stopped dead in his tracks. Taking a few steps back, he sat in the chair by the window. Calmly, he looked at me and waited for me to come around.

"Have you come to let me go?" I asked, my voice was helpless and faint, knowing the answer was no.

"No, I'm afraid not." Alex sighed.

"Then, can I call my parents?" I asked, "Please," I begged. "I know they're worried." I closed my eyes and waited for the rejection.

"I'm sorry. There is no safe way for you to contact them right now. The phone lines are too risky, and leaving would

be far too dangerous, but, I've sent word as to where you are."

"And I'm just supposed to take your word for it?" I sneered. Alex smiled.

I folded my arms and pushed myself further into the corner. "Arri? Maybe if I knew what you were thinking? I might be able to help you in your decision." My head swam as his voice hit me.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Alex," he answered. "Why are you afraid?"

"A stranger abducts me, and then, I hear you tell Michael you are a werewolf. What am I supposed to feel?" I was hoping at this point that I was wrong, and I was just delusional.

"I am," Alex replied without hesitation. "A werewolf, I mean."

"Awesome, not only am I stuck here as a prisoner, but my best friend is totally maniacal. Perfect. Is there anything else I should know? Are there wood sprites and trolls too?" I said sarcastically.

"You don't believe me?" I, on the other hand, scoffed at his words, but Alex looked amused. "I would have thought that after the attack at your house, you would be a little more understanding."

"The man who broke in didn't think he was more than a man, Alex, he knew he was human."

"Are you sure?" His words cut me off short. He's right, I didn't know for sure.

"Okay, just a hypothetical question, if I did believe you, could I go?"

"I'm not crazy, Arri; humans tend not to believe in things they don't understand." Alex smiled tentatively.

"Fine, you can believe anything you want to believe. Can I go now?" I asked.

"You're not going to make this easy are you?" He cocked his head to one side.

“Alright then,” Alex said nervously. Carefully, he stood and put his hands up in surrender. Taking a deep breath, he gave me a weak smile. “I’m sorry, Arri.”

His eyes looked scared, and I sensed his heart was afraid. Closing his eyes and hanging his head, he took one last breath. I thought he was going to turn to the door and leave. I didn’t like seeing the pain in his eyes, so I looked away. The hair on the back on my neck prickled, and I got goosebumps. Suddenly, I shuddered. Looking back at Alex the air got cold. It was like looking through the heat from a campfire as his body blurred and turned from a man into a large white wolf.

The sound of thunder and the lightning flashing in the background made the news even more frightening. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I stood there, stunned and in shock. I felt my face drain of blood as disbelief ran through me. Do I run, or do I dare move? I was scared to death. Situations like this don’t exist. My breathing got shallow, and I found it hard to breathe. I was hyperventilating. Slowly, I moved to the bed and sat down putting my face in my hands. Nervously, I laughed. Looking back up at Alex, he was turning back to himself. He tried to speak, but I raised my hand to stop him.

“For my own sanity...” I said through a quivering voice, but I couldn’t finish, leaving my mouth wide open. There were no words to explain what I just saw.

“I’m sorry Arri.” Alex was sitting back down on the chair.

All I could do was nod. There were no words that could be said, just the feeling of total betrayal and fear. What could one say to a werewolf; a man who changed into a dog, and a friend who had deceived me?

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I looked at him in shock.

“You weren’t ready. You had no clue you were in danger. Your parents and I wanted to keep you away from everything as long as we could. I was lucky enough to have Michael

keep you here 'til I was able to interrogate and dispose of the intruder.”

I sat and thought for a moment. I stared at him, looking for something I might have missed, like an elongated nose, or furry arms that would have indicated he was different, but there was nothing. He still looked like the same old Alex.

Alex sat there calmly, and unaffected by my reactions.

“Are you going to kill me?” I asked honestly.

“No,” he said, as a matter of fact.

“Are you in control when you turn?” I asked

Alex smiled at me.

“I won't hurt you, if that is what you are asking?”

“No, I...” I couldn't finish.

“Arri, your parents entrusted me with your life. If they thought I wasn't able to handle myself, you would be with someone else right now, but you're not, you're with me. It's not a matter of losing my temper or turning while I am angry. It is more... I only turn when I tell myself to. It's not involuntary, and we don't have the drive for the kill; we are still in full control of our actions.”

“How do you know my parents and where do they fit into all this?”

Alex let out a chuckle. “I'm afraid I know your parents better than you do. Who do you think assigned me to you as your guardian?”

“What is a guardian?”

“A guardian is like an overly trained bodyguard.”

“Why do I need one?”

“I'm afraid it's not my place to tell you.” Alex relaxed his rigid posture and slouched back in the chair. His softened demeanor and the carefree way he spoke calmed my perplexed and puzzled emotions.

I was starting to relax around him and found myself carefully moving to the foot of the bed just feet from him.

Alex being a werewolf was a shock in itself, but I was far more hurt by all the deception. The only friend I had was assigned to me by my parents.

“Are you ok, Arri?”

I didn't have the heart to tell him my real feelings,

“Oh nothing,” I lied, “I just remembered how hungry I was.” I lied again, trying to divert his attention.

Alex looked down at me. His face was sullen,

“Arri, exactly how much did you hear yesterday?”

I twiddled my thumbs in my lap. After a moment of joined silence, I glanced up to see Alex looking out the window. I think he was trying to hide his face.

“Well, Michael doesn't want me here; he made it very clear, and the only friend I have, lied to me.” I smiled, and let out a small laugh. I was more embarrassed than anything.

Alex was looking at me, and his face mimicked my feelings.

I thought for a moment then asked, “Were you ever really my friend, or was it all just an act?”

“I was a friend from the start, being your guardian was just a perk.” Alex smiled at me, and then, put out his hand.

“Are you ready to eat? I thought I heard you say you were hungry,” he said, changing the subject.

As I took his hand, I found myself examining it for freakishly long fingers, claws, and even fur. This was not unnoticed by Alex.

Shaking his head and letting out a good hardy laugh, he pulled me along behind him. Like a gentleman, he opened the door for me and allowed me to go first.

As soon as we cleared the doorway, I was thrown off by the size of my prison, or more like the castle, I was being held in. The cool, grey, stone walls lined the entire structure. The smell of damp air, rich wood, and citrus polish gently filled my nostrils. I was speechless. Caught in awe, Alex laughed at my expression.

As I took in the magnitude of my surroundings, I forgot to walk. I looked all around me. First, I glanced over the banister, looking down onto the room below. I could see the large castle-like doors Michael brought me through, and the rug I tried so hard to make a stand on. Then, I looked at the high ceilings with square, plaster moldings painted in ivory and inlaid in gold. Several different designs filled the open cavities. A large candelabrum hung in the center of the open space. The chandelier was breathtaking as its intricate design and delicate shapes and patterns filled every inch. Several hundred prisms hung around the enormous work of art; it was a crown to a king's throne. As I studied the walls, I noticed several tastefully placed works of art. Some were modern, and some were old. The paintings basked in individual lighted illumination. Its majestic grandeur took my breath away.

Large windows divided the walls, making the already grand mansion feel even more massive. Enormous red, thick-velvet curtains covered them. The only light in the room danced playfully from the hanging candelabrum. The flickering reflections from the lit sconces bounced off the smooth polished hardwood floors, and after a minute or two, I became acquainted with my surroundings.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, cool huh?" Alex laughed, "Michael had this place brought over from Europe. Apparently, it was his parents."

Impatiently, he started to drag me down the hall. A simple, but detailed banister divided me from the floors below. A small, engraved coat of arms lined the top and bottom of each dowel.

Allowing Alex to guide me toward a grand staircase, I felt like I belonged in, "My Fair Lady." A thin, oriental rug, carpeted the large staircases on each side of the room. They were fabulous, like those you would see in the movies. Alex walked me down one. Stunned at the amplitude of the

foyer, we quickly walked through the palace-like room and into a hallway.

The mansion seemed deserted. Eventually, we found the kitchen. Industrial-like, it looked like one of the kitchens I had seen on TV. Several stainless-steel cupboards lined the walls with two large islands in the center of the room. Granite countertops sparkled in the light from the many inset can-lights lining the ceiling. It was a little odd to see a castle that kept the old but elegant charm with a kitchen that looked like it was taken right out of Modern Homes. As soon as I walked in, I stopped in my tracks.

“Who needs a kitchen this size?” I said sarcastically.

Alex laughed. “Well, if you entertain as many people as Michael does, you need a large kitchen. Actually, during his meetings with dignitaries, royalty, and nobility, this place gets really crowded.”

I found that hard to believe. How a place this size could seem small was beyond me. We walked up to a bar and sat down. I was feeling a little out of sorts when a man came up from behind me.

“May I take your order?”

I flinched at the sound of his voice. He was well-spoken, but I couldn’t place his accent.

“Sorry?” I asked.

Obviously finding my reaction humorous, Alex took the pleasure of ordering for me.

“Yes, the lady will have spaghetti topped with parmesan cheese and garlic bread. For dessert, she will have the raspberry-wine cheesecake. I will have the same, but instead of the cheesecake, I will have an angel food cake with extra cream.”

I looked at Alex. He knew me well, but after the chef left to prepare our meals, I scolded him.

“It’s not like we are ordering at a restaurant, Alex. This is someone’s home. I would have settled for a p,b,&j.”



Alex laughed! “Michael would have my neck if I allowed you to order a sandwich when he has a retained chef.

I was so hungry. The chef brought my food, and the savory taste of homemade spaghetti sauce made my mouth water. The food was great. It topped any of the gourmet meals my parents and I had. Finally, when I had eaten enough to feed fifty people, Alex and I left the kitchen feeling full and a little pot-bellieish.

Even now, he was still amazed at how much I could eat. We slowly sauntered toward the front door. As he laughed and poked fun at me, we walked the grounds.

The next few days got better. I was no longer locked in my room. I never did see Michael again. I would hear his voice as he spoke to Alex and some of the staff, but never the physical Michael. Alex would come and greet me every morning, and then, we would take our daily walk around the grounds. I learned how different we were. He told me all about his pack, and who he was. He was born a wolf cub, and he turned into a human for the first time when he was weaned. Not all cubs turned into werewolves, only a selected few inherited the werewolf gene.

Alex said, “My mom and dad were two of the last twelve remaining werewolves. After Nicholas ordered them dead, they fled, and I was born here. Out of all the litters my mother had in two-hundred years, I was the first to turn. Jonathan and I are not from the same litter, but we were the first two making our bond stronger. I am the pack leader, and Jonathan is second-in-command, my beta.”

My mind wandered as he continued to fill me with random information. Nicholas had ordered the death of an entire species. He had ordered my death as well.

This bit of information was not comforting. I remembered the psychopath that attacked me almost a week ago said that Nicholas would get me. My thoughts were haunted by his cold, callous words.

To keep me away from thinking of my circumstances, Alex would tell me a new story every day. In the meantime, we continued to talk, watch movies, and hang out. Although Alex and I were renewing our friendship, I was still upset with Michael for keeping me here.

When Alex wasn't around, I ate alone and stayed to myself. Time passed slowly, and I realized that I missed the strict and structured life my parents had provided for me. With that thought, I found that I cried myself to sleep several nights. I missed my parents, but mainly, I hoped that eventually, I would understand the reason for my imprisonment.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I hung my head upside down over the side of the bed and watched the clouds roll by as I waited for Alex. Over the last couple of weeks, he came and kept me company, but when I asked him questions, he delicately avoided them. I was getting light-headed when a knock at the door startled me.

“Come in,” I said, trying to sit up and regain my balance. My head flushed, and I planted my hands on the bed to steady myself.

“Are you ok?” Alex asked, offering his assistance. Today, his demeanor was different. Instead of his confident and assured attitude, he was nervous.

“Is something on your mind?” I asked. His distressed look worried me. My heart sunk, “Alex,” I prodded, “tell me, what is it?” My smile vanished, and my shoulders fell.

“It’s a good thing you are sitting down,” he joked with a light chuckle, then took a deep breath. I stared at him waiting to be told the worst news. “Michael has asked you to dinner tonight.” He stopped for only a moment to take a breath.

“Is that all?” I interrupted, and let out a small laugh. “I thought it was something serious.” My words were cut off when Alex snapped at me.

“Arri, focus! It is serious, but I need you to stop and listen until I finish, completely. Okay?”

I agreed, but Alex snapped again.

“A simple nod will do.”

I nodded; my eyes wide with shock.

“Here goes nothing,” he said, “Michael approached me yesterday. He’s under the impression you are upset with him. I guess I could see where that would come from, but I am afraid your anger is misplaced.” As Alex spoke, I nodded my head in agreement until the last part. Then, I cocked my head to one side.

“Misplaced, how so?” I asked. Alex looked out the window.

“Michael didn’t kidnap you.” Alex looked at me. I felt his heart twinge as he waited for my response.

“I beg your pardon. How can you be serious? I was there when he picked me up and brought me here. He is the reason I am still a prisoner. How can you claim it wasn’t him?”

My voice rose, and fear was turning into a small bit of anger. I furrowed my eyebrows and folded my arms. Alex let me finish and then, slowly raised his head.

“Do you remember that night?”

I frowned. The hair comb and the music box my parents gave me were lost and gone. I didn’t own much, but what I did, I treasured with all my heart. My eyes filled with tears, as I remembered the things I loved being destroyed by a monster.

“Yes, I remember.” I hung my head, and a single tear fell from my cheek and landed on my charcoal slacks. My pink blouse caught the next few that fell. My heart sunk further as I felt Alex’s pain.

“After I changed back into my human form, and when the police asked how you were, a man said he would take you.”

“You mean Michael? Before he told me to come like I was a dog.” Alex glowered at me, and then looked at me with impatience.

I searched the back of my mind for the detail that Alex insisted that I missed.

“Yes, but,” Alex started.

“No, Alex. There is no but. I remember perfectly, Alex. I was there. Have you forgotten?”

Alex took a breath as he tried to control his temper. I could feel his anger rising, and his desperate attempt to keep it under control.

“No! I haven’t forgotten.” Alex said, raising his voice. “I was the one who told Michael to take you. Michael was only there because I asked him to be!” Alex was now yelling, and the more he shouted, the quicker he paced the floor and spoke through his teeth.

“Wait, what?” My belated realization shocked me.

“Arri,”

I raised my hand to stop him. “It was you? This whole time, you’ve been acting like a friend, to comfort me, when you were behind it all?” Then it hit me, “Michael never wanted me here.” My voice quivered, and my chest hurt. I buried my face in my hands and shook my head.

“Yes, but it’s not that simple,” Alex stated.

“You lied to me, again?” I yelled, as I folded my arms and glared at Alex. “You are my best friend. I trusted you.” Although he looked regretful, it still didn’t change the fact that he hurt me, twice, and both times, he betrayed my trust. “I never want to see you again,” I said, looking him straight in the eyes.

Alex just sat there and stared at me. His mouth wide open, and his eyes confused and hurt.

“Is everything you told me a lie?” I waited for a response, but Alex said nothing. “Wow,” I said, closing my eyes and shaking my head. “Then, I have no reason to stay.” I

don't know what was stronger, the pain, or the anger and frustration.

I walked to the closet and picked up a small duffel bag. Walking to the dresser, I opened the drawers and started to place a few things in the bag.

"Arri?" I heard Alex's voice, but I paid no attention.

I walked into the restroom and grabbed a few things. Looking around, I made one final sweep of the room.

"Arri!" Alex's voice was growing louder. "Let's talk," he said. "Where do you think you are going?" He placed his hand on my shoulder and spun me around to face him.

"Home!" I yelled. My voice cracked, and my eyes filled with tears. Alex's eyes were full of pain and disappointment. He reached out and grabbed my hands.

"Arri wait, please be reasonable. Let's just sit down and talk about this, besides, you are in the middle of nowhere, you don't even know your way home." His words were there, but I heard nothing.

I pulled the duffel bag up onto my shoulder and took a few steps away from him. "I don't know where home is, but I will find it without you." I was actually sad to leave. I found a part of me wanting to stay. Yanking my hands from his, I looked around; I made a mental snapshot, then turned, and left. As I cleared the door, Michael leaned casually against the wall. His expression was emotionless, then as if by magic, his lips turned into a sweet, amused smile. I waited for him to stop me, but instead, he pushed off the wall, stood straight, and bowed. As I passed him, guilt washed over me. I couldn't help but slowly smile as I turned to him.

"I'm sorry for the way I've acted. Thank you for everything. I don't believe I will be taking up anymore of your time or space."

I tried to keep my emotions at bay, but my bottom lip started to quiver. I knew it wasn't his fault. Swallowing hard, I turned and continued down the open hall. Behind

me, I heard Alex yell, his roar bouncing off the ceiling and open cavern below.

“Aggh, Arri, wait! Dog-gone-it, Michael. Why did you let her go?” Alex chastised Michael. When I got to the end of the railing, I turned to see Michael raise his arm, and hold Alex back as he watched me go.

“Let her go. I promise that no harm will come to her.” Michael’s voice was calm, smooth and confident.

“Michael,” Alex’s voice grew angry.

I heard Michael’s voice behind me as I walked down the stairs. “You know, she might have been a little more understanding if you had told her the truth. If she knew the attackers were out to kill her, she would have been more willing to stay. You underestimated her.”

I stared at the giant castle doors. As they towered over me, I felt small and insignificant. My fingers reached out to touch the door handle, and then, just as the cold and uninviting metal brushed my fingers, I yanked my hand back.

The truth was I didn’t know if I really wanted to go. Is this what I wanted, to leave safety for freedom? A part of me knew what Michael said was right; the man in the window would have most likely killed me, or worse. I shuddered at the thought of what he might have had in store for me.

The longer I stood there, the more my chest tightened. I snaked my arms around my waist and hugged myself. I stood there trembling. Somewhere in the distance above me, I could hear Alex and Michael still discussing my, not so graceful, exit.

Their voices drowned out as I took a few reassuring breaths. I thought of everything that I have gone through in the last few months. Now more than ever, I wished I had my mom here to be my voice of reason. She was always the one I went to for advice, a simple chat, and even silent comfort. Usually, I could see her sweet smile as she laughed at my naïve, childish fantasies. I could hear her voice as she

told me I was acting foolish, or to follow my heart and see where it leads. Somehow, tonight, her words didn't tell me anything. Her encouraging smile just offered me comfort, as it so often did.

"Where are you going?" Michael's voice snatched me from my hypnotizing thoughts. I let out a surprised shriek as my stomach jumped.

Michael stood just feet from me. His green, glittering eyes looked at me with understanding and concern. My heart gave a jolt, I shook my head.

"Nowhere, I guess. Where ever my feet lead me." It was then that I looked around and realized that somehow, through all my thoughts and thinking, I had managed to not only make it out of the front door, but I had also made it to the tree line just outside the fenced yard. I looked at him, but he didn't look back. Michael made no effort to move. I turned and walked the other way, but he stepped in front of me.

"I am not letting you leave until you hear me out," he smiled. "Please."

Tears ran down my face, and I was only holding it together by a thread. I turned, but yet again, Michael blocked my way. I took a deep breath, ready to yell, but instead, unexpectedly, I fell into him. I knew I didn't have a chance at fighting him, nor did I really want to. Michael was not the culprit. Alex was. My body trembled as I cried and Michael's supportive and gentle arms held me softly. I knew I was childish by running and looked foolish for crying, but I felt I had no other choice. Michael kissed the top of my head.

"Hey, it's ok." He ran his hand through my hair and pulled it away from my face. "Why are you crying?" His words were kind and soft. They were comforting. I picked my head up off his chest and looked at the trees and endless forest surrounding me.



"I guess there is nowhere to go, is there?" I asked, watching his wavy, brown hair fall into his face as he looked down at me. "I don't have a chance, do I?" He moved his hands to grab mine.

"My dear Arri, my meeting you was fortuitous, but my feelings are not. If you are willing, I desire you to stay as my personal guest." I could feel his gaze penetrate my very soul.

"After the last few weeks, how could I trust either of you?" It hurt to look at him.

"Alex has lost your trust, and I have yet the chance to earn it. I promise that you will be treated with dignity and respect. I don't know if you will learn to fully trust either of us, but I welcome the challenge." We sat in silence for what seemed like a lifetime. We held each other's gaze. I thought about what I wanted. Did I want to stay? If I went home, what would I go back to? An Empty life? A boring job?

"The rest of my staff will be here tomorrow," he continued, "and I would be furious if anything happened to you." I looked into Michael's eyes. I felt a deep connection. My heart pounded, and I stared at him, I tried to pull myself away, but there was something about him that made me want him more. I wanted to be close to him, feel his skin against mine. Whether it was for comfort from feeling alone, or for other reasons, the feeling still engulfed me. He grabbed my hands as if he read my thoughts. I tried to break free so I could gather myself, but Michael wouldn't let go.

"Do I have a choice or is the offer false?" My breathing quivered as I waited for the answer. Michael thought for a moment.

"Yes, you have a choice. I will be more than thrilled if you'd stay, but if your desire is to leave, then I will make the arrangements to ensure your safety." I searched his eyes to see if he was lying.

Suddenly, his lips turned into a mischievous smirk, and his eyes looked curious. Cautiously, he leaned in. My

stomach had butterflies, and I tried to control my rapid heartbeat. He put his hand through my hair, stepping in closer and closer. I could feel his breath against my face, and his body against mine. With one hand behind my neck and the other on my waist, he pulled me flush against him. I closed my eyes.

My hands trembled and my heart stuttered. His breath teased my lips, but just as I felt the warmth of his skin and the touch of his lips, he pulled back, leaving me caught in the moment. My eyes snapped open to see why he stopped, and that's when I saw him staring behind me in surprise. I swung around expecting to see someone or something, but all I saw was Alex, staring at the two of us in complete shock.

"Alex?" Michael started to say, but Alex put up his hand to stop him.

"I'm not interested in your story Michael, I came to see if you found Arri, and I see you have." He turned and stalked away. His figure changed from man to wolf, and he was gone. I stared off into the distance.

"What just happened?" I asked Michael. He grabbed my hand, and we started to walk toward the house. I yanked away, "What just happened?" I repeated. Michael calmly turned to me and sighed.

"Alex just realized why I wanted you to stay." He took a deep breath, "Arri, I am not like you. There are several scary things about me that you may not want to know. Alex knows who I am." I looked at Michael's vibrant green eyes.

"What would scare me?" I tried to ask, but I was interrupted when Michael picked me up, cradling me in his arms, and started to run to the house.

"I need to find Alex," he said, "when I come back, will you be here?"

I didn't answer; I didn't know myself.

"I want you to stay," he said, as he put me down on the lawn. "I need you to stay," he said, then leaned over ever so

gently, and kissed me on the cheek. His lips were perfect. They were warm and soft. I vowed to myself, I would never wash my face again.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



It felt like hours as I sat on the bed waiting for Michael. Pacing the room in hopes it would ease my tension, I heard a soft knock on the door.

“My apologies for your wait. Alex proved to be harder to track than I had expected.” Taking my hand and leading me to the bed, my foot hit the unpacked suitcase still sitting next to the door. “You haven’t unpacked?” The disappointment was beyond visible in his eyes, it was almost tangible. The sound of his breath as it caught, and the stiffness of his gait as he walked next to me screamed with unease.

“No.” My voice caught as I tried to think of a way to tell him how I felt without hurting him.

“Do you require assistance?” His voice was light, but the look in his eyes showed he wasn’t fooled. He knew.

“It’s not that, I just don’t feel I belong here.” I plopped down on the bed and stared up at him as but Michael stiffened. “I am a peasant in your world of royalty and castles.” I tried to explain. “You are obviously someone of importance, and I am, a nobody. Maybe if I left, then things could go back to normal, me to my work, and you to your lavish parties.” I laughed, but Michael never took his eyes off of me as he sat down.

“If it pleases, maybe explanations are necessary, thereafter, if you so choose to leave, then so be it.”

Looking into his eyes, I saw his honesty.

"Thanks, but what about Alex? He's really not happy."

Michael smiled, "Let me deal with my friend. Our arguing needn't upset you."

"I don't want to make you guys fight," I said, letting myself fall back on the bed.

"We fight over you for different reasons." Michael said. Curiosity flashed in his eyes.

"What reasons?"

"Well, as your guardian, Alex is bound to you. His feelings for you are purely platonic."

"What do you mean bound?"

He smiled at me. "I forget. There is much for you to learn." He took my left hand and pointed to two tiny and almost invisible scars on my wrist.

"I've had them from birth."

His thumb made tiny circles around the marks, and his warm and comforting touch relaxed me. "My mom said it was from an IV when I was an infant." Tracing his fingers over the two tiny pin dots, he turned back to me.

"These marks are not just any marks. They are the marking of a werewolf." His stare was intense. He raised his eyebrows and smirked. In all reality, it was a little heart clenching to think of. "They were put there by Alex. When your father hired him, he needed the two of you to be bound. Alex bit your wrist for a taste of your blood, and to seal the binding. When you are in trouble, real trouble, Alex can feel it." Michael placed my hand back on the bed then interlaced his fingers with mine.

"Can he feel everything I feel?" I asked through a quivered breath, as Michael's touch sent a tingly sensation up my arm. Michael looked amused at my reaction to his touch. It was odd really. Every time he was near, and every time he touched me, it felt like the air around us was charged.

"No, just fear. He will forever be bound to you unless you, or your father, release him."

“How do you know all this?”

“Alex and I have been friends for a long time. I hadn’t realized Alex was so good at keeping secrets.” Michael looked at me and had an ear to ear smile. “But alas, I am happy to finally meet you.”

“Ok, so Alex is bound to me by some mystical blood thingy. What about you, what’s your reason?”

Michael turned and looked straight ahead. Embarrassed as he blushed, a slight shade of pink touched his ears.

I smiled to myself. Finally, we were even, well, sort of.

“Well I, I...,” He took his hand from mine and rubbed his face. Michael seemed to be quite nervous. “Well, I adore you,” he said quickly. “Alex feels that I am not properly suited for you; hence our quarrel.” Michael looked away.

“Does he think I am below you?” I said in a slight voice.

“No!” Michael stated. “The other way around. He thinks that with my past, and with who I am, you are suited for someone better than me.”

“How could anyone get better than you?” Even though I barely whispered, Michael heard. Without saying anything, he grabbed my hand and kissed it twice.

“Once, for the kind words, and once, for how I feel.” Sitting up, Michael looked at me. “Your suitcase is by the door. I’m afraid I have some neglected business to attend, but I will see you in the morning.”

I sat at the edge of the bed. Thinking back, when I left earlier, the room was messy and disheveled, but now, it was spotless. My pajamas were folded on the bed. The sheets were changed, and my clothes were pressed and hung in the closet. It was as if I had never left. It seemed Michael had never planned on letting me go. In reality, I don’t think I really had a choice.

Lying back, staring at the canopy above me, I realized how exhausted I was. I hadn’t done anything yet. Still, I felt tired. All my energy had been depleted, and it felt like

my mind and body was begging to rest. My eyes started to close. I felt relaxed, and the next thing I knew, I was consumed by darkness.

Stretching my arms and legs, I woke up. A feeling of uneasiness washed over me. Sitting up, I squinted in the darkness. Looking around, I realized I was in my old house sitting on my comfy bed. There was no sign of a break-in or an attack. The window was as it was before, stable and undisturbed. The bright, full moon shone beckoning rays of light through the thin gap in the curtains. The clock on my dresser said two o'clock AM.

Were the last few weeks nothing more than a silly nightmare? I reached over to the lamp on my nightstand and switched it on.

My heart stopped, and my breath stilled. A man with white hair sat in the chair next to the bed. His well-fitted, pristine, white Gucci suit shone in the light giving him an illusion of glowing. His translucent skin looked frail and brittle. I could see his veins move under his skin as he rapped his fingers on the arm of the chair. But as the cold, icy air bit into my skin, I knew he was far from weak and fragile.

The smell of stale sweat and the deep undertone of age assaulted my nose causing my breath to halt.

Cautiously, I readjusted my position, readying myself to run, but the man began to speak.

"I'd have to admit, you have proved to be much harder to kill than I had thought. You have a skill for self-preservation, or maybe, it is just plain dumb luck." His voice was raspy and deep, but it wasn't the sound of his voice that told me he was full of malice. It was the cold, hard, and soulless look in his eyes.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Oh my sweet, you know who I am, and I would think it is obvious. I mean to kill you," he said, with an evil sneer. It was then that I realized it was Nicholas.

“Why, why me?” I asked as I slipped my foot from under the covers placing it on the hard wooden floor. The sudden coldness gave me chills.

“Oh, my sweet.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood straight on end, and shivers ran down my spine, as he repeated the pet name he gave me. “It is because of your existence I seek your death. I can’t allow you to threaten what I have made,” he scoffed.

The man spoke in riddles. As I struggled to keep eye contact, not showing the fear that pooled within me, I squared my shoulders, lowering my other foot to the floor.

“What makes you think you’ll win?” I asked, as I tried to appear defiant, which was ineffective. The thunder of my rising fear and the fact that my voice quivered kind of gave me away with neon lights.

The man’s laugh broke the eerie silence. “Oh, I’ll win, and your death will seal my fate.”

Something happened in that moment that my fear fled, and courage stamped its claim on my heart.

Shaking his head, the man stood in his deceptively, feeble form, and rose to his feet. Watching his movements, I stood too at the side of the bed. Mentally, I calculated the distance between me and the door, but it was useless. As my heart rate doubled, I narrowed my eyes and attempted to stand my ground.

“You’ll never win,” my outward appearance may show courage, but the whimper in my voice gave me away. “You’ve already tried and lost, can’t you just leave me alone?” I knew it was a lost cause when the feral look in his eyes deepened.

“Careful my sweet, I have been waiting a long, long time to kill you. You may meet your fate before time, and I was hoping to show you off first.”

“Don’t call me your sweet.” My skin prickled at the use of his pet name.



“Oh, but you are my sweet. There will be nothing sweeter than the vision of your tormented face as I watch your demise.”

Although the man briefly broke eye contact as he smoothed his hands over his suit, I was never out of his sight. The mocking smile on his lips was enough of a tip. He was hoping I'd run. The thought was tempting enough, but as I readjusted my footing, his eyes snapped back up at me, and a bit of excitement flashed over his features before he hid it behind his casual façade.

“That's great, now he's threatening me,” I whispered, as I wrapped my arms around me trying to hide from the biting air that scraped against my skin.

The man's eyes burned with unleashed anger as the tarnished lines in his face hardened. Turning his head from side to side he cracked his neck, his wavering control slipped for a second, before he forcibly calmed himself.

“My sweet, you're so young and innocent. You ought to know by now the difference between a threat, and a promise. That... was a promise.”

“What do you want?” My voice broke as the air in my lungs simply ceased.

“I've already told you, your death.”

“No,”

With a slick smile, Nicholas closed the gap between us and ran a finger down my cheek. Then leaning forward, he moved his hand to squeeze my neck as he whispered in my ear.

“But can you live with the consequences?” his words hit me like a freight train.

Sitting up, panting in a cold sweat, the feeling of a promised death still spun in my head. As the smell of bar soap and cologne waffled through the air, I realized I was back at Michael's.

Suddenly, a voice came from beside me.

“Arri, are you well?” Michael asked. My heart started as my adrenalin raced once again. And then, my eyes made contact with Michael’s sweet face. As if he sensed my panic, Michael carefully placed his arm around me and pulled me in slowly for a reassuring embrace.

“Yeah,” I stuttered, “I’m fine, I think. How long was I out?”

Michael regarded me with a concerned look. “Only a few hours?”

I absently touched my neck as the feel of Nicholas’s hands still haunted my skin. “It was just another nightmare.” I rested my head against Michael’s shoulder, tears started to fall down my face. This nightmare was no ordinary nightmare. It was a warning. “This one felt so real, like I could actually feel his touch, smell his presence. How can I sense his desire to kill me, without him being here?” I whispered.

I looked up to see Alex leaning against the open door. Although he had a calm and emotionless exterior, I could feel his emotions were tight with concern.

“What is it?” he asked.

He and Michael shared a silent conversation as he pushed off the doorframe with casual easiness. Walking toward me, he sat at the foot of the bed. I sat up, and with great reluctance, Michael’s grip loosened, slightly. Fidgeting with the blanket beneath me, I pulled up a corner and twisted it in my hands.

“It was the white-haired man that’s been haunting my dreams for months. I think it was Nicholas.” My body gave an involuntary shiver. “Usually it is just the slight sight of him or his creepy laugh, but this time he was threatening to kill me. I know they are just nightmares, but wow.” I shook my head then folded my arms around me. “I guess that is why they are called nightmares and not warm and fluffy’s.” I felt anything but relaxed. In fact, the lack of emotions would be a plus right now. The fear, horror, and overall nervousness I felt right now was enough to make me go insane.

“You shan’t worry. You’re safe with us.” Michael’s embrace was tight but consoling.

“I feel like such a child,” I said, looking back and forth between the two of them. “A simple nightmare sending me into tears.” Letting my head fall back onto Michael’s chest, I saw Michael and Alex exchange a worrisome glance.

“Nightmares would scare even the toughest of men.” Alex’s said, but I knew he was lying. I know it was just a dream, but it still felt like the stench of him clung to me. Trying to shake off the unease that settled over me like a wet cloak, I gently shrugged out of Michael’s arms.

Michael grabbed my hand and brought me back to sitting next to him. “Are you okay?” His concern was etched in his face as his eyes perused me with warmth and tenderness.

“Yeah, it just feels like I’m in way over my head.” I shuttered as Nicholas’s last words echoed in my mind, ‘but can you live with the consequences?’ “I’ll be fine. I just need to shower and rinse this nightmare off.” With a reassuring squeeze, Michael let go of my hand.

Grabbing my clothes, I headed to the bathroom. I leaned against the wall and sank to the ground. Cradling my knees, I allowed myself to wallow. It wasn’t long before I heard Michael’s and Alex’s continued conversation.

“What do you think? Are they connected?” Alex asked in a hushed tone.

“It’s unlikely. No one carries the power of foresight, even telepathy. The ancient powers were lost many millenniums ago, but her description sounds right. Maybe she has seen him before, maybe in passing?”

“I doubt it; besides do you think he would have let her just walk away if he had?” There was a long pause as the two of them thought. Then with great reluctance in his voice, Alex broke the tense silence. “You seem very protective of her? Have you decided to make her your mate?”

“And how would this matter concern you?”

“It doesn’t, but if you were to, then, you may want to tell her. She has the right to know. She is bound to find out eventually, and I think it would be better if she found out from you. I speak from experience.” Then, Alex took the conversation down a new path, “Your family will be here tomorrow, I think they will find it peculiar, and a little odd, to have her here. Besides, being involved will raise some questions.”

“Are you challenging me? You may be her guardian, but you are in my house and on my land. You would be wise to watch your place, or I shall have to put you in it.” Michael’s voice drowned into a growl.

“My apologies milord. I’m not trying to challenge your position. I am speaking on behalf of Arri, and I know her. She is human, and it has been a while, my lord.” There was silence. Then, the bedroom door shut with a loud clang.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



An hour later after rinsing and getting dressed, I cracked the door to let the steam out.

Putting on the last few touches of make-up, I looked to the door and saw Michael staring back at me. His perfectly toned body shadowing the entrance suggested he has been there for a while. He was casually leaning against the doorway with his arms folded in front of him displaying the rippled muscle under his nicely fit, thin t-shirt.

“Are you ready?” His voice was seductive.

“For?” I questioned.

“I did promise thee an explanation.” He shoved himself off the door frame. Carefully reaching out, he tucked in the tag of my shirt. His touch gave me butterflies. Every time he was in the vicinity I knew it, the hair on my arms stood up, and my heart danced the rumba.

Silence filled the hallway, as we walked to the garage. All I could hear was the padding of my feet on the shiny and polished wooden floors.

Opening an ordinary looking door, Michael flipped on the lights. There were rows and rows of cars of every shape and size. Cars, from a Model T to a Rolls Royce, filled the garage. Michael, looking rather pleased, smiled and gestured for me to pass. The smell of oil, gas, and rubber permeated the room.

“So?” he asked, sounding proud of his collection.

“This is definitely... something.” Passing through them, I allowed my eyes to land on my old SUV.

I turned to look at Michael as a smug smile lit his face.

It was polished and looked better than it had when I got it from the dealership. Smiling from ear to ear, Michael jingled the keys in his hand. Reaching for the keys, Michael playfully pulled them out of reach.

“Really?” I asked in a teasing voice.

“I’ll drive. I’ve seen you in action, and I fear for the pedestrians on the sidewalk,” he badgered.

“Hey, not fair! I will have you know; I am a great driver.” I said, as I grudgingly crawled into the passenger seat. Michael smirked and started the engine. It sounded different, quieter, and smoother.

“I had the engine redone.” Turning the car off, he gracefully hopped down, then wandered his way to my side.

“We will not be taking this. If we are going to town, it will be in style, my style,” he said. He picked me up; then smoothly placed me in a sleek and stylish silver and red car. My knowledge of cars consisted of three kinds: Cars, SUV’s, and trucks, and I’m pretty sure they all have four black wheels. I was usually oblivious about vehicles, but this one I knew. The name on the car confirmed it.

“A Mercedes-Benz?” I asked. I was afraid to touch the interior. Carefully, I placed my hands on my lap keeping them to myself.

“A Mercedes-Benz AMG Vision Gran Turismo,” he corrected. “I arranged and supervised it’s build based off a concept. It’s one of my crowning joys. I’ve made some improvements since then.” Climbing into the driver side, he started the engine. The car rumbled everything around us as it roared into action. It hummed and purred. Michael closed his eyes and listened to the engine’s melodic sound.

Pressing a black button in the glove box, the garage

door opened. The sound of the engine masked the sound of the door. Slowly pulling out of the driveway and onto the curved road in front of the castle, he revved the engine and smiled.

“Ready?” he asked.

Smiling, but internally jumping out of my skin, I nodded, and he slammed on the gas. We tore out of the drive onto the gravel road. Rocks spit and flew in every direction. I didn’t think these cars were made for off-road, but it seemed to handle just fine. Following the winding road, and weaving in and out of the trees, my body seemed to relax against the seat as the rhythmic hum of the engine pulsed through me. Michael was definitely an experienced driver. We drove for about two hours or so at top speed when we finally met the paved road. Entering the freeway, Michael made no attempt to slow down. He kept the odometer steady.

Richfield was not the largest city, but it definitely had its charm. Several brick buildings lined Main Street and the small-town-look complimented the older houses. I could feel the eyes of the town’s people staring at the high-profile car. Passing through town to my old home in Elsinore, my heart sunk and my breath quivered. The closer we got to the house, the more I feared what I would see. My heart was still raw from the last time I was here. I didn’t know what to expect. We turned the corner, and a dilapidated resemblance of my home came into view.

“I remembered leaving it a little less... eerie.” My voice failed me, and it came out in a whisper. Michael slowed down but did not stop. I could feel sympathy and anger developing behind the placid and calm exterior Michael portrayed.

“After you were secure in my home, Alex and I came back to salvage what was left. Apparently, the men assigned to retrieve you took everything they thought would lead them to you. The house was left in ruins. There was not

much left to reclaim.” He turned the corner and headed to the convenience store less than two blocks away. His voice was heavy, and I could sense his empathy.

Michael pulled into the gas station parking lot and stopped. “Do you know why they are after you?”

“No. I thought it was just a random break-in.”

“Unfortunately, it was not a random break-in. It was planned. Their goal was to find and retrieve you. Apparently, you are far more valuable than you thought.” Michael smiled, turned, and got out of the car. “Here, get yourself a drink.” Handing me some money, I went into the store. I walked in and got my drink as I always did, on autopilot. My mind was elsewhere, thinking of why anyone would go through all this trouble for me? It’s not like I had enough for a ransom, or knew anything of any value. As I left, I notice that everyone was staring at me.

When I got back into the car, I placed my drink in the holder and folded my arms in front of me.

“Is there anything else I should know?”

“Yes, I have something else to show you. Do you feel up to it?”

I nodded and looked down at the carpet. We rode back to Richfield in silence.

“Was anything recovered?” I asked.

“Just one thing. We retrieved it after the...” His voice broke off as he pulled in front of the diner. Looking regretful and penitent, Michael handed me a newspaper. The date was three days ago. The front page jumped out at me as I saw a picture of a woman blanketed by a sheet while two men held the stretcher as they walked from the credit union doors. Everything was hidden except her arm and brown hair. Techno-colored bruises covered her thin, fragile arm, but what caught my attention was the thin almost unnoticeable cut that ran down the outside of her arm. Then, as if things couldn’t get any worse, my heart clenched as my



eyes saw a small pearl comb unnaturally placed in her right hand. It was evident that she did not have it before the incident. The comb was cut from buffalo bone with ten little pearls set with a blue abalone daisy placed in the center. I knew this, because it was mine. It was a sweet-sixteen gift given to me by my parents along with a gold ring with two diamonds in the middle of two hearts. Tears streaked my cheeks while I looked at the horrifying sight. I looked up at Michael, but he had already read my face.

“Maggie Cartmen lies beneath that sheet.” With a gentle stroke, he swiped a tear off my cheek. His hand fell to my lap and grabbed my trembling and unsteady hand.

“Maggie? From the bank?” My heart stopped.

“There is one more thing.” Michael looked down, and then, reached in his pocket. Producing a piece of paper that had been wadded, torn, then taped together, was clenched in his hand. “I have a few friends on the squad, and this was found in her pocket. No one has seen it except Alex and me. Ryan saw that it was addressed to you and gave it to Alex. Alex and I were in disagreement whether or not you should see this, but I didn’t want you to be misled. I want you to understand why it is you need to stay in my home. You are not safe out here.”

Shaking his head, he reluctantly placed the piece of worn paper on my lap. I picked it up. The paper was thick and coarse. A wax coat of arms seal once sealed the letter. A shield with a Viking helmet set slightly askew and a bear hovering above it. The writing looked familiar, and the script was noticeably meant to be. It was the same writing as the card I received with the flowers before moving here. I opened the letter and read.

Arri,

You have eluded me thus far, but I have yet to give up. You are close, and I can taste it. Your existence here was not meant to last, and already you have lived longer than I feel necessary. I will have you, and I will stop at nothing. Let this be my proof.

Nicholas

I froze in terror with the letter still stuck in my hands.

“Why?” My mind raced as I tried to sort it all out. Why would anyone want to kill me? I was a nobody, an insignificant person that meant nothing to anyone. Letting the letter fall to my lap, I stared out of the window. There were no words to describe how I felt. I wanted to crawl in a hole and cry.

“I’m afraid only your father can answer that. Alex and I are only here to protect you.” I looked into Michael’s eyes, and I could feel his sorrow and regret. He knew I was not prepared to handle any of this. Trying to help, Michael smiled.

“Are you hungry?” His voice was soft. I shook my head.

“No, just take me home,” I said, through sob-filled words.

“Do you want to come home with me?”

“Yes, I think it’s the only home I have,” I said, as I folded my arms in front of me. Recoiling, I sunk into the seat of the car, and pulled my knees up to my chest. Michael pulled out of the parking lot, and we sped off toward home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



As we pulled into the driveway, my vulnerable and exposed heart froze in fear with the thought that someone was trying to kill me. I was glad to see the castle as it came into view, but my heart hiccuped when my eyes landed on a young dark-headed man standing at the front door.

“*Quid est hoc?*” Michael’s voice was frustrated. I had no idea what he said, but his fidgeting and nervous pacing showed he was afraid as well as annoyed as we approached the house.

The unexpected visitor was tall with short-spiky hair and a black, floor-length, hooded cape with a red-satin lining. His fingers were loosely intertwined and placed gently in front of him. The bottoms of his jeans were soaked from the snow. You could see the confusion in his eyes when he saw me. Cocking his head slightly, he followed us to the garage. Before the car was in park, with a swift movement, the man opened the door and offered to assist me while I exited the vehicle. Cautiously, I took his hand and allowed him to gently pull me up. His grip was gentle, but his eyes were dark and hard. The grim lining of his jaw clenched, and I could see his physical restraint. A small voice in the back of my mind warned me to let go and step away, but the anger and frustration directed at me knotted my stomach and froze me. It was obvious he did not like me.

Michael got out of the car and quickly ran to my side.

"I thought that outside food was..." His Italian accented words broke off as Michael addressed the visitor.

"Ransom?" Michael's deep grave voice was cautionary and coated in ice. "May we continue our meeting inside?"

"Yes, my lord," Ransom said. He offered Michael a gracious bow as he forcibly let go of my hand and took a cautionary step back allowing Michael to place his hand protectively around my waist.

Michael took my hand and ushered me to the house.

The mansion was still and as quiet as a crypt. As Michael wordlessly led us through the foyer, Ransom followed in silent pursuit as we entered the library. Careful to keep a reasonable distance between us, he stopped at the door and awaited instructions from Michael.

"My good friend, have a seat." Although the words would usually sound friendly, Michael's biting tone told another story.

"Achoo." I sneezed, as the smell of dust, polish, and paper filled my nose.

In a half second, Ransom was in full alert and back on his feet and moving toward me. In flying speed, Michael appeared before me placing himself between the two of us. Ransom's eyes darted back to me, and then, to Michael. Michael took no time in reminding the younger man of his place.

"I said, sit!" Michael's words echoed through the small room and into the entryway as Ransom took a few hasty steps back. Then, as if Ransom was physically forced to sit, he fell into the chair with rugged and unrefined grace. A touch of satisfaction touched Michael's lips.

"Arri, this is Ransom. He is one of my family members. His job is to secure the northern territory, the Canadian border to be specific."

"Ransom, this is Arri. She is my personal guest."

Although Michael's voice was matter of fact, there was a sense of lingering understanding as the two of them seemed to continue their silent conversation. "So you had news, and what pray-tell is so urgent as to arrive early?"

"Sorry for the intrusion My Lord." He reverted his attention back to Michael; Ransom concentrated on keeping his eyes diverted away from me. "I know I am early, but there has been a breach in the northern territory, and I am afraid that some of the men made it through our defenses." He paused and studied Michael's unreadable face.

"Yes, well that is unfortunate." The irritated and vexed expression on Michael's face made Ransom grimace. Even the proud and unaffected way he held himself didn't hide the fear that danced in his eyes as he fought the urge to sink into the chair. Then, with a simple wave of his hand, Michael dismissed his friend, and as soon as he was sure we were alone, he turned his attention to me.

"Now for you," he turned to face me. His expression softened and his ridged and stiffened posture relaxed. "How are you?" his worried voice conveyed his genuine concern.

I smiled.

"I'll be ok, I think. Besides the fact that I am being hunted by people who are trying to kill me, and my friend is an oversized dog, I should be fine, as long as there are no more surprises."

I nervously laughed, but Michael's eyes flashed with anxiety.

"The only good thing, I can think of so far, is you."

I blushed and looked away. Michael put his finger under my chin and turned it back to him.

"If you ask me, the last part is the best part." He smiled, and I went weak at the knees. He chuckled and gestured for me to sit down. "My family will be arriving tomorrow. As you may have guessed, Ransom is the first to arrive. Although it is only a small fraction of them, a group of eighty

or so relative's will be here." He paused to see my reaction.

My breath stilled, and my heart jumped. "Eighty? That is not small, how many family members do you have?" I gasped.

Michael paced as he shook his head nervously before looking back at me.

"I have a very unique family," he said, raking his hands through his hair, "we sort of... go beyond marriage and blood."

Closing the distance between us, he took my face in his hands as he traced my bottom lip with his thumb. "But the important thing is that you feel safe. My family does not have the same self-control as I do."

"Self-control?"

"Yes, well, they are not used to visitors, especially ones as unique as you," he said reaching out, pulling me up before he kissed my forehead. There was an awkward silence as Michael held me. "Well now," he said breaking the silence. "I'm sure Alex is gnawing at the leash to see you." Michael clenched his jaw. "It was my thought that if I told you the truth, then you would understand a little more about why you are here."

I looked down and nodded my head knowing Michael was referring to my little bout with Alex yesterday. Michael looked down at me with a mocking smile.

When we got to my room, Michael opened the door and kissed me on the cheek as he bid me good night.

Taking my hands in his, Michael took a nervous breath. "I must say that you are a pretty understanding person to be taking things so well. I could only imagine what you feel."

A ping of regret and sorrow filled his heart and fear crossed his features before he tucked them away. "To add to the amount of information that you have found out today, I am afraid to say that there is one more thing."

My heart cried. I don't think I could take any more. I

have maxed out my crap-o-meter. Sensing my alarm, Michael hesitated for a moment and then, looked me straight in the eyes. His confident look faltered, and his shoulders fell when he saw the worried look on my face. I had been strong so far, but I don't know how much longer I can keep it up.

"Alex suggested that I tell you who I really am." His expression softened. "The person I am all the time, not just when I am with you."

Fear started to well up in my heart. I didn't think I could take anything else, especially Michael.

"Alex is right. You should know. I have not lied to you, but I may have masked the truth." He paused for a moment before continuing. "I am not like most people."

I smiled only because that was obvious when I saw he lived in a castle.

"I am different in more ways than one. I don't want you to think I am someone I'm not."

He was about to say more when Nana called his name. He looked at me apologetically, and then smiled, "I will tell you more tomorrow. Get some sleep, and I promise tomorrow will be better." His voice seemed genuine, but there was still a hint of worry hidden beneath.

The sky was dark, and only a few stars were visible through the clouded night. I moved the chair to face the window. Something about the night gave me comfort. I pulled the blanket up to my chin, slouched down, and watched the stars come and go as the clouds silently moved through the night sky. Muddled voices echoed against the hall walls. I could almost bet that Michael was yelling at his new arrival. The sound of loud footsteps was heard stomping down the stairs, followed by the slamming of the sizeable heavy castle doors.

"Why now?" Michael questioned after him. "What is my old friend up to? What game of chess is this?" Michael

mumbled to himself. After a few moments, his footsteps and the mumbling quieted as it faded in the distance. I looked out the window and felt tears run down my cheeks.

Walking echoed in the distance, and a growl reflected back. Wiping the tears from my face, on the off chance they paid me a little visit, I brought the blanket to my chin and nestled further into the chair.

“What now!” Michael yelled. “Are ye not yet tired of flexing your authority, or are ye purposefully trying to irritate me?” The yelling was not far outside my door. I could hear the shifting of weight on the wood floors. Small creaks sounded as the teetering weight moved back and forth.

“You do understand that I cannot be here all the time.” Alex’s voice was upset.

“If ye untrusted me, then why did you bestow her presence upon me?” Michael retaliated.

“It isn’t you I am concerned about. It is them; what if one of them is working for Nicholas. What happens then? Your guests are unlikely to welcome Steven’s daughter.” Alex sounded concerned, and his voice was on the verge of yelling.

“Even thee would admit, tomorrow’s events are unknown. What will come, will come! We can do nothing to stop it. I cannot guarantee anything, but neither can you. I have offered her a room here as a guest, and I plan on keeping it that way. If for any reason, she wishes to leave, then I will rightfully grant her wish, but until then, she stays. I think thine affections for Arri are clear, and I hope that she can accept me for who I am.”

I heard a sigh. Then as if Alex had conceded, Michael continued, “Now, with that said, you and I both know that my family will be arriving tomorrow. They all know that hunting within town limits is forbidden, but just in case, I would like you to post your pack in town.” There was a pause, and then, Alex spoke again.

“I don’t like it. She doesn’t know who you are. She



has the right to know, and make that decision for herself.” There was a little bit of a challenge in his voice. I waited impatiently for Michael’s response.

“I know, and she will, but for now, some last minute details need my attention, so if ye will excuse me.” The conversation went silent. I listened carefully, but there was nothing. No footsteps approaching or retreating. Shaking my head, I returned my attention to the view outside.

“Why me?” I asked myself. “What did I have to offer, and what does Steven have to do with anything?” I folded my arms in frustration. “My life was boring. Now all of a sudden, I seem to be popular for all the wrong reasons.” I shook my head.

“Maybe I can answer that.” Alex was standing at the door.

“Hey, how’s it going? Come in.” I waited for him to take the chair next to me.

“What are we looking at?” he asked, squinting, hoping to see something through the darkened window.

“Nothing, I was just trying to keep it together.”

“Upset?”

“Yeah, a little. Did you see the way Ransom acted around me, it was like I had the plague? His piercing eyes and his gun-shot reactions to a sneeze.” I scoffed. “I mean, I was supposed to be an assistant branch manager, not being chased by crazy people.” I huffed as I sunk further into the chair. “I mean, really? Who is this guy?”

“You know of him,” Alex said, looking straight forward as if looking at me would halt his words. “You just don’t know of him, or about him. You’ve heard his name before, Nicholas. He is a ruthless tyrant,” Alex shook his head. “He lives without compassion or mercy. He makes many evils in your world look like child’s play.”

“Why would you tell me this? It doesn’t exactly make my heart all warm and fuzzy.”

“I don’t tell you this to scare you, but I wanted you to know; I need you to know what you are facing. He is not to be underestimated. He will kill you for whatever it is he is after.”

“So, you don’t know what he wants?” The question stumped Alex for a moment, but after thinking it over, he shook his head.

“I didn’t say that.” He looked back outside and followed a rain droplet that fell on the window.

“Did you and Michael get together this morning and have a little pow-wow to see who could scare me the most? First, Michael shows me Maggie, and now, you are saying that the man is evil. Wow, this day just keeps getting better and better. The next thing I know, you are going to tell me that I’m some kind of elf, and he wants me for my immortality, right?” I stopped and took a deep breath. Tears welled up in my eyes. My hands shook and the breakdown I had been hiding from, finally found me. I let out a mocking laugh. “When Michael left here earlier, he said he was surprised how well I had taken everything, given the circumstances. In reality, I was just waiting until I was alone so I could cry and carry on by myself. When I got up this morning, I didn’t expect you two to tell me all this.” Looking away from Alex, I took a few shaky breaths. “Alex I think I just want to be alone. Can I see you tomorrow?” I was hoping for no arguments or questions, and I was relieved when he left peacefully.

Thoughts of the man tearing me limb from limb, and being executed in front of a rioting group of people filled my head. I broke into sobs and uncontrollable weeping. Curling into a ball and putting my hands over my face, my tears ran through my fingers and fell from my wrist. Eventually, I cried myself to sleep.

The brightly lit, marble room shone in its entire splendor. The windowless cavern reeked with death as blood dripping

vampires yelled and hollered in agreement. I was bound and chained as a man's cackle echoed through the halls. I was doomed. I tried to free myself, but the relentless restraints prevented any movement. Just as the cackling stopped, soft thudding stirred behind me.

I was jarred awake.

I woke to footsteps pacing back and forth in front of my bedroom door. My room seemed to taunt me as the shadows stretched and danced across the walls. I sat up and attempted to stretch my aching body. Apparently, sleeping in a chair isn't the best idea. My head throbbed. Every heartbeat pounded above my eyes. Three-twenty-one AM, my eyes squinted at the clock's bright blue light. Slowly, trying not to joggle as I walked, I opened the door. A few candles burned just outside my room, illuminating the hallway. The increasing light turned my pounding headache, to a rumbling roar. I leaned against the semi-open door and watched Michael through pained, narrowed eyes.

"Did I wake you?" his voice was soft.

"No, a headache did." I lied.

The self-inflicted pain in his eyes told me he was worried.

"I heard you crying. Are you ok?" He looked down at his shoes and fiddled as he rocked back and forth.

"Yes, thank you."

"Sorry, Arri. I wish there was something I could do." He kissed the back of my hand, then bid me goodnight.

"Michael," he slowly turned but didn't look at me, "would you like to come in?"

"You're sure?" His curious tone stunned me, and uncertainty danced in his eyes.

Michael, unsure?

"Well, I'm not going to throw anything at you." I teased as I did the Boy Scout salute with my fingers. "This way, you can watch over me without pacing in front of my room." I mocked. Michael grimaced.

“Sorry, I just, I mean, I worry about you.” He pulled the chairs together, then waited for me to seat myself before easing into the chair. The stern contours of his face stilled as he stared out the window. Leaning my head against his shoulder, I snuggled as close as I could through the hurdle of the armchairs. It wasn’t long before he relaxed and slouched into the chair, and we watched the clear night’s sky from the large gothic arched window. With ease, the natural silence stretched into commonplace. The blackened sky was flawless and spellbinding as a shooting star shot amongst the dark winter sky.

I closed my eyes and made a wish. The desire for normalcy was replaced with dreams of adventure, excitement, and love. When I opened my eyes, the sheer force of Michael’s amused gaze caught my attention.

“Staring is beginning to be a habit of yours,” I said, looking away from his permeating stare. I was oddly surprised to find I was more than a little shy. It seemed that when Michael was around, I was strangely aware of myself, Michael, the movements we made, and even the very breath I took. Ever so sweetly, Michael took my hand and brought my palm to rest against his face. I could feel the warmth coming from his cheek as he held it there.

“I am fascinated by you. I can’t help it. It is like you are still innocent in many ways. Wishing amongst stars, blushing, even the way you fidget when you are nervous, I adore that side of you.” He took my hand away from his cheek, and placed it in my lap, and interlaced our fingers. I gave a little shiver and adjusted my seating. “Are you comfortable?”

I gave out a yawn and snuggled into the chair, leaning my head on his shoulder.

“Yes, thank you.” I was so content, and somehow, I knew I belonged with him.

I was awakened by a slight jostling as Michael picked me up, and placed me in bed. He covered me with the comforter and tucked me in.

“Don’t go. Stay with me,” I said sleepily. Michael made no movement.

“I thought you were asleep.” Walking back to the bed, he laid down next to me as I rested my head on his chest. It was the one place through all the chaos I felt safe and secure. I dreaded the morning when this would all change. I wanted it to be just Michael and me, alone forever. I thought of all the ways I didn’t want this moment to end. Finally, I managed to fall asleep.

The next day, something had happened. There was a small uproar at the house, and Michael didn’t want me mixed up in the upheaval, so he decided to take me camping. The ambiance of the winter silence and the nesting birds chirping in hushed tones filled the reserved and quiet forest. The thick, white cloak of snow obscured the forest floor and crunched and pressed beneath our shoes. It was the epitome of perfection. Nothing stirred in the distance, and the silence enveloped the vast forest in a spell of peace and tranquility. I was so involved in the beauty that I nearly jumped out of my skin as Alex approached. Standing next to me, he was on constant alert. He had been following nearby, along with Jonathan. Jonathan had taken the protection thing seriously. Apparently, he had been pacing the perimeter of the mansion ever since I got here. I was completely unaware of his presence, but I was beginning to see that he was all work and no play.

As we cleared the forest line and wandered into a small meadow, the sun started to set. The cold, chilly temperature began to plummet, and the rising moon erased any trace of day, including what little heat there was.

In the center of the quaint clearing, Michael had pitched two tents, one for me and one for him. Between the two, a small but warm and inviting heat radiated from the fire pit. As it started to get dark, eerie sounds reverberated from the woods close by. Leaving the comfort of Michael’s and

Alex's company, I decided to turn in early. The weird and creepy noises that made me think of things that go bump in the night had me on edge.

Slipping between the layers of the sleeping bag, I pulled the covers up to my chin and closed my eyes, I tried to sleep, but there was no way I could after learning werewolves were real. I mean, if they were, then what else was?

I heard owls hooting, and branches breaking under the weight of a heavy foot. I sat up in the sleeping bag and tried to calm myself. Then, I heard the footsteps again. A large and unnatural shadow haunted the thin fabric of the tent. As my panic and fear rose, I screamed. I couldn't stop it. I had never been the outdoor type, mostly because I was never allowed, but now I was in a tent by myself. I let out another loud shriek and covered my head as Michael threw open the tent to find me huddled under my sleeping bag in the corner with tears streaming down my face. Kneeling beside me, he cupped my face in his hands.

"Are you alright?" His eyebrows arched with curiosity.

I looked at him like the words 'duh' were plastered on my face.

"I don't like the outdoors," I said, burying my face in his shoulder.

"Look, Alex and Jonathan are scouting the perimeter, no doubt, so there is nothing to worry about." I shook my head. Sensing my hesitation, Michael chuckled. "Alright then, why don't you come and stay with me?"

It didn't take me long to come to the conclusion, that if I didn't want to be scared to death, I'd better chance it. With a wry smile, Michael grabbed my sleeping bag and led me to his tent. Taking our sleeping bags, he opened them up to make a bed out of them.

"There, now we have a real bed," he joked. He helped me into the mock bed and slid in next to me. Careful not to touch me, he turned on his side. "Good night, Arri," he said with a smile in his voice, and then I faded away.

I was vaguely aware of my position when I woke up. At some point in the night, I had turned over and settled on Michael's chest. He smelled so good, a mixture of spring soap and cologne. I took in a deep breath, holding on to his scent as long as I could. It was then that I realized where I was, and the embarrassing position I found myself in.

Quickly, I sat up and covered my face.

"Michael, I am so sorry," I said, through the covers. My face felt beat red. I always found myself in these predicaments. Michael gave one quick jerk of the sleeping bag, and I sat there in the open for him to see.

Giving me a knee-melting smile, he leaned over the small space and kissed me on the cheek. Opening the tent, he looked back, "It didn't bother me; I rather enjoyed it to be honest." With a jerk of the fabric doors, he headed outside into the cold winter air. "I will make breakfast. You get ready, my sleeping beauty." He shot back over his shoulder as the tent closed behind him.

Belatedly, I realized how bad I must have looked. My hair had its own personality and had a habit of making a fool of me. If I was lucky, my face wasn't on backwards. After brushing my teeth, I pulled my hair into a ponytail and dressed as fast as I could. As I stepped out of the tent, Michael just walked by with a glass of juice and a large silver canister. It wasn't fair. He looked like he had just stepped out of the shower with damp styled hair, faded jeans, and a nicely fit t-shirt. I, on the other hand, wore wrinkled clothes and had hair that would rival Medusa.

"Breakfast is ready." Michael shouted without looking up.

Taking a seat on the closest log, Michael handed me a plate. The ham and cheese omelet smelled delicious, and the cut and seasoned baby red potatoes looked terrific.

"Are you two ready?" Alex asked, as he and Jonathan came back from their morning hunt.

“Yep, just finishing breakfast,” Michael answered; looking down at the plate in front of him, I almost missed the slight grimace that touched his face.

Alex laughed, “Why don’t you scout the area while the two of us sit here with Arri?”

“Thanks,” Michael sighed in relief, “I think I will. I should only be but a moment.” With graceful speed, Michael disappeared into the thicket of the trees.

While I finished eating, Jonathan and Alex broke down camp and packed the bags.

After returning with added color in his cheeks only an hour after leaving, Michael decided to show me his property and took me on a hike. He called it a hike, but it would have been easier to climb the Andes. The ups and downs, gorges, and rivers killed me but didn’t seem to affect the other three. Cussing their athletics, we passed a small dip in the terrain the size of Rhode Island. I almost ate it twice, but Michael came to my aid and rescued me from total humiliation.

After demanding we stop, we took a rest at a small waterfall next to a river. As Michael and Alex talked about meeting up after they hunted and scouted up ahead, I decided to take a closer look at the beauty of the frozen water. Just below the arctic surface, I could see babbling water following the current. The silent dance as the water rushed from the icy climate hypnotized me. For a moment, I allowed myself to be swept away in the serene scene before the growing voices of Alex and Michael’s constant bickering pulled me from my entrapment. Glancing up at the two of them, I noticed a small waterfall and ice cycles that formed as the water gradually froze creating hanging crystals. As I reached out to touch one, I got the sensation of icy fingers grabbing my ankle. Before I could look, the fingers tugged, and I lost my footing. The ice shuddered as I plunged into the frigid water. My breath stalled, as the water splashed against my face and neck. The deceptively deep river pulled



me down as the strong undercurrent fought its way down the ravine. The sound of water gurgled in my ears as I tried to keep my head above water.

It seemed like a lifetime as I fought and thrashed about trying to find the surface. As the current pulled me, the solid ice above me kept me from breaking through. Just as I thought I was going to die, I felt a comforting touch. Michael's arms wrapped around me, like a warm blanket. My fighting ceased, and Michael turned me around to face him. I looked at him in panic. I wanted him to save me.

The icy water bit at me and I started to shake uncontrollably. Michael's bright green eyes were sad and hopeless. He knew there was no way to save me, but he was there to be with me, so I didn't have to die alone. I thought of the many things I still wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him I was falling in love with him. I thought of how I would never be able to feel his lips on my own, and all the time we would no longer be able to spend together. My head hurt as my body begged for air.

Michael and I locked eyes. As I started to slip away, I could feel my grip weaken. I was beginning to lose consciousness. In the darkness, before I died, a haunting face appeared before me, taunting my death. His white hair floated around him as his grim and menacing smile mocked me. "You can never run from me, I am everywhere." His wicked smile and hypnotic voice made me shudder, and then, the total darkness overcame me.

I had given up. It felt like invisible bindings were wrapped around me, squeezing me tight. I couldn't move, my mind became foggy, and my will had vanished. All that remained was the constant whispering voice in the back of my head.

"Arri, Arri!" In all the darkness I heard my name. It was Michael's voice begging me to come back.

With a jerking shake, I awoke. I took a sigh of relief

when I saw Michael's hands on my shoulders and his alarmed look.

I was still in bed.

"Are you ok?" He asked, in a worried voice.

"Michael!" I yelled, and threw my arms around him.

Michael pried himself out of my grip and held me by the shoulders.

"Are you ok?" he asked again.

"Yes, I'm fine." I threw myself at him; this time, he didn't fight. Instead, he placed his arms around me. "It started out so normal, then just as we drowned, I saw Nicholas' Face." The haunting memory of his face and his words had my heart racing.

"Don't leave me," I said, shaking beneath his grip.

"Never." Without having to look at Michael's face, I felt the certainty and promise in his words.

Even though I was safe, and far away from water, I drifted in and out of sleep, waking every now and then, making sure Michael was still next to me. I was happy when I saw we were still wrapped in each other's arms. His warm, smooth skin felt like silk, and I couldn't get enough of him. He looked so peaceful and perfect; his face serene and angelic. It was hard to believe that just a few weeks ago this was the face of a man I thought kidnapped me. Now, it was the face of the man I had fallen in love with. I took a few heartwarming breaths and drifted back to sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



When I woke, Michael was already up and changed.

“Arri, Arri? Are you awake?” He shook my shoulder gently.

“No,” I said, turning over and pulling the covers up to my chin. The soft satin brushed against my skin.

“Come on Arri, I need you to get up.” Michael’s chuckle reverberated through the room.

“What time is it?” I squinted at the darkness that still consumed the night’s sky.

“What happened to the sun?” I asked, sitting up and pointing to the window.

“The sun will be up in a moment, but first, I thought I would give you enough time to get ready before my company arrives.” That woke me up. My eyes shot open, and I stared at Michael in a panic.

“That’s today?” I threw off the covers and bolted to the bathroom door. As I brushed my teeth, I started the shower, and ran out of the bathroom and gathered a few outfits. I was sure one of the six would work. Rinsing my mouth out and jumping in the shower, I was washed, dried, and moisturized in record time.

With the towel still wrapped around me I peeked out, and Michael was looking out of the window. It was just light enough to see the outline of the yard and trees.

“Which one?” I asked, throwing all my pre-picked outfits at him. Laughing, he threw me a thin, dusty-orange, scoop-necked shirt and well-fitted jeans. Slipping into the outfit and exiting the bathroom, I was caught off guard when Michael grabbed me by the waist and pulled me close to him.

“Have I ever told you I adore you?” His smile was priceless, and his eyes had a sparkle.

“Maybe once,” I said, remembering just a day or two ago when he so nervously admitted to his liking me.

“Yes, well I meant it.” I smiled, and my heart giggled. With a warm touch, his lips pressed gently against mine. I closed my eyes. His breath caressed my lips, and his hands ran through my hair. This was perfection.

“Ahem?” A small voice came from behind me. Slowly and reluctantly, Michael pulled away, and my eyes opened. With the usual impassive expression on her face, Nana stood at the door. Her apathetic behavior was detached and devoid of all emotion. “Sorry to interrupt, but your guests will be here soon my lord; they will be anxious to speak with you.” My stomach turned, and my heart sank. If Ransom was any indication of how the rest of his family was going to be, then today was going to suck.

Michael studied me for a moment as if he could read my thoughts. Placing a light kiss on my forehead, he pulled back and looked at me with a rueful smile.

“I need to meet with my family and brief them on your arrival. After our meeting, I would love it if you would accompany me for lunch.” After a short pause, I gathered myself and agreed.

“I will send for Alex. I’m sure he could keep you company for the time being.” He kissed me on the cheek, and then, turned to leave with Nana on his heels.

The small break alone gave me a chance to think. Pacing the room, I let out a frustrated sigh. Ever since arriving in

Utah, maybe a little before, I've had a chilling thought that all these nightmares were somehow connected. Somehow, they felt like more of a promised dream; like a small glimpse or vague peek into the future, each one growing more lucid and vivid. If that were true... I shuddered. That meant that eventually, Nicholas was going to... "NO," I said aloud as I rubbed my arms and tried to shake off the unwelcome thoughts.

I leaned against the cold window and folded my arms. A small foggy outline of my warm body appeared against the chilled window. From atop the promontory, the still and calm winter scene was peaceful and serene. A pale-blue glow from the dawning sun washed over the valley below. Last night's snow was undisturbed; a continuous blanket covered the entire yard.

Everything seemed to be in perfect harmony. The still, winter's day offered promised pastoral beauty. The trees unyielding to the weight of the newly fallen snow showed strength and might. But even as the peaceful winter tide claimed the serene scene before me, a sturdy and stout white gypsy horse, pulling a simple but elegant looking white carriage, flew down the driveway. Billowing clouds of snow followed in the wake of the carriage, showering the countryside. When it reached its destination in front of the castle doors, it came to a startling halt.

I watched in amazement, as a single figure stepped out of the carriage. The passenger wore knee-high black boots under a heavy maroon-hooded cloak. The hood was drawn, and the person stood for only a moment, waiting for the driver to produce their bags. A single large suitcase was handed to the passenger.

I have heard of showing up in a limo, an SUV, or even an expensive car, but to arrive at someone's house in a horse-drawn carriage, was just over-the-top.

As I watched the hooded figure walk to the front door,

their dark-red cloak contrasted with the white and glimmering snow as they walked and then, disappeared into the house.

Another person arrived in a black limousine. The windows were so darkly tinted I couldn't see who was in the vehicle, then the same thing transpired. A hooded figure emerged, and was given a suitcase, and walked to the front doors. One by one, I watched his family arrive. Some came in luxurious vehicles, some in basic forms of transportation like Lincoln Town Cars, and even a few more by horse-drawn carriages, but what really confused me, were the ones that came from the trees. They just walked through the yard like they knew where they were going. Where did they come from? It's not like Michael lived anywhere near a town.

I watched person after person arrive. I guessed that more conventional ways were too ordinary for the rich. As each member arrived, the conversations and chatter coming from downstairs got louder and louder until it was a medium-sized roar.

I was about to turn and walk back to my bed and wait, but something caught my attention. From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the figures come from behind a tree. Unlike all the others, his hood wasn't up. His short, blond hair was slicked back. He wore jeans and black boots. His cloak was different as well, while the others were well-kept and almost new looking, and his was black but looked worn and tattered like it had been through a few quarrels. While the others walked with pride and purpose, his stance and demeanor was common and undignified. As he approached the castle doors, he paused, and with a slick devilish smile, he looked straight up at me. He stared for a moment, then raised his hood, squared his shoulders, and vanished into the house. His presence was creepy and a little uncomfortable. I shuttered as chills made their way down my spine.

“Arri, are you in there?” Alex’s voice came from the other side of the door. Without waiting, he turned the knob and stepped in. “Michael’s family has arrived. Are you coming down?” Alex’s voice took a curious tone. “Is everything ok?” He asked.

I was a little preoccupied, so I didn’t answer.

“Arri?” Alex placed his hand on my shoulder. I looked at his hand, then back at the door.

“Where is everyone?” The roar from downstairs dispersed and disappeared within seconds.

“Michael sent everyone to their rooms to get out of their traveling clothes and to get settled in before the meeting. I thought this would be the perfect opportunity for us to slip out unless you want to stay.” I looked at Alex and shook my head. The serious and unemotional looks on the guests’ faces as they arrived somehow told me I was better off waiting until Michael was with me for the initial pleasantries.

“No thanks. I think I will pass on the introductions, for now. Let’s go.” I stood and grabbed my heavy jacket.

As we walked out of the room, the halls were silent and eerie. The house seemed abandoned. Nothing was stirring, not a soul in the emptiness, and the warm and inviting feel of the mansion stilled, and a bare and vacant feeling consumed its halls. A shiver ran down my spine as the unnatural vibe echoed through me.

“Wow, Michael’s guests are a little odd,” I said, interrupting the silence, as we closed the large, front doors behind us.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.” Alex sounded sullen.

“I take it you don’t really like them.” Alex stopped just inside the tree line and turned to face me.

“No, it’s not that I don’t like them, under any other circumstances, I rather enjoy their company.”

“But now that I’m involved, this changes things?” I interrupted.

“Yes, it does.”

“I heard you and Michael last night. You are afraid one of them might be working for Nicholas, right?” An awkward silence fell between us. Finally, Alex spoke.

“You don’t understand,” Alex raked his hands through his hair. “Although they are much like Michael, they have never actually lived among, or with anyone like you,” Alex said, waving his arms in my direction.

“Like me? As in, what?” I folded my arms. My curiosity spiked and the broken and iterant rhythm of his heart spoke volumes.

“Michael is...” Alex paused, “well, different doesn’t exactly explain him.” Alex looked at me, and he rolled his eyes, then shoved his hands in his pockets as he kicked the ground.

“You are..., more different than you think.” He continued. “The world we live in isn’t exactly normal.” He tried to explain.

“Okay, so you’re losing me here. What isn’t normal, besides the obvious horse-drawn carriages?” Just then a loud crack came from behind Alex. A slight blur passed him and stopped just behind me. I turned and came face to face with Sara.

“Oh, there you are Alex.” Sara’s voice spoke concern, but her eyes darted back and forth between Alex and me, and her insides cussed him.

“Sara? What are you doing here? I thought you and Jonathan were stationed in town.”

“I was, but no one is there, and if anyone stops for a snack, Jonathan is more than capable of handling the situation. I was more worried about Arri.” She turned her attention to me.

“Are you holding up okay? You must feel devastated.” Although her smile and calculated facial expression showed she was sincere, her inner battle to keep herself in check confused me.

“Why would I feel devastated?”



“Sara,” Alex spat, “as you can see,” Alex gestured toward me, his voice grave, and his eyes expressive and full of promised punishment. “Arri is just fine. Maybe, you should attend to your post.” Alex’s anger was only a nudge away from exploding.

“I was only trying to help.” Sara offered, looking confused and innocent. “I figured she would need a little consoling after finding out that Michael...” Her words were cut off short, and her eyes widened in fear as Alex let out a growl and a snap that made my heart flutter.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said, “but I promised Michael I’d have lunch with him. Do you mind if I head on back and catch up with you guys later?” I’d give almost anything and do almost anything to get out from between them.

They exchanged a sordid look. When Alex looked back at me, his irritation was replaced with concern, but Sara’s annoyance doubled.

“Sure, I’ll walk you back,” Sara said, as she held out her hand to me.

The look on Alex’s face spoke volumes, and I opted not to accept her offer.

“No thanks, I think I can make it from here. Besides, I’ll need to face the troops eventually.

When I turned away and started back, I could hear the quiet whispers of their heated argument. As the castle came into view, I hoped more than anything, the guests were still in their rooms.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I entered the house and stared at the vast emptiness. An ominous hum filled the mansion. Although, it was bright, sunny, and still the middle of the afternoon, the hallways seemed to be dark and dismal. As I passed the informal dining room, I heard the sound of disgruntled voices and my name.

“So, the rumors are true. A human resides here!”

“What of our secrecy?” Murmurs of agreement followed in hushed tones.

Some of the voices were hardy and thick, while others were light and whimsical. I heard one voice say,

“Do you wish her dead, which will be her fate if she stays?”

His villainous voice was crude and deep. I imagined him being a well-dressed, high-statured man with greased-back hair. Suddenly, a silky-smooth debonair voice interrupted.

“No, I mean her no harm.” It was the sweet sound of Michael’s enchanting delivery. He steadied his voice and paced his words. I sensed Michael was getting angry.

“She clearly doesn’t belong here. She is not one of us.” Another voice just as ill-tempered as the first one said. This one was a little less shady and vile, but just as angry. His rustic and husky tone sounded like an old-leathered cowboy.

Then, Michael chimed in. “You worry about a child, while we have walked among humans for centuries?”

I didn't understand their hostility. There is that human-thing again. What did they all think they were, ducks? I was almost to the door when I heard Michael say,

"I welcome thy woes but caution, I still demand thy respect."

A stern but light voice interrupted. This one was a female; although her voice was raised, she was soft-spoken. "We are only thinking of her safety and our secret. How do you expect us to hunt or even...?" A loud crash muffled the murmuring and conceding room. What I assumed was a chair flew across the dining room and shattered against the wall. The sound of broken hollow-wood hit the floor. Everyone hushed, and the lady's voice came to an abrupt halt.

"Ryn, I would hold thy temper if I were thee. Ye art on thin ice. Our secret has not yet been told, therefore still safe. Ye need no explanation." Michael's voice was angry. Although he didn't raise his voice, the weight and authority in it was terrifying. I backed away from the door and sat as quietly as I could. The last thing I needed was to upset an angry mob of people who were against me.

"With all due respect, why would you bring a human into our world?" Another female voice asked.

"Yes, why would you risk her life, and bring her into your home?" There was a defining silence, and then, Michael responded.

"Thy insubordinate behavior in concern to Arri disappoints me." The room hushed and the air stilled. You could hear a feather drop. Michael took a deep breath. "For those of you, who were here in his time, know of Steven's evils," There were several gasps and murmurs when Michael said this name. "And those of you, who have only heard of him, I will guarantee the rumors, are only half as scary as the real events. This man was thought to be dead, but alas we were wrong." Another series of gasps were heard. "Steven

is alive and well. If to hear of his return was not enough, he has been bonded. Their little girl is now living amongst us. I have been living with thy daughter for weeks. Please get to know her before you decide her fate. Am I understood?" His words were said slowly and clearly. A small hint of an English accent and a fight to speak with certainty flowed in his voice.

There was some rustling and a unanimous, "Yes, my lord."

I stood up against the wall. As I turned to walk away, I bumped into a small, oval table. A vase, full of newly cut bright and vibrant, yellow sunflowers, almost fell over and broke, when I caught it inches from the floor. I was about ready to panic. My heart clenched. I was in mid-thought when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I was about to yell, but Michael quickly placed his hand over my mouth. He looked at me with disappointment. He was not amused.

His black cape hung over his shoulders attached by two chains draped across his upper chest only allowing the purple satin lining to peek through by the waist. A white, long-sleeved shirt shone through the holes of his black velvet vest. Brown fur lined the vest around the bottom and the sleeves; embroidery adorned the opening of the garment and completed his ensemble. His thin black pants were tucked into his brown, leather knee-high boots. It looked like Michael had stepped right out of a Shakespearian play. A lord or royalty fit him well. I would have to say the costume was a little over the top, but it seemed to suit him somehow.

"Arie, you're just in time. I want you to meet my family." He grabbed me by the hand and kissed the back of it. Then ever so softly, he pulled me in closer and whispered in my ear. "You have some explaining to do."

He said I had some explaining to do, but he was talking about me. I tried to pull away, but Michael whispered in my ear again, "Now... is... not... the... time." I reluctantly

agreed. He gestured toward the door. I took his hand, and we walked in together.

The room was expansive and had several high windows, but it actually looked small and cramped. A large, broad rectangular table and chairs filled the center of the room. All the seats were taken, and everyone sat shoulder to shoulder. Additional chairs were brought in from other rooms and permeated the rest of the empty space, leaving some of Michael's guests still standing. A residual mess from the crashing chair still cluttered the floor near the door. Each one stood as we entered, and all eyes focused on me. Some simply looked at me with no emotion, while others looked at me with horror.

It seemed like I walked into a Masquerade Halloween party. The attire of each differed from one to the next. Some of the ladies were in dresses and corsets, wigs decorated their heads with white make-up covering their faces. Some had short-hair, sleek-flowing dresses, and small hats. They looked like they jumped right out of the past; some from the eighteenth century, others, the 1970's. It was a menagerie of people. Men in suits with vests over white-dress shirts, their sleeves rolled up a notch, and bowler hats. Others with long-tailed tuxes and white powdered wigs; men even wore skirts, tights, and hats with feathers. I was the only one wearing contemporary clothes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is la belle, Arri. Arri, my friends, and family," Michael said, as he gestured to everyone in the room.

"Hi, it is nice to meet you." My meek and tiny voice barely carried.

"Bonjour, Salut." They all responded.

One by one, they all got up and greeted me formally. The ladies curtsied, and the men kissed the back of my hand and bowed as they left. Finally, it was just Michael and me; he squeezed my hand and kissed me on the cheek. After

sitting me down in one of the chairs, he left the room. His quiet absence filled my heart with fear. Just a few moments ago, this very room was over-flowing with anti-Arri guests. Returning with a plate of lasagna in his hands, he placed the meal in front of me, then poured himself more wine.

The room was quiet before Michael spoke first.

“I apologize for my family’s reactions to your presence, you were not expected.” Picking up his wine glass and moving to sit next to me, he placed a small, simple silver-wrapped box next to my place setting. Sitting down, he pushed the box to my hand. I smiled, and he looked pleased with himself. When I opened the lid, inside was a small dainty, delicate, thin silver necklace with a large, amber center-stone. Small silver scrolling adorned the side of the gem to hold it in place.

My heart leapt, I looked at Michael’s satisfied face. I was so excited and happy. My emotions ran away with me as I threw myself into his arms. I melted immediately. I felt his warm, firm lips pressing gently against mine, and I melted into the contours of his. I was shocked by my behavior and began to pull away. When his hands met both sides of my face, he pulled me closer, almost asking for my permission. I leaned in feeling his mouth part slightly, and his tongue trace my upper lip. My head swam, and my knees buckled. He continued to hold me close as his hands ran from my face down my arm stopping at my waist, pulling me in even closer. I pushed toward him, tightening my hold. I ran my hand through his soft wavy hair. We were almost one as we continued our lustful kiss.

His hands were so warm and welcoming. I could feel the warmth of his body bleeding through my clothes. This moment couldn’t be more perfect. Suddenly, the moment was interrupted as I heard a small sound in the background. A woman softly cleared her throat. Michael pulled away slowly, and turned toward the door, keeping me close.

It was Nana. My face turned crimson. I was embarrassed by the way Michael and I were caught displaying our hidden affection.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but there is a phone call for you. It is Steven; he said you are expecting his call." Nana's voice was professional and showed no acknowledgment of me. Michael gave me an apologetic look.

"Don't lose that thought," he said, and then walked out the door, closing it behind him. I smiled and blushed to myself, giggling like a school girl after her first kiss. Shortly after he left, Nana came back in.

"He asked me to tell you he would be a while. If you want, you can wait here, or he will meet up with you later." Nana's voice was dull and monotone. It held no emotion.

"I'll just head back to my room, thanks." After a short bow, she started picking up our dishes and left.

A few minutes later, I gathered my courage to face his family. I knew some were just outside the door, and from what I heard and felt earlier, I knew they weren't too excited about me being here. Taking a deep, resolute breath, I opened the door. I passed by a few of Michael's friends and family huddling in small separate groups. They were talking amongst themselves and barely noticed me at all, or at least I thought.

"Hello. I'm Patrick McCleary." A voice came from the side of me. I turned to see one of Michael's guests smiling at me. He was tall, swarthy, and dressed like a lumberjack. He had orange, reddish hair, and his Irish accent was so thick he was a little difficult to understand. Then, he smiled,

"Arri, is it?" He asked, as he reached out to shake my hand. His hands were huge and engulfed mine as I shook it.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you really Steven's daughter?" I sat for a moment.

"No, I'm sorry, my father's Roger." When I looked around, I noticed I had an audience, and everyone looked at me with fascination.

"If I may," the man continued, "I know you are new to our world, but how is it you know Michael?" I thought of how I wanted to answer. I didn't want to come right out and say, I was kidnapped. Michael seemed to hold a large amount of their respect. I took a deep breath, and when I exhaled, they all glanced at each other in confusion and looked a little more than puzzled.

"Well, I met Michael through a friend of mine, Alex. I was staying in town until they brought me here."

"Why here?" Someone asked. "It is so rare that someone of your nature willingly enters this house."

"I was attacked by... by what I'm told is one of Nicholas's men." I stammered. The crowd gasped.

"How do you know Nicholas?" another asked with total, undeniable shock.

"I don't. He just seems determined to get me I guess." The crowd nodded in agreement.

"My dear, I think you're a little naive." A tall, thin brunette said, looking down at me. Her thick English accent dripped with disgust. "How is it, you know nothing of your father, but know of Nicholas?"

"I don't know of Nicholas, but how do you know my father?" The brunette shook her head.

"You mean you know nothing of your father's and Nicholas's involvement?"

"What involvement, to kill me?" I asked with unintentional sarcasm.

"No, Steven's relationship with Nicholas, the two of them go way back."

The brunette went quiet. The entire room stilled as everyone looked behind me. Their postures drew up straight, and their quaint masks were neatly in place as they didn't dare make eye contact with me.

"Sorry about the delay. Your father does seem to talk a lot, especially when he is talking about you." I turned to see



Michael standing beside me. His expression set in a forced smile, but his annoyance toward his guests was more than noticeable.

“I thought you were talking to Steven?” Michael’s face fell slightly.

“Can we go for a little walk? I want to show you something.” Michael’s family bowed to him as we walked hand in hand through the shocked and paralyzed crowd.

When we entered the courtyard, a full and vibrant moon shone brightly in the sky. The light from the moon cast shadows danced, as the breeze blew through the cold winter air. Michael seemed unaffected by the cold weather. I, on the other hand, was freezing. My teeth were chattering, and I was shaking from head to toe. Michael pulled me in closer, and we walked a little further ‘til we came to a glass building.

The structure was vast and enormous. Towering over me, the height aligned with the treetops. Instead of being square and rigid, it was circular and made entirely of monumental glass panels. The walls were frosted. The roof was transparent, looking as if there was no roof at all. Michael opened the fogged doors, and a blast of hot moist air blew past me. I felt like I was in a giant humidifier. Michael put one hand in front of my eyes, and reached around me and flipped a switch. He pressed a button on a side panel, and I could hear the whining of a motor. The noise stopped, and Michael turned me around. To my surprise, I viewed a perfect garden.

Now, this terrarium was not just a garden. It had a pebble walkway, a gazebo in the center, and grass that covered the remaining area. I was stunned at its beautiful vista and the strong flowery fragrance that hung in the air.

“Do you like it?” I walked my way toward the bench in the gazebo.

“This is ...?” I shook my head. “Wow,” was all I could say.

"I'll take that as a yes," Michael said. His voice came from somewhere in the background.

I admired the rare and delicate flowers; Birds of paradise, orchids, and rare luscious lotus, which grew wild and untamed.

I still had the tiny silver box clenched in my hand. Michael reached out and took the box from me and opened it. The necklace glittered in the light.

"Here, I didn't have a chance to put this on you." Michael held up the small, thin-silver chain. I pulled up my hair, and he leaned forward and placed it around my neck. He pulled away and admired it. "It is an heirloom. It was given to my grandmother by her husband only a few years before he passed, and it was handed down to my mother. When my mother died, I took it as a reminder of her love."

"Thank you," I said, I smiled and looked down to admire it myself. Michael placed his finger under my chin and lifted it, 'til we were eye level.

"You did more than say thank you, and you are welcome." He leaned forward. I closed my eyes and leaned in 'til our lips met. He placed his hands on either side of my face. My heart fluttered. My head flew, and I was getting dizzy as I pulled him closer. I felt his tight and firm frame pressing against mine. He parted his mouth, and his tongue traced my lips. My eyes rolled back, and I lost complete feeling in my legs. Michael pulled me to my feet, placing his hands on my hips, and guided me to lie on the grass. Positioning his body to hover over me, his lips pressed against mine, and continued its exploration. I slowly pulled back to catch my breath. He leaned down pulling me back in. His breath was intoxicating. His body pressed down against mine as he held up his weight. I blushed and knew it was time to stop. I gently pushed him away. I felt the warmth in my face, and turned my head, hiding my crimson cheeks. Michael laughed slightly and lay down next to me.

“Now that was a thank you,” Michael said jokingly. Again, my cheeks turned scarlet as the blood rushed to my face. I turned away trying to hide my face. I dated Mark, but I never felt the desire for him as I do for Michael. Michael propped himself up on one arm and then turned my face to his.

His scrutinizing stare stilled my heart. His lips turned up into that adorable smile, and he nodded as if he knew. I was embarrassed. For what seemed like forever, Michael and I laid there in silence. Finally, the sky lit up like a light, and shortly after, thunder followed. The rain pittered and pattered, as it fell along the glass structure. We rested quietly and watched the storm.

Michael gently placed his arm under my head, and I cuddled in his arms. The rain fell harder and harder. Lightning flashed continuously, and the thunder never stopped. Completely content and comfortable, I closed my eyes.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



The storm was over, and the only remaining sign of the roaring and thunderous tempest was the damp, wet earth that surrounded the lustrous garden. The brilliant, morning light waffled through the leaves in the trees, creating dancing rays of light that drifted through the glass. The sun shone and lit the beautiful garden. I was so content in his arms. I would have rather been struck by lightning than leave the comfort of his embrace. Sleepily and groggily, I turned over on my back and rested close to Michael, staring up at the clear, blue sky.

“Good morning,” Michael said, as we both sat up. I put my fingers through my hair trying to tame it, and then, rested one hand on the necklace Michael gave me and took a deep heart-warming breath.

The garden was just as magnificent during the day. The kaleidoscope of color was more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. The sun reflected off the glass windows, casting rainbows, as the light hit the droplets left by the rain. The flowers were bright and effulgent as the sun hit the delicate petals. The aroma and redolence filled the air. Everything around me could not have been more perfect than this moment.

Leaving the greenhouse, I smoothed my wrinkled clothes. Michael, of course, looked like he did last night.

Not a hair was out of place, and his shirt and slacks were just as pristine as ever. It just wasn't fair.

When we entered the manor, the house hummed with buzzing conversations and gossip. Slowly, and gradually, the room quieted with each step we took toward the stairs. Each member bowed to Michael, but it was the looks on their faces that made me nervous. Their eyes shot back and forth between Michael and me, then to our intertwined fingers. A look of curiosity and shock covered each and every awestruck face.

When we got to my room, Michael walked in behind me and sat in the chair as he watched me gather some clean clothes. "Would you like to join my family and me for breakfast? I am afraid it is more of a meeting, but I would love you to accompany me."

Careful not to look me in the eyes, Michael fiddled with the simple yellow-gold ring my parents gave me on my sixteenth birthday. It was one of the only things I had, besides the necklace from Michael, which I treasured. Last night, I placed it on the nightstand before I left my room. Finally, Michael looked up at me. He looked so hopeful, I couldn't resist.

"Of course I will. Do I have time to get ready? Or shall I scare them with my Medusa impersonation?" I tried to joke as I plumped up my hair. Michael let out a light chuckle, and then, looked at his watch and smiled.

"I will postpone the breakfast until dinner, but before we meet up with my guests, we need to talk." As I disappeared into the bathroom, I gave him a nervous nod. Those four little words are never good. It is usually accompanied with 'I think you're great, but, maybe we should see other people, and a girls' all-time favorite, can we still be friends?' Those four words are like the kiss of death.

I hated to think what he wanted to say. Michael was completely irresistible. When I was around him, I wanted

to be as close to him as I could. My heart would skip a few beats, and I would feel light-headed. Just thinking about him made my insides giggle. But apparently, that feeling was only one-sided.

Leaving the bathroom, I spotted Michael looking out the window. Light flooded through the stained glass, casting a shadowed outline of Michael's frame. Turning to face me, I could see the weight of concern and uncertainty in his eyes. This was not the confident, self-assured man I knew Michael to be. Michael took my hand and led me to the door.

"Walk with me." His questioning tone raised goosebumps on my arms. Taking my hand, his thumb traced circles on my wrist.

When we entered the library, I eyed the book-filled shelves. The suffocating smell of old polish and paper filled the room making me sneeze.

"Have a seat," Michael gestured to a chair along the side of the room next to an old, varnished table. Sitting in the chair, the cool and smooth leather embraced me as I sunk into it. Michael walked the room, cautiously keeping an eye on me. His posture was rigid with his arms still at his sides, and his expression locked with doubt. Stopping in front of me, he studied me. His eyes looked as uncertain as I felt. Reaching across the calculated distance between us, he took my hands in his. His touch was tender and gentle, like I was his most beloved treasure.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes of course," I said, but there was something in his voice that said I shouldn't. He releases his grip, but slowly pulled back inch by inch. As his fingertips met mine, he let my hands fall to my lap. He walked to an over-stuffed shelf. Scanning the bookcase, fingering a set of old leather bound covers, he selected one and brought it back to his chair with him and placed it behind him.

“You know, it wasn’t until recently I actually thought and judged who and what I am.” Michael offered me a coy smile. “I merely accepted the facts, but with you, I fear that I may not have the privilege of your acceptance.” Michael shifted his weight as his untarnished, porcelain features tightened with concern.

I furrowed my brows. My heart rate picked up speed, and Michael’s frame stiffened. His gem-like eyes were frozen in anticipation, and his anxious and fearful heart was heavy with fear.

“There is so much of my world that is based in fiction. In a way, I am born of what you would call myth and legend.” Michael ran his hands through his hair. Looking back at me, he shook his head.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“I know I’m fumbling through this.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what’s bothering you.” Michael’s emotions jumped from one to the next before I had a chance to decipher any of it.

“When you first came into my life, I knew from the moment I carried you through that door, that you and I were different, and that I should have kept my distance. I told you once that I needed to tell you who, and what, I am all the time, not just when I am with you. Now, I need to fulfill my promise.”

Michael stood up and paced the floor walking among the shelves picking up books and replacing them. As he spoke, the air in the room gradually became cool and thin as I became more and more nervous.

“In my day, guns and tanks were unheard of. Wars and battles were not won with planes and tanks. They were won with warriors, arrows, and swords.” What did he mean, his day? I thought to myself. Michael paused at the look of confusion on my face.

“For the last several centuries, nobody outside of the

covens knew of our kind. You are the first.” He stopped and looked at me. Trying to judge my reaction as his eyes pleaded with mine.

“Centuries? Of your kind?” He was starting to scare me.

“Arri, do you understand what I’m saying, I’m not like you. My guests and I are separated from society because we are ...” Michael closed his eyes and hung his head as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “What you would call vampires.” He looked up at me, and his beautiful emerald-green eyes were sad and unsure. He was afraid of my rejection.

After a few shocking moments, I finally understood. ‘She is not one of us. Do you wish her dead? I think she has the right to know who you really are.’ Everyone’s words echoed in my head. Michael was a ‘vampire’? I didn’t mean to, but the word came out loud. Michael flinched at the term and backed away from me. The lump in my throat grew, and it felt like I was swallowing a bowling ball. My heart cringed, and my breath came out fast and shallow. My chest tightened, and terror spread through my veins, leaving me breathless and close to tears. I was scared.

“Everyone out there,” I gestured to the door, “they’re like you, vampires?” I asked in a quivering voice. My heart stopped.

“Yes, they are.” His words were quiet and soft. At that moment I realized I was in a house full of vampires. I began to shake. Emotionless and numb, I looked at Michael. Part of me was so frightened my thoughts were paralyzed. The other remembered the man he was last night. Biting my bottom lip, I pushed my fear back, I took a few deep breaths.

“The red wine,” I said aloud, trying to put what he just told me together, “it’s blood?” I shook my head, “They don’t exist, I mean, you don’t exist.” I shook violently as he leaned over and took my hand. The hand that was once so warm and soft felt the same, but belonged to a demon.

“I don’t understand; you go out in sunlight.” Michael’s



mouth turned up at the corners; just enough to notice he was smiling.

“Yes we do, the turning to ash thing is just a myth.”

“But you said you were born of myth and legend,” I said, with a shaking voice.

“Yes, but those stories are just that, stories. We are nothing like the ones you have heard, read, and seen in movies.”

I tried to rationalize everything.

“You can’t exist,” I said, just seconds from tears.

“You saw Alex, and he is a werewolf, how am I any different?” I about said ‘You drink peoples blood’, but kept it to myself.

I threw my arms around myself and looked away. Michael sat back in his chair. I just can’t see him being a savage monster. Anyone who could prey on others couldn’t possibly be civilized, but Michael has proved to me that he is. He has shown me kindness and love. He has given me help and protection; something a monster is incapable of. My body shook. I started to feel light-headed. My vision blurred and the room began to sway. My solid and firm look on life felt askew and unstable.

“Arri honey, breathe slowly and deeply.” Michael’s voice echoed my nervousness. Trying to place some much-needed space between us, Michael moved to stand behind his chair. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I was afraid. I didn’t want you to leave.”

I closed my eyes and steadied myself. Swallowing hard, I tried to strengthen my heart. I looked back at Michael. His defeated expression resolved my fears. Michael was my stabilizer. My pillar.

As the room came back into focus, I stood on wobbly knees and walked toward him. He stilled. Every bone in my body told me to run; it was like willingly approaching a vicious predator, but my mind wouldn’t allow it. Instead, I steadily approached him, my fear turning into strength.

Placing my hand over his heart, I looked him in his eyes. "Does your heart beat?" I asked tentatively.

"No." Our voices were just above a whisper. I studied him for a while, watching him as he smiled when I moved closer. He didn't feel like a vampire to me. In all honesty, I didn't know what I felt. I'm not dead, so there must be some good in him, and the thought of losing him would be devastating. I wasn't going to lie. I didn't want to be scared of him, but the fact that he drank people's blood terrified me.

The look on Michael's face was intense. He was staring at me with such concentration. I bit my bottom lip as I watched him.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, bringing his hand up to cup my face.

"I don't know. I know I should be running out of here screaming, but so far, you haven't acted like a blood-thirsty vampire, biting the neck of every human you meet. Part of me, says this can't be real. Knowing there were werewolves, was hard enough, I'm not sure how to handle vampires too." A single tear made its way down my cheek. Michael's thumb brushed the tear from my face.

He leaned down and softly kissed me. His lips had barely touched mine when he stiffened as if he was scared of me. As his hands rested on either side of my face, I could feel the warmth of his touch flush my cheeks. The kiss started out soft and timid. His hands shook as he held me, then, as if he could sense my want for more, he leaned in. The kiss turned more powerful as if he was thanking me. That was it. How could someone so vicious and monstrous be so gentle and loving? I pulled away, and Michael's eyes stayed closed. Finally, he looked back at me.

"Are you scared of me?" he asked.

"Yeah, a little," I responded. "Do you have any plans on killing me?" I asked in return. If I were going to stay here

with him, then this would be a clue as to whether I wanted to stay or rethink the idea of running out of here screaming.

“NO!” he bit out as he growled in disgust to my question. At first, I flinched at his reaction. He looked so startled, angry, and hurt, “Why would thee ask this? Have I made attempts thus far?” The look on his face matched his furious voice.

“Sorry, it seemed like an obvious question,” I said, through a small, scared voice. I’ve never heard Michael so angry and offended. I shook my head and tried to slowly back away. Taking small unmeasured steps, I bumped right into the back of a tall, winged-back chair. I had never been scared of Michael, but just now, my heart dropped and clenched in fear.

Bowing his head, Michael closed his eyes before reaching out and resting his hands on my shoulders keeping me from my retreat. I shook uncontrollably, having no idea what was coming next. I closed my eyes and bowed my head in defeat.

“I’m sorry, my reaction was uncalled for. I apologize if I scared you.” There was a long pause, then finally, he spoke. “Please, look at me.” I could hear the desperation in his voice as I looked up. A few of the tears that I had been holding back fell and stained my cheeks. “Oh Arri, I’m so sorry.” Michael leaned down and kissed my tear-stricken face. “I didn’t mean to bark at you. You surprised me *il mio amore*.” He grabbed me by the waist, and pulled me close, melding his body with mine, then kissed the top of my head. My trembling slowed, and I relaxed, as I knew he would never hurt me. I’ve known it the whole time, but it didn’t make the news any easier to swallow.

“Now what?” I asked, “Where do we go from here?”

“Well, this can go one of two ways; one, we can get some lunch, or two, I can take you home, and between Alex and myself, we’ll make sure Nicholas doesn’t bother you. You would never have to see me again.” Michael pushed me away just enough to look at me.

I've thought about this. I've wanted to go home since I got here, and now that I have the chance, the offer doesn't sound so appealing.

I shook my head. "I'd like to stay if that is okay with you."

Michael looked at me with surprise and relief. "I would be honored." He kissed my forehead. "My offer still stands, are you hungry?"

"Yes, thank you, but um, hopefully, I'm not lunch, right?" I said nervously with a hopeful grin. Michael responded by sending me a playful glare and tsked me.

The wariness I felt toward him followed me as we entered the dining room. The same place that less than twenty-four hours ago, his family expressed their disliking of my arrival into their world. When we sat down, his actions were so attentive, cautious not to make any sudden moves. His emotional chaos and uncertainty made me even more nervous.

Michael held out my chair as I took my seat then seated himself. The formality of the gesture was a little awkward.

"I took the liberty of ordering you a pizza for lunch, on the hopes you would stay." His devilish grin brought a smile to my face.

"That would be perfect."

"Well then, bon appétit." Just then, one of the cooks placed my meal down in front of me.

"Thank you," I said, as he filled my coke.

"Siete i benvenuti, Arri." His smooth and thick voice took me by surprise. The man bowed, then retreated back to the kitchen.

"He said you're welcome. I apologize for Signore Damon. He has yet to speak any language but Italian."

It's been over twelve hours since I've eaten and my stomach growled as the smell of fresh Italian food fluttered through the air.

I picked up a slice and took a bite. The thick crust and the hardy sauce had me moaning in satisfaction. It was delicious. I closed my eyes. The flavor burst with every bite. When I opened my eyes, Michael was staring at me with fascination.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing, I’m glad you’re enjoying your meal.”

“Your cooks are amazing.”

“Yes, well, most of them have made it into an art after several centuries of cooking.”

I took another drink and watched Michael over the rim of my glass. His long, wavy hair was loosely combed back and out of his face. His contemporary shirt and slacks spoke businessman. There was nothing about him that screamed vampire. He looked well above-average, but nothing told me he would be the kind to suck blood.

“What is running through your head il mio amore?”

“Nothing really,” I shrugged, “it’s just, you don’t look like a vampire.” I almost choked on the last word.

“Hum, and how exactly is a vampire supposed to look?” Michael folded his arms in front of him, then leaned back in his chair, as an intriguing look painted his face.

“Well, you know, black tux with long coattails, long fangs,” I put my fingers to my mouth demonstrating, “black cape with red-satin lining, dark-rimmed eyes. You know, the whole vampire look.”

“Yes, I see,” he smiled, “and it disappoints you that I’m not the cliché?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I just thought vampires would look more... Dracula.” I said, then bit my bottom lip hoping I didn’t insult him.

“Yes, well, Dracula did love the dramatics didn’t he?” A smile teased the corners of his lips.

I smiled there too, for a moment, and then my smile faded, and so did his. “You’re nervous.” It was a statement, not a question. I smiled tentatively.

“Why do you say that?” When I cocked my head to the side, Michael shrugged his shoulders, with a simple non-committal gesture.

“Yeah, well, I guess I am; it’s just not every day you find yourself in the presence of a real-life vampire.”

“Ah, but Alex didn’t scare you.”

“Oh, yes he did, and part of me is still scared of him.”

“But you have been living with me for weeks. Why would I scare you now? Does it have to do with the fact that I drink blood?” Michael’s eyes looked nervous.

“Yeah, a little. I just don’t want to become a meal, you know.”

Michael chuckled, and a smile reached his lips, and then, it disappeared just as quickly. “Yes, but while you are in this house, I guarantee you are safe.” Michael looked like he was studying me carefully. His eyes, unblinking, and his rigid posture, unyielding. “You are still scared of me though, yes?”

“Yes, I guess so.” I looked down afraid to meet his eyes. After everything he has done for me, I would think that I could get over a simple difference like being a vampire, but his very existence had that little voice in the back of my mind still screaming to run. Michael placed his fingers under my chin and lifted my face to meet his.

“That is reasonable. But I will never hurt you,” and as if to seal the statement, Michael leaned forward and kissed me softly and passionately.

The moment passed, and silence followed the kiss. The cook reappeared a few times to fill my glass or offer more breadsticks but other than that, the quiet room echoed my every move. Picking up a napkin to wipe my mouth I could smell the hot fresh slice of pizza Damon just placed in front of me, which gave me a slightly uncomfortable thought. I wonder if he could smell my blood. My face must have given me away because Michael cocked his head to the side and smiled.

“What are you thinking that makes your eyes so curious?” Michael inched his seat closer to mine.

“Well, is it any or just human blood you crave?” I asked, as I bit into my slice of pizza. I tried to mask how appalling that sounded; the hunt for blood? A shiver coursed through my body.

“Both, although we prefer the latter.” He looked away and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Is it true that you can smell our blood?” I feared what I would smell like. Dirty socks, fine wine, something candy coated? My own thoughts horrified me.

“Yes, normally we can smell mortals before we even attempt our hunt. Each person has a simple savor, a simple taste. Their smell gives us everything we need to know, health status, gender, age. It tells us everything.” Michael took a sip of his wine; I felt better not thinking of what it really was. He peered at me over his glass.

“What do I taste like?” Michael almost choked on his drink, then picked up his napkin from under his glass, and wiped the red from his mouth making me cringe. I lost my appetite and moved my plate away from me and tried really hard not to gag.

“Ah... that is an interesting question;” Michael let out a nervous chuckle and slowly, rubbed the back of his neck again as he averted my eyes. “To be honest, you have no smell, no taste. You are scentless.” He finally looked back up at me, then away again as he continued. “At first, I thought it was just me, but when I heard my guests’ reactions to your scent, then I knew that I was not alone. I must apologize for my family. You are somewhat of an oddity, to them, you are different. You make them very nervous because they can not feel your presence or smell you, and in general, vampires have control over their surroundings.”

“What do you mean, they can’t feel my presence?”

Michael looked down as he adjusted his wine glass. “It

means they can't feel where you are. In our minds, we can place a person up to a few centimeters of where they are just by their smell and sensing their body heat. You, on the other hand, elude our most powerful gifts. Our only way of knowing you are there is by the sight of you, and the sound of your heartbeat." Michael looked at me nervously, just waiting for it to sink in. A touch of panic hit me, and my heartbeat rose. I looked at Michael, and he smiled and nodded at me. He heard the rise in my pulse, just as I had felt it.

As we finished our lunch, Alex knocked at the dining room door.

"Enter," Michael's voice broke the silence.

Alex walked in and closed the door behind him. As he approached us, he bowed to me, then to Michael.

"Yes Alex, what can I do for you?"

"Sorry for my interruption Milord and Milady, but we are ready." Alex was acting so business-like. It was almost weird, but he still managed to send me a questioning look. A silent query as to whether or not Michael had dropped the bomb. I nodded, and his eyes widened. I shrugged, and a small but genuine smile touched my lips. With our silent acknowledgment, Alex took a lingering glance at me and winked.

"Ah, yes, and who have you appointed in charge?"

"Jonathan was appointed pack leader until my return."

"And he is aware of his duties?" Michael and Alex showed no emotion toward each other.

"Yes, the pack will be within calling distance."

"Good, I need this to be quick. I can't have you gone for too long."

"I understand." Alex bowed to the two of us and turned to walk out.

"Wait, where are you going?" I stood in front of Alex, blocking the door.



“Alex was kind enough to offer his assistance as a courier.”

“I’m not going to be gone long. This meeting was just a formality. Besides, Jonathan will be close-by.” Alex came in a little closer and whispered in my ear. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I think.” I laughed under my breath. Alex nodded and hugged me.

“I’ll be home soon. Jonathan can call me at any time.” Alex kissed the top of my head and smiled.

As soon as he rounded the corner, Michael grabbed my hand and pulled me to him.

“Are we okay?” he asked.

“Absolutely. How long will he be gone?”

“I’m not sure. It could take a while. Since your identity has been exposed. Nicholas’ search for you continues, and sending messages has become a problem. It’s a dangerous journey. Nicholas’s men have been attacking our messengers, but Alex is our best. He’ll be back, I promise.” Michael assured me.

After leaving the dining room and finding out Michael and his coven... well, purposefully drank blood, Michael and I were inseparable; mainly, because I was scared to leave his side. The fact that they could not smell or sense me made it a little easier to swallow, but my fears still remained.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Everyone seemed friendly and cordial at dinner. I almost fit in. It didn't take long for me to realize that Michael meant every word he said when he told me dinner was more like a meeting. It was a little unnerving that I was the only one eating. I felt like I should eat quickly just so I wouldn't have to look different in front of everyone. Also, I was the only one with two drink choices; one glass was filled with sparkling cider, and the other, mimicked everyone else's. I knew that the thin-red liquid in the wine glass probably wasn't a matured glass of Michael's finest Medoc wine.

After I finished the cider, I fiddled with the wine glass. I traced the top with my middle finger and turned the flute as I tried to follow their conversations. Just like at home, the colloquy took an awkward turn when some of them started to speak in different languages or conversations that didn't relate to the topic at hand. After about ten minutes, I stopped paying attention. I heard something on renegade vampires, but nothing that I thought pertained to me. The way that everyone addressed Michael as 'my lord' and 'sir' threw me. I was amazed that Michael was so respected.

As my thoughts wandered in and out of their conversations and debates of how to handle situations, it sounded just like a board meeting for a big company trying to figure

out the best way to advertise their business. They had a discussion on how to go about eliminating certain vampires, and how to handle, well in simple terms, me.

Although my concentration was split between their conversation and my own thoughts, there was also another force at work. I didn't always know how to differentiate my emotions from others, but this time I did, and it seemed to come in handy. I felt someone's evil thoughts. I didn't know who it was, or exactly what they were thinking, but I sensed uneasiness and restlessness in the pit of my stomach. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. It gave me the chills. Not only was he ominous, evil, and nefarious, but I felt his satisfaction. He thought he had already won. Finally, when I was about to excuse myself, hoping that Michael would follow, the meeting came to an abrupt end.

With guests around, it was hard to talk with Michael privately. As if Michael sensed my want, he took my hand and led me out of the room. We walked to the old willow tree in the courtyard and sat on the bench that surrounded it. People were walking in little groups discussing the results of the meeting, but I was relieved that none were paying attention to us. Michael tried to start a conversation and ask how dinner was, but a dark feeling nagged at me.

Michael's voice faded into the background. The feeling had returned and grew quickly. It was coming at me fast, and the intensity was getting stronger by the second. I tensed up, and I could feel the agitation in Michael as he responded to me. Unintentionally, Michael put his arm around me, ready to react to whatever it was I feared. I gave a small shutter as I looked around for the source. I searched the garden, the extended yard; I even looked in the trees for anyone or anything. There was no one there. Michael was growing nervous, and the two feelings mixed together were so strong that it pained my heart. I was ready to break down in tears and yell at the top of my lungs to vent or

release some of the emotional baggage. It was like yielding to a freight train. Finally, off into the distance, I saw a few people walking the grounds. He was among them.

“Michael,” I whispered. I didn’t want the perpetrator to hear me. “In the group by the barn, someone is not who they seem.” Just as I concluded my thoughts, there was a loud snap, and I jumped. An evil-eyed man stood in front of us. He snarled, showing his pearly whites, as his face was torqued into a sinful grin. Michael quickly pushed me behind him and started to growl. The shadows of the night hid the man’s facial features. My heart beat painfully fast. My breath became shaky, and I was frozen with fear. I thought Michael was going to attack him when the man finally spoke.

He spoke in a thick, greasy, English accent. The corners of his mouth turned up into a large vile smile. It felt as if he knew something we didn’t.

“Michael, just hand over the half-breed, and I will leave your coven alone.” His words sounded civil.

“I promise thee, that if you just as much as look in thy direction, ye will not see the days, light again; and I never break a promise.” Michael’s voice was stone cold. As the cold air swirled around me, I felt like I was living between seconds on a clock.

“You don’t need this pathetic excuse of a half-breed. Nicholas is looking for her, and I will be rewarded for her capture. Nothing is going to come between me and my reward.” The man reached in my direction. I didn’t have time to move when I saw Michael leap forward and tackle him. I heard ripping and tearing as Michael fought him.

I was about to yell for help, but my thought was interrupted as I felt someone come up behind me. I turned around to see who it was, hoping beyond all hope that it was Alex. My heart dropped. I was wrong. The man behind me grabbed my hand and started to drag me into the woods. I

could feel the branches and twigs scratch and cut my arms and face as he pulled me.

The guy Michael was fighting was only a decoy. He was planted just to get Michael diverted away from me so I'd be left alone. This was an ambush. A well-thought-out ambush, I might add. Someone knew I would never be left alone or without protection. I opened my mouth to yell, but the man covered my mouth before I could get a sound out. Although Michael's hand was soft and warm, this man's skin was quite the opposite. Feeling the rough and unnatural coolness against my skin, without thought, I bit his hand, hard. Vampires surpassed me in every area: speed, strength, fighting knowledge, and experience. I was utterly helpless and incapable of fighting him, but I was not going to let him take me without a struggle. As I bit him, it was like biting into stone. He yanked it away and raised his hand to slap me. That is when I saw blood dripping from his hand. At least I knew they bled, just like me. His hand came down across my face with a loud smack and an even more painful blow as it felt like my eye was going to explode. I struggled to get away, but he grabbed my shirt yanking me from behind. I yelled for Michael's help. He looked up, horrified at the sight that I was caught. I knew he would help if he could, but Michael was in a fierce fight for his own life. When I turned back to confront my attacker, I was surprised to see it was someone I knew. I planted my heels and froze in disbelief. It was Erik, a colleague of my dad's, he had dinner with my parents almost a year ago. He was the dreamy-eyed man I couldn't take my eyes off of. He was the snitch; the only one who knew about me, besides Alex. He had not disappeared. He was with Nicholas and returned when they found out I was alive. He managed to trick not only my dad but Michael as well. He had been hiding among us the whole time. His grip tightened as I tried to pull away.

I was getting angry. My blood started to boil, and I lost my temper. I yanked my hand from Erik's grip. I didn't just hurt myself, I hurt Erik as well. His eyes burned with rage as he reached for me again. Suddenly, he stopped, dead in his tracks, and stared fearfully at me. I walked toward him, and he backed away. I felt a hand on my shoulder pulling me back. With one swift move, I grabbed the person and threw him over my shoulder and onto Erik. Watching him land on the ground in front of me, I realized I had thrown Michael and he too, now looked at me with the same fear as Erik. Scrambling to his feet, Erik ran in the opposite direction, and Michael backed away from me with careful, deliberate movements. My heart dropped when Michael looked at me with such apprehension. I looked over my shoulder for the lowlife Michael was quarreling with, but he was laid on the ground lifeless and in pieces.

I had lost myself in the anger and hatred I felt for these men I had allowed the rage to consume me. "Arri?" I heard Michael's cautionary voice. He was nervous, and it showed not only in his heart but in his expression as well. I was still in the moment. Slowly, I was able to come back around, and Michael's face evened out, as I felt myself return to normal. As the animosity and fury faded, it was replaced by fear and it that lodged itself in my heart. My eyes filled with tears, and I felt jittery.

"What was that?" I asked Michael in a broken and cracked voice, meaning the attack, but Michael tentatively said, "I don't know, you tell me." Michael's voice was iffy and questionable.

"How am I supposed to know? I didn't attack us." I said a little snappy. Michael pulled me close to him, and then, picked me up, and ran me into the house. "I'm not hurt," I said, wondering why he cradled me carefully as he ran. As soon as we cleared the doorway, Michael took me straight to the formal living room. Gingerly, he set me down on the

dark-leather couch and called for Nana. “Not this again,” I said. “It wasn’t my fault. I was being attacked, just as much as you were!” Michael didn’t seem amused, nor did I. Nana came, along with a few of Michael’s friends.

“He is still out there,” Michael said sternly. “I need one of you to sweep the perimeter, and one of you to contact Jonathan and his pack, and see if we can still get Erik,” Michael said, as he turned to his friends.

“Michael?” Nana asked.

Michael told Nana what had happened in great detail with a low, toneless voice. In the meantime, he was checking me over, looking for something.

“I’m not wired,” I offered. Michael looked at me and frowned.

“I am not looking for a wire, nor are we back to you being a hostage. I am looking for cuts, bruises, any type of damage that you might have sustained before you turned.” His voice was forced and harsh. He grabbed my arm and looked at the scrapes I got from the trees, but they were almost gone, and I was close to normal.

“I turned? Into what? I was being attacked! I was simply trying to protect myself.” By this time, we had gathered quite an audience.

“Arri, you were growling. Your eyes turned red, and you looked like you were going to rip his arms off. I think you have been holding back on me. No one holds that much power.” Michael looked at me like I had just betrayed him.

“Michael, I don’t understand. I was just trying to protect myself. I was angry. Why are all of you looking at me like I’m lying? I don’t understand what you want from me!” I yelled at, not only Michael but at the crowd as well. My eyes filled with tears, and everyone started to look blurry. I realized that they were looking at me as a threat and not as a victim. I looked back at Michael.

“Are you done playing monkey so I can go?” I was

obviously not welcome down here. Michael looked at me, then let go of my hand. I started to walk away, and a few of his friends stood in my way, blocking me from leaving.

“Let her go; she means us no harm.” Michael vouched for me, and I continued on my way.

I needed to cool off and review what just happened. Entering my room, I could smell the awful cologne-filled stench of my attacker on my blouse. I stripped off the ripped and dirt-stained clothes and threw them in the trash. I still felt dirty, and the foul fetor of Erik lingered on my skin. I shuddered. I turned on the shower and washed out the leaves in my hair, dirt from being dragged, sticks from the trees, and any odor that still clung to my body. After I showered twice, taking special care to scrub my skin almost raw, I dressed, then left the bathroom, and there sat Michael on the chair across from the door.

“What do you want?” I asked sharply. “Am I being accused of attacking you too, or just planning it?” I walked over and sat on the bed, just waiting for his response.

“There are no accusations or judgments against you, but you startled me. I didn’t realize you... you looked so defensive. I wasn’t expecting you to take care of yourself.” He was holding back, and I knew it.

“What do you mean?”

“I have never seen you get so angry. You were growling, and you threw me over your shoulder with no effort. Didn’t that seem strange to you?”

I thought back, seeing him on the ground in front of me. At the time, I was scared, but now, it does seem rather weird.

“Your eyes were red, and I don’t mean just filled with anger. I mean, really red, the color red. There was no humanity left within you. I have seen your eyes change color before, depending on your mood, but I have never seen this side of you.” He took a breath.

I looked at Michael and tried to feel if he was lying, but he was honest and sincere.



“What do you mean my eyes changed? My eyes are gray?” But if werewolves and vampires existed, I guess it was possible I was my own mood ring.

“When you are happy your eyes are a deep brown. When you are confused, your eyes are gray. When you are sad, your eyes are almost a pale ice blue. When you are kissing me, your eyes match my own, an emerald green.”

I was bewildered that he remembered all of this, and my heart fluttered because he noticed.

“But the ones I just learned were when you are scared, your eyes are almost black, and when you are enraged, your eyes turn red.” He stopped there, and slowly walked over to the bed, and sat down next to me.

Michael’s erratic and confused emotions bounced around like ping pong balls as he neared me. Maybe with his inner rollercoaster, this would be the wrong time to tell him I could feel everything that was happening.

He took my hand and kissed the back of it. “Arri, I was not happy when you first came into my life. I wanted nothing more than to wash my hands of you. You broke my things, and brought trouble.”

“Maybe, I should leave then.” I interrupted, “It looks like I can take care of myself; maybe I have over-stayed my welcome.”

“Arri, I have fallen in love with you, and it would break my heart if you left now.”

I leaned over and kissed him. I was overwhelmed by everything that had happened. In a way, it felt like one nonstop beating. He pulled away.

“I don’t want to go, but I feel like I need to. What purpose would I serve causing chaos in your quiet world?” I said, in between sobs. Michael held me close and wiped the tears from my face.

“Arri, I love you. You will always have a place with me.” He kissed me again and held me until I stopped crying.

“Michael?” I asked.

“Yes, my love,” he replied.

“I know, who and what you are, and I know who your friends are, but who is Nicholas, and who am I?”

*The End*