



SURVIVAL

A.M. HARGROVE

Book 1 of the Guardians of Vesturon Series

Survival

By
A.M. Hargrove

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For more information on *The Guardians of Vesturon*, please visit my website at <http://www.amhargrove.com>

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For Henry

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Book One

Maddie

Prologue

Maddie slowly cracked open her eyes to see the brilliance of the morning peeking through her tent. Squinting, she poked her nose out of her sleeping bag to test the temperature, and just as she imagined, the frost in the air nipped at her. She knew she would have to get up soon to use the facilities, if you could call the outhouse that, and also to make her breakfast as well as break down her campsite.

She was so warm and cozy though, the thought of moving didn't really appeal to her. But... it was Christmas morning, and she wanted to spend the day roaming the Smoky Mountains, enjoying the scenery. She knew that if she delayed too long, she would have limited time since it would get dark so early this time of year.

She quickly unzipped her toasty sleeping bag, slipped her boots on, threw on a jacket, and unzipped the door to her tent. When she got her first glimpse of the morning, her jaw hit the ground, and she sucked in her breath. She was standing in a winter wonderland, complete with a three inch blanket of snow. She broke out in childlike laughter and jumped around like someone had just handed her a million bucks. She ran around in a circle and then suddenly let herself plop backwards in the snow. She flapped her arms and legs wildly and then stood up to admire her handiwork. Out of her pocket came her camera, and she commenced to snap photos of the awesome snow angel she had just created.

Maddie was in heaven! This was the first time in her life she had ever awakened to a white Christmas, and she was going to milk this one for all it was worth. This was absolutely the best present she had ever received, and today was the first day since... well, she wasn't going to let herself think of that. She simply felt sheer, unadulterated, uncomplicated happiness.

She took care of her outhouse business, headed back to her tent to make breakfast with some hot cocoa, and sat down to enjoy the view. She was still shocked at her luck. Snow hadn't been in the forecast, so this was the greatest surprise... ever!

In a flash, she had everything packed up, and she was ready to head out of camp. She had spent the night up at Mount LeConte and was now going to head over to the Appalachian Trail. Her next stop would be the shelter at Peck's Corner.

When she was all geared up, she headed for the trailhead, yet quickly, she realized that she may have some difficulty. The snow had completely covered everything, including the trail, and it might be a bit tricky staying on track. She worried about this until she noticed a single set of footprints that started right at the trailhead and led her in the right direction... down the Boulevard Trail. It was as if her guardian angel had been there and created it just for her. She paused to consider it for a moment, but then, she quickly moved on as she had a lot of ground to cover today and didn't know the condition of the trails ahead. She said a quick thanks to her "trail guide" and headed down.

As usual, while she hiked, her mind wandered and started drifting in the direction of her parents. She could do that these days without getting weepy about it. She had college and her roommates to thank for that. It was Christmas though, and she felt she was entitled to think about her parents. That's how she spent most of that day... until she passed the stranger coming toward her. She felt her first cause for alarm when she laid eyes on him, but never expected how that chance meeting would alter her destiny forever.

Chapter 1

I was running down the soccer field toward the goal, preparing to receive a pass from the center forward when my eyes abruptly flew open. My dream had been interrupted by the first hints of cinnamon as it wafted into my room. I threw off the covers, bolted out of bed, and took the stairs two at a time as I headed toward the kitchen. I came to a screeching halt when I saw my mother standing there staring at her watch.

“Well?” I asked.

“2 minutes and 10 seconds,” she replied. “I believe that’s a record.”

She was referring to the amount of time it took me to awaken from a dream-filled sleep and get to the kitchen after she had pulled the tray of her yummy homemade cinnamon rolls out of the oven. Just the thought of those deliciously gooey, sweet concoctions made my mouth water, but the scrumptious smell was totally off the charts. My mother made the best cinnamon rolls known to man. Whenever I recollect them, I can still taste and feel their sweet melting texture in my mouth.

* * * * *

I shook my head as I pulled myself back to the present and away from one of my favorite memories. I stared at the imposing structure before me-- my new home. I was moving into my college dorm at Western Carolina University, located in Cullowhee, North Carolina! My trepidation mounted, as did my excitement. My roommates should be here any minute so I threw a bag across my shoulder and stuffed a box under my arm. I joined countless other students trudging in and out with various items in tow, including futons, TVs, and other strange things that made me wonder where they would stow them all.

The dorm was one of the new ones on campus, thankfully. When I entered the building, I was greeted with all kinds of flyers and posters stuck everywhere, announcing this function or that party. It was mind boggling at first to even contemplate all the activities that would be taking place on campus. Now my excitement began to mount. When I walked up to the door of our suite, there were all of our names listed in alphabetical order: C. Kittredge, C. Newman, M. Pearce and J. St. Davis. I was “M. Pearce,” short for Madeline Mariah Pearce, and I was officially a college student!

I felt a huge grin spread across my face. I just stood there and stared, until I heard someone say, “Well, are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to walk through that door?”

I spun around and looked... down... to see an itty bitty, blonde girl with a big grin and eyes that sparkled.

“Are you—?”

She interrupted me, “Catherine Newman... but just call me Cat, and I hope to heaven you’re Maddie!” She said as she held out her arms and pulled me into hug that nearly squished the air out of me. That little thing was *strong!*

“Yes, lucky for you, I *am* Maddie. Actually, Madeline Mariah Pearce, from lovely Spartanburg, located in the magnificent upstate of South Carolina, where the air is pure and the sky is blue and the...” I said in an exaggerated Southern accent before she interrupted me.

By this time, she was guffawing, yelling, “Stop! I can’t take any more!”

Cat and I hit it off fabulously. She was half my size. Ok, not really, but it felt that way. She stood all of five feet (I think she was only four feet and maybe ten inches, but she swore she was taller than that!), had steel grey eyes and a head full of really curly blonde hair, which appeared to be as unruly and uncooperative as mine. It *so* went *everywhere*... but it suited her.

Cat was full of life. There was just no other way to describe her. From the first moment I met her, I knew we’d be BFF’s—and I mean forever. She was my soul sister, AND we were so much alike it was uncanny. Like me, she was constantly in a rush, and she always looked like she had just survived a hurricane. When Catherine made up her mind about something, well, that was it. She was as hardheaded as a cinder block, again, like me, in that regard—and funny! OMG, that girl could make me laugh until my sides were killing me.

She was born and raised in Asheville, North Carolina, so it was easy to find one thing we both loved. That was, no surprise, hiking. She had spent two weeks over the summer hiking the Appalachian Trail and was hooked.

Moments later, two adults appeared, which I correctly assumed were her parents. We quickly introduced ourselves and then the question I had so been dreading was popped.

“So Maddie, are your parents here?”

I felt my head swim a bit as I was thrust into another disturbing flashback.

* * * * *

It was still difficult, after all these years, to think of the day when the doorbell rang, and the police were in the foyer explaining to my dad and I about “the accident.” That’s how we came to label it. It wasn’t her “untimely death” or “the day she left us” or even “the day she died.” It was simply “the accident.”

We were home doing the usual things late one Saturday morning, when a police car pulled into the driveway. I dashed to the window to look out, because in our neighborhood, it was a rare occurrence to see a police car, much less one in your driveway.

“Daddy, the police are here!” I yelled as the two officers rang our doorbell.

“Hello, young lady. Is your daddy home?” they asked.

By that time, my dad had entered the foyer and said, “Can I help you officers?”

“Are you Henry Pearce?” When my dad nodded, they continued, “Mr. Pearce, are you married to a Mariah Pearce?”

“Yes,” Dad hesitantly replied. “Why? What’s going on?” he choked out.

“I’m so sorry to inform you sir, but there’s been a terrible accident.”

Another car had crossed the centerline and hit her head on. She died instantly they told us. She was on her way home from the grocery store.

When I heard the news, I started to feel a buzzing in my head. I couldn’t make out any more words... it was like the voices I heard were coming from the next room. I thought back, and it occurred to me that I never told her goodbye or that I loved her. The next thing I remembered, I was lying on the sofa with a cold cloth on my head.

I was eleven years old then, and I couldn’t help thinking there couldn’t be a worse time to lose your mom. Who would I talk to about periods, boys, prom dresses? Who would help me tame my unruly red hair? What was I going to do? My guts had been ripped out, and I was dying.

The funeral was a blur... I couldn’t even tell you who was there. My stomach hurt constantly... I couldn’t keep anything down. I stood with my dad, squeezing his hand with all my might. It took my mind off the possibility of vomiting everywhere.

My life changed dramatically after that. The fun had been sucked out of me, leaving me pathetically miserable.

* * * * *

“Maddie, are you ok?” I heard someone asking.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I guess I am a bit excited with everything here.”

“I understand,” Mrs. Newman replied. “Honey, are your Mom and Dad here?”

One part of me wanted to lash out and say, “Um, that would be a big ‘NO’ seeing as they’re both dead,” but I knew that would be rude and totally uncalled for. So I went with my usual response instead.

“No, ma’am, they aren’t. It’s just me, myself and I today,” I said with a tug of a smile.

Mr. and Mrs. Newman both gave me a surprised look that quickly turned to pity... something else I abhorred.

“Don’t worry, it won’t be a problem. There are all sorts of students they have recruited as ‘Moving Aids’ out there. You can find them by their t-shirts. They are the ones wearing red,” I supplied.

“What a wonderful idea,” Cat exclaimed. “I wonder if any of them are cute?”

“Cat, I don’t think this is a time when you need to be worrying about that since you have loads of stuff to do,” Mrs. Newman admonished.

“How about we head back down for another load?” I suggested, saving Cat from any more comments.

In reality, the “Moving Aids” really were a blessing and we all made short work of hauling everything up. I only had one “oops” too. Let me explain that. I was horrifically clumsy and had been my entire life. My mom did her best to rectify that to no avail, bless her heart.

I had been lugging up a plastic bin filled with all of my intimate items, such as panties and bras. As I walked through the door to our suite, the toe of my tennis shoe caught on the threshold and I tripped. I shot like a rocket across the room, trying my best to prevent a crash and burn. Unfortunately for Mr. Newman, he was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he took the brunt of my momentum. My plastic bin burst open and we both tumbled to the floor. When I finally was able to sit up, I was mortified by what my eyes beheld. Mr. Newman was lying on the floor with all of my panties and bras mounded over his head. He was a vision in thongs! Cat and her mother were in hysterics, slapping their knees and hooting. Apologizing profusely, I quickly dashed over to him, stuffed everything back in the bin and scurried to the bedroom. What a way to make a first impression.

Our suite was actually pretty cool. In the center was a main living area with a non-cooking kitchen. By that I mean it had a microwave and full size refrigerator, but it didn't have a stove or oven. That was fine by me because I couldn't adequately boil water.

Off the main living area ran two hallways. On either side was a bathroom, a vanity area, built in dressers and two walk-in closets. The hall ended at the bedroom, which was quite sizable for a dorm. It contained two lofted bunk beds and two desks with chairs.

I looked around trying to decide where to put everything. Once we got to work, we set up the room in no time flat and then started the unpacking and stowing of everything.

Our other two suite mates, Carlson Kittredge and January St. Davis, were doing the exact same thing so it wasn't until the evening that we were able to convene in the living area and start getting acquainted with each other.

Admittedly, I was dreading this part as well. It wouldn't take time before the famous questions would hit. I had prepared myself for the inevitable queries, but they always rattled me nevertheless.

“So Maddie, why didn't your parents come?” Cat asked.

“Well, it's sort of a long story,” I said.

“If you don't want to talk about it, I understand.”

“No... actually, I should probably just get it out of the way.” So I began the story of my terrible years as a teen.

Chapter 2

I started with “the accident” and moved ahead, explaining how life without my mom was sheer hell, and how I had blindly groped my way through middle school and then high school.

“I missed her incessantly and was in a state of acute and abject grief but didn’t know how to cope. You never realize how much you depend on someone until they’re not there any more. Thank heaven for my dad.”

“That first year after ‘the accident,’ Dad and I spent nearly every weekend backpacking. It was our escape from the pain; sleeping under the stars while marveling at the splendor of the Smoky and the Blue Ridge Mountains was the perfect antidote.”

“We loved going to the Great Smoky Mountain National Park or the Pisgah National Forest. We gained a sense of peace and serenity there that we couldn’t find back home. Shivering from the cold or drenched in sweat, we loved it all the same.”

“Dad taught me all the tricks of living outdoors—how to tie every kind of knot known to man, how to pitch a tent in the best spot, where to find water, how to protect your food from the bears, how to start a fire, how to stay dry in a deluge, how to stay warm in the snow, and how to cook using a teeny tiny camp stove. We did some serious bonding on those trips,” I finished.

Cat finally interjected, “Maddie, I am so sorry for all of that. It sounds horrific. I couldn’t imagine going through middle school and high school without my Mom.”

“Yeah, it was pretty bad, which is why I don’t usually mention it. It’s not exactly party talk.”

I went on with my story because I knew if I didn’t, those awful moments would eventually resurface. After all, these people would be living with me and they wouldn’t just ignore the fact that my parents were mysteriously absent all of the time. What I didn’t know then was that January, one of my other suitemates, had experienced something much different, but equally as tragic. I didn’t find this out for quite some time.

“My Dad was my rock. He was there for everything and always had a positive attitude about things. He kept me grounded.”

I continued with my story, because what they didn’t realize, the worst was yet to come.

“My senior year began and school was going great for me. Running cross country and hanging with my friends kept me pretty involved. You could say I had finally re-engaged myself in life. My eighteenth birthday was on September 14, and my dad wanted to throw a party for me. It was awesome of him to want to do that, but some kids would have tried to sneak in beer and liquor, and I didn’t want my dad to have to deal with that. So I told him my preference would be for him to take several of my friends and me out to dinner somewhere.”

I told them how we ended up at a local favorite, Yanni’s, where we chowed down on pizza, subs, and salads. And afterwards, how they all surprised me with a huge Bruster’s Ice Cream

cake—my very favorite. It was lots of fun, and my dad was a great sport, considering all the girl babble that took place. Things had begun to work out for me, I recounted to them, and I found myself actually enjoying my senior year. Then October hit, and preparing essays for college applications monopolized all of my time.

“In mid-October, October 14th to be exact, another devastating blow turned my world upside down. I was sitting in my AP physics class when an announcement came over the intercom asking me to report to the principal’s office.”

I told them how I grabbed my stuff and headed for Mr. Emery’s office. “When I arrived, Mr. Emery, the principal, Mrs. Overland, the senior guidance counselor, and Mrs. Woodburn, the school nurse, were all there.”

I relayed to them how Mr. Emery dropped the biggest bomb ever when he informed me that my dad had suffered a heart attack at work and died. I tried my best to explain how I couldn’t breathe, how I had tried to inhale, but how the air seemed to have been sucked out of the room.

“I woke up on the floor of the principal’s office, and Mrs. Woodburn had a cool cloth on my forehead and was taking my pulse. I heard Mrs. Overland saying, ‘She MUST have some next of kin. Are you saying she’s ALONE... no cousins, aunts, uncles, anything?’”

“When I tried to sit up, but the room began spinning, making me sick to my stomach. ‘Maddie, is there anyone we can call?’ they asked. ‘We need to release you to someone...’

I told them how I started screaming about not having any other family and how I was all alone.

“Then, the school nurse took me down to the emergency room, and there he was. At six feet tall, my dad was a fairly large man, yet he looked so small lying on that table. You could tell they had made every attempt to save him. He was still hooked up to a bunch of tubes and wires. Then, some woman came in and asked me where they should send the body. I had no clue what she was asking.”

“The names of the local funeral homes weren’t something I could just spurt out. My mind went blank when I tried to remember the one my dad had used for my mom’s funeral. Not to mention that the thought of leaving my dad was killing me because I knew this would be the last time I would ever lay eyes on him.”

“Mrs. Woodburn, the nurse, took me home. I wanted her to take me to school to get my car, but instead, she took my keys and said someone would be dropping it off. When I got home, there sat my dad’s empty coffee cup on the kitchen counter and his empty cereal bowl in the sink. His bed was made, as it usually was; his bathroom was neat and orderly. There was nothing unusual to make you think that he hadn’t felt well. I climbed on his bed and held his pillow to my face. That’s when the tears hit and I cried myself silly.”

Hours later, I recalled how I heard pounding on the front door. “I kept hoping it would go away, but it was relentless. I finally got out of my dad’s bed and answered the door. It was all the girls from the cross-country team. They pushed their way in the house. They had all kinds of food and drinks. One of them, Lillie, had brought her mother.”

“Lillie’s mom, Mrs. Mack, kept telling me how sorry she was and invited me to stay with their family. I refused, of course, but luckily for me, she took over making all sorts of phone calls. She, along with my attorney, Jay Dennis, literally saved me...they took care of all the arrangements for the funeral and Mr. Dennis handled everything else that had anything to do with finances. I couldn’t have gotten through it all without them.”

Chapter 3

By the time I finished telling them of my unfortunate past, tears were streaming down my face. Ironically, my sympathy went out to Cat and the others. How could they have realized the can of worms they were opening when the question was originally asked?

“I’m sorry for getting so sappy,” I apologized.

“Are you kidding me? My gosh, after everything you’ve been through you deserve to be able to vent. I didn’t realize all that Maddie. Seriously, I am so sorry. Listen, if you ever need a shoulder or anything, you let me know,” Cat said, her voice quivering.

Great... I hadn’t wanted to make her cry too. Yeesh!

The other two girls chimed in with support. January knew my whole story since she and I had been in high school together. But when I glanced at Carlson, I almost had to suppress the urge to laugh. She had this ridiculous look on her face—like a deer in the headlights. I didn’t want to make any judgements, but from the looks of her, the worst thing she had ever dealt with in her life was possibly a broken nail. She was a society girl from Raleigh, North Carolina and it seemed her life had been filled with lots of parties, debutante balls and the like. She now looked positively... distraught!

“It’s ok Carlson. Really, I’ve been dealing with this for almost a year now. It’s improving all the time. Seriously, you look like you might have a heart attack yourself,” I said, trying to inject a bit of humor into the situation. Everyone kind of chuckled and then I added, “Hey you all, I am starving! Anyone up for some dinner?”

That got a resounding, “Yes,” so we headed out the door in search of food.

* * * * *

Cat and I seemed to jump into college life with both feet. We both joined the local hiking club. One of the reasons I had decided to attend Western Carolina was because of its location. It was situated a mere handful of miles from The Great Smoky Mountain National Park and my love for hiking and backpacking pushed me in this direction. Cat and I had promised each other we would do weekend trips to the Park as often as we could.

On a completely different tangent, we decided to go through rush. Boy, what an experience that turned out to be!

We had to dress up for parties and make constant conversation with a bunch of strangers. I was incessantly worried about tripping over my own feet, my dreaded problem I was saddled with, and doing a face plant in front of the sorority girls. Talk about a migraine. It was also a major pain in the ‘you know what’ to endure the mindless chatting that went on. I would make things up just to move the conversation along, but Cat was the best. The stories that girl could contrive would have you on the floor, bursting at the seams with laughter. Oh my gosh... she told one girl she had a pet goat that was blind and she told another girl she had spent the summer living in a Tibetan monastery! Where ever did she come up with that stuff?

Considering four of us were living in fairly close quarters, we all got along amazingly well, but I was worried about January. As I said, we were both from Spartanburg, South Carolina and had actually attended high school together. We weren't close friends... January was actually two years younger than I. She was unbelievably bright and had skipped a couple of grades in elementary school. So we knew each other well enough as we had shared many classes, but she didn't really hang out with anyone in our class. January was unbelievably kind and was always thinking about everyone but herself. But sometimes she seemed to withdraw into herself, like she had some deep, dark pain of which she dared not speak. She, like me, had no one there to help her move. She never spoke of her parents, and avoided any attempt at conversing about them. She would, however, talk lovingly about her younger siblings; she positively adored them. There was quite a big gap in their ages. Her little brother was eight, and her sister was six. She loved them fiercely and would write them letters all the time.

January was super busy going to school full time as well as working two jobs. She was burning the candle at both ends, and though she never complained about anything, I could sense there was something *so* not right with her. I tried once to open up a discussion, and she cut me off and said she didn't want to discuss it—end of story. So I respected her wishes, and we never discussed it.

Carlson, Cat, and I intended to pledge a sorority. January declined, saying she was too busy with work and school and wouldn't be able to afford it anyway. In the end, Carlson was the only one of us that actually pledged. Cat and I decided we were not cut out for it. Neither of us wanted to deal with the obligations that came with Greek life. Even though we didn't pledge a sorority, there were always parties and mixers going on and we met tons of people, male and female. The guys were pretty cool for the most part, but I was mostly interested in friendship versus dating. I wanted to focus on my classes, and with all the other things I had on my plate, dating just didn't seem to fit into the schedule.

One disappointment Cat and I shared was that we didn't have much time to get to the park to hike or backpack. Cat and I laughed about it because initially we swore we would try to go every other weekend. In early November, we both realized that we had only gone one time, and we had completely missed the colorful leaf season. We promised each other we wouldn't let that happen in the spring.

Chapter 4

It was hard to believe I was nearing the end of my first semester in college. Thanksgiving was in a couple of weeks, and then two weeks later we would be heading home for the Holidays. Finals were just around the corner, and I was expecting to be studying around the clock.

“Hey, Cat! How about hitting the park this weekend? I would love to get away before all the Holidays craziness starts.” I had just come in from the library, and I dumped my books on my desk.

“Hello! Are you crazy? We have that semi-formal dance on Saturday!” she said. Cat was stretched out her bed studying.

I checked the calendar. “Oh, no, I forgot about that!” I threw myself across my bed.

“What are you gonna wear? And who are you going with?” Cat wanted to know.

“Jonathon. Oh my gosh, I need to go shopping! I don’t have a thing to wear. I hope Jonathon doesn’t mind dancing with Gimpy over here. I just hate dancing; it’s so humiliating! Not to mention I look like a complete moron,” I rambled. I must have been making a ridiculous face because Catherine started laughing.

“Oh, come on now! Fess up already! You know you love it. I know you do. You have become quite the show girl.” She was referring to my dancing antics. I was such a horrible dancer that I had taken to exaggerating my movements for the fun of it.

“I really can’t figure you out, though.”

I rolled my eyes at her.

She continued, “You’re so athletic. I mean you’re a natural at any sport you attempt, graceful, in fact. One would think you’d be pretty decent at dancing. You know, you *have* to have some kind of rhythm if you can waltz across a soccer field the way you do. I *SO* don’t get it.” She let loose a big sigh. “In any case, you will definitely have a blast with Jonathon. He’s so sweet and *so* easy on the eyes too. Since he’s seriously in love with you, he won’t care a bit when you squash his feet!”

“Would you please stop it with the ‘he’s in love with you’ stuff already?” I barely knew the boy. “Besides, like I always say, I’m just not interested in going out with anyone.”

“Whatever. You know I’m right about Jonathon though, even if you won’t admit it. What about all those texts you get from him?” Cat hopped off her bed and grabbed a bag of chips. “Want some?”

“Naw... he does send me a lot of texts though. Never really thought much about that. But, hey, do you want to go to town tomorrow? I’d like to get this over with. You know how I can’t stand shopping.”

“Sure thing. What time?” she asked, as she continued to crunch on the chips.

* * * * *

We headed to the local town of Sylva the next afternoon to look for dresses. Believe it or not, the town actually had a great clothing store for college girls. They had unusual things that you couldn't find in the bigger department stores.

I found a dress, shoes, and accessories in record time. It was a good thing too since shopping, in my humble opinion, was the antithesis of fun. My dress was a basic black, off-the-shoulder, cocktail number that was versatile enough to wear to a variety of functions. Since we had an hour to spare before we needed to head back, we wandered down the street to the local coffee shop to get a latte.

On the way there, Catherine noticed a strange man following us.

"Have you noticed that man following us down the street? I saw him before we hit the dress shop, but didn't think much of it. He's behind us again. It's kind of making me nervous."

"Don't worry. It's broad daylight, and there are two of us. Just think about it. This area attracts some weirdos anyway—you know how the mountains always do." I acted a bit more sure of myself than I actually was as we continued walking.

"Yeah, I guess you're right, and I'm just being paranoid."

We sat at the coffee shop for around forty-five minutes and then headed back to our car. Cat looked around to make certain that man was gone, but she was not pleased with what she saw.

"Maddie," she gasped, "there he is again." She put a death grip on my arm. "This is definitely starting to creep me out. What should we do?" she asked anxiously.

"Yeah, it is kind of creepy. I read somewhere once that if you were afraid of being followed, you should go directly to the police station. Do you know where it is?" I now shared Cat's apprehension, but I didn't want to alarm her.

"I think it's on the next block. I don't think it would be a good idea to go to our car. I don't want him to know what we're driving or what our tag number is."

"Good idea! Let's head to the police station."

When he saw our intended destination, he turned the corner and went the other way. We told the police about what happened, and they took down a description of him and escorted us back to our car. After that day, we never gave him another thought.

Big mistake... very big mistake.

* * * * *

The dance was a complete success, and it was way different than the few high school dances I had attended. Jonathon was the perfect date: sweet, gentlemanly, funny, and an excellent sport about getting his toes constantly trampled and saving me from nearly falling several times. He escorted me home, but I think he wished we had spent more time together that night.

When Cat came home, we recounted our evening.

“Jonathon is definitely hot after you. The word was out everywhere. All his friends kept asking me if I thought you were interested in him, as a, you know, someone to go out with. I told all of them that they would have to ask you and that I wasn’t your keeper. So, Maddie, what do you think about him?” she was yanking her dress off as quickly as possible.

“Oh, no!” I groaned. “I mean he’s really nice, sweet and all, a good sport, and pretty cute, but I just don’t want to go out with anyone yet. I don’t mind a date here and there, but I’m not interested in just one guy.”

“Maddie, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

She had that ‘you should’ve listened to me’ look in her eye.

“A blind person could notice that. My gosh, he practically drools whenever you’re around. What in the world are you running from anyway?” Cat demanded from me, as she pulled off her jewelry and threw it in her drawer.

“Nothing. I’m *not* running,” I insisted. “I just have my priorities. I think that school is more important, and I don’t want to have to dedicate time to having a boyfriend or anything. I have enough on my plate right now, and that would complicate things even more,” I explained as she raised her brow and gave me that ‘I don’t believe you’ look.

“Why don’t you just admit it, Maddie? Own up to the fact that you’ve erected a wall around yourself that’s twenty feet high and three feet thick. You won’t let anyone through no matter how great they are.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You know what I mean. Quit trying to pretend you don’t. You can fool yourself if you want to, but you can’t fool me,” Cat retorted.

“I’m not trying to fool anyone!” I exclaimed with exasperation.

“Oh, yeah? Then why won’t you even consider hanging out with anyone? Jonathon, by your own words, is a perfect gentleman. And he obviously thinks very highly of you, yet you won’t even give him a chance.”

“I told you why!” I exclaimed again. By this point, our voices had risen to the point of yelling at each other. “I don’t want to get involved with *anyone!*”

“Maddie, stop! If you won’t admit it, I’ll admit it for you. You’re afraid. You’re afraid you may actually like him and that he may like you.” Cat continued to badger me.

“No, that’s not it. You don’t understand. You can’t possibly understand,” I insisted.

“What? That you’re afraid of losing someone again? Is that it?” Cat was very perceptive. When I didn’t respond, she continued, “Maddie, if you don’t ever put yourself out there, you’ll always be alone.”

“Well, maybe it’s not so bad that way. I’ve made it this far, haven’t I?” I asked.

“Yeah, and look at everything you have. You know, you’re going to have to break down those walls sooner or later or you’ll be a lonely old woman someday,” she blasted back at me.

“What could you possibly know about loneliness?” I snidely asked.

“Not nearly what you know about it, but that’s not the worst, Maddie. The worst thing of all is that you have lost all faith and hope—faith in your fellow man and hope that your life can be everything you want it to be. You won’t let yourself feel either of them and when you’ve lost faith and hope, you’ve got nothing left. I feel sorry for you, Maddie, and not because of what you’ve already lived through. I pity you because you won’t have much of anything in the future without faith and hope.”

“I wish it were that easy, Cat; I really do.”

“And I wish you would change yourself so that you can really live again and not just go through the motions. You should be having the time of your life right now, living the dream and all, but you won’t let yourself. Don’t wait too long, Maddie; you’ll regret it.”

“How did you get to be so wise, Cat?” I asked. She said things to me that needed to be said, even though I didn’t want to listen to her.

“I’m not wise. I’m just observant. And I care about you like a sister. I want you to embrace life again and not just pretend you are. Can you promise me you’ll try?” Cat asked.

“Yes, I’ll try. But I can’t promise you any more than that. OK?” Cat nodded, and I continued, “Besides, I just don’t feel any chemistry with Jonathon, if you know what I mean. I think that’s my issue if you want the truth. Every guy that shows an interest in me leaves me with nothing but a blah feeling. Can you unzip this thing? I’m stuck.” I glanced up to see Cat standing there with her mouth hanging open.

“OMG, if he doesn’t blow your skirt up, I doubt anyone ever will! He is totally hot, and I just think you’re making excuses,” she chided as she grabbed the zipper and released me from my prison. “So, on a different note, what do you want me to tell Jonathon’s friends? I know my cell is going to be ringing off the hook tomorrow.”

“Yeesh! I hate this!” I yelled. “Just say that if they want to know they need to ask me! That will shut them up!” I picked up one of those pre-moistened facial cloths and started rubbing off my make-up. “And, for the record, I swear I’m not making excuses!” I said adamantly.

“If ya shay so. But it wouldn’t sprise me if dey all call ya. Ya know haw dey’ll keep afta you till ya tell dem sumtin,” she slurred out around her toothbrush and toothpaste.

“So what did you think about *your* date tonight?”

“Hang on.” Swish, rinse, ahh. “In a word: hot! No make that two words: really hot!”

“Shut up! I wouldn’t have known that by the way you were both draped over each other,” I teased.

“He was awesome! I had the BEST time!” she gushed, as her cheeks turned pink from excitement.

“Did you all hook up or anything?”

“Yeah, and he would have gone for more if I had let him. You know me, though, after my last disastrous experience, no encouragement in that area,” she added firmly.

“I wish they would just quit trying to do that; it gets so old. It seems like that’s the only thing they ever think of,” Maddie declared, rolling her eyes.

“Not all of them are like that, and Scott wasn’t like that at all. He was really nice about it, and I am definitely ‘in like’ a *whole bunch*. He’s supposed to call in the morning. He said something about lunch tomorrow,” Cat said excitedly. “I haven’t been this thrilled about a boy in, shoot, I can’t remember when!”

“Awesome! I hope he turns out to be exactly what you want. I’m going to crash; I can’t seem to keep my eyes open. Thanks, Cat. I know what you’re trying to do, and I really do appreciate it, even though I may act otherwise.”

“I know and just a little FYI: I WILL keep hounding you about this whenever the opportunity presents itself. I’m just warning you. Good night, Maddie,” Cat finished.

“Night,” I said as I switched off my light. As I lay there, I thought about everything Cat had said. She was right... one hundred percent dead on. I *had* built up a wall around myself for protection. I wouldn’t allow myself to feel emotional pain for anything. I had my fill of that. But, she was also wrong about something. I did not feel a thing for Jonathon... or any other boy I had been with for that matter. When Jonathon had kissed me, I might as well have been kissing a brick wall. There was nothing there for me... no sparks, no butterflies, nothing at all. Maybe there was something wrong with *me*, I thought as I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 5

Thanksgiving arrived, and Cat's family begged me to join them for dinner. After a ton of cajoling and enticing, I finally agreed. I didn't want to intrude on them but the thought of spending Thanksgiving alone, threw me back in time, to painful memories that brought the darkness upon me.

* * * * *

One Year Ago

Thanksgiving was around the corner, and I hadn't thought about it until the Monday before. We didn't have school from Wednesday on, giving everyone a nice break. Well, everyone except for me. I didn't have anywhere to go for the traditional Thanksgiving dinner. I think all my friends assumed I would be going somewhere, but in the end, since I had never learned to cook, I ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It *was* pathetic, but it was out of my hands. I decided that I had to make some kind of plans for Christmas. There was no way I could do a repeat of this. It was simply too depressing.

The Friday after Thanksgiving, I decided to keep up our family tradition and buy a fresh tree. I went to the place by the YMCA, where we always got our tree and picked out a really pretty one. I had the man tie it to the roof of my jeep so that I could drive the six blocks home. When I got it home, though, I had to get my neighbor to help me get it in the house. It was simply too heavy for me to do on my own. I had a doozy of a time trying to get it straight in the stand. After it fell over a time or two (well, maybe more like ten), I finally had it looking pretty decent. Ok, it wasn't great, but it would do.

I pulled the decorations out of the attic and put some Christmas carols on, determined to make this a happy event for myself. Christmas had always been my favorite time of year, so I wanted to keep the great memories flowing. That sure did backfire though. After I got the lights strung and started hanging ornaments, I began thinking about the presents we normally had under the tree, and that's when the tears started to flow.

Quit feeling sorry for yourself, Maddie, I kept saying. But in the end, that's not why I was so miserable. The dark cloud of heartache had imprisoned me, and I was saddened by thoughts of all the Christmases I wouldn't have with either of my parents. I realized that it wasn't the holiday that I had always craved, but it was the closeness of the family relationships that I loved so much. I turned off the music and the tree lights and went up to my room. A week before Christmas, I took down the tree. It had become a symbol of something I could never have and made it nearly unbearable for me to walk in the room where it stood.

On Christmas Day, I woke up at five in the morning and decided to go for a run. I desperately needed to get out of the house, and I knew running would offer me an escape. As I made my way to the street, I could see a few houses in the neighborhood coming to life. Through the windows I saw glimpses of lights turning on and figures moving back and forth. I imagined the little ones were waking up and dashing to the tree to check out what Santa had left them. Oh, how I envied them. It was still dark out, so I decided to peep in one of the windows of my neighbor's house. I know—kind of creepy and all—but my desire to be near someone and watch their joy on Christmas morning overrode any hesitations I may have had.

The little kids were flying around, their cheeks pink with excitement. I could see their frustrated parents trying to calm them down so that there would be some sense of order. Chaos ruled in the end, and the little ones had a blast, wrapping paper and toys flying everywhere.

When the sun started to lighten the sky, I backed away, afraid of being discovered, like a peeping tom. I didn't have the energy for a run anymore, so I went back home and changed clothes so that I could attend the early church service. I slipped in at the last moment and sat in the back row to avoid seeing anyone. I didn't pay much attention to the service. I simply reminisced about the previous Christmas when I sat there with my dad. When it was over, I realized I had barely heard a word.

I couldn't endure going home, so I drove around town for a while. Eventually, I ran out of places to go and ended up back at my house. I changed once again into some exercise clothing and headed down to the woods. I decided I would stay there as late as I possibly could. I ran and ran and ran until my legs felt like dead weight and my lungs were on fire. I ran to chase away the demons, to forget about being alone, to remember the good times, and to release all of my sadness. I ran until I couldn't run another step. I ended up on the big bridge over Lawson's Fork Creek and sat there until it started getting dark.

I had lots of conversations that day with God, my parents, and the grandparents I never met. I begged for their help, because somehow, I knew there was a reason for all of this, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what it was.

It was an oddity because when my dad was still alive, I always thought our lives were so full of everything—friends, family, love and so on. I never thought about it only being the two of us, never thought about not having any relatives to visit or cousins with whom to hang out. I was always so happy with him; it never dawned on me that being completely and totally alone was only a heartbeat, or lack of it, away.

The sun had set, and the darkness was rapidly encroaching when I pulled myself off the bridge and made my way home. I didn't have any idea how long I had sat there, but I was shivering from the cold. By the time I unlocked the back door, it was pitch black outside. I was not the least bit sad to kiss that Christmas goodbye. I decided that day I would not spend another Christmas in that house. I was going to call the attorney, Mr. Dennis, to find out what I needed to do in order to sell it. I had to move away from there. I would buy a condo or rent an apartment or something. There were too many memories there. I needed to move forward in my life, and I knew I wouldn't be able to if I stayed there.

Life could really suck. I thought it was awful when my mom died, but this was much worse. There were no words to explain it. I was in a place that I hated, but I seemed helpless to change anything.

I made the decision then to head up to the mountains the next morning. I would go on a two or three day hike. I would start at Newfound Gap and head toward I-40. Getting out of Spartanburg was a must. It would be a great escape and help divert my thoughts away from the holidays. In fact, this would be my plan for all of my Christmases in the future. The time had come for me to move forward and make my life my own, with a new future, one that wasn't overshadowed and burdened by the past.

My time in the mountains was excellent and upon my return, I put the ball in motion to move and surround myself with new things. I was quickly approaching graduation and the thoughts of establishing a new life for myself was uplifting. I was fortunate enough to be financially set, as my dad had ensured that with his investments and life insurance. I wouldn't have to worry about finances for college, living expenses and would most likely have a nice nest egg for the future.

* * * * *

I yanked myself back to the present. My flashbacks tended to put me in a funk so I was relieved when I felt the darkness begin to lift. I was eager to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with Cat's family; it would be something new and different for me. I would follow her to Asheville after classes finished on Tuesday and stay until Friday, when I would head down to Spartanburg, to check on things back home.

The Newman residence was wickedly wild on Thanksgiving, and I absolutely loved it! I had never experienced anything like it—a big change from all my past Thanksgivings. There were four kids in their immediate family, with Cat being second in line. She had two brothers and one sister. Then her five cousins and aunt and uncle were there, along with her grandparents. It was quite an event. Her mom was totally calm, cool and collected. I didn't know how she managed it all.

All the women pitched in with the food. Cat's grandmother brought the mashed potatoes, the sweet potato crunch and two pumpkin pies with homemade whipped cream. Her aunt made green beans and corn soufflé, and she also brought homemade biscuits and rolls.

Cat's mom made everything else—turkey, stuffing, gravy, and all the fixings, plus a homemade chocolate pound cake. It was all so wonderfully delicious. I couldn't remember ever being that happy... and stuffed!

We had a blast that night playing all kinds of games, and we ended staying up until two in the morning. I adored Cat's family. They were such warm people, and I envied their closeness. I would have to remind her of that when we got back to school. When my head hit the pillow that night, I felt like Harry Potter when he visited the Weasley's. It was warm fuzzies all the way.

We woke up the next day around noon. I felt more relaxed than I had in forever. This visit with the Newmans had been the most perfect time ever. I hated to think of leaving, but I needed to head to Spartanburg since I hadn't been there since August. That afternoon I was headed home down I-26 for the rest of the weekend.

After all the activity in my dorm and all the noise and mayhem at the Newman's, the silence at my house was a bit unsettling. I had so gotten used to having people around that I found myself craving the activity and commotion.

Chapter 6

When Sunday finally arrived, I was more than ready to head back to Western. Catherine had beaten me back. I noticed her car in the parking lot. I grabbed my stuff out of my car and ran up to my room, colliding with Cat as she was headed out the door.

“Hey! Where are you headed?”

“I’m gonna grab a pizza. Wanna come?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m starving.”

We headed to the local pizzeria and caught up on our weekend.

“So how was it?” Cat asked.

“Oh, it was nice to see all my friends, but the house was scary lonely. The other thing, I don’t feel like I have as much in common with my friends anymore. And, if you can even believe this, I missed you!” I said.

“Hey... what do you mean ‘if you can believe this’? I can’t understand why everyone doesn’t miss me!”

“Shut up! What about you? Did you have fun?”

“Well, after beating up my brother a time or two, I guess it was ok.”

“Hey, I’d trade with you in a heartbeat any time. Don’t knock it,” I admonished.

“Just kidding! No, really, I missed you too. And I had fun with my fam. They’re good peeps for sure. They all loved you, by the way.”

“Tell ‘em I feel the same. They’re awesome! It was great being with you all for Thanksgiving. Cat, I don’t think I’ve ever had such a great one.

Cat was fidgeting with her napkin, twisting it around, and I sensed something was on her mind.

“What’s up? I can read you like a book.”

“That obvious, huh?”

“Yeah. What’s going on?”

“My parents want me to move back home and go to UNCA, University of North Carolina at Asheville.”

“What?” I was dumbstruck and felt the beginnings of panic begin to course through me.

Cat's parents were tight for money and didn't know if they could afford her tuition and boarding expenses. They thought it would be a better decision for the family if she would move back home. I could see how upset she was, and she was trying her best not to show it.

"Can you apply for scholarship money?" I inquired.

"I've already done that, and I'm also applying for financial aid. But I don't know if I can swing it. They said they would help me with tuition, but that they can't help me with my room and board. So, basically, I'm screwed."

"No, let's think about it. I can help you. I have money, Cat. I can loan it to you, and you can repay me whenever—no time frame or anything. No interest either. I... you can't leave here." I reached across the table and squeezed her hands. "You are my only family, and I've just found you. You can't leave me now," I said brokenly. I was heartsick by the prospect of Cat not being here. I couldn't stand the thought of it.

"Hey, Maddie, don't be upset. Ok? I don't want to leave you, but I can't take your money either," she said sadly.

I felt like a jerk. Here she was trying to comfort *me!*

"What about a job?" I asked.

"Now, there's a thought," she said sarcastically. "Maddie, even with a job, I couldn't afford all of this."

"So, what are you saying? Are you definitely out for next semester?"

"No, not definitely... yet, anyway."

"I'm sorry, Cat. And I'm sorry about being so selfish about this. I shouldn't be thinking about how sad I'll be without you. I should be thinking about how sad you are over this situation. I really do wish you'd let me help financially though. Can't you talk to your parents about it? We could even do it officially. I would have my attorney draw up papers and all. Can you just think about it?" I pleaded.

"Ok, I'll talk with my parents about it and see what they think."

"Promise?"

She nodded.

"That's a deal!" I said, feeling a bit better about things. I knew I could find a way to convince her to let me lend her the money.

Cat continued by telling me her family wanted me to return for the Christmas Holidays or, at the very least, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. They were unwavering about me being alone on those days. Cat told me that her parents said that if I didn't agree to it, they would come to Spartanburg and drag me back to Asheville.

It was hard for me to think about Christmas; my mind was locked into the fact that there was a strong possibility Cat wouldn't be returning to school as my roommate, and that thought

was disturbingly unsettling to me. I would not allow my mind to wrap itself around that suggestion. I tried not to be selfish. Cat had become family to me, and I was not going to give that up.

I numbly responded to her that Christmas had become my day for backpacking. It's where I had decided to celebrate it, so maybe I could come to Asheville afterward. I had even thought of going down to the Keys after hitting the mountains for a change of scenery.

And then I remembered, "Oh, before I forget. You and I are finished with finals on the same day: the 12th. Do you want to go on a two-nighter backpacking trip? It'll be awesome because all the foliage is gone so the views will be phenomenal. What do you think?"

Catherine answered back glumly, "I doubt I can. My mom has me lined up to get my *WISDOM TEETH* out that week... I think on the thirteenth. YUCK! I am so mad at her! We argued about that all weekend too. I had a pretty crummy break now that I think of it." Cat scarfed up the last bit of pizza.

Regrettably, I answered, "I'm sorry. I had my wisdom teeth out the summer before last. It's not too bad once you get past the first couple of days. You'll be fine in no time. And thanks for the Christmas invitation. Let me think on it a bit, and I'll let you know. I just don't want to be an intrusion, you know. Maybe it would be best if I came for New Year's instead," I said.

* * * * *

A week passed, and then we were up to our necks preparing for final exams. This was our first experience with this, and we were both edgy about everything. We didn't quite know what to expect, and listening to everyone who had been through it, we were getting ready to run the gauntlet. Neither of us was looking forward to it, but we both wanted to get through it and move on.

We basically lived at the library, staying up too late, existing on too little sleep, too much caffeine, and Red Bull.

We both finished on the same day and felt pretty positive on what our grades would be. I was hoping for A's in everything but Chemistry. I'm pretty sure I ended up with a B in that class.

Cat was headed back to Asheville, but we went out to lunch before she left. She had not made a decision yet, but the deadline was drawing painfully closer.

"Just so you know, Cat, the offer still stands if you need the money. I'm one hundred percent serious. If you really want to come back here, I can definitely swing it. I already spoke with my attorney, and he can draw up legal documents. But I want you to know that you need to base your decision on what *you* want... not what anyone else wants," I explained.

"Thanks, Maddie, you're the best," was all she said. And then, "Well, I guess I'd better hit the road. I have to get these teeth yanked out in the morning. You still going backpacking?"

"I'm just going to go for Christmas, and then I'll see you on New Year's Eve. Ok?"

"Sounds great. Have fun up there and be careful. If you change your mind about Christmas, the door will be open for you." We walked back to the dorm, and Cat hopped in her car and took off.

I watched her drive away and thought that she was the greatest thing in the world. She was the sister I never had... the family I didn't have. I went upstairs and started packing to go home.

My plans would be to go up to the mountains on Christmas Eve, stay two days, head back down and drive to the Florida Keys. I would stay there for a few days and then head up to Asheville, in time for New Year's Eve.

Chapter 7

Darryl Carter was a highly trained marksman, a skill he had pick up early in life. Born and raised in the mountains of West Virginia, his parents were, by all standards, brutal child abusers. His father forced him to practice his shooting skills beginning at the age of five. He was so small he could barely hold up a rifle. If he didn't make his mark, he would have to endure a beating that would incapacitate him for days.

"Son, real men don't *ever* miss. I'm gonna make sure you don't forget that," his father would sneer. The beatings would begin after that. Not only did Darryl learn how to become the most accurate of marksmen, he was also as steady as a concrete post. He could stand for hours and not move a muscle, also courtesy of his constant beatings.

Darryl's mother wasn't any better. She was usually drunk by noon, so if he came inside nursing his wounds after a beating from his father, she would pick up where his father left off. He had the worst kind of upbringing anyone could imagine. He learned to isolate himself from anyone and anything, and he became an expert at hiding his pain and emotions for fear of enduring more abuse.

The last thing Darryl learned was how to be cruel to others. You could say he came by it honestly. He never had any friends in school. He was a true loner. Early on the kids would make fun of him. However, as he got older, his own cruel streak emerged, and they began to fear him. He thought nothing of waiting for a solitary child walking home from school so that he could make his move. He would twist arms, kick, punch, and steal money. He also had a knack for being cruel to the local animals. You didn't dare ever tell Darryl you had a pet dog or cat. He would find a way to make the animal disappear, only to turn up dead on your front porch days later. He was also known to use this threat as a way to get money from you. Yeah, Darryl was a cruel bully.

It came as no surprise to most folks when Darryl left town and never returned. What they didn't realize was that Darryl actually joined the military. Because of his talent as a marksman, he was quickly channeled to the Green Berets, and then, he became a sniper as a part of the Special Forces. Unfortunately, Darryl had become brilliant at hiding his twisted nature, so his superiors were unaware of his warped mind.

The most regrettable part of all was that Darryl ended up with the kind of survival training that is usually reserved for the most competent of men. He could live in the woods for days on end and survive on barely any food. He learned to live off the land and endure extreme temperatures without the benefit of proper equipment. His comrades jokingly and, sometimes, jealously referred to him as a machine.

If there were ever any shooting competitions, Darryl would win. He never lost at anything, whether it was a training mission or just simple fun. He was so intense about everything; he truly acted like a well-oiled engine. He was both respected and feared by his fellow soldiers.

One other talent Darryl had was his skill with a crossbow. He could split an arrow in a bull's eye without even stopping to aim. He would bet the other guys that he could shoot a cigarette out of their mouths. Only after many shots of whiskey would they ever really let him try. He *never* failed... just another small gift from his loving father.

Darryl's military career ended abruptly when he was dishonorably discharged sometime during the war in Afghanistan. There was a skirmish in a mountain village, and some of his fellow soldiers witnessed him executing an entire group of women and children. The men claimed he did it dispassionately and without remorse. The Army could never prove anything but they wanted it hushed up. So, in lieu of pressing any charges, they discharged him and sent him home. Huge mistake!

Darryl returned to the States, but he never again set foot in West Virginia. He had nothing to go back to, since he never kept in touch with his parents. As far as they were concerned, he was as good as dead, and that was just fine with him.

Darryl first wound up in Alabama. His people skills were all but non-existent due to his psychopathic nature, so getting a job of any sort wasn't likely. He thought about the mountains in the northern part of the state. He had heard several soldiers from that area talk about them. He took to the woods and stayed there for a while, but then, he moved on to Northern Georgia. It was there the killing began.

He was out on a "mission." Somewhere over the past several years, living in the forest without any real contact with humanity, his true psychosis took root and fully developed, and he imagined himself on missions in which he had orders to kill the enemy. The enemy would be any kind of young woman he would find alone. He would hear his superiors telling him these young women were dangerous, and they wanted to kill his comrades. His mission was to take out the "targets." So began his serial killings of innocent young victims, completely unaware of the monster he was.

He would usually find them hiking or running alone on trails that were devoid of most crowds. He would render them unconscious and hold them captive until he deemed it was time to terminate them. It was never an easy death for the young victims. Torture was usually part of his plan, because he imagined he needed to get information from them, needed them to "talk." They, of course, would have no idea what he wanted from them. They would beg and plead to no avail. The whole process would take several days, when finally, they would be begging for death. He was quite gruesome with them at times, taking the opportunity to explain to them exactly what he intended to do.

The authorities could not find him because his Special Forces training made him an expert on covering his tracks. He was also highly proficient at tracking the authorities. He could discern their every move, so it made it quite simple for him to evade them. It was as if he had been born to do this very thing.

The killings continued, escalating in numbers. He would stalk his "prey" and attack when they least expected it.

He stayed mainly in the Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee area, but he was on the move constantly. Sometimes, he would venture down into Mississippi or even Louisiana, but his favorite was Tennessee. He felt more at home there. He would oftentimes find farms where he could steal small animals for food.

It was only a matter of time when he decided to roam into the mountains of North Carolina. He imagined the many opportunities in this uncharted territory. Darryl recognized the need to be covert, and his missions in Tennessee had been attracting the attention of others. Thus, he deemed it necessary to find somewhere else to continue his duties.

He was thrilled with the prospect of exploring the Smoky Mountain National Park. Most of his time was spent surveying the trails and familiarizing himself with the area. His travels took him all over the park, from Lake Fontana to Forney Creek, Hazel Creek to Oconoluftee, and out to I-40. He often found himself up around Mt. LeConte and took a real liking to that area. It was fairly close to the Appalachian Trail, so he would have a good in and out access route. He loved the Appalachian Trail as it gave him access to virtually the entire Eastern United States.

* * * * *

Darryl Carter pulled into the town of Sylva, North Carolina, shortly before Thanksgiving. The town was small with a population of about 2400. The setting was idyllic in that it was in the heart of the Great Smoky Mountains, surrounded by majestic views. Darryl did not notice any of that. He was on a scouting mission. He was intent on looking for potential prey, a young female unaware of her surroundings. Sylva was a good place to focus on, because it had the draw of being in the mountains, which attracted all the hikers. It was also only a few miles from Western Carolina University. This was a Mecca for young females that loved the outdoors. Yes, this was going to be a great place for Darryl to hunt and to accomplish more “missions.”

He spent some time wandering around the town and hanging out at some of the coffee shops. He ventured to the university a few times just to see what kind of targets he would have. He found a couple of internet cafes where students would hang out and socialize. He was getting a very positive feeling about this place.

One afternoon, he found himself walking along the streets of downtown Sylva when he spotted two females that matched up perfectly to the kind of game he wanted to hunt. Yes, those two were exactly the type he'd been searching for. They looked to be wholesome, not those kind of trashy city girls that wore pounds of make-up on their faces. These girls were not fancy but just plain pure; they were precisely what he wanted.

He followed them from one store to another and decided he'd sit and wait for them to come out. He didn't figure they'd notice him because they'd been busy chatting to each other. Darryl never could quite figure out how women could talk so much; sometimes, he wished they'd just keep their mouths shut. After he watched these two for a spell, he decided it was time to start tracking them.

Suddenly, Darryl felt like someone was watching him. That one girl with the blond hair started looking his way. He should have kept his distance, but he didn't figure they'd see him follow them. He was wrong. Damn. They kept walking and headed straight for the police station. It was time to hightail it out of town. He would have to change his plans and head up to the mountains and hide out for a while. Darryl didn't really mind that. He was a patient man, and being patient brought a better prize.

He quickly made his way back to his car and drove straight up to the park on US-441. When he got to the Oconoluftee Ranger Station, he turned right and parked his car in an obscure spot on a dirt road. He got out and went to the back of the car and removed his license plate. He didn't need to worry about the car's VIN; he had scratched that out a long time ago. He grabbed his registration from inside the car, and then he retrieved all of his gear. This included a backpack filled with his survival tools, food and sleeping bag. It also held a small camp stove with a tiny tank of propane, some water purification tablets, a headlamp, a good

length of rope, matches, and all of his ammunition, including six loaded clips for his 10 mm semi-automatic Glock and twelve aluminum broad head arrows for his crossbow.

He put on his camo pants and made sure his holster was in place. Next came his jacket, then a black hat pulled down low on his head, and finally, his pack. Darryl made sure his water bottles were full, slung his crossbow over his shoulder, and took off up the mountain.

He was feeling a little down because he had really built up his hopes for those pretty girls he saw back in town. He figured he would have to put that on hold for the time being and focus on the woods. With any luck, he would find something that interested him. He was getting itchy for a good hunt, and he knew this time of year could put a real damper on things. He'd just have to be patient.

If things got too bad, he could always go chase after a bear or something. Animals could be fun to hunt, but they had an uncanny knack of knowing their end was near. That was one of the reasons Darryl liked to hunt young women; he simply liked to hear them plead for their survival.

Darryl made his way over to the Smokemont Campground. He checked things out there to see if any campers had shown up, but no such luck. From there, he decided to take the Hughes Ridge Trail up to the Appalachian Trail. He figured if he was to have any luck, it would be on the AT. People hiked that trail all the time, and it was so popular that most folks felt perfectly safe there even if they were alone. There were rustic lean-to shelters scattered along the AT, and this time of year, he had a good chance of running into a lone backpacker up there. This was a good thing for Darryl.

He could feel his excitement mounting with every step that took him closer to his goal. He didn't pay much attention to his surroundings but had his ears tuned in for any kind of sound that would indicate he wasn't alone. He eventually made it up to the shelter at Peck's Corner and was not to be awarded with any kind of prize, as the shelter was empty.

His anger started to surface. He had built his hopes up for this, and now he was going to have to settle for a good night's sleep—that is if he could calm his anger enough to even go to sleep. He finally willed himself to calm down enough to make something to eat and bed down for the night.

Darryl awoke with a start. The sun was just beginning to lighten the sky. At first, he couldn't remember where he was, and then, it all came to him. His mood shifted back to excitement as he had a new day of hunting to look forward to. He fixed some breakfast, packed up and headed out. He decided to head toward I-40 to see what was going on in that direction. He ended up staying on the Appalachian Trail for several weeks. The weather had turned fairly cold, and he could tell winter would be settling in for good. He knew it must have been getting close to the Christmas season because that's when he would be out here and not pass a single person. He looked at the date on his watch, and sure enough, it was December 21st. He decided to turn around and head back in the direction of Mt. LeConte.

It took him a few days to get back to that vicinity. He got to Charlie's Bunion, and it was completely deserted. He thought that maybe he'd sit there for a spell. It was still early, and he was hoping that maybe there would be some activity here. Charlie's Bunion was a popular place, and you could get there on a day hike from the parking lot at Newfound Gap. Most

folks might not get up there until noon. After several hours of waiting, his patience started wearing thin, so he decided to move on.

He made a decision to head straight up to Mt. LeConte. He decided that he would make camp there and use it as a base. He felt pretty confident that eventually someone would come up there. If that someone looked like they would be good “game” for the hunt, he would go for it. If not, he would just wait for the right opportunity. It wasn’t like he had to be on a schedule. This was his time, and he would use it as he saw fit.

A couple of days had passed, and Darryl remained camped out up there waiting for the perfect opportunity. He would soon be rewarded for his patience.

* * * * *

It was getting close to noon the next day when Darryl made a circuit of some of the nearby trails. He was out scouting the area when he heard the snapping of twigs and the rustling of leaves. He made his way into the brush and was rewarded with a fabulous sight. There, in all her glory, was a pretty young woman out on the trail—it was that same girl he’d seen back in Sylva. She had deep red hair, and she was a real looker. She was one of the pair of girls he’d been tailing that headed to the police station that day. Boy, this was going to be a special hunt. This one was even geared up for an overnight. He could tell by the size of her backpack. She seemed to be at ease with her surroundings, but best of all, she had absolutely no idea she was being watched.

As Darryl watched her pass from his position in the rhododendron thicket, he began to feel an adrenaline surge. His heart rate increased, and he made himself concentrate on controlling his breathing. He didn’t want to give himself away... not yet anyway. He needed to track her to assure himself that she was truly alone. He would find out soon if the hunt would be on.

Darryl followed the young woman for several miles. She appeared to be deep within her thoughts, as she never even suspected she wasn’t alone. He decided he would circle around so that he could approach her from ahead. He always liked his prey to see him and get a good look at him before he struck. One of his biggest thrills was to see the initial fear in their eyes when they realized they were in danger.

About a mile up the trail, Darryl made his move. Funny thing was, she didn’t even notice him until he was almost directly in front of her. When she looked up, Darryl was given the greatest gift from her: a look of true terror came into her eyes. He knew this was going to be one of the greatest of days of his life.

Chapter 8

I left home early on the morning of Christmas Eve and headed toward the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. After going through Cherokee, North Carolina, I drove directly to Newfound Gap. I marveled at the beauty of this place as I drove. *I will never get tired of these views*, I thought to myself. Winter was really my favorite time up here. You could see for miles and miles without any obstruction from the foliage on the trees. Yeah, it could get pretty chilly at night, but with the right gear, you could be very comfortable.

As my mind wandered that day, I thought about what I would do if I ever had to move away from here. I didn't think I could do that. My hopes and dreams were to one day live very close to this very place.

I parked my car and had to laugh. I was the only car in the entire parking lot. In the summer and fall months, you couldn't get close to this place for all the crowds. I was really going to enjoy this! I double-checked to make sure I had my camera with me.

I hopped out of the car, put all my gear on, grabbed my hiking poles and took off straight up the Appalachian Trail. I knew I had passed the time where I would run into any through hikers, the ones that hike the entire 2000 plus miles from Georgia to Maine, or vice versa. They were usually gone by the end of November. It takes about six months to hike the entire trail and hikers usually try to avoid the winter months for obvious reasons. Someday, I wanted to be able to make that claim of being a through hiker. That was a goal of mine.

Oh, how I loved the solitude out here. I was really in my element. This was going to be a much better holiday for me this year.

I was always in awe of all the wildlife. I started thinking about everything Dad and I had seen out here. My favorite was always the black bear. Some people were scared to death of them, but they were only dangerous in extremely rare occasions. My dad made sure to make sure I remembered to never approach a cub if I wanted to live! I loved seeing the little red fox too.

It seemed like no time at all, and I had hit the junction of the Appalachian Trail and the Boulevard Trail. I took the Boulevard Trail and continued on. I started thinking about Catherine and what she was missing. I hoped her wisdom teeth extraction went well. I was glad it wasn't me going through that!

I continued making my way up to Mt. LeConte, enjoying the scenery. The views were spectacular now with all the leaves gone. It seemed like I could see for miles and miles. I finally made it up to the campsite at LeConte to find that I was the only one up there, as I suspected I would be.

I pitched my tent and got everything set up to get my dinner ready. I laid out my sleeping pad and bag and made sure I had plenty of water before it got dark. I ate my dinner of macaroni and cheese and apple crumb cheesecake. They were both the dehydrated kind, but they were very tasty. I was always amazed at how great food tasted when you were on the trail. I cleaned everything up, and then I took out all the clothing I would need for the night. I brushed my teeth and then closed up my backpack, put the waterproof cover on it, and strung

it up on the cables for the night. The chance of bears being out this time of year was close to nil, but I never took any chances.

I climbed in my sleeping bag, pulled out my iPad and started reading. Before long, exhaustion took over, and I fell asleep. I always got the best sleep when I was on the trail.

When I opened my eyes in the morning, the cold had penetrated my tent. I was glad I had worn my Smart Wool to bed. I was as warm as could be, but nature was calling so I was going to have to get up to use the facilities, which was a very rustic outhouse up here.

I threw on my boots and jacket and unzipped my tent... and had a glimpse of my first white Christmas ever. I could not even believe my eyes! I was so excited that I ran around like a three year old. The snow was at least three inches deep and it covered everything, including my tent, like a thick, white blanket. I made a snow angel on my way to the outhouse and also stuffed a handful of the white fluff into my mouth. It was absolutely the most perfect Christmas morning. I immediately thought of Cat and how excited she would be to see this. Then, I thought of Dad and how he would have loved this.

I ate my breakfast sitting in the doorway of my tent, looking out over the beauty of everything. It was so peaceful up here. I hated to leave, but I wanted to head over to Peck's Corner for my second night, and I was also really excited to hike in the snow. It would make for some excellent pictures, and I planned to take bunches. I had already been snapping my camera every couple of minutes. I captured a great shot of a little rabbit in the snow earlier, and with any luck, I would see more animals as I moved along.

I finished my breakfast, packed up everything and broke down my tent. A short time later, I was ready to move out, and it was then I thought about the trail being covered up. I headed in the direction of the trail, and I suddenly noticed a set of footprints in the snow easing down the trail. "Amazing," I thought as I followed them. They headed straight down the Boulevard Trial. It was as if they had been made especially for me. I didn't give it any more thought as I followed them.

I continued on down the trail, relishing in the spectacular beauty of my own personal winter wonderland. I took tons of pictures and continued on my merry way.

I was lost in my thoughts when I became aware of the change. It wasn't anything I saw or even heard, for I had not been paying attention. It was more of a sensation, the whisper of the air, the rustle of a fringe of pines. The hairs on the back of my neck were at full attention. I couldn't believe how careless I had gotten.

Daddy would not have been happy with me. Of everything he had taught me, awareness was his most important lesson.

"Always be aware of your surroundings, sweetheart. It can save you a lot of misery," he would say.

Daddy taught me to use my senses. "All of them, Maddie, not just sight and sound. Yes... listen for the snap of a twig, the rustle of a leaf, or the whisper of the pines. They can tell you a lot—what the upcoming weather is or if you need to get out of the way of a bear. But don't ever forget about your sixth sense, your intuition, your gut feelings. If you think it's not safe, then it most likely isn't."

In that moment of time, I knew I was NOT safe. I looked up to see a man approaching on the trail in front of me. How I had not seen him before, I was uncertain.

Fear gripped my heart, as my eyes met his icy cold ones. I gasped slightly, unsure of what to do or say. A slight smirk briefly crossed his face, and that chilled my heart even more.

He nodded once, as if to say, hello, and continued on the path in the opposite direction that I was going.

I attempted to regain my composure, and I turned around to see what direction the man had decided to go, but he was gone. This was even more disconcerting.

After taking several deep breaths in an attempt to calm my nerves, the fear still would not subside. I shook my head once, twice, and tried to clear my thoughts.

With a blur of motion, I was flat on my back, having been pulled from behind. Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw a flash. I would soon discover that it was the sunlight glinting off the blade of a knife.

One look in his cruel, emotionless eyes told me I was in grave danger. My blood ran cold. He was evil personified. I could feel it radiating from him—deep, dark evil. My sixth sense was in an abnormally heightened state. My heart rate accelerated until I felt it would explode right out of my chest.

He was a large, stout man. Not fat by any means, but muscular and thick. He was tall and dressed in army fatigues. In his hand was a huge hunting knife pointed directly at me. A crossbow slung was over his shoulder.

I began hearing voices in my head. I looked directly at him to find he wasn't speaking. I kept hearing the voices, and they were saying all sorts of horrifying things. It was as if his mind was projecting his thoughts to me.

This had happened to me once before... when I found out that my dad had died. I never told anyone for fear they would think I was crazy, and now it was happening again. Was he really thinking those things? If so, he intended to kill me, and those thoughts made me want to throw up. I became sick to my stomach. I knew I had to say something to try to dissuade him.

"What do you want? I don't have any money other than \$20. I'll give you that and my credit card. I can also tell you where my car is, and I'll even give you the keys. Please... just don't hurt me!" I begged.

"You're like all of them, offering me whatever they can and then begging for mercy. You know I'm not interested in that. Get up and let's go," he said.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

No answer. For no apparent reason, I began to laugh hysterically.

"What're you laughing at?" he inquired. "You better not be laughing at me if you know what's good for you." I could see this irritated him.

His anger intensified, as did the voices I was hearing. The next thing I knew, he landed a crushing blow directly to my right jaw that buckled me.

The force of the blow jolted me, and I fell forward. I hit the ground and couldn't seem to gather my wits about me. Suddenly, I realized he was crouching over me, and again, I saw the sun glint off the knife. Before I could move my head, he brought the knife down and slashed my left cheek with it. I remember thinking how he must have missed because I didn't feel any pain. Then I started to feel the warm stickiness of my blood as it ran down my cheek.

I brought my hand to my face to find it had been slashed from my ear to my nose. I was shaking uncontrollably from shock.

Who was this man? Why was he doing this? I was suddenly sick, bent over heaving.

He started circling me, much like an animal would his prey.

“That'll teach you not to EVER laugh at me! NOW get UP, or I'll do the same to your other cheek. MOVE it!”

“Please, I'm sick...” I began only to be backhanded across the face. I stumbled back to the ground and started to tremble.

I struggled to my feet and swayed with dizziness. It took me a moment to gain my balance. He started shoving me forward, so step by step I started moving.

The blood was still pouring out of the wound, so I tried to stem the flow of blood with the back of my hand.

It took us about another hour to reach our destination: LeConte Lodge. It was a cluster of rustic, primitive cabins, located on Mount LeConte, that was open from April to November. Since it was late December, there would be no help for me there.

We walked up to the main lodge, and he grabbed a fire log from the porch and broke a window, allowing him to unlock the door.

Once inside, I removed my backpack to get something to wipe off my face. He heard me, spun around and landed another blow to my right jaw. This time, I was sure I heard it break. I screamed from the excruciating pain. Waves of nausea rolled through me.

“Do NOT touch ANYTHING without my permission. Is that clear? Any more moves like that, and I'll put an arrow in you. You understand me?!” he screamed.

I quickly nodded my head. I was so terrified, and the waves of pain and nausea coursing through my body made it impossible to do otherwise. I lay there and prayed, for exactly what, I don't remember. I was trembling so much that it was making my head pound. I tried to cradle my head in my hands, but any kind of movement was pure torture. I closed my eyes and started to concentrate on my breathing. I told myself that I must get my wits about me. This man intended to kill me, and if I were going to survive, I would have to buck up and come up with some kind of a plan.

He left the main room, and I heard him rummaging through the kitchen looking for food, I guessed. I heard things banging around. I was still afraid to move because I was so unsteady

from the pain. I focused on breathing to calm myself because I was an inch away from blacking out, and if that happened, I knew I wouldn't have a chance.

He came back up to me and handed me a cloth. "Here, clean yourself up. You're a mess, and you look like hell. And stop crying... I hate a whiny-ass, and I'm not in the mood to hear you bawl. If you don't want another cut like the first one, you better not let me hear you make another sound."

A little cut? Is that what he considered this? It felt like my face was gaping open. I couldn't open my mouth. This monster just called all of this a little cut. I felt the fire coming back into my head. I was NOT going to let this crazy bastard take my life away. I would come up with something, somehow, somehow.

It was freezing in the lodge, as it should have been. Darkness was quickly descending, and the temperature had dropped precipitously. It was probably below freezing outside already, and I was beginning to shiver.

"Would it be possible for me to get my sleeping bag?" I asked him.

"Yeah, you can have it, but I'll get it out. No funny stuff," he said.

He dug into my pack. I hoped he wouldn't find my knife because that would have to be part of my plan. "Here you go." He tossed me my bag.

I unrolled it and got inside. I was now shivering so badly that my teeth were chattering, causing violent spasms of pain, and I couldn't think of a single thing except getting warm. I wondered what his next move would be. I was on edge, but I didn't want to open up a can of worms by asking him.

I stayed as still as possible and tried to calm myself with my breathing. I also started to formulate an escape plan.

There were three main trails leading down from LeConte Lodge: the Boulevard (the one I came up), Alum Cave Bluffs, and Trillium Gap.

I was very familiar with both the Boulevard and Alum Cave Bluffs. I had never hiked Trillium Gap, so that was out. I would have to go down one of the other two.

The Boulevard was about eight miles long but a more gradual descent. Alum Cave was only about six miles, but it was much steeper. With the snow and ice, I doubted I could make much better time on Alum Cave.

I chose the Boulevard. I would have to run most of it, but that would allow me to gain precious time.

I would wait for him to fall asleep. I had my bear spray in the cargo pocket of my pants. I would use that to disable him. I needed to get my knife out of my pack, along with my headlamp. I wouldn't make it very far without my light out there. I decided to try to get some sleep now so that I would have some reserves for when I tried to make my break. This had to work; it absolutely had to work. I knew if it didn't, I would certainly die up here.

I must have drifted off, because I suddenly felt someone nudging me. I opened my eyes to see him standing beside me. He offered me a drink of water.

“Drink. I want you around for a couple of days, and it’ll be much better if you’re not dehydrated.”

Considerate of him, I thought. I drank as much as I could before he grabbed the bottle away from me. Ten minutes later, I felt the room swimming around me. I started experiencing double vision, and that’s when I realized he drugged the water. Fear coursed through me. He saw it in my eyes and began laughing. That’s the last thing I remembered of that night.

Chapter 9

I awoke in a state of confusion, surfacing from a thick haze. My memory came flooding back in a rush, and I realized I was a prisoner.

My bludgeoned face was on fire, and my tongue was dry and swollen. I couldn't move my jaw or open my mouth, so now I had no doubt my jaw was broken. My cheek stopped bleeding sometime during the night. My sleeping bag was covered in dried blood, and my face felt like it was the size of a balloon.

I had to look at the positives though; I was still alive. My injuries, while painful, were not life threatening. My arms and legs were uninjured, so that gave me inspiration to continue with my escape plan.

I contemplated how I would put things in motion. Should I wait until his back was turned? I'm not sure how that would work since I needed to have a direct hit on his face with the bear spray. If I was even slightly off, that could mean precious minutes lost to me.

Seconds later, he headed toward me with some food. It wasn't possible for me to even get my mouth open, so I wondered how he imagined I would be able to eat. Then I realized he never intended to give the food to me. It was for himself.

He gave me a big smile as he started to take a bite. He ate and stared at me with those emotionless, evil eyes. It was very unsettling. I had this feeling he knew what I was thinking... knew about my plans for escape. I tried to look away, but I didn't seem able.

Suddenly, he stood up and walked away. Seconds later, he was headed back toward me holding a rope and a roll of duct tape.

"I'm heading out for a while. I've gotta scout out the area and see what's around. I'm gonna have to tie you up. You know I don't trust you to stay here," he said with a vicious smirk. I started hearing those voices again—nasty and terrifying thoughts about how he would torture and kill me.

I knew my time had come. I had to act NOW. It was daylight. I could get down the mountain without my headlamp, so I didn't need to get into my pack. My bear spray was in my pocket. As he began to unwind the rope, I slowly inched my hand into my pocket. I needed for him to get very close so that I could be 100% sure of having a complete hit. It would incapacitate him for at least 10 minutes. That would give me my head start.

He reached for me, and I released the spray on him. It was a direct hit in his eyes. He stumbled backward, fell to his knees and started screaming. He covering his eyes and howled in anger and pain. He was yelling profanities at me, but I couldn't tell what they were because I was out the door and running toward the trail.

I ran as fast as I could, careful all the way not to slip and fall. I couldn't afford to make a costly mistake. It wasn't long before my lungs started to burn as I continued to push on. I was thankful for it at first because it took my mind off of the stabbing pain my jaw was causing with each and every footfall.

I kept repeating to myself, “Only eight miles. I can do this in my sleep. Stay focused, Maddie.”

The burning in my lungs that I was initially thankful for soon turned into my mortal enemy. I somehow knew my lungs would explode soon if I didn’t slow my pace. My adrenaline rush was still in high gear, thankfully. It enabled me to push myself as hard as I could, even though I was gasping for every agonizing breath. Still, I knew I couldn’t take the chance of slowing my pace. This was better than the alternative that was undoubtedly chasing me by now.

I ran for what seemed to be hours, but in reality, only about fifteen minutes had elapsed. On the bright side, that put me at least a mile closer to my car and safety. I kept pushing myself forward. The pain in my jaw seemed to be easing a bit, most likely due to my desperation for safety. I started pondering about slowing down to see if I could hear him in pursuit, but my adrenaline wouldn’t allow me to do that quite yet.

I kept moving on at a steady pace. I had now been on the move for approximately one hour. I looked at my watch to gage the distance I had covered. At the pace I was pushing, I was probably covering about a mile every ten to fifteen minutes. That would put me about a third of the way down.

I was approaching a fairly tricky spot that would force me to slow down. It was a point where the trail narrowed to barely a single footpath that literally clung to the side of a mountain. With the recent snow, it became all the more hazardous. There was a thick cable nailed in the rock for hikers to grab as a handrail. I had been on this trail in the past when it was icy, and it could get extremely treacherous. I didn’t want to take any chances here and risk losing my balance or my footing.

I decided to slow down, and that’s when I heard a twig snap in the distance. I gasped with fear. The noise seemed to turn my legs to concrete, halting my ability to move. I forced my mind and, hence, my legs, into action. I started running again. I had made it about halfway across the danger zone when I felt a searing pain in my left calf. The force of the impact spun me around. I looked down and at first didn’t realize I was looking at an arrow in my leg.

A second later, I felt another searing pain; this time, it was in my chest near my left shoulder. I gasped, not so much from the pain, but from the sheer shock of it. It threw me off balance, and then, the pain hit, leaving me senseless. I looked in the direction from which the arrow came, but I couldn’t see anything. I could only guess he would be upon me in minutes.

I couldn’t put any weight on my leg, and then, I felt my left hand going numb and losing its grasp on the cable.

I started to panic. I became dizzy and lightheaded, and my feeble hold on consciousness began to slip. I tried to will myself to keep moving forward, but my legs ignored my commands. My foot slipped, and the cable began to slide out of my grasp.

In slow motion, I realized I was falling. Survival wouldn’t be possible here. The fall was at least thirty feet, and that was a conservative estimate. If the fall didn’t kill me, the freezing temperatures at nightfall and the wounds would... if my predator didn’t get to me first. The last thing I recall was scraping the side of the mountain, trying to grab onto anything to stop my fall, only to come up empty handed. I don’t remember hitting the ground—I must have lost consciousness by then.

Chapter 10

The mist swirled around in my brain, washing over me like an early morning fog in autumn. First there was darkness, stars, and then bright lights. At times, I could feel myself spinning. I awoke with a start and sucked in my breath. Had I dreamed this? The pain that ensued with each breath I took reminded me this was no dream. I couldn't move either of my legs. I lifted my head to try to see what had them trapped. I was lying on my right side. Where was I? What happened to me? When I lifted my head and saw the arrows, my memory came flooding back, like a giant wave crashing over me.

I knew I needed to do something... but I didn't know what. I took a try at pulling out the arrow in my chest, but the pain it created nearly made me lose consciousness again. I began talking to myself, convincing myself of the importance of staying awake.

I began to wonder how long I could survive like this... exposed to the elements... with no water, like wounded prey, waiting for the hunter to return. I knew I was at death's door.

Somewhere, in the recesses of my mind, I knew I *must* try my best to remove the arrows. I gritted my teeth against the pain and pulled as hard as I could on the one imbedded in my chest. I succeeded in pulling it partially out when I blacked out. I awoke, disoriented and dizzy, with pain hammering every fiber. When I remembered where I was, I lifted my head to look at the arrow once again.

I achieved my goal on the third attempt. It took everything I had, but the arrow came out, leaving a gaping hole of ragged, bleeding flesh. I held the offensive weapon tightly in my hand for no apparent reason. Then, I returned to the blackness that released me briefly from the grips of agony.

* * * * *

Everyone has defining moments in their lives, moments that they can recall with precise clarity the details that shaped them. I had several up until this point.

The first one was when my mother died. The second was the day my father died. Anyone I have ever met who has lost his or her mother will tell you how painful that loss was. In my case, the worst was the loss of my father. Maybe it was because I was such a tender age when I lost my mom, or maybe it was because it had only been my dad and I. In any case, the profound and abject misery I felt when he died will be carved in my memory forever.

I remember the announcement over the intercom... my physics teacher's slight nod to acknowledge my departure from class... the clicking sound of my heels as I walked down the tiled corridor... the cold feel of the door knob as I turned it to enter the principal's office... the looks of pity on the faces of those present... the smell of the principal's aftershave... the feel of the cold cloth on my forehead when I regained consciousness... the sounds of the emergency room... the antiseptic smell of the hospital... all the machines to which my dad had been hooked... the deathly pallor of his face. I remembered it all as if it had just happened... every single time I thought of it. What would happen to me in the next weeks would come to hold many more of those unforgettable defining moments.

* * * * *

I awakened again. She was standing about five feet from me, shrouded in a hazy mist. She reached toward me, and I started sobbing. Why did I have to start hallucinating now?

“Maddie, don’t cry. I’m here to help you. You *must* reserve your strength. Crying will only weaken you, and you can’t afford that now.” She placed her *warm* hand on my brow, soothing me. It was an odd sensation.

“Oh, for the love of God, Mom! Why do you have to show up now? I have spent so many hours thinking of you and wanting to talk to you. Why now? This is *so* not fair!” I whispered between sobs.

She replied, “I told you. I’m here to help you. You are... not in the best of situations right now.”

“Really, Mom?! Who’d have guessed? I’m dying, right? It’s ok, really, you can tell me. My life hasn’t exactly been a carnival ride, you know,” I whispered.

“Maddie, don’t say that. You cannot possibly want to die. You are destined for great things in your lifetime. You must believe that,” she scolded.

“I’d like to, Mom. I really would. But I can’t help disagree with you on that,” I muttered. “I never thought things would end up like this. You know something? If I’m going to die here, no one will ever know I’m gone for week or so. That’s the kind of life I have, and that’s not much to brag about.”

“Oh, Maddie, I’m sorry. You know it wasn’t our choice to leave you. It was not in our hands. There are much greater powers at work here.” Regret laced her words.

“I’m not *blaming* you. I know you and Dad would still be with me if you could. It’s just that life doesn’t mean a whole lot if you don’t have anyone with whom to share it. I’m just glad you’re here now, so I don’t have to die alone. You will stay with me, right? I mean I’m really scared,” I begged.

Her image seemed to become clearer as she continued to speak. “Maddie, listen to me. Help is coming. I’m not going to let you die. The man who hurt you turned away after you fell. He thought you had died. I’m here to see that everything is done to prevent that; trust me when I tell you great things await you if you’ll only be patient a bit longer.”

“Mom, I can’t feel my legs. I don’t get it. They should be killing me. I’ve been shot, right? I pulled one of those arrows out, but I don’t think I can get the one in my leg. My head and my face are killing me too. What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I feel my legs?” I could feel myself panting from exertion.

“Maddie, just stay calm. Take slow deep breaths for now,” she advised. “I’m here with you.”

I wanted so badly to hold her hand that I found myself reaching for her, begging, “Could you please just hold my hand?”

I could feel the blackness threatening to take me over again, so I fought to stay awake. I didn't have the strength to beat it, much less compete with it. It won, and I slipped into unconsciousness again.

In the dim recesses of my mind, I heard a constant murmur of voices. I couldn't decipher what was being said, only sounds and whispers. I can't recall how long I stayed in that state of mind. I lost all recollection of time.

Then, unexpectedly, three brightly glowing melon-sized balls of light came soaring across the dark sky. When they were a few feet away, from me, they elongated into long thin slivers. Moments later, the slivers expanded and then took form into three indistinct shapes.

I kept blinking my eyes, not trusting what I was seeing. I was positive I was hallucinating. *This must be what happens right before you die.*

Then, the indistinct shapes morphed into three men—three very tall, powerfully built men. They were identical in that they were all dressed alike—wearing black hooded cloaks that fell to their ankles. The hoods hid their faces, but I had the strangest feeling they were there to help me.

Eventually, I could understand words and phrases from the voices I was hearing.

“Serious injuries.”

“How long?”

“Does she know?”

“Fell...”

“Arrows... “

I was still fading in and out, but the hallucinations were disturbing. I couldn't quite discern them. I heard one of the men saying something about a scanner. Then, I heard a high-pitched sound. After that, there were more discussions about injuries. I assumed they were speaking of *my* injuries, but I was so befuddled I wasn't sure of anything.

I must have been crying because one of the robed strangers brought a hand to my face and gently wiped my tears away.

He whispered, “It is ok, Madeline! We are here to care for you.”

“Who are you?” I struggled to get the words out, as it had become increasingly more difficult for me to breathe.

Then, my senses were assaulted with the scent of an earthy pine forest—deep and luscious, the type of scent, that you could only experience hiking in the woods after a rain, when everything is moist and damp. It was simply wonderful; I just wanted to continue inhaling it, enveloping myself in the heady aroma. It was extremely soothing, almost a sensual feeling. I didn't stop to think it was unusual, all of these sensory encounters. My mind couldn't focus on any particular thought. I was simply... there. Was I still alive? Had I lost my mind?

“Madeline, we are going to have to move you, but do not worry. We have given you something for the pain, and we will take great care not to cause you too much discomfort,” the man said.

“Where are you taking me?” I whispered. “I’m really scared,” I pathetically squeaked out.

“We know.”

Whoever spoke tenderly placed a warm, soothing hand against my uninjured cheek. I felt a soft, gentle touch that somehow soothed me.

“We are taking you someplace safe... where you can heal. We are here to help you.” I felt this savior take my hand and hold it firmly, passing his strength to me.

I tried to lift my head, but I didn’t have the strength anymore. Then, I started feeling a sense of numbness wash over my body, and my pain began to ease tremendously. I think they had given me an anesthetic for the pain. Then, I felt myself being lifted, but I couldn’t open my heavily weighted eyes. I felt the comforting cocoon of darkness return.

Chapter 11

I awakened to see a strange, beautiful woman leaning over me, wrapping a bandage over my chest and shoulder. She was wearing a leather tunic and pants, much like you would imagine the Cherokee Indians wore two hundred years before.

Who was this woman, and why was she dressed this way? While I was curious about my surroundings, it was her astonishing face that captured all of my attention. Simply put, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Her delicate features were absolute perfection. Her dark eyes, like molten chocolate, were soft and kind. Lips the shade of summer berries surrounded her perfect teeth. Her black silken hair hung past her waist, and she was tall and slender and seemed to glide instead of walk. I can't define it, but a glow emanated from, and surrounded, her so that she lit up the darkness.

I continued to stare at her in amazement; I felt myself reaching to touch her to make sure she wasn't in my imagination. Her bronze skin was warm and smooth. She let me rest my hand on her arm; she *knew* I needed that.

When she arose, I noticed there were others around her. They were much like her with their incandescent beauty. There were about ten of them; at least that was how many I could see from where I was laying.

I had never seen this many stunning people in one place. They all seemed to have a glowing aura around them. As captivated as I was, I could no longer keep my eyes open.

I drifted off into a deep slumber, and for the first time in a while, I felt completely at ease.

When I awoke, I was alone, floating in a pool of warm water. I could see a waterfall in the distance. I felt like hands were holding me so that floating was completely effortless. I felt entirely calm and at peace once again. "Where am I?" I wondered.

A voice, or more like a sensation, floated back to me, telling me I was safe.

That's not exactly what I wanted to hear. Deep down I instinctively knew I was safe. I had no feelings of any imminent danger. I was just curious and wanted to know where I was.

"But where am I?"

"All of your questions will be answered soon. Please be patient with us. You sustained severe injuries, and the important thing now is for you to get better. Let the waters calm and heal you."

I felt myself drifting off once again.

I awoke in another place that had a cave-like appearance. I was lying on a very soft, and comfortable, bed of fur. I was cocooned in warmth and felt very drowsy. The strangest part of all was that I didn't question anything, but instead, I felt entirely at ease. The beautiful woman I saw earlier came toward me with a cup of liquid.

“Drink this. It will help ease any pain you may have.”

“Can you please tell me where I am?” I inquired.

“You are in the place of the Nunne’hi. We are deep in the caves of the great mountains. We are Spirit People. Once you gain some strength, we will tell you more.”

“How long have I been here?”

“You have been here for forty-two suns and moons.”

Forty-two days! What in the world happened to me that I have lost all track of time? I was unbelievably shocked.

“Do you have any memory of what happened?” she asked hesitantly.

I thought about that question for a while. My memory was clouded with images. I could remember flashes, bits and pieces mostly, of hiking and running and... suddenly, I gasped and put my hands to my face.

I saw an image of that hateful, evil man. I remembered that awful knife arcing toward me, and the devastating blows to my face, head and body. I reached up to my face. My jaw was only slightly sore but not the way it hurt before. The wound on my cheek felt healed. I could feel where the deep gash had been.

“Ah, you are remembering now,” she said as she reached for my hand to comfort me. “We have done as much as we can here, but you still have injuries with which we cannot help you. We are waiting for The Guardian to arrive. He is the one that brought you here, and he will be able to complete your healing,” she informed me.

“The Guardian? What’s that? And what other injuries?” She had a look of pity in her eyes, and I gathered she did not want to answer my question. She didn’t say as much; I could just sense it.

“We will speak of this later, when you are stronger. Please drink this to help ease your discomfort.”

I soon drifted off into a deep sleep again.

I awoke to voices, and this time I could comprehend them.

“She is mending nicely. Her wounds from the arrows are all but healed. Her face has healed as well. The spinal injury is what we are most concerned with now. One more thing, my lord, you should know. She carries ‘the mark’ on her back.”

All the memories flooded back in an instant, drenching me. They were so powerful that I felt like someone had landed a severe blow directly in my solar plexus, completely knocking the breath out of me. The strangers must have heard me gasp because several people came running toward me. I was caught in the memory of it all and started trembling and screaming. It was so horrific that I couldn’t breathe.

I remembered my abductor's face with intense clarity... those dreadful eyes... his clothing... his deranged laughter... but mostly the knife and crossbow. I knew I was hysterical, but I couldn't stop because I was caught in the backlash of the images as they poured forth. The strange and beautiful people had surrounded me and were trying, without success, to comfort me.

I wanted to run away from this place, but I found that I **COULD NOT MOVE!** Something was holding my legs down, restraining them, imprisoning them. My arms began flailing, and I jackknifed my torso, trying to break free of the restraints, but my lower body would **NOT** respond to my mental commands. Dear God in heaven, I was *paralyzed!*

I heard someone screaming, and I wanted it to stop. The noise reminded me of a wounded animal; it was ear-splitting and unnerving. It never occurred to me that I was the one producing the horrific noise.

Suddenly, the strangers moved aside to make way for another person. I became aware of someone touching my arms. Then came soothing words in a language I didn't understand.

"Madeline, look at me!" he commanded.

I ignored him, still squirming and trying to free myself. I once again felt like a trapped animal.

Louder still he commanded, "Madeline, look at me! Look into my eyes!"

I was shaking my head from side to side, not wanting to see this person who held me prisoner.

I felt him firmly take my chin in his hand and once again command, "Madeline, I command you to look into my eyes!" He placed his hand on my forehead, and I felt the inability to ignore him. The fight in me simply fled.

Oddly, I felt peaceful and calm. I no longer felt the terror that had only moments before held me in its grip. Then, something else bizarre happened. I inhaled deeply, and my senses were filled with the most wonderful of fragrances. It was the forest of pines again—that delicious woody, earthy scent. I felt my nostrils flaring with the intensity of it. My curiosity had me now, so I dared allow myself to look at the person responsible for this tranquility.

I lifted my gaze, and my eyes locked onto an exceptionally tall boy. No, not a boy at all, or not like any of the boys with which I hung out. This was a man of the likes I'd never seen—an unbelievably amazing man.

His long and wavy thick black hair brushed the tops of his broad shoulders, and he had one long, thin braid hanging down past his chest, which looked strangely out of place. A lock of his hair hung down his forehead, and my fingers itched to brush it back in place.

His facial features looked like they had been drawn by a brilliant artist, and then molded to perfection by the most talented of sculptors. Everything was perfectly shaped, but his mouth was absurdly beautiful. His full and sensuous lips grabbed my attention and refused to release it. I suddenly had visions of touching them and... tasting them. *Whatever was I thinking?* I had *never* been affected by anyone like this... *ever!*

I suddenly had this irrepressible urge to reach out and touch him. I found myself doing exactly that before I realized it. I quickly snatched my arm back, and I could feel myself blushing with embarrassment. I squeezed my hands into fists, my nails biting into my palms. For some reason, my arms seemed to have a mind of their own because it took everything in my power to keep them tightly clenched on the blanket that covered me.

Then, he graced me with the most amazing smile, flashing a set of impossibly perfect teeth flanked by the tiniest of dimples. I felt hypnotized by it, yet I had the sense that he was uncomfortable smiling, like it was out of character for him. There was only one way to describe him, drop dead, devastatingly gorgeous. I just stared at him open-mouthed and speechless.

When I finally regained some of my senses, I was able to tear my eyes away from his lips. If I thought his mouth was perfect, then there would never be words to describe his eyes. I was thoroughly mesmerized by them, more so than even his lips. Rimmed in black, his irises were a shade of green I had never seen before, virtually iridescent in color. I felt I had fallen into deep pools of shimmering emeralds. Huge and surrounded by a thick fringe of obsidian lashes, they were impossibly breathtaking, but more importantly, they spoke to me.

Safe... I am safe with this man!

He didn't just fill space; his formidable presence *infused* it. I absolutely could not stop gazing at him as I felt myself drowning in his essence, losing any trace of coherent thought and barely able to breathe. This man exuded sheer strength and power.

"Please know you are safe with me. I will protect you and let no harm come to you. I am a Guardian, and I swear this to you." Then underneath his breath he whispered, "I release you." His voice was deep and rich and sounded like music.

Only by sheer force of will was I finally able to tear my eyes away from his beautiful face. It was then I noticed how strangely he was attired.

He was encased in black... from the shirt he wore underneath his long, flowing cape, to the boots that came up to his knees.

The backs of both hands were covered in unusual gray metallic plates that ended at his wrists. I didn't know if these peculiar objects performed some kind of function or if they were simply adornments. In any case, they covered his hands from the base of his fingers, over his knuckles and then narrowed to his wrists, encircling them.

His mannerisms spoke volumes. This man was in charge. He didn't speak; he commanded.

His hypnotic gaze captivated me. Once again, I had this unrelenting urge to reach out and touch his perfectly shaped lips.

"Do what you will. I will not bite," he said in a beautifully deep timbre with a trace of an accent I couldn't place.

I was confused by his comment, as I didn't know what he meant. In a timid whisper, I stuttered, "Wh-what?"

"Touch me."

It was a command versus an answer. I had the feeling he was ordering me to do it. Noticing my confusion, he continued in a slightly softer tone, “My lips. You have a desire to touch my lips, and I was telling you that it was agreeable to me if you did,” he explained.

Then, he did the weirdest thing. He took my hand and placed my fingers upon his lips. I flinched—not from his touch, but from the current of electricity that flowed through me.

His lips were warm and soft, and I was simply dying to place my lips where my fingers rested. Dear Lord, who *was* this man, and what was he doing to me? He was impossibly fascinating. My fingers ached to explore every inch of his lips, face, hair, but I was embarrassed by these explicit feelings of mine. I rapidly changed the subject as I snatched my hand away.

Before I could even think, I impulsively blurted out, “Are there not *ANY* ordinary looking people here? Where in the hell AM I? Why are you all dressed so weird? Will somebody *pleeaasse* tell me?”

I saw the corners of his mouth slightly twitch, but thankfully, he didn’t laugh. He didn’t take his hands away either. He must have been afraid my pathetic hysterics would begin again.

“The answers are yes; no, not hell; we always dress as such; and yes.”

“Huh?”

“You inquired of me...” he started, the corners of his mouth turning up again.

I interrupted him. “Stop it. Now you’re toying with me. And I’m sorry I said ‘hell.’ It isn’t proper,” I managed to contritely eke out.

“Who *are* you? And please don’t touch me,” I said in a rush, my rude attempt at hiding my embarrassment.

He removed his hands from my arms, and I immediately felt a great sense of loss, as if I’d been doused with a lethal dose of anxiety. I thought to myself, *God, I really must be going crazy.*

Then, he said in his authoritative tone, “My name is Rayn Yarrister, and I am known as a Guardian. There is much you need to be told, and from your reaction just now, I assume you overheard us discussing your condition. Madeline, you must trust me when I tell you we are here to help you. You have suffered grave injuries, and you have much healing to do. The Nunne’hi found you on a small ledge on the side of the mountain. You had been severely wounded. Do you remember what happened?”

“What is a Nunne’hi?” I interrupted him again.

He sighed before answering. I sensed he wasn’t used to being questioned, nor did he have much patience. He didn’t want questions; he wanted answers.

“The Nunne’hi are the Spirit People of the Cherokee Nation. Not many people are aware of their existence, but their main purpose is to help those in need that come into these mountains. They heard your calls and came to you. Do you remember anything at all?”

“Some things very vividly, and others are kind of cloudy. And how in the world do you know my name? Are you going to kill me or... wait, am I already dead?”

Maybe I was caught between the two worlds. I was having serious trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality.

“No, Madeline, you are not dead, and we do not wish to kill you. We wish to *save* you,” he said, exasperation tingeing his voice as he raked his hand through his lush head of hair.

It was nearly impossible for me to pull my eyes away from this magnificent man.

He arose from the bed, although it wasn't really a bed. It was more like a raised platform of some kind. I tried to inspect it more closely, but I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away from Mr. Outrageously Beautiful. He went over to the other people in the room and asked them all to leave.

“Let me start at the beginning, Madeline,” he said in that rich velvety voice as he took a seat next to me.

“Maddie,” I said. I began to feel the panic and trembling setting in.

“I beg your pardon?”

“My name—I am called Maddie. It's short for Madeline.” I was now trembling so hard that he could also feel it. I rubbed my arms trying to stem the shaking.

“Oh, Maddie it is then. Give me your hands,” he commanded.

What an odd thing to say.

“My touch can make you feel less anxious. Come, give me your hands.”

It was not a request but a command. I wasn't sure what he meant by relieving my anxiety, but at this point, I was shuddering so badly that I could only nod my head. He grasped my hands in his, and within seconds, I felt an inexplicable relief sweep over me.

“Gosh, that feels *really* good.”

I felt complete alleviation of my anxiety first, and then, a sense of pleasure washed over me. I felt calm, happy even.

“What are you doing? How can you do that? Is this some kind of mind game? Hey, you're not a vampire or something? You're not using that glamour stuff on me are you?” I asked, desperate for some kind of explanation.

“No, not a vampire, and I know not what this ‘glamour’ is. Let us say it is a... talent I have.”

“Wait, you're not one of those weirdos that practice black magic or... you're not a devil worshipper are you?” I was highly suspicious of this man. This was all too weird here.

He actually had the audacity to laugh at me!

“No, Maddie, I am nothing close to black magic, nor do I worship the devil. I am definitely not a vampire or werewolf for that matter,” he explained, still laughing.

“Well, I had to ask. I am very confused right now. Not to mention, you do have some strange ways about you—your clothing for instance. I feel like I’m at a Halloween party.”

“I know we must appear a bit unusual. Now that your anxiety has lessened, I want to offer you some answers and explanations. Maybe it will help with your confusion. But, first, do you remember what happened to you?”

“Like I said, I can remember some of it. I think I dreamed about my mom, other weird stuff too, like balls of light changing into people. I thought I was dead. You know, the bright light and all?” I searched his face for recognition; none was there, total impassivity.

“Can you tell me anything else about what you remember?” he asked, as he continued to grasp my hands.

Chapter 12

I didn't want to even think about my ordeal, much less talk about it, but I knew I owed these kind strangers an explanation.

I began, hesitatingly at first, telling him about my backpacking trip on Christmas Day. Once I started recalling the incident, I couldn't seem to stop the words from tumbling from my lips.

I put my hand to my cheek to feel the place that had been lacerated. I flashed back to that moment in time, and I could see that evil man's face clearly. I began to see everything in slow motion, reliving it.

I felt like I was in a trance, though I must have been speaking. I could feel Rayn's firm and comforting grip on my hands. Surprisingly, I remained calm enough to tell him everything.

"I remember thinking how peculiar it was that I only felt the throbbing on the side of my face where he hit me, but that the knife wound didn't really hurt. Then, I could feel the blood, and I thought how warm it felt because my face had become cold from the winter air," I spoke, barely louder than a whisper. I let my mind wander a bit, and it drifted back to that night.

"Go on," Rayn urged.

I continued talking, staring at the large, elegant hands that tightly held mine. I explained how I knew I had to formulate an escape plan if I wanted to make it out of there alive. I told him of getting my hopes up but then having them dashed when I felt the arrows pierce my leg and chest.

"I don't remember much after that, except, strangely enough, talking to my mom who died years ago," I concluded.

When I was done telling of my ordeal, I looked up and found his face only inches away from mine. His eyes bore into mine, and I found that I could not tear my gaze away from him.

He then spoke aloud in a language that I didn't understand and couldn't even recognize—not that I was any expert in languages, but I knew it wasn't Spanish, French, German, or anything else I had heard.

"What did you just say? What language is that?" I wanted to know. "Was that Greek or Latin?"

"Not exactly. I said it was your mother that contacted the Nunne'hi. That is how we knew you and where to find you."

"That's not possible. My mom died eight years ago."

He told me about the Nunne'hi having a strong spiritual connection. It was how my mother informed them about me... and led them to me.

“You must understand something, Maddie. There are many things that are possible if you only believe.”

It was all too much to comprehend.

“I must be going crazy. Why is it that your touch makes me feel as if I don’t have a care in the world. Have I lost it or something? Have I gone crazy?”

I was surrounded by his strength and warmth, and it was sublime... indescribable.

He had a bit of a grin on his face when he replied, “Since I have only just met you, I am not certain if you are crazy. However, let me simply say that I have a gift—an ability to relieve your fears. You have been through a very traumatic time, but I promise to stay with you for as long as you require me,” Rayn vowed.

I didn’t know if he was joking or not about me being crazy, but I would willingly accept his promise to stay any day of the week.

I glanced up at him and saw the corners of his mouth turn up.

Chapter 13

Mr. I Can't Believe How Hot You Are sat with me for some time, holding my hands. I didn't want to admit how much I liked it. I decided I could get real used to this. Things were too mysterious though, like that language he spoke and the way he calmed my fears.

"How will I be able to return to school, like this, I mean?" sweeping my arm across my legs.

Rayn quickly stood up and started to pace around the room.

"Currently, I have not an answer for you," he said, strangely enough.

"What's that supposed to mean? I don't understand."

"I cannot explain it right now."

He walked over to me and reached out to take my hand, but suddenly, he stopped.

"There are places I can go that can help me adapt to this, using a wheelchair and all. I'm pretty sure my roommate would help me."

"Maddie, there are things you do not understand, things I cannot explain right now," he reiterated, as he started to sound frustrated.

"What do you mean?" I didn't like the direction this was taking. "I don't want to sound dense, but... I still don't understand," I continued. "Am I a prisoner here?"

"No, you are not a prisoner, but there are things I simply cannot explain. You must trust me."

"Easy for you to say. And am I supposed to know what that means?" I countered.

"No, but in time, I will explain things to you. You must accept my answers now and stop being so inquisitive. Now it is time for you to eat."

Rayn was not used to anyone challenging what he said.

Next he said something incredible. "You have heard enough for one day. There are things that are not possible in your world, but they are in mine. And, no, you have not smoked anything or been given any drugs either."

"How did you know...?" I trailed off, confused at how he could possibly know what had run through my head. "And exactly what do you mean by 'things are not possible in your world, but they are in mine?' And how did you know about the drug question?"

"Well, my world is very different from yours. There will be time for explanations later," he said as he turned away from me.

I got the feeling he was uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation. Maybe that's why he was so cryptic.

There was something else I didn't want to think about and that was the man himself. Honestly, he was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I felt magnetically attracted to him in a way I couldn't explain and like nothing I had experienced before. But he also made me feel very tranquil. I didn't understand this, but with my current situation, it was a feeling I did not want to lose. Every time he was near me, I felt this inexplicable urge to touch him—his skin, his face, his hair. Everything about him lured me in. I wanted to wrap myself around him.

Minutes later Rayn returned with a tray laden with food. Either he was extremely hungry, or he was planning on feeding a herd of elephants.

“You can't possibly think I can eat all of that?”

“Are you not hungry? I brought you a variety because I was not sure of your preferences. Please eat,” he begged. He extended his hand, which held a fork full of something that smelled delicious.

“Only if you share with me, because this girl is not putting away all of that—no way.” I opened my mouth, waiting for the fork.

“Well, I could always make you,” he challenged.

I could think of worse things than being force fed by Mr. Hot. With that thought, I noticed the corners of his mouth turning up.

“I'm not saying I won't eat, just that I can't eat that much. Please have some.”

Rayn set the tray on my lap, intending to make it easier for me to eat. That turned out to be a big mistake for him. He was unaware of my extreme clumsiness, and I had chosen this moment to give him an explicit demonstration.

The tray was unbalanced, with some heavier items on one side. When he set the tray on my lap, the heavier side dipped down, allowing the lighter side to angle up in the air. In my haste to rectify the situation, I slammed my hand down on the lighter side, which ended up causing the food on the opposite side to catapult in the air. Off it went flying, and unfortunately for Rayn, he was in the direct line of fire.

In mere moments, he was covered in a vast array of food and some type of beverage that appeared to be tea. The contents of the tray were slowly dripping down his hair, face, and chest, turning him into an adorable but gooey mess. I sat there looking at him with, I'm sure, an idiotic expression glued onto my face. No words could suffice.

His eyes quickly flashed from green to black. If I hadn't been staring at them, I never would have noticed. With his jaws clamped shut and a murderous expression on his face, he sarcastically asked, “How do I look?”

Again without thinking, I responded thickly, “Good enough to eat.”

Oh. My. God! Did I really just say that? I thought, as I thumped myself on the head.

“Yes, you really did and I guess I should say, ‘thank you,’ but I will spare us both.”

Again, there were no words in the English language, or any other language for that matter, to aptly describe my acute mortification.

Rayn's murderous expression bore into me, as he said, "Excuse me, please." He turned and walked away.

Well, he didn't have to act so huffy about it. It's not like I did it on purpose!

Minutes later, the beautiful dark haired woman returned with another tray loaded with food saying, "I shall take great care in placing this on your lap." She set it down and quickly moved away. No doubt she was afraid of wearing the food, like Rayn had.

Since I had no choice, I took a bite of the delicious smelling concoction on my lap. I must admit, it was the most delicious, sinfully tasting food that I'd ever put in my mouth. I devoured the contents in record time. I tried to eat slowly, but the tempting morsels were melting in my mouth. I simply couldn't get enough.

I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten anything at all. I wondered if it had been six weeks ago.

Minutes later, Rayn returned, clean as a whistle.

With a raised brow, he dryly remarked, "Well, I am glad to see you have enjoyed your meal. Since this is your first real meal in a few weeks, I would tell you to go slowly, but I can see I am too late for that! Do you always eat this quickly?"

Oh, Lord! He must think I am a chowhound.

"No, I don't usually, but it was so tasty. I was much hungrier that I thought. I've never had anything so yummy."

"Yes... it appears as such. I must make sure Talasi feeds you often. We don't want you going hungry."

I had a gazillion thoughts and questions swirling through my mind, but suddenly, I could feel my anger and frustrations returning.

"I am *so* sick of feeling so helpless, and I'm sorry for making such a mess with the food. I should have warned you I can be a bit of a disaster at times."

He had taken my hand in his, and his warmth penetrated me. Instantly, I felt much better. What *was* this effect he had on me? I had never experienced anything like it.

"It is part... well, never mind, and please do not worry about the mess. It was nothing a little water could not clean up," he said, as if he could read my mind... again! I breathed a huge sigh of relief that made him chuckle. For some inexplicable reason, I laughed too.

"How is it that you always seem to be on top of what I'm thinking? Are you one of those mind reader people that I've read about in novels? You know, like Mr. Spock in Star Trek or something?"

“Not exactly,” he answered. I glanced up at him and caught a strange expression on his face that he quickly hid.

“How is it that you have this effect on me? One minute I’m spitting fire, and the next, I feel fine... great, in fact!”

“It is part of my ability as a Guardian. Part of what I do is to protect people, like you, from getting hurt or into trouble. I do not know how, but we did not see your attack coming. That only rarely happens. It is what we rely on the Nunne’hi for. We have somewhat of a symbiotic relationship with them. They communicate with us through telepathy.”

“Telepathy? Like reading minds? Are you telling me you *can* read minds?” I couldn’t hide my incredulity.

“Yes, that is one way to describe it, but in reality, it’s more like communicating without speaking.”

“Okayyy! What other tricks might you have up your sleeve?”

If he could read minds, I hope he didn’t know what I’d been thinking about HIM! How awkward and embarrassing. I glanced at him to see him smirking at me.

Busted.

With a furrowed brow, I scrutinized him.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Something very strange is going on here. Are you a wizard or something? You know, like Harry Potter?”

He lifted an eyebrow and gave me one of his exasperating looks. “No, not exactly.”

Then, I thought I heard him say, “Perceptive,” under his breath.

“Have you drugged me? Wait a minute! Did you force me to smoke crack or something?”

“No! I thought we covered this... no crack! Or any other illicit drugs for that matter. Other than giving you things for pain and to help you sleep and relax, we have not given you any kind of weird drugs. You have been through a very traumatic time, and it is perfectly normal for you to be apprehensive about all of this. I can tell you that you are safe and secure here, but I realize those are only words. As time passes on, you will come to that understanding on your own. I wish I could help you to believe that. I promise only to protect you.”

His frustration had erupted, and I knew I was annoying him immeasurably.

I inhaled deeply and again my senses were filled with him. There it was—the earthy scent of pines again.

“Do you use pine scented shower gel or shampoo or something?” I asked.

I forced myself to stop sniffing the air... I was beginning to resemble some kind of a hound dog.

“No,” he replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, you smell like evergreens, like a forest full of pines, you know, that great earthy smell.”

I lifted my eyes to him and caught him glancing at me with a peculiar look on his face. I averted my eyes and busied myself with my blanket. I suddenly became self-conscious of how awful I must appear to him. In my better days, I was very average and ordinary looking in every way—average height, average build, reddish brown hair and light brown eyes and totally nondescript. I couldn't expect someone like *him* to be remotely interested in me, so it made no sense that I was now concerned about my appearance.

My eyes drifted back to him, and I saw he was still staring at me with that odd expression on his face. He reached out and gently brushed my cheek with the backs of his knuckles, and then jerked his hand away, as if he'd been burned. I put my hand to my cheek where he had touched me to see if my skin was hot, for I had felt that charge of electricity once again.

He was still staring at me, and I finally asked hesitantly, “Is something wrong?”

He didn't answer, but just slowly shook his head. He promptly stood up and walked away, leaving me pondering what I had done. He had probably been revolted by what must be an enormous scar on my face. I hadn't seen it, but I was sure it must be hideous.

Minutes later, one of the women entered the room. It was the woman that had brought in the food earlier.

She came to me and said, “Maddie, I am Talasi. I will be helping you until The Guardian decides... where to take you. Is there anything I can get for you?”

“I saw you in my dreams.”

“You saw me?”

“Yes... and you were speaking a strange language. Odd that I dreamed of you when I had never seen you before.”

“Yes, that is odd. But, sometimes, our dreams are speaking to us. They can tell us things our mind isn't capable of understanding.”

“These were totally weird dreams. I guess I was in shock because I thought I was dying. I saw my mom and talked to her and all.”

“I spoke with her too Maddie. She came to me in my dreams, which is how I knew where to find you. She watches over you all the time.”

Talasi walked away leaving me more bewildered than ever. I wanted to scream at her to come back, but I wasn't sure I wanted to know everything right then. I was still too curious about Rayn and why he had left.

Chapter 14

That night was the first time I dreamt about Rayn. We were running through a forest in a place where the colors defied description. I had never seen anything like it before, and I could barely think of anything besides their magnificence. The trees, flowers, and overall landscape were bursting in this newly discovered rainbow of mine.

I awoke with a start, and the first thing I detected were deep pools of emeralds. His eyes bore into mine, and he wore the same puzzled expression on his face. I felt like he was trying to assess my thoughts. I began to feel ill at ease, so I averted my gaze. He stooped toward me and grasped my face in his hands, forcing me to look back at him.

Words would not surface; I could not think of anything except how much I wanted him to put his arms around me. It was at that precise moment that he did exactly that.

I thought I heard him murmur, “This cannot be happening.”

Then, he proceeded in that unrecognizable language. I didn’t want to know what he was saying now. I just didn’t want this moment to end. I felt a sense of contentment, a warmth seep into my bones that I couldn’t explain. I felt like I *belonged* there.

I wanted to reach up and touch his face, his hair, but I feared I would break the spell. We sat together like that for a very long time. Words seemed unnecessary.

Eventually, he arose, bent down, placed a kiss on the palm of my hand, and strode out of the room. I wanted him to turn around and come back, but he didn’t. I fell back to sleep, and my strange dreams resumed.

* * * * *

I knew my strength was returning. I was ready to deal with my final injury: to go home and learn how to live without my legs. But I felt like everyone was avoiding that issue. I asked Talasi about it earlier, and she would not give me an answer. I was overcome with frustration. I wanted to pull my hair out!

After what seemed like years, I fell into a restless sleep, filled with unpleasant dreams. When I awoke, I was drenched in sweat. I threw off the fur covers and let the air hit my body. I was dressed in a cotton gown, so I pulled it up around my legs to try to see my wound.

I touched my calf, and it felt like I was touching someone else. I pinched my legs to see if I could feel either of them. Then I scratched them. Nothing. That’s when it all came crashing down on me. I would *never* walk again.

Many minutes passed by before I realized that someone was shaking me and calling my name. When I could finally focus, I was looking into *his* eyes. He had a disconcerted look on his face. I was so angry at the unfairness of it, how my life had taken yet another dastardly turn for the worst. I wanted to hit something, throw something, stomp my feet, and scream. Instead, I started accusing him of holding back information on my condition, my frustration and anger evident in my emotions.

I confronted him with my voice raised, and through gritted teeth, I said, "I'm tired of laying here, days on end! I want you to take me home where I can start mending my life!"

I stopped suddenly, feeling badly for speaking to him in such a manner. I continued on in a softer tone, "I need to move forward. I appreciate everything you and the Nunne'hi have done for me. I wouldn't be alive without you, but it's time for me to go home."

"There is nothing I can do about your dissatisfaction, and for that, I am sorry. I am trying to work something out, but I cannot tell you more right now," Rayn said.

"UUGGHH! This is driving me CRAZY! You are driving me crazy!" I exclaimed.

"Again, I am sorry. That is all I can say right now," he said curtly.

"NO! I want more of an explanation than that. Right now, you are telling me I can't leave and go home. You are so circumspect with everything! Why?!"

He sighed deeply and said, "It is the way things must be. You must trust me in this."

My frustration and anger were not being assuaged one bit. I *HAD* to have answers now, or I would tear my hair out.

I sighed, letting my breath escape raggedly. "How can I trust you when you won't give me any answers? Am I to just sit around and wonder about it?"

I was about as exasperated as a person could get. This man refused to give me any straight answers, and it was driving me to the edge.

"You may huff and puff and be annoyed all you want, but it will not change the way of things. I am sorry I do not have a better answer for you, but in time, you will understand. Now, you must rest because you will need your strength."

"I'm sick and tired of resting; I just want to understand what's going on here. Can you not understand that?"

One minute, he was across the room, and the next he was by my side, grasping my arms. His movements were lightning fast, so much so that I had trouble comprehending what I had seen. It startled and frightened me. I wrenched my arms away from him.

He reached out for them, but instead, I balled my hands into fists and started hitting his chest. I desperately wanted to scream at him and run away, but I was helpless in that regard. I kept throwing punches at him, and he sat there and allowed me to do it. Finally, he took both of my wrists in one of his hands and held them steady, forcing me to a halt. The sobs came then.

They took over my body, shattering my hold on my emotions. I cried my heart out for the unfairness of it all. I mumbled incoherent words through my tears. I shuddered at the force of my grief, and then, I felt myself becoming ill. He held me while I couldn't stop myself from vomiting. He wiped my face with a cool cloth and whispered soothing words in my ear, attempting to ease my pain. I had ached inside for so long that the inevitable dam had ruptured, tearing me apart in the process.

I was embarrassed and distressed by my ghastly outburst. If he was put off, he gave no indication. He calmly and serenely continued to hold and soothe me. My hair had become a massive tangle, so he ran his fingers through it, attempting to smooth it from my face. He was tucking an errant lock behind my ear, when I opened my eyes to gaze upon him.

He had treated me like a precious piece of porcelain, gently wiping my face and brow, while caressing my arms and back. No one had done this for me other than my parents.

This would become another defining moment in my life. I think I fell in love with him at that very instant. He never said a word, never tried to get me to stop grieving. He knew it was precisely what I needed, so he allowed himself to be my punching bag. I somehow knew he cared, and no one had cared about me in such a long time.

My tirade had exhausted me, but I forced myself to stay awake.

I cleared my throat, but my voice was raspy nevertheless. "Please forgive me for that... outburst. I—"

"There is no need for words of apology," he interrupted. "Have you not yet grieved your father's death?"

I thought for a moment, and then uttered, "I thought I had, but I only did so once. I was alone and wouldn't allow myself to think of it, because I was afraid that if I started, I wouldn't be able to stop. It was such a horrible time for me I just wanted to push through it."

"I thought as much. You still miss him."

I nodded.

"It is good for you to release this. You must not hold this back. Your experience with your abductor must be dealt with as well. You cannot bury this with you lest it will destroy you. You have so much life in you, Maddie. Do not let this happen."

"Um... I don't quite know what to say. I am a bit humiliated by my outburst."

He tilted my chin up, so I faced him. "Do not feel as such. You have been a most brave female and have endured a great deal. I do not think less of you for this."

He gathered me in his arms and held me securely.

Talasi entered the room with a cup in her hand. She handed it to me to drink, so I did as I was told. Within a few minutes, I felt my head swirling, and I figured that they had given me something to relax me and make me sleep.

Chapter 15

When I awoke, I was lying in Rayn's arms. He must have held me throughout the night. I felt the flames of embarrassment burn me. I had never allowed my emotions to escape before, so I was most uncomfortable with him.

He became very inquisitive and wanted to know everything about me. For no apparent reason, my feathers started getting ruffled. Had I been honest with myself, the reason I was uncomfortable was I couldn't bear the fact that he had seen such vulnerability in me. It was something I never wanted anyone to see, much less him. For years I had painstakingly built a concrete fortress around myself, allowing no one to gain entrance. Cat had barely made it in, so there was no way I would allow Rayn in. I didn't want him poking or prying into my psyche. Not to mention, it was like pulling teeth to get *him* to tell *me* anything.

The nastiness in me decided to make an ugly appearance. What a short memory I had. I completely disregarded his kindness from such a short while ago.

"Why should I tell you anything? *You* won't tell me a thing!" I retorted harshly.

"You should tell me because you are helpless to do otherwise," he so matter-of-factly responded.

He was really starting to get under my skin. The audacity of this man! Of all the things to say, who did he think he was that he could boss me around like this?

I saw his brow lift. Maybe his super-duper telepathy thingy was picking up on my anger.

A bark of laughter escaped from him. What a shock!

"I'm glad you find me so amusing," I said bitterly.

"Amusing? Not really. Bold? Yes. You do realize that it would not be difficult for me to find out whatever it is I want to know about you? So, with that being said, why not be a nice little girl and tell me?"

"Of all the rotten things to say... why, you are a horse's bohonkas!"

Another bark of laughter escaped from him, and he added, "This time? Definitely amusing! I know what a horse is, but please enlighten me regarding this... what did you call it? Oh, yes... a 'bohonkas'." The corners of his mouth were twitching with mirth.

"Why don't you just use your super-duper telepathy thingy to figure it out... or set your pea brain in motion and use some deductive reasoning?"

"Pea brain?"

"Yes, pea brain, or maybe I should have said pig-headedness—either one will suit," I said with derision.

Talasi rushed in the room carrying one of her cups. She shoved it toward me to drink.

“Why is it every time I start digging for information, or refuse to answer your questions, Pocahontas here runs in to sedate me? Answer me that!” I was spitting nails and getting ready to chew them. He gave no response, but his eyes bore into mine.

“Let me tell you one thing, mister, if I could get out of this bed, you would be eating a knuckle sandwich right now!”

Next thing I knew, Mr. Hottie was bent over at the waist laughing hysterically. He was maddening!

“Go ahead and laugh. Get it out of your system. It’s obvious you were raised without any manners. You were probably a spoiled little brat with all the girls fawning over your good looks, hanging onto every one of your words. You probably never had to work hard for anything in your whole life, most likely had it all handed to you on a silver platter. Mommy and Daddy running around getting little Rayn anything his little ol’ heart desired. You were probably a bully too... to those of us not fortunate enough to have been born with the good looks with which you were so obviously endowed.”

I whipped my glance over to Talasi to see her standing there, mouth agape, utter horror displayed in her expression.

“Well, well, well. Isn’t this interesting? By the looks of little Pocahontas here, I can tell she isn’t used to hearing anyone speak to you like this. Am I right?” I had finally reached the end of my tirade.

“Talasi, leave us please,” Rayn quietly said, in a velvety voice laced with steel.

“Yes, my liege.” Talasi bowed to Rayn and scurried out of the room.

“And what’s up with this ‘my liege’ crap. Who are you anyway? King of the pirates? Are you trying to emulate Jack Sparrow? If so, you need an eye patch and a red bandanna to complete your ensemble.”

It was at that precise moment I knew without a doubt, I had severely overstepped my bounds. However, being the pride filled idiot that I was, I refused to acknowledge it or apologize.

In a blur of motion, Rayn was at my side. He moved with incomprehensible speed, and I was barely able to track him. He bent toward me and grasped my arm in an ironclad hold. His fingers clamped down, and I had the impression he was fighting for control. He was seething with violent energy; I could feel it saturating the air. I knew with certainty it would take very little for him to snap my bones in half. His emerald eyes were now glinting, and I could all but see the sparks in them. I was, for the first time in his presence, fearful of what he might do to me.

“Ms. Pearce,” he said, with barely controlled menace, “you forget yourself... where you are at this moment... and who controls your reins. You are the most insolent, sullen, manner-less, spoiled child I have ever encountered. I will not justify myself by explaining things to you. You can figure it out yourself by using your own... what did you call it? Oh yes, ‘pea brain.’ But let me be perfectly clear, Ms. Pearce. You are a *guest* among my people. They have *saved your life* and done an admirable job at that. But for the life of me, I cannot figure out why they did it in the first place. It is *not an option* for you to treat them with respect; *it is mandatory!* You can throw your little tantrums at me any time you please, but never, and I

repeat, never, will I allow you to speak to Talasi or anyone else here like that again. Do you understand?"

I was terribly frightened... by him, but also by my own shamefully appalling behavior. I had never acted so rudely before, and I didn't understand why I had done so. My mouth had become so bone dry that I could barely swallow, let alone speak. I gaped, giving him the slightest of nods.

"Good... I am glad you understand. Now, then, I asked you some questions about yourself, and I intend to get some answers."

Rayn applied even more pressure to my arm, and I knew he had every intention of breaking it. When the pain became nearly unbearable, he eased the pressure.

With burning determination, I refused to show him my fear, so I returned his hardened gaze with defiance. I would stand up to him and not back down, but I could not understand why he brought this reprehensible behavior out in me. However, as I gazed into his eyes, my heart softened. I never acted like this around anyone.

I had every intention of refusing him again, except I found it was... impossible.

The words erupted from my mouth like a geyser. I started from the beginning. I told him about my mom and how close we were and "the accident." I told him intricate details about that horrific day. I felt hot tears scalding my cheeks but was helpless to stop them. I told him of the day my father died and how I was called to the principal's office. It seemed I was destined to bare my soul to this man. I tried to stop talking and found, once again, that it was impossible. I recalled for him the day I moved into college and how Cat was everything to me and that I loved her like a sister. I went to great depths and recounted exactly what happened to me on the trail. I detailed every nuance of emotion from abject fear to apathy. I described how I felt when I saw my mom and how I wanted to cling to her forever. I relayed my life story—all the while the tears flowed effusively. I was unmistakably not in control of myself; something was *compelling* me to speak.

When I got to the part about my mother being beautiful, he suddenly said, "You may cease."

The obdurate urge to speak immediately fled. I felt odd, much like I'd been unchained.

Then, he flabbergasted me by saying softly, "You must surely favor your mother," as he picked up a lock of my hair and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger contemplating it.

Are you kidding me? Was this a joke? He looked so serious when he said that. Then, I started to laugh.

"What has amused you?" he queried.

"I'm laughing for two reasons: because I am the polar opposite of my mother and because you were *nice* about it," I replied, suddenly thinking I shouldn't have said that.

"Maddie, I usually am 'nice.' I only get demanding when the situation makes it so. Explain about your mother."

Demanding once again.

“If you saw her, you would know what I mean.”

“Explain.”

Still demanding.

“Everything... looks, likes, and dislikes, hobbies need I say more?”

“Elucidate.”

Seriously demanding.

I randomly asked, “Are you always used to getting your way?”

He cocked his head and his eyes flashed. “You have no idea, but I must ask you why you would want to know that?”

“You are extremely persistent and dictatorial, and it’s your way with words. You sound like a boss or something, overbearing even. And while we’re on the subject, you have a strange way of saying things sometime. Like, your use of the English language is very proper. Yes, that’s exactly what it is. Are you foreign or something?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Hum... evasive again.”

“And you are very perceptive. But, getting back to our previous discussion, before you digressed, please tell me why you believe you are so different from your mother.”

Wow... politely demanding.

“Well, first off, I am quite ordinary, average in every way—height, build, hair color, you know. And then there are the activities. I love the outdoors, and she hated everything about it, especially bugs! I used to laugh at her for that! Every day, it didn’t matter when, she looked like she stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine. She was absolutely extraordinary in EVERY way. She was tall with beautiful blonde hair and eyes so blue you couldn’t stop staring at them. She would take my breath away she was so beautiful. I am nothing like her at all.”

The disbelieving look on his face surprised me. He turned to me and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. He opened his mouth, and then shut it, several times, as though he were mentally debating whether he should say something or not.

He finally decided to speak. Quietly, he said, “Ah, Maddie, I wholeheartedly disagree. Your eyes may not be blue, but they are the color of molten gold. They are mesmerizing. They are the windows to your soul, and one can look into them and see your spirit reflected. And your hair... it is an extraordinary shade of copper that all but begs my hands to run through it. It reminds me of the sun’s rays as it drops to meet the horizon. I can barely keep myself from touching it. You are nothing short of exquisite, Maddie.” He had picked up a lock of my hair and brought it to his cheek, holding it there.

I was hypnotized by the sound of his deep voice as if it caressed me. He took the backs of his knuckles and brushed them across my cheek and said, “Your face is perfection, and, Maddie, you are quite magnificent in every way.”

He continued to speak with his eyes locked onto mine, picking up my hands and entwining our fingers together, “Your hands are beautiful—artistically elegant—and your mind is incredible, sweet, one moment, and provokingly on fire, the next. I happen to think you are exceptional. *You are unquestionably a very brave female.*”

Shut the front door! Who is this man and who is he describing? And what happened to Mr. Demanding?

I never imagined anyone would see me as he did, and it astounded me. There must be something terribly wrong with his eyesight. Was he just trying to make me feel good or did he really mean it? And what was that bit he said at the end? That strange language...

“I can see that you doubt what I say. You merely see yourself very differently than others see you. But, Maddie, make no mistake, I meant every word. You *are* beautiful—stunning, actually.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just looked at him, dumbfounded. I got lost in his eyes. He gazed back at me and reached out and ran his fingers through my hair. He picked up a section of it again and rubbed it between his thumb and fingers. Then he leaned his face into it, and I could hear him inhaling deeply. I dared not move. I didn’t want to break the spell.

When he raised his head, he looked directly into my eyes. My desire to touch him could no longer be denied. I extended my hand and put it on his face, running the pad of my thumb across his lips. I ran my other hand through his hair, mimicking what he did to me. I pulled his head toward mine in order to breathe in his essence. It was sheer heaven. Then, his arms went around me. He leaned in and briefly touched his lips to mine. I felt a spark ignite that startled me. He felt it too for we both jerked away from each other. His eyes bore into mine, and I could see the shock in them. He hadn’t expected that either. Neither of us said a word as we leaned in toward each other once again. The second kiss was equally as brief and yet both of us felt the heat.

I wanted to ask him about it, but still, I did not want to break this spell—this truce that had erupted between us.

He situated himself next to me, and I laid my head on his chest—his very warm and comforting chest, where I picked up his braid and wrapped it around my fingers, toying with it. It was soft and silky, and I could feel his heart beating beneath my hand. I was comforted by the feel of him.

We talked about everything—everything but him. He was still reluctant to answer many of my questions, and during the ones he did answer, he was always evasive. I got used to hearing, “kind of like that” or “not exactly.” It was all so mysterious to me. He begged me to be patient and promised I wouldn’t have to wait much longer. Why couldn’t he just tell me now?

Little did I know that when I would have the answers I wanted, they would forever change my life.

In the morning, we both ate breakfast. He left me for a bit, and when he returned, he said that it was time for him to leave. I was completely jarred. He told me we wouldn't be seeing each other again—something about our worlds being too far apart. He didn't say much else, but I felt his eyes, boring deeply into my soul, like he was searching for something, answers maybe.

I didn't know what to do. I felt like a part of me was being ripped out. I was speechless. I suddenly blurted out, "Where are you going?!"

He reached for me and held me close. He swept up my hair, inhaled deeply and placed a brief kiss upon my neck. He briefly touched his lips to mine and said, "I have to leave. It is not my choice."

"I don't understand," I whispered feebly.

"I know you do not, and I cannot offer another explanation."

He was gone in an instant.

I felt an emptiness I couldn't describe, like a part of me had been torn away. I sat there and stared at the opening to the cave, wanting to cry, but refusing to give in. I knew I shouldn't be surprised by any of this; there were never any guarantees in life. I, of all people, understood that.

I knew I should not have opened myself up to him. I had experienced too much loss to be comfortable with that. Everything, or I should say everyone, I had ever loved or been close to had been taken away from me. Why should I have expected anything different with Rayn? It was better this way—better for both of us. At least that's what I told myself.

Chapter 16

Why that little hellion! Red sure turned out to be a feisty thing! I was NOT expecting her to be packing that pepper spray, Darryl Carter thought. I should have known better. I was even going to be nice to her today. The way she looked at me kind of reminded me of a trapped animal, with those huge doe eyes of hers. I was beginning to think that maybe she could tag along with me for a while. But not now, definitely not. I'm just going to have to take Red down. Pity, too... she would have been such fun to play with a little.

As soon as the burning subsided, Darryl took off. Unlike most men, he had endured a great deal of pain in his life... at the hand of his loving parents. So the pepper spray, while irritating initially, wasn't bad enough to slow him down much. He hesitated a bit, not wanting to leave any of his things behind. He didn't know how long it would take for him to catch up to her. He also didn't know if he would kill her on the spot or bring her back here. If he had to move on in a hurry, he would be without his gear.

In the end, he decided he would give himself six hours. If he didn't take care of her by then, he would come back here and collect his gear, and then continue to hunt her down. He was definitely going to catch her—no question about it.

He took off and had to make a quick decision on which trail to take. He looked for signs of her, anything at all that would indicate which direction she had chosen.

“Aha... I gotcha, Red!” he exclaimed.

He was looking at the snow on the trails, checking all three of them, and there on the Boulevard Trail he saw her footprints. They had to be Red's for two reasons. The first was the most obvious: no one else had been up here besides them, so there were no other prints in the snow. Second, her tracks were completely inconsistent. They appeared to have been made by someone who was having difficulty walking a straight line, someone who maybe was dizzy or in pain. Yes, they were definitely Red's.

Darryl didn't waste any time in his pursuit. His tread was light. He wanted the element of surprise on his side. He expected to come up on her at every turn. However, she had gotten further along than he had anticipated. He picked up his speed a little and then even more. He thought that the element of surprise was not as important as actually catching her. He had to catch her; there was no other option. She could describe him to anyone she came across and that could put his future missions in danger of exposure. Must. Catch. Her. Fast.

It was when he had started jogging that he noticed movement in the distance, way beyond his present location. He stopped to watch and sure enough, there was Red in all her glory, weaving her way down the mountain. He had to hand it to her again; she had put an impressive distance between them—impressive, but not nearly enough. She was getting ready to enter a clearing, the section of the trail that was strung with cable. It was on a sheer rock face, and the trail was narrow, with not much leeway on the downhill side, hence the cable. One had to guide his way across, holding on to that thing. One false move and the slide down would be deathly. It would be doubly treacherous now with the snow and ice.

This area would give Darryl his chance at taking her down. Too bad it was going to end this way; he'd had a lot of fun with that fiery gal. He did want one thing though. He wanted her to know her end was coming, which meant he would have to alert her somehow so that her fear would increase. He decided to step on a branch so that she could hear the snap. She was smart enough to know what it would mean.

His opportunity was upon him. Crunch, snap. She gasped and hurried all the more; she knew he had found her.

Ahhh, this is heaven! Darryl thought.

Darryl's first shot to her calf was intentional—punishment for running away from him. He watched her flail and groan in agony. His pleasure increased as he aimed his second arrow and released. He knew immediately he's hit his mark when he saw Red stumble and then lose her footing, tumbling off the side of the cliff. It was a beautiful sight. Yeah, it sure was. He made his way around a thicket to see where she had landed. It took quite a bit of maneuvering before he was able to get a decent view of her. She was lying on a ledge that jutted out about 25 feet from where she had fallen. By the angle of her back, Darryl was almost certain she was a goner. Sure enough, he could see both shots sticking out of her—one in her leg, the other in her chest. There were also a couple of pools of blood. He wondered if that fall had cracked her head open. He stood there for a while, just to make sure she wouldn't start moving. He had another shot waiting if she did.

After about thirty minutes, when she never so much as twitched, Darryl decided it was time to go. He regretted how it had all turned out. He had really been enjoying this one. Oh well... he figured he would start looking for his next mission.

He decided to head back up to the lodge and clean that place out. Afterward, he'd come back and try to get a closer look at Red.

When he got back to the lodge, he retrieved all of his belongings and packed everything up. Then he rifled through Red's things and found her cell phone. He decided it would be good to have for... well, you just never know. He disabled it by taking out the GPS chip and burned it over his lighter. By the time he had completed his cleanup, it was getting to be late in the afternoon. He hiked out and headed for another spot to set up camp for the night. He would try to get to Red first thing in the morning. He prayed it would warm up so all the footprints would be gone. He was all in favor of leaving absolutely no trace.

He chose his campsite about five miles from the lodge and bedded down for the night. At first light, he was up, boiling water for coffee and breakfast. After he'd finished, he cleaned everything up, packed his stuff and went through his campsite to make sure he left absolutely nothing behind.

His training with the Special Forces taught him a lot, and he knew exactly what to do in order to leave no evidence that he had ever been anywhere. He even knew how to remove his fingerprints, hair, even DNA—definitely leave no trace whatsoever. He was also granted his wish—the weather warmed up considerably and in a couple of hours, most signs of snow were completely gone.

Darryl Carter prided himself in his expertise. He never got rattled, even when Red hit him with that pepper spray. He was able to control his breathing so incidents like that wouldn't

affect him like it would a normal individual. The guys in his unit could never figure out how he did it. Well, they never had a Pa, or Ma for that matter, like he did. Yeah, maybe there was something after all that he could thank them for.

He backtracked to where he remembered giving chase and followed that trail down the mountains. When he came to the cabled section, he slowed his pace so he could carefully look to see where Red was. He went back and forth several times and then he started getting frustrated. He knew he'd shot her while she was on this section. That's why it was such a great place to catch up to her. She had to slow her pace because of the steepness and the way the trail had narrowed to almost nothing. He went back and forth and he finally discovered the ledge but... NO RED! What the...?!?

No way that girl could have gotten up and walked out of there. What the hell happened to her? he thought.

Darryl figured he had to find a way to get down there. He skirted around a few thickets until he found a way, at the very least, to get him closer. After some finagling, he got close enough to have a look. Sure enough, there was dried blood, but that was all.

Well, I'll be... he thought.

The hunt was back on. Darryl could feel his excitement mounting. This was his favorite part... and the part he was best at. NO ONE, and he meant no one, had ever escaped from Darryl Leon Carter, and Red was NOT going to be the first.

He looked for any kind of trace of her he could find. Doggone it, though, he couldn't figure out how she'd done it. From the looks of things, she appeared to have been mortally injured. He could have sworn her back had been broken by the way she laying there all twisted up. The other puzzling thing was the ledge she had ended up on afforded no way for her to get up and walk out of there.

"How in the world had she gotten out of there?" he tried to figure it out. Strangely enough, Darryl couldn't even get to that ledge if he tried.

He broke though brush to see if he could find any kind of a trail she may have left behind, any indication of which direction she went. But everything around the area was cold, like she had just vanished. This was a real head scratcher for him. He was at a loss in this hunt, and Darryl Carter was never at a loss. This spurred him on with an even greater intensity. He was bound and determined now to find her. She had cheated him out of his fun, so she owed him, owed him big. And he was going to find her to get his due.

Chapter 17

A week passed since Rayn's departure, and I felt a hole in my heart I didn't want to face. I couldn't believe what was happening to me. How did I ever get to this place? I so did not want to stay here, but I had no choice. I was in a terrible place in my mind. I could not leave... heck, I couldn't even get up and walk out of here had I wanted. I was trapped. Where would my life... if that's what you wanted to call it... take me next? Maybe there was some kind of place I could live for a while until I learned how to function in this new body of mine.

I knew Talasi worried about me; my appetite had deserted me, as did my ability to sleep. I simply existed.

One night I finally fell into an exhausted sleep and dreamed of *him*. I dreamed we were together, and I was healthy. We were in a place I had never been. When I awakened, I was saddened by the reality of everything. I wanted to go back to the happy place with *him*.

So began my quest for dreams of Rayn. I tried to do everything I could think of to help me dream of him. Sometimes I succeeded, other times I would awaken, burdened with disappointment. I thought of how my life had changed from the days I was at Western rooming with Cat to my dismal existence in the caves of the Nunne'hi. I didn't know how much longer I could exist like this. I contemplated whether or not there would be a way to end it all. At times, I even wished I hadn't survived the fall.

That night, I fell into a deep sleep. I hadn't slept well for the several previous nights, so my fatigue overtook me. I was awakened by a sound of footsteps. I opened my eyes to see a three tall figures shrouded in black hooded cloaks. My memory stirred to the night in the woods when I was rescued. I thought I had hallucinated the vision of the three men rescuing me. Evidently, I hadn't, because they were in my room walking toward me.

I thought I should be afraid, but for some reason, I wasn't. They came to me, and one of them lifted me in his arms. Then, my mind became very fuzzy, and I drifted in and out of consciousness. When I opened my eyes again, I was in the entrance of a hospital, lying on a gurney, baffled as to how I got there.

The nurses kept asking me how I got there, and I had no answers for them. I was terribly confused, and my mind and memories seemed to be so muddled. I couldn't think straight and kept seeing strange visions of a man that caused my head to ache.

The next morning I woke up in a hospital room. The nurses kept asking me my name, what day of the week it was, etc. I had no answers except I knew who I was, where I was born, my circumstances, etc. I was full of questions and very confused by everything.

Initially, I didn't remember anything about my time with Talasi in the caves or even meeting Rayn for that matter.

Later that day, Dr. Thompson came to my room accompanied by a police officer. They asked me the same questions the nurses had asked, but then, they threw me a curve ball. They said that I had been missing for over two months and asked whether I could fill in any blanks. Unfortunately for everyone, I was clueless, absolutely clueless.

Dr. Thompson said it appeared that I had sustained and had been treated for severe injuries including a severed spinal cord, which had caused my paralysis. He said I had been shot in my leg and chest and that I had also suffered a fracture to my jaw. My memory loss was due to the severity of my injuries. It seemed the circumstances of what had happened would forever remain a mystery.

There wasn't anything else they could do for me in the hospital, so they were sending me home and setting up help for me.

My new life had begun. I was moved home the next day, and I initially had nursing care around the clock. I began physical therapy and learned how to live as a paraplegic. The thought of living the rest of my life in such a state was quite daunting to me initially. I couldn't begin to fathom how I could make it for a week, much less months and years.

The physical therapy was grueling. I never imagined what it entailed. I had heard accounts of it, but it required brutal strength and an endless positive spirit. The therapists knew how hard to push me, and it amazed me at times to see how much more I could actually do versus what I thought I could do. Their mantra was always, "If you can visualize it, you can do it!"

I never thought I could curse the way I did during those sessions. I was embarrassed by my actions. My parents would have been mortified if they could have heard me. Thankfully, that was the only time I was glad they weren't around.

The therapists seemed to like it when I acted that way. Their feelings were that if the patient was strong-willed and spirited, they could get her to achieve many more milestones than if she didn't care at all. And, boy, did I care. If I was ever to resume a "normal" life, I knew I had to demand much more of myself than I thought possible. I would not lie down and let life pass me by.

I quickly progressed to where I only required nurses during the day. My home made it convenient for me to maneuver around. I was adapting to my new life!

I continued trying to remember what had happened to me. I remembered hiking up to Mt. LeConte, but everything after that became a blur. The more I tried, the more frustrated I became.

About a couple of months after I returned home, the dreams began. I dreamed of a cave filled with beautiful people.

Suddenly, as if the sun's rays penetrated the cave walls, I looked up to see a man—the most stunning man ever. He came toward me, smiling, holding out his arms, reaching for my hands. In the background I saw my parents, looking on, as if they approved of this man. I couldn't take my eyes off of him; he was simply the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. He was tall and muscular with long wavy black hair—the kind you'd want to run your fingers through. But his eyes were an astonishing color of green—bright like emeralds. I had this nagging sense that I had seen him somewhere before, but I didn't know where.

I woke up in a cold sweat with a pounding headache.

The dreams started increasing in their frequency, along with the headaches. The doctors thought it may be a posttraumatic thing, but they could find no other cause.

Cat, January and Carlson came to visit. They tried to convince me to return to college. I thought it made more sense for me to go to school in Spartanburg, as my home would make it more convenient for me to do so. They tried to argue their points, but in the end, I remained in Spartanburg. My decision was sound, and I didn't feel comfortable yet away from my doctors and therapists. I didn't think they bought it, but they eased up on me after that. I missed seeing them every day, but being in my own surroundings was paramount to me at that point.

The dreams of *him, the beautiful dark stranger*, continued with increasing frequency. Sometimes, they would be a continuation from the night before—my own little series. Each night, there would be a new part added. Conversations with him, information about how I came to be in that place of the caves, names of the beautiful people there. This continued for weeks, until I looked forward to going to sleep at night so that I could live in my series of dreams. It was odd how my sleep seemed to center around them, and they were so vivid when I awoke I felt like it had actually happened.

Chapter 18

One night I was awakened by something. I sat up in my bed, leaning back on my elbows, looking around my room. I felt a presence there, but I couldn't see anything.

"Who's there?" I kept scanning the room for any sign of anyone. Nothing was discernible. My heart pounded in my chest, and I began gasping for air. I knew I needed to get a grip on myself, but I couldn't shake the fear that someone had invaded my home.

"Please, is anyone there?" I called out again. No one responded. So after a few minutes, I finally calmed down enough to lay my head back down and close my eyes. I couldn't sleep for the rest of that night.

In the morning, I went into the kitchen, and en route, I noticed that one of my pictures had been moved. I was keenly aware of this, as it was a picture of me with my dad—the last one we had taken together before he died. I'd been looking at it the night before, and I remembered exactly where I had placed it. Had someone been in here last night? Is that what awakened me from my sleep? Maybe I needed to have the security people come out and check things. It wasn't a very comforting thought for me to have someone breaking into my home at night.

I jumped on the phone and had the alarms checked that same day. My nurse came in, and I had her check all the locks on the windows just to make sure everything was secure.

Everything checked out ok, so in a sense, I was relieved. I had all but forgotten about it until it was time for me to turn in for the night. Once again, I passed the picture and thought about it. That night, before I turned in, I made a mental note of the placement of all the pictures I had on display. *We'll see if they look the same in the morning*, I thought.

I fell asleep easily enough, but once again, was suddenly awakened by something unidentifiable. I sat up and once again asked, "Who's there? What do you want? Why are you doing this?" I don't know how, but I simply knew someone was in my home.

I was suddenly gripped by an intangible fear. Memories started to surface from the dim recesses of my mind. I had visions of a man with unbearably evil eyes, bringing a knife down toward my face. I felt myself shaking, and suddenly, I was lost in this nightmare of a memory. In the distance, I could hear someone calling my name, over and over, telling me it was all just a memory and that I was fine. When I regained my senses, I saw someone standing over me, wearing a black hooded cloak and whispering. I began screaming.

The hooded figure took a hold of my hands and continued to talk to me. I immediately felt comforted, and for some peculiar reason, I was no longer afraid.

"Who are you? What do you want?" I whispered back, my voice filled with desperation. I no longer feared him, yet I needed answers.

"I am someone who cares deeply for you. I am here to take you away, if you choose this journey," he replied.

The stranger lifted his hood and let it drop off of his head. He looked up, and I got my first real look at him. I felt myself reeling with shock, trying to inhale some badly needed air into my lungs. It was the unknown man from my dreams.

“*YOU!* Oh my God. You *are real!* You’re the man from my dreams!”

Suddenly, memories slammed into my head with such force I was thrown back amongst the pillows. I was stunned, as if a bolt of lightning had hit me. The onslaught of sensation was unsettling, and my mind reeled with agonized confusion.

“Yes, and I am so sorry for all of this, Maddie.” He waved his arm across the room and then took my hands in his.

“I thought if we brought you back here, it would be better for you, but I could not stay away. I have thought of you night and day, and I could not bear to be apart from you any longer. I am so sorry for taking your memories away. We all agreed it would make it easier for you when all the questions started. We thought we would let the doctors assume your trauma caused amnesia. Your mind is too strong though. You were remembering everything through your dreams.

“Maddie, these past weeks I have driven myself crazy over you. I have no reasonable explanation for this, but I do not want for us to be apart. I have come to offer you something—something that I hope you will accept.”

I felt my world spinning crazily out of control. Erased my memories? Remembering everything through my dreams? What was he saying? None of this made sense; none of it was even possible.

Chapter 19

The strange, enigmatic specter from my dreams truly existed! He was dressed as he was when I first saw him—head to toe in solid black. His shirt was long sleeved and form fitting, and his legs were encased in tightly fitting pants that were tucked into his knee-high black leather boots. His attire was almost comical because in a different time and place I would have thought that to look ridiculous, like he was headed for a Halloween party. However, this stranger—Rayn was his name—pulled it off with great ease. His hands were partially covered by some strange looking metal objects, and he was enshrouded in a hooded cape. He oozed strength—imposing, impressive strength. And I could not tear my eyes away from him.

“What is going on? What are you doing here?” I finally asked.

He came to me in a blur of movement and said, “I have come to offer you something, something that I hope you will accept. But consider this with great care because it is clouded with many complications.”

“Okkaaay...” I said tentatively.

He continued, “I would like to take you someplace where your spine can be healed. You would have a complete recovery, and you would be able to walk again.”

“You mean my paralysis would be gone?”

“Completely and totally. You would be as you were before the fall.”

“That is not possible,” I countered.

“It is in my world, but not in yours. I cannot explain more than that right now. You must trust me with this.”

“Then what is the complication?”

“You could never return to your world as you know it. You could never speak to your friends or any of those you have known. It would be as if you vanished into thin air.”

“You are kidding me, right?” Who in their right mind would believe something like this?

To my dismay, he shook his head in the negative.

“‘Complication’ is an understatement. Can you explain this, or are you going give me a nebulous response?”

“Truthfully, I yearn to tell you more, and if you choose this path with me, shortly you *will* learn more. But for now, the less you know, the better for both of us. Simply put, some rules would be broken.” He extended his arm toward me and then let it fall to his side, as if he had second thoughts.

“If I choose to stay as I am, will I see you again?”

“No. I would leave you tonight never to return. In time, you would come to forget I exist.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible, now or ever. But you said something about breaking the rules. What exactly does that mean?”

“It means that I would have to do some things that are not... well, let us just say many wouldn’t approve of my actions.”

“Meaning?”

“There may be consequences for me.”

“Bad consequences?”

“Something like that.”

Without hesitation, I replied, “Then my answer is no. I will not put you or anyone else at risk. I appreciate everything you have done for me, believe me, I really do. But I would never ask anyone to take any unnecessary risks for me... ever.” I was emphatic about this.

“As you wish,” he shot back. I could see the veil of disappointment descend on his face. “I will take my leave then. Good-bye, Maddie.” He held my hand and placed a kiss on my palm. He was gone before I could even blink. He simply vanished into a ball of light and disappeared.

I shook my head, wondering if I had dreamed of his presence. The longer I lay there, the more convinced I was that I had imagined all of this. I forced myself to forget about him and move on, but it proved much more difficult than I ever dreamed.

I dreamed of him nightly, and he was never off of my mind. With a fierce determination, I promised myself I would move on. I honestly tried as best I could, but images of him persisted. A month passed and they were as strong as ever. It seemed they had imbedded in my mind and would not leave. I wished I had someone in which I could have confided. I was afraid to say anything about him to anyone, for fear they would think I had lost my mind.

* * * * *

My physical strength had returned, and I was fully engaged in my new life. I was going to enroll in two summer classes at the local college, and I was adapting to it all. I had a car that would accommodate my wheelchair and me, so I was able to go and do what I wanted to. I had gained both my independence and a strong sense of pride in my accomplishments. Everything was moving along in the right direction—except for my thoughts of *him*.

The more time that passed, the more I was convinced I would have to live the rest of my life with him heavily imprinted in my mind. I often wondered whether it would have been better not to have remembered anything about him. I saw his beautiful face as clearly as if he’d been standing next to me. I couldn’t lie to myself; I didn’t *want* to forget him. It was this realization that I knew I had made the biggest mistake in my life. It didn’t matter to me that I couldn’t walk; I had adapted to life without legs. It didn’t matter that I was alone in this world. What mattered was that I would never see *him* again. There was something tangibly alive between us. It was something that I had never felt before, and I had just let him walk away.

Book Two

The Guardian

Chapter 1

I am power. I am strength. I am the wind. I am speed. I am courage. I am faith. I am hope. I am fierce. I am loyal. I am steadfast. I am true. I am protection. I am honor. I am a Guardian of Vesturon.

Vesturon—it has been called the most beautiful place in the universe, and I would have to agree. Of course, I am prejudiced since it is my home.

It is inarguably stunning. Imagine the snowcapped peaks of the Rocky Mountain range, the white sands and turquoise waters of the Caribbean, the azure skies of spring over the Smoky Mountains, coupled with the breathtaking rich tapestry of the fall foliage. Put them all together and they still cannot touch the beauty of Vesturon.

My name is Alexyon Rayn Devvan Rowan Yarrister, and I am... an alien, an extraterrestrial, an otherworldly being. I do not resemble the aliens one would imagine that have been conjured up by Hollywood folklore—no third eye, extra limbs or scaly dermis. I look and act human. Well, my family might argue differently, but I digress.

I was born on the planet Vesturon, which is located in the Delta quadrant.

Eons ago my ancestors ventured forth in search of life on other planets. Earth was one of the many planets they visited. During their travels to Earth, they explored all the continents and developed an alliance with many different civilizations, including the Nunne'hi—the Spirit people that are an unknown sect of the Cherokee Nation in the Great Smoky Mountains.

As the years went by, our relations with them strengthened. Our bond with them became so strong that we now consider them as our brethren. The Vesturions became very protective of the Nunne'hi. Since we were so much more technologically developed, we decided to provide Guardians to the Nunne'hi.

The Guardians, a group of men and women sworn to provide protection where their leaders deem it necessary, would see that the Nunne'hi would remain secreted in their caves in the mountains and would also ensure that no one would ever discover their existence.

The Nunne'hi welcomed this protection, because as time moved forward, more and more people came to these great mountains. When the humans moved across the mountains in their push to develop this nation, the Nunne'hi faced the risk of discovery. However, the Guardians kept their promises, and the Nunne'hi remain undetected and untouched, even today.

As you might imagine, with time, the role of the Guardians evolved. They found themselves being called more and more to the aid of lost or injured visitors. They became responsible for the protection of the lands and resources in many places that reach beyond that great place in the Smoky Mountains. But most importantly, they became protectors against evil forces, physical and beyond, which threatened the safety of others.

The Nunne'hi welcomed their activities, and being a spiritual people they felt obliged to help those lost, injured or in danger. With the assistance of the Guardians, they were better able to aid people with less risk of exposure. Eventually, the role of the Guardians extended out to

other civilizations that existed on Earth and, as with the Nunne'hi, remain strong to this day. In fact, there are thousands of Vesturions acting on Earth as Guardians in our present time.

The Vesturions were well adapted to their role because their physical abilities are much greater than that of their human counterparts. They are able to move faster than the human eye can detect. Their strength is that of many human men combined due to their dense bone and muscle mass. Their life span is much longer due to genetics and advanced medical discoveries. However, there are other distinct advantages they have over their human brethren. They are telepathic—they can read minds and communicate through thoughts alone; they have the unusual ability of bringing peace and serenity to those they encounter; and lastly, they have a protective ability that allows them to obliterate someone's memory. Some are born with other preternatural abilities, such as telekinesis, empathic abilities, and the unique power of Command (much like hypnosis), but that can vary greatly from one to another.

My father, Rowan, is the Great Leader of the planet Vesturon, and I stand to inherit his domain when he steps down. I was sent to Earth as a Guardian as part of my education and preparation for the day I would assume the role as Great Leader.

The Guardians' roles have also changed. Our protective services have expanded to all parts of the world. As a result of this, we now have Guardians on every continent.

My family—four brothers and one sister—resides in Haywood County, North Carolina. Our house, located within the compound for the Guardians, is situated on a mountaintop, very close to where the Nunne'hi live. We have over 100 acres of land in a remote area and our grounds are teeming with security, making it impossible for the average sightseer or local to discover us.

It is our wish to keep humans from wandering up here because the compound is filled with things that cannot be found on Earth. Our technology would undoubtedly boggle the human mind.

We also have the capability to “veil” our property. In other words, we have devices that produce forces or shields, making it impossible for anyone to see our house. The compound is also secured with infrared video and other more complex surveillance so that we know when someone approaches. Luckily for us, we are accomplished tech geeks, since our world is so advanced.

We have assimilated to some degree into society. That is not to say we are active with other locals. We just try to exist with them so as to blend in and not raise any questions about our existence.

All of my siblings are here on Earth with me. They are named Therron, Rykerian, Tesslar, Xarrid and Sharra. They, too, are Guardians. I am the oldest and have been here the longest. We work closely together but sometimes we travel to different areas to help others. We meet frequently with the Guardians that have been assigned to other parts of the Earth. If they need our assistance, we are available and vice versa.

Chapter 2

“What is the plan for today?” Therron asked Rykerian. They were sitting at the bar in the kitchen finishing up breakfast. Our housekeeper and cook, Zanna, who spoils us beyond measure, was picking up their plates.

Therron, who stands about six feet four, has shaggy brown hair and green eyes that resemble mine. I always think of him as rough-around-the-edges. He has impeccable manners and is exceedingly easy going, but when he enters a room, the sheer size of him turns heads—not in an over bearing way, mind you, but he commands attention in an inelegant way. His shabbiness makes you want to take him and straighten up everything about him.

Rykerian on the other hand is elegant sophistication. His look is always polished, no matter the circumstances, like a model from the pages of *GQ*. The two of them are complete opposites in that regard. Rykerian never has a hair out of place, and if only there were words that could describe it, his hair is incomparable. It is a rainbow of hues of brown, red, blonde and every color in between. It is truly magnificent and never fails to escape anyone’s attention. Add to that his vivid blue eyes, and he summons instant female attraction.

But even with his elegance, Rykerian could not be more genuine. If I am the dead ringer for my father; Rykerian is the same for my mother.

“I was going to cover some of the lower trails,” Rykerian said as he stood and stretched to his full height of six and a half feet. “This drought will most likely kill some of the smaller creatures this winter. I hoped it would break by now, but that is not to be. Most of the tourists and hikers are gone for the season with the cold moving in. What is your opinion?”

“I agree. I was up there last week and never laid eyes on a soul,” Therron responded. “I think most people fear getting caught in a winter snow up there. I am truly glad it is over. I did not think we would ever quit having to carry water up to people. We could make a pass through and then head back down. Rayn, your thoughts?” Therron walked over to the refrigerator to put the coffee cream away.

“Your call, my brother. Have any of you been on the Appalachian Trail lately?” I responded.

“I was up there last week and did not see a soul. Therron, I believe a quick pass up there should suffice as I think all the thru hikers are gone by now, so if anyone’s up there now it is only a local hiker,” Rykerian offered.

A thru hiker was one that hiked the entire 2180 miles of the Appalachian Trail, from Georgia to Maine, or vice versa.

“Sounds like a plan. Let us quickly cover the AT and then head down to some lower trails,” said Therron.

“Would you like to travel by speedster, or would you prefer to go the old fashioned way?”

A speedster was a high tech motorcycle with a big difference. It didn’t have wheels and hovered above the ground, basically flying at low altitudes.

“I prefer the old fashioned way today. I should like to get a bit of exercise,” Rykerian shot back as he headed out of the room.

“Zanna, could you be so kind as to supply us with some food for the trail, maybe enough for a three day trip? And some snacks please. Your homemade cookies would be excellent!” Therron requested.

“My lord, you must know you only have to ask, and I will make whatever your heart desires!” Zanna replied.

Zanna was the greatest. She stood about five and a half feet tall and was elderly. Her grey hair and wrinkled skin were deceiving though. She had the strength of an ox and could outperform most young humans in any task. She had lived among our family for several generations and would be with us for the rest of her life. Her husband Peetar was her perfect match. He complemented her in everything they did.

They were responsible for the entire upkeep of our home and grounds and did an admirable job. Over the years, we have offered to bring others here to assist them in their duties, but they want nothing of that. They are very possessive of us and do not think anyone else is capable of taking care of us. I left the kitchen in search of the others.

I found Sharra in the den watching that movie about a group of vampires... she had a thing for those that I will never quite understand. Sharra was the youngest and the only female of the siblings. She was about five feet nine inches tall with a slender build. Her hair was as black as mine, minus the wave; she had the bluest eyes I have ever seen, more vivid than even Rykerian's. Sharra was a beauty.

“Um... have you not seen this movie about a hundred times already?” I asked her.

“Oh, yes, and I will most likely watch it another hundred times. You had better get used to it, Rayn. I just love this story. So what is up, my liege?”

“Shar, you know I dislike it when you call me that. Please save that title for public appearances. What are you working on this week?”

She hit the “pause” button on the DVR and said, “Yes, I wanted to talk with you about something. My surveillance of Sylva and of the campus is indicating a drifter has surfaced. He was reported to the police by two females, and they were pretty crapped out by him.”

“Er, Sharra, do you not mean ‘creeped’ out?”

My sister had an unusual knack for slaughtering American slang.

“Yes, well and that too. Anyway, the police report said they could not identify the man, but he had been seen dangling around some of the coffee shops on campus and in Sylva.”

“You mean ‘hanging’ around.”

In a blur, she was on her feet pacing around the room.

“Yes... well, that too. I want to keep him in my sights. I do not have a good feeling about him, Rayn. I talked to the Guardians in Alabama and Tennessee. You must know they have

found many women beaten to death in the woods, hiking, camping or backpacking. I do not want that happening in our area, and I keep wondering if this drifter has anything to do with that.”

“Damnation, Sharra. I hope there is not a connection. You truly seem concerned about this man. We must have a meeting to inform everyone on this. I am planning on paying Talasi a visit in the next couple days. The Nunne’hi need to be aware of this too.”

“That is a very good point. When do you want to meet?”

“Tonight. Get Tesslar and Xarrid and we will have to tele-commune with Therron and Rykerian. They are leaving for patrol. Eight o’clock tonight.”

“Consider it done.”

Chapter 3

Therron and Rykerian arrived at the Newfound Gap parking lot to see a lone jeep parked there.

“Well, it appears we are going to have to do more than a quick pass. I did not think there would be anyone up here,” Therron commented.

“Nor did I. I was hoping we would not even have to spend the night here. Where should we start?” Rykerian replied.

“Let us proceed toward Siler’s Bald on the AT for a while. If we do not run into anyone there tonight, we will backtrack in the other direction.”

“Stop. I am getting a mental hit from Rayn. Are you?”

“Affirmative.”

As thoughts of the three men swirled around each of their heads, they received all the information from Rayn about the drifter and the meeting set for eight that night. They asked if they should return for the meeting. Rayn explained they could do it through telepathy.

Rykerian started talking immediately after the tele-commune ended. “I cannot believe this is happening. I am—how do the humans say it?—*so* not ready for this. We are not prepared for more than three nights up here.”

“Well, let us just continue with our plan, and if we do not find anything, we will head back to the compound and restock our supplies so that we can return for a longer time. Let us make sure we have camp set up before that meeting at eight,” Therron responded.

If only they had decided to go in the opposite direction, they could have prevented Maddie’s abduction.

* * * * *

The Appalachian Trail was cold... meaning they went all the way to Siler’s Bald and didn’t run into a soul. That was about ten miles, so they made camp for the night. That night, they received all the information from Rayn about the drifter, so they made the decision to check some of the trails that intersected the AT, just to make sure there hadn’t been any activity up there.

The next morning, they packed up after breakfast and headed back toward Newfound Gap, checking out several other trails along the way—no activity on any of them. They crossed back over Newfound Gap Road and made it to the juncture of the AT and the Sweat Heifer Creek Trail, where they made camp for the night.

Later that following day when they arrived at the Boulevard Trail, they noticed tracks in what was left of the tiny bit of unmelted snow and mud. They followed the AT for about a half of a

mile but didn't see any sign of activity. So they turned around and headed back toward the Boulevard Trail. That's when things started to get interesting.

Initially, they saw one set of prints. After a few miles, they noticed there were two sets of prints. They were barely discernible for by now, most of the snow was gone.

"I am getting a bad feeling about this, Rykerian."

A half of a mile later, they saw blood—a lot of blood.

"Sweet Deity! What in the world...?" They continued on, following the trail of blood.

"We need to notify Rayn of this."

"Therron, you do not think...?"

"I do not know, but we need to investigate this and Rayn needs to know. He needs to tell Talasi too. Whoever left this blood trail has been badly injured."

Therron crouched down to get a closer inspection the blood. "This is dried, so it has been here at least a day."

Minutes later, they made short work of the hike to Mt. LeConte, due to their Vesturion speed.

They reached their destination well before dark to discover what they hoped they wouldn't.

"Someone has broken into the lodge; look at the window," Rykerian remarked.

They walked up to the porch to have a look and noticed the door was ajar. They pushed open the door, and they immediately knew something terrible had taken place here.

"Can you feel that?" Rykerian asked standing still, eyes closed, using his empathic ability.

"Oh, yes, and I can smell the blood as well. Rykerian, look at that sleeping bag. Is there any identification in that pack?"

Rykerian rummaged through the pack and came up empty handed. Therron picked up the sleeping bag and shuddered.

"This is a female's bag; look at the size of it. Whoever owns this has lost a great deal of blood. Look at the stains, and they are not completely dried. So this is relatively fresh."

"What do you think happened, Therron?"

"I cannot speculate, but it is not good. We must to return home and notify Rayn and Sharra about this. We may need to start a search and rescue. If this female is injured, she will not be able to get back."

"Use the teleporter. We have no time to waste."

Therron entered their information, and in seconds, they were taking form at their house.

Sharra met them on the porch and explained that Talasi had summoned the other brothers, and they were involved in a rescue of some sort. She filled them in as best she could, with her limited knowledge, but now, all they could do was wait for them to return.

Chapter 4

Before I could get to Talasi, I received a mental hit from her. She was a member of the Nunne'hi who was basically my direct link to the tribe. She informed me that she had felt a disturbance in the air all day. She sensed the presence of evil, deep, dark evil, in their sacred lands. This was cause for great concern, since Talasi had a great connection to the land and was keenly aware when something was amiss.

At eight that night, my siblings and I joined thoughts. Sharra brought everyone up to date on our possible suspect. We decided that until we had more concrete information, we would double our patrols along the North Carolina/Tennessee border. If this man was moving into our area, we wanted to make sure we had surveillance on him.

I explained to everyone what Talasi had told me earlier and decided I would meet up the next day with the Nunne'hi and give them all the necessary information. Rykerian and Therron would stick to their original plan.

The next day, I went to see Talasi.

She told me there had been an accident. I knew something was terribly wrong. The usually serene Talasi was pacing around wringing her hands, visibly distressed. I had never seen her in such a state.

“A woman contacted me through the Spirit world and said her daughter was in great danger. She told me where to find her,” she said. “When I arrived, she was unconscious. She is located on a ledge on the side of a cliff, and because of this, my people cannot move her. She is severely wounded, and I fear for her life. Her name is Madeline and I—”

“What happened to her?” I asked, interrupting her.

Talasi squeezed my arm and said, “As best we can see, it seems she has been beaten. She is seriously injured. She has been shot in the leg and the chest, with arrows oddly enough, and we think she has injured her spinal cord. She must have fallen down the side of the mountain. Can the Guardians go to her?” she asked, placing her hand on his arm.

“Yes. We will go now.”

I teleported back home after telling Talasi that I would be in touch with her to let her know what had happened. I met up with my brothers Xarrid and Tesslar and after locating the female, the three of us teleported onto the ledge where the injured female lay.

Initially, my mind could not fathom what my eyes were seeing. It was a beautiful young woman lying on the ground, terribly broken and twisted. She had the face of an angel, but this angel had been severely beaten. There was significant bruising around both eyes, and she had a deep bloody laceration that ran from the corner of her mouth to her ear. The awkward positioning of her jaw indicated a fracture. As Talasi said, she had an arrow protruding from her left calf and a ragged, gaping hole in her chest. In her hand, she held another arrow. She must have extracted it from her chest somehow.

“Great Deity! What or who could have done this to her?” I asked aloud.

Tessler replied, “This is terrible, critical, actually,” he claimed, as he began to scan her for injuries.

Holographic images appeared before us. She had a severed spinal cord, a fractured tibia, a deep chest wound into her lung, and significant bruising of the face. Her jaw was fractured in several places and a deep laceration nearly split her face in half.

“Bloody hell! She has been shot with broad band arrows in her chest and leg. Look at the image of her chest. What kind of beast are we dealing with here? Who could have done this to her?” Tessler demanded to know.

“She must be in excruciating pain. Someone has beaten her mercilessly,” Xarrid added.

I heard a moan and looked in her glassy, opened eyes to see she had regained consciousness and had begun to mumble incoherently. It was obvious she moved her mouth with great difficulty.

“It is ok, Madeline. Do not fear us... we are here to help you,” I said. Her eyes were an unusual shade of amber, and they were watching me, widening in abject fear.

My main goals were to make her understand she was safe with us and to comfort this poor creature.

“Xarrid, do you have any morphine with you? We need to ease her pain.”

“Yes, wait. Here you go.” He fumbled through his gear and handed me a syringe. I popped the cap off with my teeth and gave her the injection; within seconds, I could see it take effect.

“Madeline, we are going to have to move you, but do not worry. We have given you something for your pain.”

I had the greatest urge to hold and comfort her. As I knelt next to her, I carefully placed her head against my thigh, trying to offer her some small means of comfort. I wiped her hair from her face and gently touched her cheek. Then I began to massage her arms to help make her more comfortable and to ease any anxiety she may have had.

“Tessler, scan her body mass so that you can enter her statistics in the teleporter. We need to get her to Talasi, so she can start her healing magic.” I remained kneeling down next to her and held her hand, continuing to offer the smallest of comforts.

Tessler entered all the information. When he was finished, I gathered her in my arms, and we transferred deep into the caves of the Nunne’hi.

Chapter 5

Talasi met us and guided us through a maze until we came to a separate cave. In the middle of it, a raised bed was placed, making it easier for the women to tend to her. Then they went to work. She needed the healing waters, but I didn't know how they would remove that god-forsaken arrow without causing considerable pain and damage to her.

As I stood by, watching helplessly, I felt my chest constrict as I looked at this young woman. For some unexplainable reason, I felt an urgent need to protect her. It was more than my usual need to do so. It went deep as if it touched my very soul. I didn't understand this feeling.

And then something else hit me, ferociously, like a jab in my gut. It was a feeling of utter rage, and it completely washed over me. I knew Talasi sensed this, because she put her hand on my arm and told me I needed to be in control now more than ever.

"You will have time to pursue her attacker, but now, this child needs your presence when she awakens, which will be any time now."

There were other Nunne'hi in the room, and Talasi went in to check on the female. I stood right outside of the room, trying to reign in my raging emotions. After what seemed like a long time, I felt that I was in control again. It was then I heard her scream.

I rushed into the room to see the young female trembling uncontrollably and screaming in terror. The women were trying to comfort her to no avail. I knew it was time for me to step in.

I went to her and gently placed my hands her arms, not wanting to frighten her any more than she already was. My calming influence started to work almost instantly. I felt the trembling dissipate, and it was then, I looked into her eyes, reaching into her mind.

I was completely unprepared for what I saw. She laid there, her long slender fingers wrapped tightly around her cover, holding it to her chin. Her eyes, wide with fear, darted around the room trying to discern where she was and who we were. Her mind was filled with apprehension and questions. She didn't know what was happening to her, and she wondered if she was safe with us. Her emotions exploded within me, and I felt myself wanting nothing but to assuage her fears. I have never felt anything so strong or feelings as deep as I did in that moment. They blasted through me, rocking me to my core.

I was overwhelmed... by everything about her. Her beauty was beyond belief... not only her physical appearance but her spirit as well. She was pure of mind and body, and I felt her soul entwining itself around mine, binding us together.

As soon as my ability to calm penetrated her being, I felt Madeline's trembling and shuddering subside. I whispered soothing words to her in the ancient Vesturian tongue and held her hands. I wanted to take this horror from her and erase it from her memory. Although that was within my powers, I would not do that do her. It was an invasion, and I could not allow it.

I sat down next to her and continued to hold her. Once she had quieted down, I started whispering to her. I whispered words of encouragement, told her everything would be alright and that she was safe. And then I spoke to her in the Ancient Tongue, “*You are truly a brave fighter to have survived so much. I will protect and avenge you. This I promise you!*”

She furrowed her brow, trying to decipher the words I had spoken. I felt a disarming need to translate them.

In all the years of my existence, either here on Earth or on Vesturon, I had never encountered sensations such as these. I felt connected to this female. I wanted her as my partner, my companion, my equal, my mate. How could I even be thinking of this? This was insane, not possible. I did not even know her! I knew, at that moment, in the depths of my soul, that somehow, I would have to find a way to do this. I felt it in my very being. She would be a part of me forever.

What in the world am I thinking? This is not possible! This cannot be happening to me. I should walk away this very second and never return.

I knew I was treading in dangerous waters. My father would never allow this as it was strictly forbidden. He would consider an earthling below me, but none of that mattered.

Then another dreadful thought occurred to me. What if she was already spoken for or, worse yet, mated to another human? I needed to switch off those thoughts of mine, as I knew they would only lead to trouble. Before I could stop myself, and as horrible as it was, I reached into her mind to see if there was another male in her life. I came up with a blank and felt myself breathe a sigh of relief.

I felt her shift. I wanted to make sure she was comfortable, so I inquired whether she was in pain. She said she was not, but then the questions started. I did not know what to tell her. I wanted to tell her everything about me, Vesturon, the Nunne’hi, but I was not able to do so. The need for her ignorance regarding my heritage was paramount. The thought of lying to her sickened me, but it was the only way. I would have to skirt the issues and be evasive in my answers.

I wanted her to trust me more than anything I wanted that. She followed my every movement with those large, unusual eyes of hers. I began to tell her of the contact made so we could find her. I was not crystal clear in my explanation, and I could read in her thoughts that she was filled with questions and mistrust. I could feel and see her anger, which was good. This was a fiery female, which impressed me beyond measure, but I still felt most... protective of her.

Naturally, she was afraid of me initially. I could not begin to imagine what she had endured, but I needed to know. I needed the details. Without them, it would be too complicated to track the beast. I would not invade her mind that would be too intrusive for her to bear right now.

She began to speak, at first hesitatingly, but then the words tumbled out one after another. I had to lean close to her to hear them. Her voice was soft, but she whispered in an emotionless manner. I didn’t dare interrupt her for fear she’d stop. I had to get the information on this monster, but she needed to speak the words as well, as a sort of catharsis. Her trancelike state indicated she was reliving every horrific moment, and I tried to absorb it from her.

I wanted to roar at the cruelty of it all. The words continued to come, faster after a time, as if she needed to cleanse herself of them. I gently held onto her hands, continuing to soothe her in the only way I knew how, feeling helpless to do more.

When she finished speaking, she looked into my eyes. Her cheeks were glistening from the tears she had shed. I reached up and wiped them away with the pads of my thumbs, trying my best not to frighten her. I kept thinking that I should release her hands, but I just could not bear to break contact with her. Without thinking, I began speaking in the old language from Vesturon.

“My eyes behold a beauty I do not deserve. You must surely be a heavenly angel sent from the Divine Being. You are, without doubt, the bravest of females, and if you would but allow it, I would ease your pain and suffering. You have somehow taken hold of my heart, and for that, you will forever have my honor and allegiance.”

I hadn't realized that I had spoken those words aloud until she asked me what language I had spoken. I was losing control of myself around her; I needed to reign in my emotions. The problem was I did not know how. She was like a drug to me, reeling me in. I was hooked, like a pitiful fish. Instead, I willed myself to focus on the moment and answer her questions.

Then I began to feel an unrelenting anger building toward the monster that had injured this female. When I could no longer tolerate my emotions, I abruptly turned and dashed outside, the need to scream overwhelming me. I was quickly losing control and needed to reign myself in. I raked my fingers through my hair and began pacing back and forth, hoping to calm myself. I screamed like an animal until there was no longer any air in my lungs. I literally felt like I was being torn apart. I wanted to search out this beast and annihilate him with my bare hands. My strength was much greater than any humans,' so I was confident this could be easily accomplished. My breathing became more ragged as I continued to rage.

Unknowingly, I had attracted an audience. Talasi and her mate had heard me roaring and came out to see what had happened. They were so concerned that they summoned my brothers Tesslar and Xarrid. I was not even aware they had joined me until they both grasped my arms.

“Rayn, calm yourself. Take slow, deep breaths,” Tesslar suggested. “I have never seen you like this. What has affected you in such a way? What has happened?” he asked.

Tesslar continued to hold onto me, waiting for me to regain control. I could feel him trying to tap into my thoughts, but my red haze of anger was blocking him. Xarrid was trying to get into my thoughts now too. Surely, they were wondering what had possessed me to get this kind of response. After some long and tortuous moments, I finally could feel my sanity returning.

Xarrid started by saying, “What in the Deity's name was that?”

I didn't quite know how to respond. “I do not really know,” I answered, still panting from the exertion. They looked at each other, and I knew then they did not believe me.

So I continued, “I was listening to the injured female's recounting of what happened, and I felt this anger, this unbelievable fury overtake me. I could not control it, so I left the cave so that I could let it go. I was unable to stop or even control my reaction.

They were both as shocked as I was. “I still do not understand. Was it just the fact that someone could have done something so heinous, or was it because it had been done to that particular female? If the latter is true, you may have a bigger problem than you think,” Xarrid countered.

“Do you think I have not thought of that?” I started wearing a new path outside as I paced again. “I am feeling things right now that I cannot explain and do not care to even try. Do not ask me anything else because I have no other answers,” I said abruptly, hoping to cut off any more questions, flashing them a look that dared them to ask.

“Well,” Tesslar began, “one thing is true my brother: we have to get the beast that did this. How do you want it handled?”

“I am not sure I can be involved in the search,” I replied. “I need to be here in case Madeline becomes inconsolable again. She is going to be grief-stricken when she finds she is paralyzed. We have a true dilemma here. The other issue is that if I catch the monster that tried to kill her, I will not leave much of him around. I will tear him apart... with joy. I never imagined anyone could be so physically cruel. We deal with evil forces all the time, but this has brought a new dimension to things.”

“Ok. We will get Therron and Rykerian to join us in the search. I think we should take off now and use the night to our advantage. He would never expect that.”

“Xarrid... Tesslar... did either Rykerian or Therron find any tracks to follow?”

“None at all. Regretfully, the snow is gone, so we are out of luck on that account. This human is very good at this, which is a rarity. Humans are never this good at hiding their tracks.”

“Talasi said she sensed an unusual evil presence. What if we are not dealing with a human here?” Rayn questioned.

“Then, we have a bigger problem than even we can imagine. Or it may be that this monster is some kind of an expert. I think we need to get online and try to search databases to find if anything similar has happened in other places. We need to dig as deeply as we can on this, and the sooner, the better.”

“Agreed. You must go back to the compound and begin the search,” and looking at Tesslar, I added, “and you and the others can start out here. Start narrow and broaden out the grid. Do NOT leave one stone unturned, understand? And I want a thorough search of the lodge with fresh eyes, just in case. Sharra can do the database run. She is already digging for information on that vagrant that showed up in Sylva. Maybe he is the connection. Go NOW.”

“As you wish. Watch over her Rayn, but take care. She is a human after all,” Tesslar said. They hit the transfer pod and vaporized into energy.

As I stood alone in the dark, I had a moment to reflect on my emotions. I knew there was something going on between Madeline and I, but I could not quite define it. From the moment I laid eyes on her, I felt this attraction, this magnetism from which I couldn't escape. Even now the urge to run to her side was so strong I had to force myself to stay outside.

What was this... thing I couldn't name? Was this how males felt when they found their own true mate? Yes, admittedly, my thoughts had been going there, even though I didn't want that.

I wanted to ignore this whole situation. Neither of us belonged in each other's world. To allow myself to think otherwise was foolhardy. There could be no positive outcome of this... it simply was not allowed.

Walk away and don't look back, I kept repeating to myself. Unfortunately, it wouldn't work. I continued to be in a state of indecision and uncertainty.

Chapter 6

Rykerian and Therron had reached LeConte Lodge the day Talasi called out to me. When they got up there, they found Madeline's backpack, bloodied sleeping bag and nothing else. If her abductor had any gear with him, he did not leave anything behind. The brothers left all of Madeline's stuff alone so that the authorities would find it and assume she'd had a terrible accident.

The next day, I returned to Madeline's side, to check on her progress. At least, that's what I told myself. The truth? I just could not tolerate the separation anymore.

As soon as I entered her quarters, the questions hit me. She was NOT giving up on finding the answers. So, I once again had to give her vague responses. I knew she wasn't satisfied, and I could see her fiery nature at war with my explanations. She clearly wasn't accepting my vague answers.

Maddie was a part of every thought I owned. I was tormented by her, as I knew that what I indubitably desired could never be. The kisses we shared, though brief, ignited something within me that I could not put out of my mind. I had never experienced such depth of emotion over a female. I was at a loss and unable to cope with it, yet I could think of nothing else.

I finally did the impossible. I made the decision to leave her because of the feelings she evoked in me. I had no experience in these matters, but this was interfering with everything I did, clouding my judgment, rendering me ineffective. I had to back away in order to maintain my sanity. It was self-preservation.

I ventured out on patrol, in a pitiful attempt at escaping from my situation, Maddie, my duties, my obligations, and myself.

I also searched for that despicable barbarian. I wanted to be the one to find him, so I could mete out the proper punishment. This was completely out of character for me as I was usually the levelheaded pacifist. That I wanted to seek out vengeance for this wrong should have spoken volumes to me.

I thought of ways I could get Maddie to Vesturon to be healed, ways in which I could do it undetected, and then erase her memory so no harm on either side would be done. Regrettably, I could not find a way to do this. If I acted on this idea of mine, there would be a great price for me to pay. I just had to decide if the steep price was worth it.

I wanted to confide in my family, but I knew that would only cause problems for them. I had to find the answer myself, and it would take some soul searching and discoveries.

I finally made the decision to send her back to her world. I would have Therron, Rykerian and Tesslar return her and erase her memory—everything that happened after she went on her hike. I wanted them to dissolve her memory of her attacker. It would be better if she didn't face nightmares of her captivity. They would take her to a hospital in Spartanburg, and leave her for the medical personnel to find her. She would be ensured of the best care there, and she would learn to function with her disability in her world—a world she was familiar with.

I could not be a part of this for I knew I would be unable to let her go when the time came.

I made one final visit to her—to tell her good-bye and to apologize for any pain or misery I may have caused her. I still was unable to tell her the truth. It nearly killed me to do this to her. I could feel the depths of her emotions. I wanted so badly to stay, but that was not possible. I then did the hardest thing I've ever done. I turned and walked away from her.

* * * * *

Weeks passed, but instead of the pain diminishing, it worsened. She had somehow unwittingly attached herself to my heart and soul, ever present in my mind. I was the addict, and she was the drug.

I began to dream of her nightly. The dreams were vividly explicit, not like the normal dreams I was used to. I could feel her warmth when I touched her. I could see and hear her. I saw us with my family on Vesturon. I saw her with young children, and somehow, I knew they were ours. In one dream, I glimpsed her wrists and noticed they bore the markings of a Vesturion mate. I would awake from these dreams shaken, disturbed and deeply saddened because they were only dreams.

Finally, tired of trying to fool myself any longer, I decided to request assistance and guidance from the Divine Being. I would beg for His help if I must. I didn't know where else to turn.

That evening, after returning home, I went to my special place outdoors. It was high on a mountaintop with a staggering view of the celestial heavens. The night was clear and cool, with a slight breeze whispering through the trees. I knelt down, bowed my head and reached out to the Divine Being for answers. The mist encircled me, enfolded my spirit, and I abruptly became aware of His presence.

“What is it that you seek, my son,” He enquired.

“I need much assistance from you with a decision I have to make.”

“I have sensed your troubled spirit. Does this decision involve the young female you rescued?”

“Yes, and I am facing something I don't know how to handle. She has a severed spinal cord from her fall, and she is paralyzed. I would like to take her to Vesturon to be healed, but I would be breaking our covenant.”

“This is indeed a difficult choice.”

“There is another integral part to this story which is much larger than that of her injury. I have become emotionally bonded to her. I cannot function without her as part of my thoughts. She is ever present in my heart, mind and soul, and I know not what to do.”

“Your honesty is refreshing as I know of this bond. Rayn, this female is your destiny, as you are hers. This union with the human is going to cause you much pain and suffering. It is your fate, so you must make your decisions in this matter very carefully.”

“Can you not tell me what path to take? Am I to take her to Vesturon? Is she to be my mate?”

“I have told you of your fate, but I cannot tell you more. You must find these answers yourself. She is a virtuous female with a strong and loyal heart. Follow your heart to the path that is as it should be. Remember, Rayn, life is and should be lived as a mystery, not something with all the answers you desire.”

“But...”

The mist dissipated, and I was left alone, still unsure of how to proceed. Evidently, Maddie was my path to the future, but, this was going to anger my family. What would my father say? I couldn't begin to imagine, nor did I want to. I had always chosen the path that pleased him. Was this a kind of test for us both? I loved my father and did not want to cause any discord, but I could no longer continue on this path of mine.

I woke with the sun the next morning, its amber rays bringing a picture of Maddie's eyes to mind. I couldn't remember returning home after my communing with the Deity. I couldn't even recall climbing between the sheets and falling asleep. My mind, now solely focused on Maddie, didn't allow any other thoughts to invade its depths.

I began to visit her nightly. Initially, I thought I would just enter her dreams to ensure she was happy. What I discovered shocked me to the core. Her dreams were exact replicas of mine. I saw through her mind, what I had seen in my own. Surely this had to mean something. Why else would our dreams be aligned? I had heard of this before, but only with bonded mates whose spirits had merged. Maybe this was supposed to happen as part of our destiny.

I came to the conclusion that I would need to air my dilemma with one of my brothers. My decision was made with Maddie. I would give her the choice of going to Vesturon or staying here. But first, I needed to inform Therron and explain my decision to him. I knew he would be hurt and upset with me, but as this was my destiny, I had no choice.

Chapter 7

“What is it, Rayn?” Therron inquired.

“I need to make you aware of something. I tell you of this for two reasons: one, because I respect you as my brother, and two, because you would stand in my place if something happens to me. But make no mistake Therron, I do not seek your approval for this.”

I proceeded to explain to him of my predicament and how I desired to take Maddie as my mate.

Before I could say another word, Therron shrieked back, “WHAT? What are you saying? Rayn! You CANNOT be thinking of this! She is human!”

I quickly shot back, holding up my hand, “Therron, as I have already said, I am not asking for your approval or for your permission. There is so much more to this.”

I raked my hand through my hair, which was my telltale sign of frustration. Then, I began my usual pacing. I knew in moments, Therron would be matching me, step for step. We always seemed to be in sync.

“When we first saw Madeline, I felt an unbelievable magnetism—a force—drawing me to her. I tried by best to shake it... to deny it... to walk away and forget about it. But every day it kept growing stronger. Surely, you have noticed how strange I’ve been acting lately. Did you stop to think why I’ve spent so much time on patrol? Why I’ve been away so much?”

Therron just stared back at me with a look of shock upon his usually calm face. His jaws were clenched, and I could see the little muscles on either side of his cheeks twitching.

I was impossibly calm as I spoke. “I tried everything in my power to forsake this, but it was not to be.”

I looked up to the heavens as I continued, “Do you remember that time when we were youngsters back on Vesturon and you just had to have that speedster—the fastest one made—but Father forbade it? You kept hounding him repeatedly, and he wouldn’t relent. So you took it upon yourself to find one and steal it. Do you remember?”

“Remember? How could I forget that? I was punished for years, it seemed. I was banned from everything. Father was always so strict, and he was not pleased I had actually stolen the thing. But what does this have to do with you?”

“Think back Therron... do you remember how you felt when you just had to have it?”

Therron nodded. I could tell his thoughts went back, and he was remembering that day. “I did not think I could live without it,” he admitted.

“Therron, what I am feeling now for Maddie is a billion times stronger than that. My protective instincts are in high gear where she is concerned. It is something I have never

before experienced. I can feel her anguish and pain, like she is a part of me. It is NOT going away. I have even discussed this with the Divine Being.”

“WHAT? You actually called on our Deity? And received an answer? Are you insane?”

We were now both walking in circles, our actions mirroring each other’s.

I stopped and turned to face him. “I did. Maddie is my fate, my future. I had to call upon the Divine Being because I want to take her to Vesturon so that Julian can treat her spinal injury.”

Therron abruptly dropped to the ground and placed his head into his hands.

“Dear heavens above, what are you saying? If you do this Rayn, you will be imprisoned. Father will bring his wrath down upon you. You will be stripped of your rank and disinherited. You will become a criminal, and, worse, you will be treated as one. Do you understand what I am saying to you?”

He arose and came to me and grabbed my shoulders. “Please, Rayn, for the love of everything, you must rethink this. I beg you.” His beautiful eyes were pleading with me.

With more peace and serenity I had felt in days, I placed my hands on his shoulders and calmly replied, “I absolutely understand... everything. Therron, what I am saying to you is that I am willing to take that chance or risk anything for that matter. I cannot live with myself knowing she is out there, and there is something I can do for her. I struggled with this before we even returned her to the hospital. I knew if we did that, and cleansed her memories, she could go on with her life, without any interruptions from me.”

I dropped my arms from him and resumed my pacing. “Her mind is strong, however, and every night, she dreams of me. Therron, we have dream walked together. I can no longer stay away from her, and I will be with her, if she will have me. I am afraid we are deeply connected, Therron.”

“Is she aware of all of this? Wait, what are you saying? You have dream walked with her? How can that be?” Therron just shook his head, as if he were trying to allow himself to understand all of this. “She is an Earthling; she does not have that capability.”

“I do not know. I have heard of it in bonded mates, but never with a human. Therron, there exists something between us that I cannot explain.”

“Does the human know any of this?” he asked, while we still walked in circles.

“Not yet. I am planning on letting her choose what she wants. If she chooses to go to Vesturon for the cure, I will take her. If she chooses to stay in her home, I will leave her be. I’m telling you this because... if she chooses the latter, I can no longer stay here. I will request to return to Vesturon. That is why I needed to discuss this with you. Either way, you are going to be required to fulfill my role. If I take Maddie, I will most likely be rank stripped which leaves you as second in command here, to step in as Leader of the Guardians.”

Therron stood up and came to me. I tapped into his thoughts and felt his torment.

“My brother, I know this is difficult, but I beg of you to at least try to understand my position here. I know you know and understand me better than anyone... to the point of knowing me

better than myself at times, so please find it in your heart to know that I do not choose this without great thought and trepidation. But also know that I would do anything for her.”

He bowed before me, placed his hand over his heart, and spoke to me in the ancient language, “*Brother of mine, I will stand at your back and protect you always. If this female is worthy of your love and honor, she too will have my protection.*”

I briefly laughed and said, “Therron, I am not sure if *I* am worthy of *her*. *She is strong of body, but stronger of mind, and faithful to the ones she loves,*” I responded in the Ancient Tongue. “I am unsure if she will trust me enough to go with me. After all, we have wiped her memory out, and when I return it to her, she will know I abandoned her in the caves. I’m not sure she will even want me.”

“Rayn, one thing I do know about you is that when you set your mind to something, you will not stop until you achieve your goals. If your goal is to be with this female, then so you shall be. When do you go to her?”

“Tonight. If she chooses me, I will bring her to our home after we return to Earth. Please do not tell the others. I do not want them to have anything to hide from Father and his wrath. I would not be surprised if he were waiting for me upon my return.”

Chapter 8

That night, I carefully dressed in the uniform of the Guardians. I donned my black long-sleeved shirt, pants and boots. My shirt was adorned with the markings of my rank. This was important; if Maddie agreed to come with me, anyone seeing me on Vesturon wouldn't question me if I was in uniform. It would provide an immediate explanation on why I was there and not on Earth. Even though duplicity was not my normal *modus operandi*, I knew it would afford me the liberties I required. I clamped my *shadars* on my hands, donned my cape and materialized in her home.

* * * * *

I stood in the darkened corner and watched her sleep, as I had done countless times before. Her luxurious waves of burnished copper fanned out across her pillow, beckoning to me. I drew in a ragged breath, apprehension sinking its cruel claws into me over what I had come to do. She must have heard me for she turned her head in my direction, her amber eyes attempting to pierce the darkness.

“Who’s there?” she wanted to know.

I felt her fear as it pierced my heart.

“It is someone who cares deeply for you. I am here to take you away, if you choose this journey,” I replied as I stepped away from the corner and out of the shadows.

I explained my presence as I approached her, in careful detail, to ensure she had a complete understanding of what I was offering her. And then she did the unthinkable, she refused me!

My grief was so penetrating that I could barely speak. I picked up her hand, kissed it, and materialized out of there. I had to get away from her before I broke into a million pieces.

I went straight to the mountaintop, and when I took form, a cry of anguish tore from my lips. I had been dealt the worst kind of blow imaginable. I never expected her to refuse me and hadn't realized how much pain it would cause. It was merciless. I dropped to my knees and screamed. I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder, and I instinctively knew it was Therron. I didn't have to tell him a thing; he knew by my misery.

“I am sorry, brother. If there is anything I could do, you know I would. Did she say why?” he asked.

“I made the mistake of telling her the truth about the consequences of taking her to Vesturon. She said she would never allow anyone to take a risk like that on her behalf. I should have lied to her Therron. What am I to do?”

“The Rayn I know wouldn't give up so easily.”

“Elaborate.”

“For my entire life I have never seen you take ‘no’ for an answer!”

He was right. I guess I had been overwhelmed by her rejection, as it was the one of the few times in my life I had ever been denied anything of importance. I felt a smile begin to spread across my face, and I could feel my eyes begin to blaze with fierce determination. I knew what I needed to do, and I would stop at nothing to gain it.

“I can almost see the wheels in your mind spinning, Rayn,” Therron said with a smile.

“That’s more like the brother I know.”

Book Three

Together

Chapter 1

Maddie couldn't suppress her thrill of seeing him again. He appeared before her, as he had several weeks ago, looking as magnificent as ever. He was definitely real and not imagined. As she was thinking this, she saw the corners of his mouth lift up in slight smile. She knew he could feel her thoughts.

He again offered her the opportunity to join with him. "Maddie, you are always in my thoughts, a part of my heart and soul, my *amashan*. I want to take you to a place where the impossible is possible, to make all of this go away."

The choices presented to Maddie were extreme. Either give up her life as it was previously or give up her ability to walk again and live forever bound to a chair. She thought about Cat and school. She thought about her home.

"I have a question for you. If I choose to go with you, where will I live?" she questioned Rayn.

"I will work something out, but I promise you will be well cared for."

"Rayn, you know my life story. I remember telling it to you in the caves. I'm a survivor, and I'll go on no matter what. But, I would be giving up a chance to live again, if I don't go with you. When I refused to go with you the last time, I felt like a part of me was missing after you left. There is something between us that I don't have an explanation for."

He'd raised his brows as she said that.

"Let me explain. My whole life I watched my parents with each other. They would gaze at each other with a special look on their faces, and I could never get it. I couldn't figure out what it was all about. When I watched all our family videos that Christmas, it finally dawned on me... I always wondered why my dad would focus so much on my mom when he was supposed to be filming me. I don't mean that in a selfish way; I just didn't get it. But I do now. I believe you are the *why* of it all... the questions I had... the looks they gave each other. I get it, Rayn. It's all about *you, my feelings for you*. I don't understand it, but you are occupying most of my waking thoughts. I feel something for you that defies logic and explanation.

"So... if I stay here, I stay alone and without you, and I don't want to do that. So, my answer is yes; I'll go with you—not because I'll be able to walk again, that will just be the icing on the cake, but because with you, I have nothing to lose but everything to gain. I need to warn you, though. It seems I bring bad luck to those I care for. I would hate myself if anything bad happened to you. I know I'm rambling, but I have a tendency to do that when I'm nervous," she said with a shaky laugh.

"Maddie, I don't believe in bad luck. Bad things just happen sometimes that we have no control over."

"What if we are not meant to be together? What then?"

“Well, we will never know unless we give it a go, will we?”

“So... when do we leave?”

“Now... right this minute. And we must not delay. I am taking you to a place that you don't know exists. It is another world, Maddie. My world is much more advanced than Earth, which is how we can complete your healing. I am taking you to a Healer on my home planet. But do not think about all of this right now. When we return, I will answer any questions you may have. I want you to trust in me.”

“Wait... what do you mean ‘home planet?’ Are you an alien or something?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“What do you mean ‘something like that?’” Either you are or you aren't,” she added.

“Well, then, yes. I am an alien from another planet,” Rayn said.

“Shut up!”

“Why do you question me if you want me to shut up?” he wondered aloud.

“No, it's just slang. I don't really want you to shut up. Are you serious? You are really from another planet?” Maddie started to look around her room, her eyes darting everywhere.

“Yes, seriously. What are you looking for?”

“The cameras. I know I can be gullible sometimes, but I am not that dumb. I'm looking for the hidden cameras. Did Cat put you up to this?” Maddie wanted to know.

“I do not know Cat, and no one has put me up to anything,” he responded indignantly. “I am taking a huge risk here by telling you these things, and now, you think it is a prank? I can assure you, Maddie; this is no joke or prank. I am one hundred percent serious here. I am truly from another planet, which is why I could not tell you anything while you were in the caves. Our medical advances will allow your injury to your spine to be repaired, and it will be as if this injury never occurred. You must trust me on this, and when we get back, I will explain everything in great detail to you.”

“Ok. And we are getting there... how?” she inquired, her words dripping with skepticism.

“Wait... don't tell me. Your supersonic spaceship is parked outside the window waiting for us to jump aboard!”

“No... we will not be using a Star Transporter today. Instead, we will be using a teleporting device. I must prepare you,” he replied so matter-of-factly.

He held out his hand, and a holographic image of Maddie was projected from his *shadar*—the metallic shield that covered his hand. He waved it back and forth over her body.

Maddie looked up to the ceiling and said, “Dear Lord, I have finally accepted that this man is not a figment of my imagination and that he is actually real. Now, I find out he is an alien from outer space. Are you kidding me?”

Rayn was configuring his device and gave Maddie a puzzled look. “Can you not accept this, Maddie?”

“I’m not sure what I can or cannot accept anymore. Is this some kind of cruel joke?”

“I can assure you this is no joke,” Rayn answered with frustration.

“What are you doing with that... that thing?” she asked curiously.

Rayn replied, “This is a *shadar*. I am configuring your body mass for conversion to energy. It is required for teleporting. I want to warn you though; when your body returns to mass from energy, you will feel odd, maybe some dizziness, some nausea. Sometimes it can make you feel like you are suffering from motion sickness. I want you to be aware of this possibility so that you won’t be frightened.”

“Yeah, right. So you’re telling me this is going to send me to another planet? Like, are you going to ‘Beam me up, Scotty?’” she asked sarcastically.

“I do not know who Scotty is, but in a word, yes. This device will, in a sense, beam you over to my home planet.”

“Ok, the joke’s over. You can stop play-acting, Rayn—if that’s even your name. I’m done. The joke is on me, and you can have the last laugh. But I don’t think this was a very nice thing to do to me.”

“Maddie, this is not a joke, and I am not play-acting. I really am from Vesturon and this device, my *shadar*, has the capability to send us both there. We keep our existence a secret for obvious reasons and some not so obvious.”

Rayn took Maddie’s hands in his and looked her in the eye and stated, “I am a Guardian, Maddie. It is against everything I have been taught, everything I know, to be dishonest. I would never joke about anything such as this. And as a Guardian, you have my most sacred word on this.”

“But, how do you expect me to swallow all of this?”

“Because, as I just told you, it goes against my very being to lie and to be dishonest. I can sense your unease and skepticism, Maddie. Trust me for a little longer, and you will see for yourself.”

Maddie nodded and said, “This is really freaking me out, but what do I have to lose, right?”

“You only have things to gain, as you will soon see. As soon as I adjust the devices, we will be on our way.”

He then moved his fingers over his *shadar* and asked, “Are you ready?”

“Wait! I can’t go wearing my pajamas. Can you help me change?”

She changed into her favorite pair of comfy shorts and a t-shirt.

“Wait! Is this going to hurt or anything?” Maddie asked, still not convinced he wasn’t pulling her leg.

“Not a bit. Except for maybe the motion sickness, you will have no effects at all.”

“I’m not going to turn into a weird scaly animal or anything by accident, will I?”

Rayn just shook his head at her, rolled his eyes, and gave her an impossible look.

“Well, you never know. Of all the things I thought you might be, an alien wasn’t one of them. I mean I must have really lost my mind. I barely know you other than your name is Rayn, and I have agreed to fly through the universe as an energy beam to go to a different planet to have my spinal cord repaired. Oh. My. God! I really *have* lost my mind. What am I saying? I think I’m having a panic attack. Please God, tell me I have not gone insane!!”

Rayn placed his hand over his heart and spoke in the language that was strange to Maddie. “*I swear by all that is sacred on Vesturon, you have not lost your mind. You are safe with me, and I will see to it that you are healed.*” Then he translated for her.

He held her in his arms until she was feeling calm once again. For whatever reason, she had faith and trust in this man.

“Ok, then... I guess I’m ready,” she said shakingly.

Chapter 2

Rayn was holding Maddie in his arms when they materialized in the corridor of the medical facility on Vesturon. Her eyes were squeezed shut, a sure sign of how alarmed she was. He laughed to himself because this mode of transportation was something he took for granted as he had been doing it his entire life. How weird this must be for her!

“Maddie, you can open your eyes now. We have arrived,” he told her.

“Holy cow, don’t laugh. That was bizarre! I feel so wonky-headed. Rayn, I think I’m going to be sick.” Had she been standing on her own, she would have been frozen in place, stupefied from the sensation.

“Ah... remember what I told you. That is your body readjusting to everything. It won’t last long. Take slow, deep breaths.”

The transfer process was really a jumbling of the molecules of the body, changing from mass to energy and back to mass again. When one wasn’t used to the feeling, it could be very disorienting. It quickly passed, but could leave one with a sense of motion sickness.

“I still am in shock over all of this though. This is real. I mean, you weren’t joking, were you? You know it’s not every day I go hurling through the universe as an energy beam or whatever! Are you sure I haven’t been smoking crack or something?” she emphasized.

“No crack, Maddie, I swear,” he said as he laughed at her.

“I hope I don’t give you a hernia or anything; I’m not exactly a lightweight here,” she remarked.

“Not a problem. And you are a lightweight... a very attractive one at that,” he quipped.

When they entered the Healer’s facility, he was there waiting.

“Rayn, my liege, what are you doing here?”

Julian and Rayn began their... discussion. He was surprised by Rayn’s presence. Rayn finally had to order him to heal Maddie, as he was unwilling because she was human. Rayn wasn’t surprised at all by his reaction. It would have surprised him more if he hadn’t reacted this way.

“Everything will be fine soon,” Rayn whispered to her.

After Julian ran the appropriate scans and discovered where the severed cord was located, he began the process of mending it.

“Maddie, now that I know where the injury is, I am going to use a healing device on you. I am going to run it over the area where the injury is. You will feel some strange sensations after a bit. They won’t be painful, but you may start to feel something like electrical shocks starting in your back and then running down into your legs and feet. This is perfectly normal;

it is your spinal cord fusing back together and regenerating nerves, which will send electrical impulses that transmit feelings and sensations. It is actually what will give you your ability to walk again. Are you ready?"

Several moments later, the healing was completed. Julian examined Maddie to ensure everything was as it should be. Maddie was experiencing the shooting impulses in her legs.

"I feel like my legs are just waking up, like pins and needles," Maddie described. A few more moments passed, and she was up on her feet. Her first few steps were a bit shaky, so Julian used another device on her to return her strength to her lower body.

Rayn was very grateful to Julian for what he had done for Maddie. He went to him and embraced him. Then he reached for Maddie's hand, and they transferred back to Earth to face the unknown.

Chapter 3

They materialized right in front of the Guardians' mountain compound. Rayn turned to Maddie and explained, "This is going to be a bit difficult. I need to speak with my family alone, and when I have finished, I will come to you and answer all of your questions. I would ask you to trust me just a little longer and then we can talk."

She nodded in agreement, and they went up the stone steps that lead to the front door. When they walked into the main living area, they were met with the stares of Rayn's siblings. They weren't just stares of curiosity. They knew exactly where he had taken Maddie and what had occurred. They were positively livid.

All five of them were standing around the living area, like vultures waiting for their next meal. Rayn could sense their anger, frustration, and disappointment, and from Therron, he sensed his empathy.

"Sharra, please take Maddie upstairs to my room."

Sharra insolently objected, "Oh, no, you don't. We require an explanation. We have waited long enough, and we are not waiting anymore." Her defiance was shocking, but Rayn should have expected it.

"Sharra," Rayn growled with burning determination. "This is not a request. As your liege, I command you to escort Maddie to my room, and as the Leader of the Guardians, I expect this order to be obeyed. Until my rank is stripped from me, you will follow my orders. Is that clear? Now... Take. Maddie. Up. To. My. Room!"

"Yes, my liege," Sharra hissed. She grabbed Maddie's arm and literally dragged her from the room.

"Sharra," Rayn growled, "Drop the impertinence. It really does not suit you!" In a deadly calm voice he continued, "This female," he gestured toward Maddie, "is to be treated with the utmost respect. You do NOT touch her unless she initiates it or wills it. Do you understand me?"

Rayn deplored using his rank as a power tool. He correctly surmised it was upsetting to Maddie; he had brought her into a hornet's nest. However, he knew he had to make an example for all. They needed to understand Maddie's place with him; and as Leader, he had to command their respect.

"Yes, my liege."

After Sharra gracefully bowed to Maddie and requested politely that she follow her, Rayn continued with his brothers. "I will give you an explanation of what has happened when Sharra returns so that I don't have to tell of this more than once."

"Rayn, I would rather stay here, as this involves me as much as you," Maddie declared.

All eyes were on her, resentment exploding from most of them. With a slight dip of his head, Rayn nodded his agreement.

Rayn gave them a brief explanation and words immediately erupted from everyone.

“Are you out of your mind?”

“What are you thinking?”

“Father is going to exile you.”

“This is absolutely the worst situation.”

“What are you planning next?”

“When Father commits you, what are you going to do?”

“Have you even thought for a moment what will happen to HER?”

The words whirled around Rayn and Maddie with dizzying madness. Rayn held up his hand, palm facing them and sternly said, “One at a time please. Or better yet, let me provide more details of my story—what happened. OK?”

The tension in the room was as thick as a blanket, and it was threateningly suffocating. They nodded in agreement, so he began the painstaking process of telling them their story.

“I was having constant, agonizing mental debates with myself. I tried to leave... to stay away from her without success. I was inexplicably drawn to her. It was as if forces kept pulling us inexorably closer. I don’t know how else to describe it. I eventually called upon our Deity for help.”

Well, you’d have thought he dropped a bomb when he said that. They all said at the same time, “You did *what?*”

“Yes... you heard right. I had to... you know... self-preservation.”

Rayn carelessly raked his hand through his hair. It’s a miracle he had any hair left at all at this point.

“I was so confused it was tearing me apart. I started visiting Maddie and found our dreams had merged. Everything between us defied all explanation. But yes, that’s what I did, and the Divine Being told me that Maddie is my fate and destiny, as I am hers. Therron, would you mind filling them in?”

That created another shockwave. They were aghast that Therron had been in his confidence, so that also required explaining. Rayn plopped into a nearby chair. His head was swimming, throbbing, and it was killing him. He rubbed his eyes, his neck, and his temples.

Thankfully, Therron filled in the gaps while Rayn collapsed into the chair and continued to massage his temples. All of the stress that he had experienced was beginning to take its toll. Trouble was... it had just begun.

“So, brother, what are your plans now?” Rykerian asked. “Are you going to wait for Father to arrive and haul you back to Vesturon?”

Xarrid bitterly asked, “What were you thinking when you went home? Did you not stop to think you forfeited your birthright by doing that? Or that Father and Mother would just die of disappointment? Or that the Council of Elders and Tribunal would strip you of everything, or worse yet, imprison you? Rayn, you have given up your rights and maybe even your life for this stranger... someone you know absolutely nothing about. Did you at least stop to think how it would tear up our family?”

From behind him, Rayn heard a gasp.

Maddie’s mouth dropped open and she locked on to his eyes. “Rayn, what in God’s name have you done?” she whispered painfully.

Chapter 4

Rayn steadfastly returned her gaze and saw the pain in her eyes. It was an uncomfortable moment for everyone, one for which he had no other words. He arose swiftly, and retorted, “Thanks, Xarrid. For once, could you not keep your blistering thoughts to yourself?” He sighed deeply. This had become really awkward.

To Rayn’s surprise, Sharra interrupted and said, “Maddie, Rayn... I think the two of you need some time alone. Come, my brothers, let us give them some space.”

“Wait! Stay. Maddie come with me please.” Rayn grabbed Maddie’s arm and marched her up to his room.

“What did he mean by ‘you forfeited your birthright’ and all that other stuff? Have I caused all of this?”

“Maddie, I **CHOSE** this. You caused nothing. I would do it all again in a minute, too. Come with me,” he said grabbing her arm.

“Where are we going?”

They entered his bedroom and he pulled her to him as they sat together on a sofa in front of the fire.

“I have wanted to tell you the whole truth since first we met. I am the son of the Great Leader of Vesturon. My name is Rayn, but my full name is Alexyon Rayn Devvan Rowan Yarrister. As you now know, Vesturon is a planet located in another galaxy. I am also the first born, so that means one day I will succeed as Great Leader, or that was the plan anyway. Part of Vesturon’s laws, which we call our Covenant, is that no human is allowed on Vesturon for any reason. This law was put in place to prevent any changing of Earth’s future. We are so much more technologically advanced than the human race is; just think about what would happen if our technology were to be brought back here somehow. It could change the future course of events. Our job is *not* to do that—*not* to interfere at all. But, I *needed* to get you to Vesturon for your spinal cord fusion, and the only way to do that was to break our Covenant. That is what my family was referring to.”

“What are the implications of all this? And please be honest.”

“Maddie, I will never be anything less than honest with you. The reason I could not tell you the truth earlier was if you had chosen to return to your former life, then you wouldn’t have needed to know everything. We are sworn to keep the secret, so to speak. I did not have a choice, and for that, I am sorry.”

“No, I understand. I was so confused by everything. Nothing made sense to me, and when you wouldn’t give me any clear answers, I would get so frustrated.”

“I know,” he took her hands in his. “There has been a lot that has frustrated me as well, and we will get to all of that. There are physical differences between us as well. Do you remember how you kept asking me how I could ease your worries?”

Maddie nodded in the affirmative.

“That is one of the differences. We are also much stronger than humans and faster. We live longer. We have telepathic abilities and some of us are able to use telekinesis as well. I can wipe away memories, like my brothers did to you when they left you in the hospital.”

He briefly paused and then picked up a lock of her hair. “Maddie... some way, somehow, we connected when we met. Have you felt that?”

“Yes, I have, but I couldn’t define it. I had so many dreams of you. When days would go by that I didn’t see you, I would dream of you.”

“Yes... well it seems that we have dream walked together. I cannot explain this because humans are incapable of dream walking.”

Rayn stood, stretched his legs and leaned up against the fireplace.

“I visited you when you were asleep, and I entered your thoughts. It should have ended there, but for some reason our minds connected. It felt like our minds were attached by this invisible band that was pulling me in to you. I tried to walk away, to leave, but I just could not do it.”

Rayn turned to face her. He felt awkward telling her this. He was so drawn in by her; she nearly took his breath away. Her mouth was slightly open inviting him to kiss her and never let her go.

Instead, he placed his hand on her arm and said, “Maddie, I was dreadfully tormented by you. I am not telling you this to cause you distress, but for you to know my true feelings for you.” Rayn took a deep breath and took the plunge. “I am connected to you in a very deep way. You are like a drug to me, and I am the addict. This is not supposed to happen between humans and the Vesturions. You have penetrated my very soul, Maddie. I—”

“Rayn, stop.” She reached out and took his hands in hers. “I don’t know what this is, but I feel the same. I didn’t understand it at first either. I thought it was the strangest thing. Whenever you came near me, all my troubles faded; it was kind of euphoric for me. When you were away from me, all I could think of was you, every waking moment, and then in my dreams too. The oddest thing, too, is that every time I’m near you, I smell evergreen trees. I kept thinking it was your cologne or maybe your shower gel.”

“Is the scent pleasing to you?”

“Yes! I totally love that smell. It is the smell of a pine forest, when all is dampened after a rain. It’s one of my favorite scents! I thought at first I was imagining it, but it kept happening.”

“Maddie, it is an impossibility that you can actually detect that scent. That is what happens to Vesturion males when they are near females to which they are bonded. The females cause the males to release a scent that only that particular female can detect. It is usually the favorite scent of that female. No one else can smell it, Maddie, but you. It is completely extraordinary that a human can detect that.”

“How bizarre. But it’s exactly the right scent. It is my absolute favorite, and it reminds me of Christmas trees. Not to change the subject, but what precisely have you done? I don’t know if I can live with knowing that I am the cause of your alienation from your family... and what about your birthright? Why didn’t you tell me? It was not your responsibility to take me on as your burden. I am so sorry you have done this. It was stupid *and* crazy of you. I think your brothers are right about this. What were you thinking?”

Rayn grabbed her and held her close, resting his chin on her head. “I would take you back to Vesturon in a second if I thought you needed something else. Maddie, you have become extremely important to me. Do you understand?”

When she nodded, he continued, “You are my life now, and I would gladly sacrifice any birthright for you. It would be a very small price to pay to see you mended and healthy.” Rayn desperately wanted to put his lips on hers, but he was afraid of frightening her. She looked up at him and put her hand on his cheek.

“Rayn, there are some things you do for people and some things you just have to let go. You can’t control everything all the time. This was a truly harebrained scheme—one that you obviously didn’t put much thought into.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying you are absolutely nuts! You have a responsibility to your people, not to me. I am appreciative of what you have done, don’t get me wrong. But Rayn, there are many people that rely on you for many things. I am of no consequence to them. You have completely disregarded all of that. And if I am correct in my assessment of things, the position you are to assume one day is of great responsibility—one in which you would need to make crucial decisions every day. The judgment you have displayed here is sorely lacking in sound reason. I am—well, I don’t quite know what to say.”

“Maddie, are you telling me that you wish I had never taken you to the Healer? That you would rather spend your life unable to walk again—forever?”

“I am saying that as a leader of an entire planet, the decisions you make must be based on the majority of your people, not just one person. You cannot let your heart rule your mind all of the time.”

He stood and faced her as he raked his hand through his hair. “You sound exactly like my father! I understand your point, but I will stand by what I did for you now and a hundred years from now. You are wrong about this. I did not make the decision hastily or haphazardly.” Rayn’s anger was surfacing. He wasn’t keen on having so many people telling him what he should or shouldn’t do.

Rayn started pacing back and forth, trying to figure out what to do next when he decided that they needed to get away. He wanted to take Maddie to his favorite spot on the mountaintop that only his family visited. It was located about ten miles from the compound.

He dashed into his closet and started gathering his gear. His backpack usually stayed packed, so the only things they needed were some food and water. He would have to add another small pack for Maddie. Maddie poked her head around the corner and wanted to know what was going on.

“We’re leaving.”

“What do you mean? Where are we going? We just got here!” she said.

“Sharra! Sharra! Where are you?” Rayn rushed out to the staircase and bellowed. He looked at Maddie and said smiling, “Trust me... again, please.”

“What’s going on?” Sharra inquired.

“Can you lend Maddie some of your camping gear—Vesturion clothing, sleeping bag and pad?”

“Ookay,” Sharra replied.

“Where are we going? I’m not going anywhere until you answer me. You are always so cryptic with me!” Maddie said sternly. He could tell she was fuming!

Rayn briefly embraced her and explained, “Forgive me. I am not used to answering to anyone. I am taking you up to one of our favorite spots on a mountain top about ten miles from here. Trust me, you will love it. Please go with Sharra so that she can give you some things to wear and Sharra—do not forget to give her some hiking boots.”

“Come, Maddie—I will tell you about this place. Rayn is right; you are going to love it. And I would also like to apologize for my rude behavior earlier. I did not intend to direct it at you. I was most upset with Rayn at the time.” Sharra said.

"Not a problem. I understand and I guess this has been a bit unnerving for everyone."

Rayn gathered their supplies, and by the time he was ready, so was Maddie. They put their packs on and headed out.

Rayn grabbed his shadar and entered their destination, and seconds later, they were there. He was awarded with a smile from Maddie that would have lit up a dark night. She was utterly radiant.

Chapter 5

“This place is unreal!” Maddie was awestruck by the vista.

The sky was bright blue, and the air was crisp, hinting at a cool night ahead. But that was the usual for springtime.

“That transfer thing wasn’t so bad this time either. Where are we, anyway?” she asked curiously.

Rayn was pleased to see her reaction to this much-loved place. “I knew you would love it up here—it’s my favorite place. That’s Balsam Mountain over there.” He pointed directly across from her.

There was that telltale blue haze that was ever present, giving the scene that ethereal quality. Nearby, the sound of a creek gurgled and further in the distance, the thundering resonance of a waterfall could be heard.

“God, I love these mountains!” She inhaled deeply, enjoying the scents of the forest. “I never knew this place was here. I wonder how I missed it, as much time as I’ve spent up here.”

“Yes, well, there is a good reason for that. We keep this property *veiled*. That is why no one is aware of it.”

“*Veiled?*” she asked with a puzzled look.

Every time Rayn spoke, he began to realize just how much he was going to have to share with Maddie. The little things that he took for granted she had no idea existed.

“Yes, another form of tech we use. We can send out an energy wave that masks the appearance of this place—or anyplace we choose for that matter. For instance, our house and all the property around it are veiled. It’s kind of hard to explain, but it makes things pretty much invisible to an outsider. It changes the appearance of things—for instance, the landscape here would look like a place you wouldn’t want to be, maybe densely forested or impassable. We can even veil ourselves if we want.”

“Shut up! That’s really cool! It makes sense too. It keeps intruders out, but also keeps humans from finding you.”

“We’re not generally concerned about them finding *us*; it’s everything we have and use—our instruments, our tech.”

“Can you give me a run down on... well, everything Vesturion?”

Rayn began with the simplest explanations. “Yes. We are not... human, but we are... humanish.”

He began with the differences. He explained about telepathy and how it works for them. He told her of their telekinetic and empathic abilities as well as how they had a profound calming

influence on people. He told her of their capability of obliterating memories, which is what Rayn did to Maddie when he returned her to her world. He explained their superior strength, agility, speed, and mind control.

“What about physical appearances? Size, looks and all,” she wanted to know.

Rayn thought for a moment. “Well, in a couple of hours, when it gets dark, you’re going to notice a big difference come over me.”

Maddie’s eyes grew wide as saucers and she said, “Like what?”

Rayn laughingly said, “When the sun sets I grow fur and horns!” he jokingly said. When he saw the expression on her face, he quickly added, “Not really, but seriously, my eyes are going to change.”

“Change? How?” His eyes were so lovely she couldn’t bear the thought of them changing.

He smiled at her and said, “Oh, Maddie, my eyes pale in comparison to yours. But, Vesturions have excellent night vision, and when darkness falls, our pupils go elliptical. I hope that doesn’t freak you out or anything.”

“Did you hear me thinking about your eyes?”

He nodded back to her smiling.

“Hum... ok. I am so going to have to get used to this mind reading stuff. It really throws me off.”

She wondered what his eyes would look like, but then she said, “I mean, what’re weird looking eyes after you’ve travelled the galaxy in a McFlurry machine and had your severed spine fused. That should be a piece of cake! You swear there isn’t a crack pipe involved in all of this?”

A crack pipe! A McFlurry machine? The stodgy scientists on Vesturon would not be impressed with that explanation of a teleporting device! Rayn chuckled at her sense of humor.

“Ok... another question... what language is that you speak sometimes? It’s very strange sounding. I can’t place it.”

“No, you wouldn’t be able to. That is the Ancient Tongue of Vesturon. The Guardians learn to speak it for a variety of reasons, mostly to take their oaths and make pledges. The Ancient Tongue is only used in certain situations and at certain ceremonies. The Guardians are taught it at an early age. Most Vesturions are also taught it, but it’s not used much anymore.”

“Why does everyone refer to you as ‘my liege’?”

“Because I am the first born. It is much like a royal family on Earth. You could say my father is equivalent to a king, so therefore, I will be a king one day. It is not something with which you need to concern yourself.”

“Seriously? A king?”

“In a manner of speaking. Does that upset you?”

“‘Overwhelms’ is a better description.”

“Do not feel as such. There is no need.”

“I’ll reserve judgment for now.”

While they talked, they both grabbed their packs and started setting up camp. There was an area that was a perfect place to pitch their tent, and next to that was a fire ring. They worked together, almost as if they’ve done this a thousand times.

“What’s up with these clothes Sharra lent me? She told me they would keep me warm, and I wouldn’t need a coat or jacket. What is this material? They’re really comfortable too.”

The clothing Maddie was wearing was weaved from fibers that had the tiniest of sensors in them. They could detect air and body temperature and would make adjustments accordingly. The sensors could be set at a certain temperature, say seventy two degrees, and it would remain constant, keeping the wearer continuously comfortable, never too hot or cold. The fibers were also waterproof and windproof, insuring the wearer maximum comfort at all times.

Maddie decided she was becoming very fond of all of this Vesturion technology.

They finished setting up the tent, and Maddie laid out all of their sleeping gear inside—pads on the bottom for comfort and then their sleeping bags. Like the clothing, the bags were also extremely lightweight. *I hope this will be warm enough for me tonight*, she thought. Rayn put some pads outside for them to sit on and started collecting wood for the fire.

“Why do you always dress like that?” Maddie inquired. Rayn was wearing his standard black shirt, pants, and boots minus the cape. “Does it signify something? And what are those things on your hands?”

“Oh... yes. This is my uniform—the uniform of the Guardians. It is made from the same sensed fabric as what you are wearing, with one big difference. It has the added advantage of a substance that is... kind of like Kevlar... but much lighter and much more effective.”

“So you’re like bulletproof?” she wanted to know.

“Exactly. You could fire any kind of weapon at me even at close range and it wouldn’t have the slightest effect on me other than slight bruising. It is also fire proof—totally heat resistant up to two thousand degrees. It comes in handy sometimes!”

“What about your hands.” Maddie reached for his hand, but he pulled it away before she could grab it.

He held them up and started talking, “These are called *shadars*. They serve several purposes. They are weapons... actually my Annihilator. And they are my scanner and teleporter. They are responsive to only my DNA so if they land in the wrong hands, no harm can be done. They also contain a tracking device so that I can be located from anywhere. If I were to die, or if something were to render me unconscious, my teleporter would automatically send me back to my home base that is encoded in here. That, of course can be changed at will.”

“Oh my gosh! That is amazing. How do they work?”

Rayn explained the basic functions of each and how they all worked. He told her his Annihilator was the most advanced form of portable weaponry in the universe. What he carried on his hands was more potent than a nuclear warhead. Maddie was stunned.

“Do not concern yourself with this, we rarely have to use it, and when we do, it is discharged at a very low setting. Mind you, though, it doesn’t take much to annihilate a human.”

He decided to give her a brief demonstration. He tilted his wrist, and a hologram appeared above his hand. He aimed it at a rock several feet away and said, “Annihilate.” The rock turned to dust.

Maddie was impressed. “Amazing.”

Not nearly as amazing as you, he thought.

They scouted the area for kindling and small pieces of wood so that they could start a fire. Rayn kept an ample supply of larger logs up there, so once they had it going, they would be able to burn it all night if they wanted. The mission was quickly accomplished. The wood was laid out, and in no time, a fire was crackling.

“Are you hungry?”

She nodded and said, “Not really. How about you?”

“I can wait. Come here, please.” She came toward him, and he took hold of her hand and pulled her down on his lap so that they faced each other. “Are you comfortable like this?” he asked.

Holy cow, are you kidding me? If I could stay like this forever, I would die a happy girl!

“Er, yeah... I’m ok.”

He flashed her that dazzling smile of his.

Oh... my... God... this guy is impossibly magnificent... my heart is definitely going to explode.

“Are you ok?” Smiling, he placed his hand over her heart. “Your heart is beating really fast.”

He’s going to kill me. I am nearly incoherent from his touch that I can barely speak. I’m going to be the first girl EVER to die of a heart attack. I can see it now... girl dies from heart attack, caused by sitting in drop-dead gorgeous dude’s lap!

“‘Gorgeous dude,’ huh?” he read her thoughts aloud. Then, he noticed the look on her face and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you, but your thoughts were all but screaming at me. Are you ok?”

Silence.

“Maddie, please talk to me. Say something!” he begged, concern laced in his voice.

Without thinking, Maddie blurted out, “Ok, how about this: I’m absolutely, positively, speechless, completely lost in your amazing green eyes, your... Oh. My. Gosh. You are *so hot*, you take my breath away, and my heart is pounding because of you, *only because of you*. You are making it do that.”

Oh. My. Gosh! Did I just say that OUT LOUD? What is WRONG with me? She took the heel of her hand and slapped it against her forehead. *Use your head, Maddie! Gah, I’m sooo embarrassed! Oh, for the love of God, what am I thinking?*

Rayn took her hands in his. “Please don’t be embarrassed,” he pleaded. “Believe me, you have the same effect on me.” Talk about an ego trip. Rayn was in heaven.

“Oh... my... God... I totally blanked on that... you can read my thoughts! You know exactly what I’ve been thinking too! Yikes!”

She exploded off his lap and dove head first into their tent, her cheeks burning from embarrassment. She was mortified and knew any moment she would die.

Rayn scratched his head and rubbed his jaw back and forth. What should he do now? How should he handle this one? He wanted to shout with laughter; the whole thing was *so* hilarious. But he didn’t want to embarrass her further. Truth of it all, he was flattered and exceedingly ecstatic that she was thinking those thoughts. If she could read *his* mind, she would know that he *so* wanted more than anything to bury *his* face in her hair, kiss her sweet lips until she was senseless, drown in those topaz eyes, and feel her body underneath him. Of course the latter was strictly forbidden, but thoughts of that would not cease.

He started to chuckle, softly at first, and then he just couldn’t hold it back any longer. Deep rumbles of laughter exploded from within, and he couldn’t control it. The harder he tried to stop, the funnier it became.

Maddie lay in the tent with the sleeping bag pulled over her head. Suddenly, she heard his booming laughter and decided she would never ever come out of that tent again. She just couldn’t face him.

How awkward... how humiliating... has anyone ever died of embarrassment? she wondered.

Unexpectedly, the sleeping bag was yanked out of her hands, and Rayn was lying in its place. He placed his hands on either side of her head, leaned in closely and said in a husky voice, “*I am so very sorry I laughed at you, but the whole thing was quite amusing. Forgive me, Maddie! I do not want you to be embarrassed. I feel the exact same way you do, only I guarantee my thoughts are a little more... er... explicit... and they should not be. It is simply not proper. But you do things to me that... um... let me just say that I am completely, positively crazy over you. You are too beautiful for words; there are none that can adequately describe you. Every time I am near you, I find myself wanting to reach out and take you in my arms, run my fingers through your lovely hair, put my face in it, and breathe as if my life depended on it.*”

He bent his head down to where her hair had fallen across the pillows and buried his face in it, inhaling deeply. When he lifted his head, he looked into those beautiful amber eyes of hers and said, “You are sheer heaven to me, and you are not the only one who feels these things, Maddie. Your scent intoxicates me, and I am positively *lost* in you.”

Chapter 6

Maddie, left breathless by his words, found herself suddenly reaching for his face and pulling it toward hers. She placed her lips on his and softly kissed him like she'd never kissed anyone.

Holy cow...I've NEVER done that to a boy before, she thought.

As soon as she tasted his lips, she felt an immediate rush of sensation, as if every fiber of her had been ignited. From the bottoms of her feet to the top of her head, she was... on fire. He tasted of something she couldn't place, like the sweetest of honey, but a thousand times better.

The fire that began in the pit of her stomach expanded until it all but consumed her. She wanted more of something—something she had never had. Her fingers tangled themselves into his hair reveling in its softness.

Rayn was equally as lost. His control was quickly slipping, but he couldn't seem to wrench himself away from her. Warning bells were sounding in his head, and he knew he should stop. Instead he slipped his tongue into her mouth and tasted her essence.

Dear heavens, she is the nectar of the Deity, he thought.

With an explosive drive, he tore himself away from her and charged out of the tent, leaving her fighting for breath, on the brink of her own explosion.

Maddie was flustered. Rayn had ignited something in her she could not explain. She had been kissed before, but never had she experienced a reaction like she had with Rayn. Electric... heated... consuming... barely touched what she had felt. She followed him outside.

“Rayn? What is it? Have I done something wrong?”

“No. I just... I cannot speak right now.” His fists were clenched, and he was trembling and fighting for control.

“Do you not want to... I mean I thought that we could... you know... unless you don't want me in that way.”

“Bloody hell, Maddie. Yes! I want the same things as you. I want *you* in that way too—more than I can say. I want us to be together in every way as a male and female, but this we cannot do.”

“You say... wait... am I not good enough because I'm human? Or do you not like the way I look... you know... my face... this scar?” she asked warily, placing her hand on her cheek where she had been wounded. She hadn't given it much thought before tonight. She hadn't even paid it much attention, but the scar must be hideous looking. Maybe her appearance was repulsive to him.

He moved so quickly. One moment, he was by the fire, and the next, he was in front of her. He placed his right fingers over her lips, laced his left ones with hers and said, “No! That’s not it at all! *Please let me finish,*” he emphatically interjected. “You ARE good enough, beautiful enough, and I can only imagine your perfection. That scar means *nothing* to me except it reminds me of the atrocities you endured. Nothing in this world, or on Vesturon, could make you less beautiful in my eyes. But... things are much different on Vesturon; we are not permitted to do these things until we have been formally joined... as in unification. It is like your marriage here on Earth, but stronger, more resolute. We unite for life Maddie. There is no divorce or separation on Vesturon. We are sworn to this oath of abstinence and commitment as youngsters. It is impossible for me to have any kind of, you know, intimate relations with you until then. I know this is an archaic way of things for Earthlings, but it is *our way*, and I must live by it.”

“Yeah, it definitely *is* archaic alright, so does that mean you’ve never... um, you know... been with another girl?” She was too embarrassed to look him directly in the eyes, afraid of what his answer would be.

He tilted her head, so he could look in her eyes. “No, never have I been with a female, not in this manner. I’ve had, well I guess you would call them girlfriends; isn’t that how you refer to them?” At her nod, he continued, “But never with a female in this sense. Maddie, you will think me strange when I say this, but I have never really wanted to. We are taught differently on Vesturon. It is a sacred act between a male and female, and we treat it as such.”

Those impossibly beautiful eyes were simply penetrating her soul. He picked up her hand and placed a kiss over each of her fingers.

What a relief, she thought. Maddie was good with that... great actually. It wasn’t a *bad* thing, but a huge part of her had hoped the mystery of it all would finally be unlocked. She had never felt this way before—never wanted to do *it* with anyone else. This was a record first for her. She thought how strange it all was. In the past, she practically fought to keep her clothes on, and now, all she wanted to do was take them off. The tables had turned on her.

Maddie thought the topic had ended when Rayn surprised her yet again. “May I ask you something since we’re on the subject?” At her nod, he continued, “Have *you* ever been with a human male?”

“Good lord, no! Like you, I’ve never wanted to. I... um... I always wanted it to be with someone special—someone I loved... someone like... *you*,” she breathed. She stole a glance at him.

This was a very uncomfortable discussion to have, and she wanted to be able to see his reaction. She wasn’t bold enough to look him straight in the eye though. Pity, her heart would have soared if could have seen his face just then.

Rayn, a huge grin spreading across his face, lifted his head up and said, “I was hoping it was the same for you. It would have been ok if you had, but I am so happy you haven’t.”

“My roommate Cat told me about when she did it. It was with her high school boyfriend. She really thought he was *‘the one,’* so she figured it would be ok and all. She said it was horrible, yeah, awful. Eww... God I can’t believe I’m telling you this. I feel so awkward here,” she grimaced. This truly was an embarrassing conversation to have.

“Go on, and please don’t be embarrassed, Maddie,” he urged. “I want you to be able to speak of anything to me.”

“Well, she said it was just dreadful and that she cried afterward. It was awkward and embarrassing and... not very pleasant. So yeah, after I heard that, I knew for sure I wouldn’t do it with just anyone.” Maddie remembered how upset Cat was when she told her about it.

Rayn had picked up a lock of her hair and was looking at it intently when he thoughtfully said, “I am most happy that you feel that way. Most humans succumb to the pressure, and that is most unfortunate. To mate with someone is a very special event. I think humans tend make it so commonplace. Maddie, I am happy that we share this!”

Rayn cocked his head and stared at her with a burning intensity. He traced her cheek and then her lips with his fingers and dropped his head down to the hollow at the base of her throat, kissing her there. She was becoming incoherent again.

He took her face in his hands, looked deeply into her eyes. “Madeline,” he began, surprising her with the use of her birth name, “I think I must have you as my life mate.” Then he continued in the ancient language, “*I know I am not worthy of thee, but I, Alexyon Rayn Devvan Rowan Yarrister, forswear to honor and protect, to love and worship thee with my entire being and to be ever faithful to thee for so long as there is breath in this body of mine.*”

Maddie opened her mouth to speak, but Rayn placed his fingers upon her lips and whispered intently, “Shh... I would like to finish what I said by translating it into your language.” When she nodded, he continued, “Madeline, I know I am not worthy of you, but I, Alexyon Rayn Devvan Rowan Yarrister, swear to love, honor, protect and worship you and I promise to be ever faithful to you so long as I live. Maddie, marry me. Will you be my life mate?”

“But, Rayn...” she said as her eyes widened in shock, “I don’t think I’m worthy of you. There is so much happening here. You would be giving up your life for me, and I don’t know if I can live with that. And then, are we really going to be able to be together? Won’t your father make you return to Vesturon to face... whatever council... not to mention we are just getting to know each other. And I don’t know about you, but I’m so young. Girls here don’t get married at age nineteen unless they are pregnant. And we barely know each other.” Maddie was astounded they were even having this conversation.

Rayn interrupted her, “Maddie, I do not know what is going to happen, but I know this. If you do not say yes, my life will not be worth much anyway. I will not care a thing about what they do to me. I would rather not think in those terms. And... another thing... I have *chosen* this path because we have connected. I tried to walk away from you, but I could not. It was pure agony for me. And Maddie, this was not a rash decision. I have thought of every consequence I can, and the positives keep winning. You are the one for me, like it or not. I *want* to be the one for you. I am not saying it will be easy; it will be everything *but* that. Without you, I am half of what I need to be. As far as age is concerned, does it truly matter as long as we are both adults and know what we want?”

Maddie was humbled and honored by Rayn. She had never thought in her life she would meet someone like him. Her heart was thrilled, but she was still apprehensive about things.

“I’m a little overcome with emotion you could say. I do want us to be together, more than anything. But this is all happening so fast. I feel like I am so young to be considering

marrying someone, especially someone I have recently met. I've gone from being alone as a paraplegic to being involved with an... *alien* for God's sake! And a King's son for that matter. This is just so overwhelming for me. Can we not just date for a while?"

"Yes, that is a possibility. But know this, I will be leaving soon. When my father arrives, I will have to go back to Vesturon with him to face charges. I would like us to be committed before I do that."

Maddie was feeling the pressure now. She knew Rayn was honorable in his intentions; however, her life had just taken a dramatic twist. One minute, she thought she was going to have to live confined to a wheelchair, and the next, she was flying through space as an energy beam, completely healed from her paralysis. At the same time, she was saddened by a loss she couldn't explain, and now her heart was filled with love for someone she didn't even remember she had lost. She was on the biggest emotional roller coaster of her life.

Rayn could see her turmoil by the furrowing of her brow. He took a chance and delved into her mind, but was thrown back by the intensity and depth of her emotions. "Oh bloody hell, Maddie, please do not feel the pressure of all of this. I am sorry, and do not want this to cause you distress. I only want what makes you happy."

"Well, I know one thing, and that is *you* make me happy," she admitted.

"May I ask you something?"

At her nod, he continued, "Do you want to be with me?"

Again, she nodded.

"Do you feel this connection we have?"

"Yes, I've felt it from the beginning. Like you, it blew me away, really."

"Can you walk away from me and be happy without me in your life?"

"I wouldn't want to do that. I cannot imagine you NOT in my life," she admitted.

"Do you think of me much?"

"Constantly, every waking moment. But as they say, it's probably just the new hitting me."

"The new what?" he asked, puzzled by her choice of words.

"Us. You know... our togetherness or relationship or whatever you want to call it."

"Ok, I think I understand," he replied, chewing on his lower lip. "But just a couple of minutes ago, when I refused your... advances... and you thought I was rejecting you, how did it make you feel?"

"Why are you asking me this? You know the answer to that."

"Please, just answer me, Maddie."

“It made me feel awful, horrible to be exact. Ok? Are you satisfied?” she asked acrimoniously.

“Please do not be angry with me. I am not trying to belittle your feelings. I am just trying to point something out to you. So, with all of this, do you think that you might be in love with me?”

“You *know* I am. How can you ask me that?”

“Because, in my world, Maddie, when two people are in love, they want to be together, as a couple should, united as one. That is what I want with you. You are the world to me, and without you, I am incomplete. So I would ask you again, would you please honor me by becoming my mate?”

Secretly, Maddie was thrilled. She was so touched by Rayn that she was speechless for a moment. She stood up and paced back and forth, trying to formulate an answer.

Finally, she answered, “Rayn, I seriously cannot say yes to you right now. And, please... hear me out.” It was now Maddie’s turn to hush Rayn. “I listened to everything you said; now it’s my turn,” she said, placing her hand on his arm, her eyes imploring him to listen.

He nodded, so she continued, “You are an enigma to me. You come from a different world. You are very powerful and have your world at your fingertips. You are a true Leader, and the son of a great man. You have a close-knit family, and for the life of me, I can’t figure out what you could possibly see in me—a mere human, with nothing to offer you. I am honored by even the thought of you asking me this. But,” she paused, choosing her words carefully, “I feel as if we need to learn more about one another. I, for one, want to learn more about Vesturon and its people. And I also want to understand you as a person.”

She saw that Rayn was on the verge of speaking, so she held out her hand to stop him. “I know you talk of us bonding, but we don’t do that here on Earth. I do not doubt for a minute that this is what has taken place between us. However, I need to be comfortable that this is the right decision for me as well.”

She stopped speaking to give her words a chance to penetrate his mind.

“I’m not saying we won’t ever be married, Rayn. I’m just saying I am not yet ready to take that step. I will tell you this, though. I will commit my heart to you, and I will be faithful to you.”

“Well, I guess I will have to be satisfied with that for now. I still thank the Divine Being for allowing our paths to cross.”

“What is this Divine Being stuff?” she asked curiously.

“That is our God. Well, you call it God, and we call it the Divine Being, or the Deity.”

“Oh... just wondering. I’m not sure if I really believe in God.”

“What?” Rayn was mortified. “How can you not?”

“I think a more appropriate question would be, ‘How *can* you?’ My life hasn’t exactly been heaven sent, Rayn. And the things I’ve had to deal with are indications to me that maybe there isn’t a God. I was raised in the church, and my parents were believers. But I just don’t think a loving God would put someone through the agony I’ve been through.” Maddie fidgeted with her fingers as she thought about all the horrific times after her father died.

“Maddie, my love, you have absolutely been through much more than most people ever have to deal with, and I can understand why you feel this way. But you really should believe in God, or the Divine Being. You really should,” he said, squeezing her hands.

“How do you think all of this happened?” Rayn swept his arm across both of them. “A better question would be ‘why has all of this happened?’ Think about it for a minute... why did you and I encounter each other? You can’t possibly think it was a coincidence. Please, I’m not going to try to convince you of anything, but just think about us for a while. I’m positive you would not be here today without the Deity. There are many answers within him, Maddie. Think about how your mother came to your aid. That is all divine intervention, my love.” Rayn was so fervent in his statements that Maddie had to stop and think for a moment.

“You do have a point Rayn. But, I am little skeptical about these things. I will agree with you though on us; it is more than a mere coincidence.” She reached out and placed her hand on his arm.

“Yes, it is much more. Maddie, I consulted our Divine Being about you and I. I was so torn about what to do. When we were separated I had to ask the Deity. I communed with him and let him guide me. He gave me the answer I was so desperately seeking, which is why we’re together today. Maddie, I have been in his presence, and I have felt him within me. You can draw your own conclusions to all of this, but I would simply ask you to give it some thought. Believing is so important, Maddie.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right, and maybe it’s time for me to start saying my prayers again, Rayn. I haven’t spoken to God in a while. I know I owe him a big thanks for you and for sparing my life.”

“Agreed. So you will at least start reaching out to him?” he asked persistently.

“Yes. You are really serious about this, aren’t you?”

“I am a firm believer, you might say,” he answered. “The Deity has come to my aid more times that I can recount, and I will leave it at that.”

Chapter 7

They soon found themselves suffering from rumbling stomachs and realized they hadn't eaten in a long time. They left the tent and saw that the sun had set on the horizon, casting its golden glow on their campsite. Rayn added more wood to the fire, and Maddie set out preparing their food for dinner. It wasn't long before she had successfully accomplished reconstituting dehydrated food into some mac and cheese. *Yummy!* Rayn hunkered down near her, and when she looked up, she observed the change in his eyes.

"What?" He was curious about the look she gave him.

"Your eyes have changed. I *have got* to check this out."

Maddie dropped what she was doing and scrambled over to Rayn on her hands and knees. She took his face into her hands and started tilting it this way and that, checking out his eyes. They mesmerized her. They were still their beautiful shade of green, but in the center where the round pupil used to be, was now an elliptically shaped one.

"That is *so* bizarre. Do they feel weird to you?"

"No, because they have been like this my whole life. I think they would feel weird if they did not transform. I can see extremely well in the dark. It is like I have on night vision goggles."

"I am *so* blown away by them."

Try as she may, she could not take her eyes off of them. She kept tilting his head around to see his pupils change size.

He dropped his eyes down and said, "Quit staring at them; you are making me feel self-conscious." It was apparent he was most uncomfortable.

"Seriously?" Maddie was shocked by this reaction.

"Yes! What if a part of your body changed, and I kept staring at it? How would you feel?" he asked, a bit harsher than usual.

She gently cupped his face in her hands and held his gaze, and murmured softly, "I'm so sorry, but I am enormously impressed by them. Yeah... they're weird looking but in a beautiful way. Your eyes are unbelievably stunning, Rayn—both day and night."

She traced his brows with her thumbs and continued, "Don't be uncomfortable, please. You know, that was the first thing I saw: your eyes, when I woke up in the caves. I looked into them and was blown away. Their color is so vivid I thought I was in a dream or something. And they gave me such reassurance; your strength was shining through them. I instantly felt safe with you. I *so love* your eyes, Rayn. So *please* don't be uncomfortable when I stare at them." They were staring intently at each other.

Rayn felt the depths of Maddie's emotions during this admission of hers. He placed his hands over hers and said passionately, "Now, it is my turn to be humbled by your words, Maddie."

Later that night, as they sat by the fire, Rayn started speaking in a trancelike way, “When I first saw you, I did not believe you were real. I thought I was lost in a dream, and I feared you would vanish. I never believed anyone like you existed. You are uncommonly beautiful, even though you do not believe that to be the case, but that is not the only reason I feel so bound to you. You see, on Vesturon, most beings that connect with each other do so on their first encounter. I had never experienced that, until you. I felt a connection with you on many levels—physical and spiritual. When I saw you lying, unconscious on that ledge, your heart and soul reached out and touched mine in a way that seemed impossible, and I have not been the same since. We have a word for this on Vesturon. You are what we call my *amashan*.”

He was staring at the ground beneath his feet, afraid to look at her for fear of what he would see in her eyes.

“You say you have nothing to offer me, but, Maddie, that could not be further from the truth. You offer me everything— life, love, and you are so courageous to have survived what you have. I—”

“Rayn, please, look at me.”

He lifted his head so that he could look into her eyes, and what he saw made his heart skip a beat.

“I know exactly what you are trying to explain. The fact that I’m here is proof of how I feel about you. Every night I dreamed about you. I longed for your touch and the way it made me feel, but I wouldn’t let myself think you would ever feel that way too. I guess that’s why I was so upset when I found out what you had done and the trouble it has caused you. I would *never* want to cause you ANY hardship,” she explained.

She reached for his hand and held it in hers, looking at it as if she was searching for something. “It’s a perfect hand,” she said simply, and then placed a kiss in his palm. She looked closely at it and saw there were odd markings on it. She grasped his other hand and turned it, palm up, toward her. On both of his palms appeared star-shaped colorful tattoos with unusual symbols surrounding the stars. The inside of his wrists and forearms also bore unusual markings. They appeared to be symbols or maybe letters of some sort. They were beautifully drawn with swirling lines and geometric angles. They puzzled her, “What are these for... they must mean something?”

“Yes, the star is the mark of the Leader and the symbols are the marks of the Guardians. All of my siblings palms contain the symbols, but I am the only one with the colorful stars.”

“What about the ones on your wrist and forearms?”

“Ah... those are the markings of the first born. I know they look like tattoos, but they are something I was born with. They are a part of every Vesturion. Since I am a first-born son, mine are much more prominent than most. If you look closely, you will also see markings at the base of my fingers. They are really tiny and hard for humans to see without magnification. But those are the markings of Vesturon. They are actually triangles with a crescent in the center. Everyone with Vesturion blood in their veins bears these marks somewhere on their body. But, Maddie, you know the ones on my wrists? You will be given matching ones if you ever consent to be my mate.”

“What?”

“Yes, as the mate of a first born, you will be given matching symbols. You know, if you rub your fingers over them, you can feel them. Yours will be placed on you using a special instrument that it actually raises the skin to create them.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No, not at all. You will see. I hope. I hope you do not mind.”

“No, they are so beautiful,” she said as she scrutinized them, gently tracing their shapes. They appeared to be script-like symbols, embellished with fancy scrolls. “Is this written in the Ancient Tongue?”

“Yes, and the best translation would be something like, ‘I am the first born son of Vesturon.’ Yours will declare you to be the mate of the first born.”

“Tell me about your braid. I noticed all of your brothers have one as well.”

“Ah, yes, the braid!” he said with a bit of a chuckle.

He explained how every Guardian must wear them as they date back to ancient times. They begin to grow them when they are inducted into the Brotherhood of Guardians and are only allowed to cut them every five years. Some of the Guardians despise them saying they are outdated and should be banned. Others, like Rayn, don’t really mind them.

“I like it. It kind of gives you a wild look. Why did you laugh when I asked about it?” Maddie asked.

“Well, some Guardians do not like them at all. They are, how do you say here, a bit of a bone of contention for some. Please do not tell Rykerian that you like them. He is not fond of the wild look; he fancies himself too refined for that!” Rayn explained.

Rayn put his arms around her and held her closely against his chest. “So, tell me what you are thinking,” he quietly requested.

“You have to ask?” she asked impishly.

“No, but it would be rude to do otherwise,” he said. Rayn explained how his telepathic powers worked. They were a bit like an iPod in that when emotions were running high, the volume of the thoughts were very loud. It was different when emotions were stable. The sounds did not project then, and he would have to reach into a person’s mind to “hear” them. He, like many other Vesturions, felt that was an intrusion of privacy and didn’t particularly like to do that.

“Um, Rayn, earlier tonight, how much of what I was thinking could you actually hear?”

“Well... all of it. I tried not to, but it was like you were shouting your thoughts out to me. I am very sorry, but Maddie, I liked what I heard!” he told her.

“Oh, Lord, I don’t know if I should be embarrassed... or just laugh! What the heck... I’m just going to throw this out there... just so you know; I do think you are totally hot!”

They both laughed and Rayn assured her she had him beat on the “hot” scale.

The conversation turned serious again when they discussed the potential outcomes of Maddie’s brief trip to Vesturon. Rayn would undoubtedly be charged with a violation of the Covenant and would be forced to return home.

“Then what happens?” Maddie asked.

“I cannot say. I have never known anyone that has been through this. It is a serious infraction, so I am sure the consequences will be extreme. I do not know if I will be allowed to come back here,” I stated.

“You mean we may never see each other again? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I do not know that either. I did not want to have to tell you that, but if the Council decides I must be confined or exiled, I will be banned from any kind of space travel. I will be unable to get back to you here. Maddie, I would like to pledge myself to you in front of my brothers and father. I am hoping that would send out a message that this is not just some sort of passing fancy or rash decision I have made. Would that be ok with you?”

“What exactly does that mean?” she asked.

“It means that I would pledge my protection and honor to you. It would be making a public commitment,” he said, wondering if he’d gone too far. “It would tell all that my intentions toward you are honorable and serious, and on Vesturon, the next step would be much like your engagement of marriage.”

“Oh, I guess that would be ok. It would show them my commitment to you too. I don’t want them to think we are getting married anytime soon though. If they put you in prison, what will happen to me?”

“I will make sure you are cared for by my family. My family here will see to it, as will Talasi. It is our way, Maddie. We will not leave you.”

“How will I live?”

“I swear, I will take care of you. We have many resources—more than I can tell you—finances, land, everything. I will see to it that you have nothing to worry about when I am gone.”

“How did you come by all of this?”

Rayn explained that over the many years the Guardians have been on Earth, they have amassed a vast fortune that includes many assets such as land. Much of it was passed down throughout the ages, and has grown through proper management.

“Maddie, there are so many things I want to show you.” He reached out and tucked an errant lock of hair behind her ear.

“Like what?”

“Things on Vesturon... things in space... even things here on Earth. I wish we had more time together. I would just enjoy watching you look at them for the first time. It is amazing to watch you observe things—like when we arrived here for instance. I so enjoyed looking at you taking in this view for the first time. It gave me great pleasure. I would be happy spending the rest of my life just watching... observing you see things for the first time. You are like a child taking its first steps... so lovely.”

Chapter 8

Maddie cracked her eyes open to golden rays of sunlight poking its fingers in their tent. She hadn't intended to fall asleep so quickly last night. She wanted to savor every moment possible with Rayn *awake*. She had tons to learn about him, from him, about his background, his home. She tried to rollover, but something had trapped her by her hair. She glanced in that direction and discovered Rayn was all but wrapped around her and laying on her hair. No wonder she couldn't move. Umm... but it sure felt nice being there next to him. She squiggled around a bit so that she could actually look at him. No doubt about it... pure perfection here.

I am in heaven, she thought.

"As am I," she heard him say.

She thumped him with her pillow. She was going to have to get used to this telepathy thing.

He flashed her a dazzling smile, and she caught her breath. She didn't think she would ever get used to this.

"Why are you all so good looking? I mean, is everyone on Vesturon beautiful? And really, what about Talasi and her people? I remember asking her about it, and she gave me some lame story about being happy. I think that's good and all, but it's not going to make you beautiful. And you and your brothers, you all are *so* large. Is that how everyone is?"

"I *adore* the way your mind works; you go straight to the heart of the matter... and you're so *curious*. I do not have an answer for you other than beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Our kind are slightly larger framed than the human race. Does that bother you?"

How could that bother her, she wondered. She actually thought it was awesome!

"Can you tell me a little of how your kind came to Earth?" she asked curiously.

"Ok... let me give you a little Vesturon history lesson. Many years ago, about five thousand, I think it was when the first Egyptian pyramids were being constructed, a group of Vesturions visited Earth. You know the rumors and stories about the pyramids and Stonehenge being built by aliens? Well, that is partially true. The aliens, or Vesturions, I should say, did not really build them, but they gave ideas and suggestions to those ancient civilizations to get them started."

The Vesturions were already a highly progressed people, obviously, or they would not have been traveling the universe. So, when they first arrived on Earth, some Vesturions remained behind and eventually the Guardians were formed. The Vesturions travelled between the two planets, as they were closely related in their environments.

"In other words, our planets are similar as far as atmosphere and elements are concerned. We are also similar physically, with a few minor differences and adaptations."

Throughout the years, the travel continued and Vesturions would form bonds with different groups on Earth. They were closely bonded with the ancient Mayan civilization. Rayn explained that whenever you see ancient temples, you should think Vesturon! And that is how they came to be tied to the Cherokee nation, especially the Nunne'hi. Vesturions are also very spiritual people. They have great reverence for the Divine Being, and they frequently commune with the Deity.

“How did Vesturions and Nunne'hi join together if the Vesturions weren't allowed to mate with humans?”

“No, Vesturions *can* mate with humans, but if they do, they cannot take the human to Vesturon. They must stay on Earth for the remainder of their life. They do have the choice of going to Vesturon, but the human is never allowed to return to Earth.”

“But I thought that you and I couldn't... you know... “ she trailed off.

“You and I cannot for *different* reasons. First, I am the first born son of the Leader of Vesturon. I stand to inherit the kingdom. It is similar to your royalty here. According to the Covenants of Vesturon, any direct descendant of the First Family can only mate with another Vesturion. It is the only way to keep the Vesturion bloodlines strong. The other reason is that I am the Leader of the Guardians of Vesturon, and the Leader must mate with another Vesturion. The only exception to this is for the Nunne'hi,” he elucidated.

While Rayn spoke, he had taken a lock of her hair and started twisting it around his fingers. Before she knew it, all of her hair was wrapped around his hands, and he was pulling her into him.

“Ummm... I love the feel of this, like silken threads. I would do this all day long if I could,” he said, burying his face in the fistful of hair, luxuriating in it.

“Rayn, are you and your family supposed to stay on Earth forever?” she asked, trying to refocus his thoughts and hers as well. It was with great difficulty she remained coherent.

“No,” he answered distractedly, his mind still mainly focused on playing with her copper tresses. “We are assigned here for a time and then another group will come in. I came first, about ten years ago, followed by the rest of them.”

“How old are you?”

That question got his attention. Rayn rose up on his elbow and slid his other arm around Maddie and said, “Do you shock easily?”

“You ask me that... after everything that's happened?” she countered.

“Well, let me just say I am a bit older than you.”

“Uh... how much older exactly?”

“A lot... by a few decades. Our aging process is much different than here on Earth. For instance, my father is nearing two hundred years old. Our life expectancy is much longer, and if you were to go to Vesturon, yours would be altered as well. If you would compare me to Earth years though, physically, I would be about twenty five years of age.”

He stared at her trying to gauge her reaction, looking for anything that might indicate her shock at this revelation. To his relief, he saw nothing of the sort.

“Does that bother you? Look at me, Maddie,” Rayn commanded. He took her face, turned it toward his, and her eyes lifted to his.

Oh my god... those eyes... he's doing it to me again... he is sooo sexy, she thought.

“Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't shocked. After all, I have agreed to let an old man make some kind of formal pledge to me! But, seriously, I don't think it bothers me.”

The only thing that bothers me is you... yeah... hot and bothered.

When Maddie saw his expression on his face change to amusement, she immediately knew he'd read her mind.

“Oh... you... you have to quit that! It's SO embarrassing. I can't help that I am *so* attracted to you and you... er... get me so... so *aroused!* Ok? Are you happy? I admit it! I wish I knew what *you* were thinking!” she said, flustered.

The amusement was gone in a flash, replaced by a fierce intensity. His piercing stare locked onto her, imprisoning her, as his hands entwined in her hair held her head in a viselike grip, rendering her immobile. In another place, Maddie may have felt frightened by his passion.

“Do you?” he asked roughly, shaking her. “Do you *truly* want to know, because I will tell you? Heaven help me, Maddie, I *will* tell you. And it is not very honorable.”

With a blur of motion, Rayn was instantly on top of her and placing his hands on her either side of her face. His gaze held her as he began his agonized confession, “I am in a *constant* state of... arousal around you. I want to caress you everywhere... feel the velvet softness of your face, your neck, your body... *all* of it... *everywhere*, Maddie... until I render you as senseless as I feel. And then, then I want to kiss you, feel your enticing lips on mine, taste their honeyed sweetness. I want, sweet Deity, forgive me, but I want *it all* with you, Maddie. I want that glorious hair of yours spread across my *naked* body. I have these visions of you doing things to me I cannot, dare not, speak of, and they drive me insane. You. Drive. Me. Mad. I sometimes feel... like right now... that I cannot maintain my control.”

In one swift movement, he was gone leaving Maddie behind, breathless from his frank confession.

Oh... my... God. Did that just happen? I am ...ok... so not going there. I wonder if you can combust from the mere thought of... nope, not going to even think it. Thank God, I'm not the only one. He is always so calm and steady about everything; I was starting to think there was something crazy about me, she thought.

Maddie arose and went outside. Rayn was staring out at the view of Balsam Mountain. He stood tall, beautiful, and glorious, like an exquisitely sculptured marble statue. His ragged breathing had slowed a bit, but his agitation was evidenced by the slight clenching of his hands and jaw.

“Are you ok?” she tenderly asked, as she hesitantly reached for him, only to let her arm fall when he didn't turn.

“No!” he forcefully spit out. “I nearly lost control in there and that *cannot* happen again.”

After several harsh breaths, he reached for her without turning and roughly pulled her into his embrace, resting his chin on her head.

He then inhaled deeply and said more softly, “Maddie, I love it that you feel so strongly about me. It is truthfully a beautiful thing and oh-so flattering.” He paused, then continued, “I adore it. Yes, that is it. I *adore* it when you have those wicked little thoughts about me,” he said, smiling. “It is frustrating on the other hand though, because I want to *be* with you, *really with you*, in *every* way possible—mentally, spiritually and, yes, physically. But it is not right to think of you in that manner. We must be united first. I feel like I am dishonoring you when my body reacts to you this way.”

With her eyes looking toward the heavens, Maddie dropped to her knees and forcefully said, “Dear God, I don’t know what I ever did to deserve a man such as this, but thank you—thank you from the bottom of my heart. And I know I don’t deserve him, but please make him understand that he honors me above all else. Thank you, God!”

She went to rise, but Rayn halted her by placing his hand on her shoulder. He surprised her by joining her on his knees and saying, “Dear Divine Being, please come to this female. Fill her with Your presence so that she may come to know, love and understand You.”

A fine mist descended upon them, enfolding them in its midst. Maddie immediately felt a presence within her, a feeling of love and joy that overwhelmed her. She didn’t want this feeling to end; it brought her a kind of peace and spirituality she had never experienced before. In minutes, it had dissipated, and when she opened her eyes, the mist was gone and the sun was shining brightly around them.

Rayn took her hand and helped her to her feet. Then she looked up at him and smiled, in a way she had never smiled before.

“Wow. I don’t know what that was but—” she began.

He interrupted her, “Maddie, surely you know the presence of your God when you feel it.”

She looked up at him and nodded. “Yes, Rayn, and you were right... about it all. Thank you for doing that... whatever it was you did.”

“You have the power in you to do that too. You just need to believe.”

“Oh, I do... trust me, I do.” She leaned in and kissed Rayn on the cheek. He was a happy man, a very happy man!

Chapter 9

The transfer back to the compound was easier on Maddie this time.

“I think I’m getting used to this. No motion sickness this time. It’s feeling less and less like a McFlurry machine.”

“Before long you will not feel a thing when you materialize. It does not take long to adapt to it.”

The last time they’d walked up these steps, Maddie’s brain was addled from the whole transfer process so she didn’t pay much attention to the house. This time she was acutely aware of her surroundings.

The compound wasn’t merely a ‘house.’ It was a mansion—a sprawling, huge, log mansion—the kind you would see in a fancy magazine. Its expansive windows were everywhere affording magnificent views from any room inside. It had a porch that encircled part of the main floor, housing a load of cushy chairs scattered everywhere.

They entered the main living area where Rykerian and Therron were flopped on sofas watching a baseball game on a huge flat screen television. They were completely engrossed in the game and didn’t so much as give them a passing glance. Rayn rolled his eyes and shrugged as he led them to the kitchen.

“How is that for a welcome? I guess they really missed us. How hungry are you?” He opened up the refrigerator and started pulling things out.

The kitchen was phenomenal. It was state-of-the-art everything. It housed two full Sub Zero refrigerators and two separate matching freezers.

How much food do these guys eat?

On the opposite wall was a six-burner gas Viking range with a griddle top, the kind you’d see in a restaurant. There were granite and stone countertops everywhere, three copper sinks and floor to ceiling cabinets.

“This place is awesome, Rayn,” she said turning around to check everything out.

“I am pleased you approve. We have bacon, eggs, sausage, and ham. I could whip up some omelets with some grits and toast. Or I could make us pancakes, French toast, a frittata... your wish is but my command, my lady!” Rayn elegantly informed her.

“I *am* starving... do you usually eat this kind of food, or do you eat different things on Vesturon? And what are you anyway, Iron Chef?” she asked with amusement.

“I must make a true confession here... cooking is a passion of mine. I *love* the Food Network! I am one hundred percent addicted to that channel. All the brothers, even Sharra, are into your Earthly sports. Not me sweetheart... it is the Food Network all the way! See?”

Rayn pointed to a flat screen in the kitchen. He turned it on and sure enough, out popped Paula Deen.

“And I *love* Paula Deen. As you say here, ‘that girl has *got* it!’”

He totally struck out on the Southern accent, but had Maddie giggling.

“Um... ok... whatever floats your boat.” She rolled her eyes at him. Maddie on the other hand couldn’t boil water without ruining the pan.

"So tell me what you eat on Vesturon."

"Our diet is very similar to yours. We are omnivores and eat a variety of things but in all, our food is almost exactly like the things you eat here on Earth. Nothing strange or extraordinary I am sorry to say."

“So tell me about this house. I didn’t really pay much attention to it before but it’s... um... kind of *biggish*. But who built it and when?”

“We had it built by a local contractor, but then, we kind of... well, wiped out any record of it. This is our compound, where we regroup, have meetings with other Guardians and that sort of thing. After it was completed, we veiled everything within a 30 mile radius, so after we wiped out the records, no one would have any idea we’re up here.”

“How did you wipe out the records... or do I even want to know?”

“Oh, we have our ways. Xarrid is the computer expert. Well, we all are really because the computers here are pretty primitive yet. We all can, how do you say... oh, yes... we can *hack* into any system we want. We mainly do that for surveillance purposes though... nothing illegal... well, except removing records sometime,” he said sheepishly, cracking half a dozen eggs and whipping them up into a froth.

“We always do it for a reason... like to keep our identity obscured... or to find out what kind of information the local law enforcement agencies have regarding safety issues. We usually tap into state and local law enforcement databases for that. Actually, that is Sharra’s area of expertise. She also combs through FBI files looking for matches on suspected criminals. She has been diligently working on uncovering the man who tried to kill you.”

Rayn realized the direction the conversation had taken and suddenly stopped chopping his omelet ingredients to focus on Maddie. Her face had turned ashen in color, and her eyes had widened into huge saucers.

I am an idiot, he thought.

“Maddie, I am so sorry! I did not stop to think... I am an idiot.”

He moved to place her within the circle of his arms when she back away and snapped, “Stop it, Rayn. It is not your fault,” frustration and exasperation laced in her tone. “You can’t shield me from this forever. I need to face this and get over it! I survived the attack, and I need to move forward. If I bury it all and don’t confront it, it’ll get the best of me, and I refuse to let that happen.”

“Damnation, you *are* a brave female,” Rayn implored, with admiration written all over his face.

“No, not brave, just someone who wants to live in the present. But thanks anyway. So what about our omelets? I’m still hungry!” she exclaimed, changing the subject.

Chef Rayn whipped up what turned out to be the best breakfast Maddie had ever eaten. When she was putting the last bite into her mouth, Therron ambled in.

“How was the mountain?” he directed the question at Maddie.

She moved next to him, extended her hand and said, “Hi, I’m Maddie. We really haven’t formally met... even though I owe you and your brothers my life. Thank you for that. And the mountain was awesome! I *love* it up there. You all truly have a special place here.”

“Glad you enjoyed it and glad you are doing so well. Hey, Rayn, got any of that omelet left?”

“No, sorry, but we were both starving. Um... Therron, may I have a word with you?”

Therron glanced at him, and Rayn motioned with his head toward the other room. Maddie, catching all of this said, “Stop it, Rayn. Really.” To Therron’s puzzled look, Maddie added, “Rayn doesn’t want me to hear anything about my ordeal because he doesn’t want it to upset me.” She turned to Rayn and suggested, “Rayn, that’s really sweet of you, but I have to get over this. I won’t be able to if everyone sweeps it underneath the carpet. Let me get through this a day at a time, ok?”

If she’d been trying to impress Rayn’s brother, she couldn’t have done a better job. She was most certainly a strong female. Therron gave her an appreciative glance and said, “Well, Maddie, I am thinking that the trip up the mountain agreed with you.”

Maddie got up to take the dishes to the sink. “Thanks, Therron. I want to thank you too for lending an ear to Rayn when he was in such turmoil over me. I appreciate it more than I can tell you. I also wanted to let you know that this,” she made gestured to indicate she was referring to her and Rayn, “was all his choice... no coercion or even persuasion from me.” She glided over to Therron and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Thanks... a bunch.”

Maddie gave Therron a quick visual inspection. He was slightly taller than Rayn, but stockier in his build. If Rayn was big in Maddie’s eyes, Therron was *huge*. His brown hair was thick, long and shaggy, and his braid was long, like Rayn’s and hung over his shoulder giving him a wild look. His eyes were exact replicas of Rayn’s, except they were fringed in chestnut. He was quite striking in his appearance but gave the impression that his looks or size were of no concern to him. He had the same casualness about his appearance that Rayn did... not caring and not having to try to look good. It just came naturally. She could feel Therron’s warm-heartedness and quickly understood why Rayn had confided in him. Maddie felt an immediate kinship with Therron, and she knew it was mutual when he gave her a huge wink.

“There is not a living thing alive that could force Rayn to do something he did not want to do so worry not about anyone here. I am quite sure I can speak for the entire family, Maddie. None of us think you did anything to influence him. Well... let me retract that statement. Of course, there is something about you that he might like just a little bit... er... you know... that may have had something to do with it!” This amused him greatly, as he let out a huge burst of laughter.

“Very funny, brother. So... anything from father yet?” Rayn wondered aloud as he was picking up the dishes.

“Surprisingly, no. But I would not put it past him to show up unannounced. Just be prepared. Have you thought about how you are going to handle it?” Therron started pulling things out of the fridge. He pulled out enough food to feed a family of ten.

Rayn described how he intended to pledge his protection to Maddie while their father was there. He also wanted the entire family in on it. He was intent on making it perfectly clear how true he was regarding his feelings for Maddie.

Therron made a towering monstrosity of a sandwich and was putting everything away when he shot back, “Good luck. Glad I am not wearing your shoes, actually.”

Maddie began to chuckle, and they shot her an inquiring look.

“Sorry... I was just wondering how you were planning to eat that.”

They both gave her another questioning look.

“I mean... it’s immense... gigantic, actually, and I was just wondering...,” she trailed off at their looks of incomprehension. “Oh, never mind.”

Therron shrugged, turned back to Rayn and continued, “Rayn, I wish to warn you, though. Xarrid is going to be a problem. He thinks you are not thinking this through. I have tried to explain to him where you are coming from, but it is not registering with him.”

Therron took a bite of his sandwich and sat down at the counter and in one fluid motion, placed his napkin in his lap. For no apparent reason, Maddie thought how well-mannered these men were. Therron ate his sandwich as if he were eating a seven-course meal in a fine restaurant. Maddie was fixated on him while he ate.

Therron looked up at her and cast her a raised brow look. She shook her head, disbelieving he could eat that enormous sandwich so elegantly.

“Maybe I can talk with him... one on one... and make him see where I stand. Hey... where are Zanna and Peetar?” Rayn wanted to know.

To Maddie’s questioning look Rayn explained that Zanna and Peetar were, basically, the servants but more like a part of the family... they had taken care of them ever since they could remember.

“They are around here somewhere,” Therron replied back.

“I hate to interrupt you two, but, Rayn, I am in desperate need of a shower. Can you...?” Maddie began, when Rayn stopped her.

He had been so caught up in discussing things with Therron, that he had forgotten he promised to show Maddie around the house. They were both in need of showers, so he thought he would give her an abbreviated tour and then take her to his room, where she could bathe and make herself comfortable.

Rayn briefly guided Maddie through the main floor and headed up the expansive staircase and finally ended up in his room.

“Maddie,” he took her hands in his. “This is your home now, so I want you to be comfortable here. Anything here is yours and do not be timid about it.”

Chapter 10

The first time when Maddie was in Rayn's bedroom she didn't take note of her surroundings as there were so many distractions occurring at once. But now she took her time inspecting it all.

For the love of God, this place is pure luxury, she thought.

The floors were done in wide-planked wood. Scattered around were thick Persian rugs in neutral shades. The bed was absolutely *ginormous*. Maddie had never seen a bed so large. It was a four-poster constructed of huge wooden timbers. The comforter and draperies were made of exquisite silk in deep earthy tones. The whole ensemble was definitely very manly, yet ultra-elegant. There was a huge stone corner fireplace and on the wall, and opposite the bed was the biggest flat screen television Maddie had ever seen.

There was a hallway at the opposite end and Maddie followed Rayn in that direction.

“Here is the bathroom and you will find the towels in that cabinet there. There is shampoo and everything else you might need in there as well. Please make yourself at home here. Whatever it is you need, just help yourself. What is mine is yours. I will give you some privacy, and if you need anything, you can use the phone here in the bathroom or in the bedroom to call downstairs. Just hit star 9. Peetar or Zanna will pick up.”

Rayn was gone, and Maddie started checking out the bathroom. The place was *unreal*. There was a shower that was the size of a room, but it was one of those Dream Showers that had rows and rows of different water nozzles to spray you from every direction. Then the bathtub was the size of a small swimming pool, with jets, lots of them. There was also a steam room and sauna, a private room with a sink and commode and another huge vanity with double sinks. It was all done in stone and marble and she had never seen anything like it, except in those fancy spa magazines.

Well...this was going to be fun! Should I start in the shower or tub she wondered?

She opted for the shower and took her time, staying in about 20 minutes. After fumbling around with all the knobs and buttons, she finally figured out how the darn thing worked, and then she enjoyed it immensely. Since all good things have to come to an end, she eventually turned the water off, grabbed two fluffy towels and dried off.

And then... Uh oh. I don't have any clothes here. What in the world am I going to wear?

She wrapped herself in a towel and headed for Rayn's closet in the hopes of finding a robe or something. She turned on the light to find rows and rows of clothes... and almost every item was black. About half of them were obviously Vesturion, with the rest being from Earth.

She went for the drawers, thinking maybe sweats. Yep... there they were but when she pulled them on, she couldn't find herself... they were way too big. No drawstring either. On to the next pair. After pulling out at least ten pairs, she was unsuccessful.

Ok...how about some shorts?

No luck there either.

Gah! What in tarnation am I going to wear? Maybe I should just pick up the phone and hit star 9. No... that would be embarrassing and awkward.

She eventually spotted a black robe... it was really a *gown*... a peculiar looking thing... but she pulled it over her head and it would just have to do. It billowed out and puddled on the floor, so she would have to hold it up to walk. The sleeves nearly hung to her calves, but at least it was *something*.

Nothing like running around naked in front of a bunch of strangers!

Now for some boxers. She knew they wouldn't fit, but she had to put on something in place of panties. She found *that* drawer and grabbed a pair, but they wouldn't stay up. Now she was getting really frustrated. After nearly tearing up all of his drawers, she located a pair of shorts that had a drawstring. Voila! They were still quite large, but she was able to keep them up by way of that string.

When she finished, she looked around her, and she had all but destroyed his closet. She'd fix it up later. That shower had relaxed her, so she felt herself getting drowsy. She decided to crawl up on the big bed and lay down for a short nap.

Chapter 11

Rayn found Xarrid in the gym, working over the punching bag like his life depended on it.

Xarrid was the youngest of the males. Tall, dark and devastatingly handsome like Rayn, his eyes were the exact image of his mother's... large, almond shaped and crystal clear baby blue. He wore his hair a bit longer than Rayn, and it was slightly wavier, giving him a wild, unkempt look similar to Therron's. His braid hung on his shoulder but was not nearly as long as either Therron's or Rayn's.

"Are you trying to destroy that thing?"

"Just getting rid of some frustrations."

He grabbed a towel to wipe the dripping sweat from his face.

"Talk?"

"Nothing to say."

"Look, Xarrid... I am sorry for not telling you about all of this. The only reason I went to Therron was because he is the next in line. If I am stripped of rank, it is Therron who has to take over, and he needed to be prepared for that."

Rayn walked up to Xarrid, and faced him eye to eye.

"I *get* that! I really do. What I *do not* get is the *why* part. Why are you doing this? I know you feel responsible for her in some outlandish way. But you are destroying this family and everything we have here." His fury was palpable.

"Xarrid, I do not expect you to understand this, but in some, impossibly strange way we have connected. It is not just attraction or pity or even responsibility, Xarrid. She is inside of me... in my heart... my mind... my soul. *Every waking minute*. Bloody hell, Xarrid, *even in my dreams* she is ever present. For weeks and weeks, this tormented me. I wanted to walk away from it all, leave and never return to her. You know the story. I did not make this decision without thought or in haste, and I am not asking you to like it. Bloody hell, if it bothers you so much I will not even ask for your support or for you to be there when I pledge myself to her before all of the others. I would only ask this... that you treat her with respect." Rayn reached out to put his hand on Xarrid's shoulder.

Xarrid backed away from him, shaking his head. He could see the pain in Rayn's eyes, the pain stemmed from not understanding, not accepting, and from the conflict Rayn had endured. Yet, Xarrid could not accept this. This was the destruction of something so monumental that it was inconceivable.

"I am sorry, my liege. I cannot do that. I cannot respect her for what has transpired between all of us. It would be best if I would not be present here." He bowed and quickly left the room, leaving Rayn to face his misery alone.

He remained alone in the gym for some time, but was keenly aware of when Xarrid left the house. Eventually Therron came down and found him.

“He left. Said it would be better if he were not here. He has gone out on patrol and said he did not know when he would be back. I am sorry, Rayn. He will not allow himself to understand this,” Therron said with regret.

Rayn just nodded, despair in his eyes. “I am sorry too, Therron. But it does not change a thing for me.” Rayn stood up. “Are Rykerian and Tesslar back?” At Therron’s nod, he continued, “What about Sharra?”

“She is here too.”

“Can you gather everyone together in the den? We need to talk.”

Therron left the gym, hoping to have everyone else there by the time Rayn came up.

When Rayn entered the den, they were all stretched out in the chairs and sofas. They all stood as he sauntered in.

“Thank you for coming here. I know you all are aware how Xarrid feels about my situation with Maddie,” he began. “I am sorrier than I can say. Therron told me he has spoken to you, and I just wanted to add a few things. Please hear me out, and after I am finished, I will answer any questions you might have.”

He wanted them to know what had transpired between himself and Maddie and told them he was going to pledge his protection to her when their father arrived. He also requested their presence. He let them know about Maddie’s refusal to unite with him, her commitment to him and her request for more time.

The silence was unnerving. Rayn had never seen his family so quiet. Suddenly, everyone began speaking at once. Then silence... and then... laughter, of all things.

Rayn finally urged Rykerian to start. He explained that they had discussed the ramifications of everything and they all realized, with the exception of Xarrid, that this was out of even Rayn’s hands. His loyalty to his family, Vesturon, and the Guardians had always come first for him, and this, in no way, was something he would discard.

“We know you would never forsake us and that you do this with honor in your heart.”

The entire family placed their hands over their hearts, and in unison, they promised in the Ancient Tongue, “*Brother of ours, we will stand at your back and protect you always. If this female is worthy of your love and honor, she, too will have our protection.*”

Therron continued, “And, Rayn, we will take care of her with the utmost respect if you are separated from her.”

What remained unsaid was they would be willing to do this in the event of Rayn’s return to, and imprisonment on, Vesturon.

“I will never be able to repay you for this oath, and I thank you for that.”

The remainder of the discussion centered on what would most likely happen when their father arrived and also how Therron would assume Rayn's role as Leader.

"I need to head back upstairs. I left Maddie up there to shower. I am sure she is wondering what happened to me," he said as he headed out the room.

Chapter 12

Rayn entered the bedroom quietly. It was silent, and the draperies were drawn. He correctly assumed Maddie was asleep. The gigantic bed dwarfed her, and his lips turned up in a smile to see her curled up in a tight ball. What in the name of the Deity was she wearing? It looked like... ha... she had on his formal Ceremonial Gown!

I wonder why she put that on?

Rayn leaned over her and started whispering words of love in her ear. She slowly opened her eyes and flashed him a heart-stopping smile.

Utterly beautiful. How can she not know how utterly beautiful she is?

“Wake up, Sunshine!”

“Umm. That was a great nap. How long have I been asleep?” She stretched her long slender legs out from under her.

“Only a few hours.”

“Are you kidding me?”

She hopped off the bed and ran to the windows, pushed open the curtains to see the sun setting.

“I must’ve been really tired. I don’t ever sleep like that.”

“Your body is still mending. That can cause fatigue.”

“I guess so.”

“Er... Maddie, what are you wearing?”

She glanced down and remembered that she had rummaged through Rayn’s closet in search of something to wear. She grabbed both sides of the gown and said, “Oh, I hope you don’t mind, but I borrowed this. And... I sort of tore up your closet a bit. I was looking for something to wear, but... you know... you’re really huge! I couldn’t find anything that fit. I mean I couldn’t find anything that would even stay on.”

“Why did you need to borrow clothes?”

“Well, duh! Maybe it’s because I don’t have any. I left home without packing anything,” she reminded him.

“Oh, forgive me! I did not even think of that. How thoughtless of me.”

“Not at all. I didn’t even think of it either until I got out of the shower. I was hoping Sharra could help me here.”

When he finished telling her what she had chosen to wear, and the significance of it, she nearly collapsed. Rayn roared with laughter, promising her he was not in the least upset about it. After all, she did the robe much more justice than he ever could. She danced over to him, put her arms around his neck and gave him a loud smacking kiss on the cheek.

As he snagged her around her waist with one arm, he reached for the phone with the other. “Zanna, can you find Sharra and have her meet me in her room in fifteen minutes.”

As he pulled Maddie up against him he said, “We’re going to rectify your clothing problem.” Then, he kissed her.

As soon as he started it, they both realized their mistake. Once again, the heat consumed them, engulfing them in desire. Rayn was the one to break the connection.

“You taste...”

“We shouldn’t...”

“Of honey that...”

“Start that...”

“I’ve never had before.”

“When we know we cannot finish.”

Maddie inhaled a shaky breath and told Rayn, “You go first.”

“I was saying that we shouldn’t start what we cannot finish, but I forgot myself when I kissed you. And you?”

“I was commenting on how you taste, like honey. It is the sweetest most wonderful taste when I kiss you.”

“Maddie, I can’t begin to describe what you taste like to me. It is delightful.”

“Rayn, maybe I shouldn’t stay in your room. It’s not exactly proper, is it? And it might pose a difficult situation for us.” She didn’t want to cause any more problems for this family.

“It is not proper, but I am not spending one possible moment away from you. You can have your privacy here. I can use the guest bathroom across the hall, if you are uncomfortable about sharing this one. But we are sleeping together in that bed, fully clothed of course. I will not break my vow of celibacy until after we are united Maddie, and your virtue will be protected. But I will not be apart from you.”

“And your family? What will they think?”

“Do not worry about them. They know how we feel toward each other and that I am going to pledge my protection to you. They have promised... well... all of them except Xarrid,” a sad look came into his eyes, “have promised their support. Xarrid has left for patrol, and I do not know if he will be back before my father arrives. He is a bit unaccepting of us right now.”

He pulled her toward the door. “What? Where are we going?”

“To Sharra’s room. As much as I love seeing you wear my garments, I imagine you will be more comfortable in clothing that fits you.”

“What will she say about how I’m dressed?”

“What does it matter? You are my female, and I approve of this!”

They went up another flight of steps to where Sharra’s quarters were located. The halls were filled with priceless paintings and artifacts. Everything was meticulously kept and arranged. There were fresh flowers everywhere, and the ambiance was positively enchanting.

Sharra greeted them at the door of her room, and Maddie was again struck by the beauty and elegance of this house. Her chamber was as magnificently appointed as Rayn’s but much more feminine. She had a beautiful black wrought iron bed that had tall posts on each corner with an overhead canopy. Draped over the entire frame was sheer white silk, giving her bed a dreamlike appearance. Like Rayn’s room, there were thick rugs scattered about and the walls were painted soft beige. She had a couch and two chairs in one corner, creating a lovely sitting area in front of the stone fireplace. Rayn took a seat in one of the chairs and flipped on the remote to the flat screen.

“Maddie needs your help, Shar. She has nary a thing to wear—literally.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry to bother you, Sharra, but when Rayn whisked me away, he didn’t tell me to pack a bag!”

“That is not a problem, I am glad to help. Come. ”

As Rayn flipped on the Food Network, Sharra and Maddie went to her huge walk-in and dug through her closet in search of some clothing. Half an hour later, they both emerged with their arms loaded down.

Sharra dumped her load into Rayn’s lap saying, “Just bring back what does not work, and we can always try other things. I can run down to Asheville and pick some clothing up for you too, if you want.”

“Thanks!”

They returned to Rayn’s room with their arms laden with clothing.

“Come. I should like to give you the grand tour of the house, and I want to introduce you to Rykerian and Tesslar. You also need to meet Zanna and Peetar. They are going to spoil you to death.” He started pulling her toward the door.

“Wait a minute! You don’t seriously think I am going down dressed like this! I don’t even have panties on... I’m wearing a pair of your gym shorts... see?” She lifted the robe up high enough for him to get of view of the shorts. They were drawn as tight as she could get them, and they still hung down to her knees.

“Niiiiice! Is that not what you say here? You look a lot better in them than I do!” Rayn was at her side, arms around her, kissing her before she could blink an eye. He released her, took her

chin in his hand, stepped back and whispered, "I definitely hate to think of being separated from you. I can barely stand to be around you and not touch you. We had better go downstairs," Rayn decided, releasing his hold on her chin.

"Give me a second so that I can change." She went to the closet and dressed in some of the clothing Sharra had given her. She donned a pair of jeans that fit her like they were made for her. They were a bit too long, but thankfully, they were skinny legged so she could roll up the bottoms. Then, she put on a black shirt, made out of that strange fabric. She was getting to really like that stuff. She slipped her feet into a pair of black ballet flats and tried to fix her hair, but it was not cooperating.

She had taken that nap without drying it, and now it had a mind of its own. Too bad...

When she emerged from the closet, she heard Rayn suck in his breath. She raised her brows in question, and he let out a long slow breath. "I have never seen you dressed as such, and you... well, you look beautiful."

She was slender but had the right amount of curves in the right places. Her hair was wildly disarrayed, giving her that untamed look. She did not have on one iota of make-up, yet her cheeks were flushed and her lips were perfectly pink.

Rayn put his hand under her chin and tilted her head up. "You are a creature of unparalleled beauty, and you take my breath away, Maddie." He gently touched her lips with his. When the brief kiss ended, he looked up and gently grasped a lock of her hair and brought it up to his face. "I adore these copper tresses of yours. They are like hand spun silk. I could not possibly ever grow tired of running my fingers through it. Now, we shall go downstairs before we get carried away up here."

He propelled her quickly toward the door, squelching his urge to grab her and throw her down on the bed and do unmentionable things to her that he should not be thinking about.

Chapter 13

The house was grand and positively magnificent. From the wrap around front porch, to the back terrace, with its stone circular fireplace, it contained everything one could possibly desire. It was constructed of huge timbers and stacked stone. There were large windows everywhere, enabling one to enjoy the expansive views of its idyllic setting. It had a rustic elegance to it and was furnished expensively but comfortably. The sofas and chairs had “sit in me,” written all over them and their comfort was unmatched. Maddie had never seen a place so grand, yet cozy. She ran her hand along everything she saw, feeling the different textures and softness.

Every so often, she would sneak a peek at Rayn, hoping he wouldn't catch her. He was so handsome with his tawny skin and black hair.

Maddie's favorite place turned out to be the back terrace. There were sofas and chairs scattered around the fire pit, with blankets and throws in which one could cocoon themselves. But the view was unrivaled by anything she had ever seen. The terrace overlooked the mountains, and it faced west so one could sit by the fire and enjoy the beautiful sunset. The mountains seemed to be an arm's length away, and the vivid hues that danced around them at the day's end were majestic.

Rayn led her through the house, room by room. He showed her where everything she might need could be found. Then he took her into the kitchen once again and showed her where all the food and drinks were kept. About that time, Zanna and Peetar made an appearance, so Rayn introduced them to each other. They were smaller than the other Vesturions Maddie had seen. Grey haired with wrinkled up little faces, they were sharp minded and moved around as sprightly as little elves.

Their love for the Yarristers was obvious. They were proud of all the siblings, and Maddie felt like she had known them for years. Maddie took an immediate liking to them.

Rayn continued with his tour of the house for Maddie. On the lower level, there was a fully equipped gym with all sorts of cardio equipment and weight machines, as well as benches and racks of dumb bells. A flat screen TV was on the wall opposite from the treadmills and elliptical trainers, and there was an open area directly in front of it if one wanted to work out to a DVD. There was also a basketball court and an area where one could spar or kick box. After he had shown her the entire house, he took her back outside to explore the rest of the grounds. There was a massive garage that had contained ten stalls. At first, Maddie thought it was a barn, until Rayn took her inside. She couldn't stop the gasp that escaped from her lips.

Maddie could not believe her eyes. Inside the garage was literally a treasure trove of vehicles.

You've got to be kidding me, she thought.

There was enough car power in here to... well she didn't know exactly since she wasn't really a car aficionado, but she was smart enough to realize there was well over several million dollars worth of vehicles in here.

“Oh my God! Whose are these?” she asked.

“Well, admittedly, fast cars are our weakness. We do not use cars on Vesturon, so this is one of our true Earthly pleasures,” he said sheepishly.

“Okayyy... who drives what?” She could not imagine anyone driving one of these. “What are they anyway? They are definitely foreign made.”

“Um... well, we favor the Lamborghinis. I have the grayish Reventon over there, and Rykerian drives the black Murcielago. Sharra has the red Gallardo, and I gave her the red Ferrari. It was mine before I got the Reventon. The Mercedes SLS AMG belongs to Tesslar. Xarrid does not care much about the sports cars, so he usually drives the Range Rover or the Escalade. Therron could not care less about the cars, so he drives whatever is available. Therron is the motorcycle lover. We also have the Maybach Guard over there. My mother is especially fond of that; for some reason, she always thinks we are in eminent danger here.”

“What’s a Maybach Guard?”

“Oh, it is just an armored vehicle. Very safe, you know.”

Maddie couldn’t disguise her shock. “Does Sharra actually know how to drive one of those sports cars?”

“Well, yes,” he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Then realizing that most humans weren’t privileged enough to afford one of these, he added, “It is not that difficult really, and we all use the Speedsters over there,” he said, indicating a group of things that looked like motorcycles without wheels.

“Speedsters?” Maddie was wondering if she could take all of this in.

Rayn explained to her how the Speedsters worked and she did her best to try to understand. They were commonly used on Vesturon, and they hovered above the ground, like flying at extremely low altitudes. They went exceptionally fast, which made them great to move around town or anywhere else for that matter.

Then there were the real motorcycles—the Ducatis, the Hayabusa, the Aprilia, and the Ninja—which Rayn explained they loved to use. They handled much like Speedsters, but were more antiquated. These were not used on Vesturon either, which made them all the more fun for them to ride.

“Most of these are Therron’s babies. I guess you might say we all like to go fast!”

Maddie walked around the place and was checking out all the cars. She had just taken a long look at their Range Rover, which happened to be the latest model of course, when she stumbled across her next surprise. The Maybach was the ultimate in luxury. It had everything in it but the kitchen sink.

“Why would you even need something like this when you have your McFlurry machine? I mean, wouldn’t it be faster to use the McFlurry?”

Rayn laughed at her description of the teleporting device.

“Yes, that is true, but sometimes, there is great pleasure in driving these vehicles. And if we are doing something in town, where we need to make a showing as a family, it is nice to be able to travel together. And as I said, my mother insisted on the armor plating.”

“Aren’t some of these rare and difficult to get?” Maddie asked.

“Yes, but we have our connections.”

Maddie continued to look around, while Rayn explained that Rykerian was the car mechanic. He was an expert and could disassemble and reassemble the engines better than anyone. It was his true hobby that he enjoyed. Surprisingly enough, Sharra was the fast driver. She was the one who was always on the hunt for the fastest car. Maddie wondered if Sharra would give her a driving lesson. She thought it would be fun to drive one of those.

Reading her mind, Rayn said, “That would be something Sharra would love. She loves to play with her toys, and she would love to have someone to share these with.”

“How do you go around unnoticed? These cars are not exactly unobtrusive.”

“Remember, we veil ourselves. It also helps to prevent us from getting speeding tickets.”

“That’s pretty cool!”

“Care to go for a ride?” Rayn asked.

“I’d love to,” she said excitedly.

They hopped in the Reventon and headed down the mountain road. She felt like she was in a cockpit of a fighter jet. The buttery leather seats all but enfolded her, and their rich scent was like a heady perfume. The car was awesome, and Rayn drove it like a professional. He took the curves at extremely high speeds, but Maddie wasn’t a bit scared. Actually, she was having the time of her life. She rolled the windows down and loved the feel of the wind blowing her hair around. She was laughing and enjoying herself immensely when Rayn pulled off the side of the road and brought the car to a halt.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Hum... I was a bit distracted, you might say. I had to stop so that I could enjoy the scenery.”

Maddie looked at him, puzzled. He reached for her and cupped her face in his hand brushing her cheek with his thumb. Then he picked up a strand of her hair and let its silkiness slide through his fingers. “I could do this all day,” he said smiling, thinking she had never looked more radiant.

“Rayn, can you teach me how to drive this car?” she wondered aloud.

That took him by surprise. He didn’t take her for someone who would have the slightest interest in driving a sports car. But then again, who could blame her? Who wouldn’t want to drive one of these?

“Of course. We must trade seats.”

After the switch, he proceeded to try to explain how to shift the gears while depressing the clutch and using the gas pedal, all at the same time.

“Remember, the clutch has to be depressed in order for you to change gears. When you release the clutch, you need to give it some gas. Are you ready to try?”

“Here goes nothing,” she replied.

Maddie released the clutch and started to give it gas, and whump... she stalled out.

“Do not worry; it takes a little time to get used to it. Try again.”

An hour and a half and nearly a tankful of gas later, they had travelled about one hundred feet. Mercifully, throughout it all, Rayn had exhibited the patience of a saint, and it was then he realized he honestly loved her. Otherwise, he would have strangled her. She could not get the car to go. He tried and tried to instruct her, and she listened. Still, every time, the car would shudder and stall.

“And... that concludes our lesson for today. You’d best move over so that I can drive us home before we run out of gas. We are almost on empty now.” He had peeked at the gas gauge and was concerned to see that.

“Okayyy. Good grief, I cannot believe I couldn’t get this thing to go. I didn’t think it would be this hard,” she groaned.

“Er... it usually is not that difficult. Maybe we can get Sharra to teach you. She might be a better teacher than I.”

“You think so?” she asked hopefully.

Rayn nodded, but he honestly didn’t know if anyone would be able to teach her. She just couldn’t seem to be able to connect the dots, like her coordination was off kilter.

Maddie disrupted his thoughts. “I hope this doesn’t turn out like dancing.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, his curiosity peaked.

“Oh... I can’t dance... at all. My roommate would make fun of me all the time. I’m really bad on the dance floor. I mean ridiculously bad. My mother prayed nightly that I would develop some rhythm when I grew older, but I’m afraid I never did,” she openly confessed.

“That does not compute, Maddie. You appear so graceful and elegant.”

“Seriously? You need to get your eyes checked! I am not even the tiniest bit graceful. But it’s true. I can show you if you want,” she said with a devilish grin.

Rayn had gotten out of the car so they could switch sides again. Instead of getting back in, though, he helped Maddie out and turned up the music. “Show me.”

Maddie started twisting and turning and shaking and bouncing, and she did this thing with her arms that was... well, quite odd. Rayn tried his best not to laugh, but before he could stop himself, he found himself caught up in uncontrollable laughter. Maddie just kept at it, doing

something weird with her feet and legs too, kicking them out at odd angles. It was a wonder her ankles didn't snap.

In reality, she was enjoying the attention. She was not the least bit insulted because she knew for a fact she looked like a total dweeb.

Quite frankly, Rayn had seen nothing like it in his many years.

"Stop! This is atrocious!" Rayn was finally able to calm himself down. "Goodness, Maddie, you haven't any rhythm... none. I simply do not understand how that can be!"

"I told you so! I am awful. I must admit I do get a bit carried away with it though. I actually like dancing, but it's just too painful for anyone to have to watch. The bad thing is... if you think I stink at dancing, you ought to hear me sing."

"That bad?" He truly couldn't imagine anything that could rival the contortions he had just witnessed.

"Awful... hideously awful. I totally suck. Wanna hear?"

"NO... between your driving and dancing, I think I have had more than enough. I would like to do this though." He took her in his arms and gently kissed her. He pulled his lips away from hers and whispered, "Thankfully, your lack of coordination has not affected your ability to kiss!"

They both hopped in the car, and Maddie turned up the radio even louder.

Unfortunately for Rayn, "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" came on, and she started blasting out her very own rendition of it.

Rayn was horrified. He fully expected his windshield to shatter at any moment.

How is it possible that someone with the voice of an angel can sing so terribly?

She was certainly a mystery to him, and he was glad of it. He could tell there would never be a dull moment with her around.

Chapter 14

By the time they returned home, the sun was sinking toward the horizon. They could smell the mouth-watering aromas coming out of the kitchen as they passed through. Zanna was hard at work getting dinner ready for them, and they realized they hadn't eaten for some time. They went in search of the others to catch up with them before the big meal.

Rayn and Maddie found the men in the billiard room, shooting a game of pool. They looked up and immediately came to attention.

"How about some re-introductions?" Rayn asked, smiling. "The first time was a bit rough around the edges."

Each of them came forward and presented themselves to her. Therron came first and gave her quick peck on the cheek.

Then Rykerian stepped forward and Rayn said, "Maddie, this is my brother Rykerian. Rykerian... Maddie."

Rykerian took Maddie's hand, bowed down and placed his lips upon it. "It is a great pleasure and honor to meet you, Maddie," Rykerian stated.

When he stood up to his full 6 feet 5 inches, Maddie couldn't hide her surprise, as his looks startled her as much as his formal greeting. He was beautiful, disturbingly so. Impeccably attired in designer clothing, he could pass for a model in one of those men's magazines. His pants were Dolce and Gabbana, and his cashmere sweater was Prada, as were his shoes. Where Rayn was dark haired, Rykerian was... well, his hair color simply defied words.

What color was that anyway?

It had hints of gold, blond, copper and brown. It was impeccably styled, with the exception of his braid hanging over his shoulder. Now she understood the comment Rayn had made about how Rykerian despised the braid. It did not fit with the rest of his style.

His eyes... those almond shaped baby blues... were nothing short of astounding. Clear blue with irises rimmed in indigo, they were beyond words. Surely hearts were broken everywhere this man went.

When Maddie noticed the corners of his mouth turn up, she knew he'd read her mind. A quick glance at Rayn confirmed her worst fears. They all had read her mind and knew what she thought of Rykerian!

"You all are *so* not right! That is *so* not fair! I can't keep anything to myself."

With a disarming grin, Rykerian said, "Rayn, I can see her temperament matches her hair."

"Maddie, do not distress yourself. Rykerian has that effect on everyone. And yes, you are correct, he has most certainly broken hearts all over this universe," Rayn piped in, laughing.

“Around here we usually call him 5th Avenue or Rodeo Drive. Back on Vesturon, he is known as the Glamour Prince!”

“I’ll certainly have to remember that. Forgive me my poor manners, Mr. 5th Avenue, but it’s a pleasure, an *embarrassing* pleasure, to meet you as well.”

She turned back to Rayn and punched him as hard as she could in the chest. Of course, that was like a gnat trying to take down a giant.

“Ow! Whatever was that for?” he asked, grabbing her fist and pulling her into him.

“For not warning me about his looks. What is it with you all?” she retorted.

“It is through no fault of ours the looks that have been bestowed upon us. You will have to ask that of our parents,” Rykerian responded. “And it is simply 5th Avenue, not ‘Mr.’ 5th Avenue.”

“Yeesh! Whatever... am I to assume you are Tesslar?” she said as she turned to the third person in the room.

“That would be correct, my lady. It is with great pleasure and honor that I make your acquaintance, and I greatly look forward to having you as my... sister.” He also bowed and kissed Maddie’s hand.

Wow... this one is truly Mr. Manners!

“The pleasure and honor are mine Tesslar. And on a more serious note, I would like to thank each of you for... well, for coming to my rescue. I owe you all...”

Tessler interrupted, “Never fear, sister. We will let you pay us back! We never forget a favor, especially one of that magnitude!”

“Looks like we have another comedian in our midst. Rayn, why did you never tell me?” Maddie liked this family more and more every minute.

“Because I try to forget it every day!” Rayn dryly commented.

“Well, I can see why. And before you even try to read my mind, I’ll just tell you right now that yes... you are extremely handsome too, Tesslar... with your lovely hair and eyes... but that’s all I’m going to say. I can sense you’re a troublemaker, so I’ll have to watch myself around you!” Maddie was enjoying herself immensely, being the center of attention with these males.

Tessler was dark haired like Rayn but had Rykerian’s startlingly blue eyes. He was built similarly to Rayn, but slightly slimmer and not as well defined muscularly. He, like the others, was astonishingly handsome, and his smile lit up the room. He had a devilish appearance to him, as if any moment he would spring a trick on you. Maddie knew she would have to be on her guard with this one. His appearance was more like Therron’s than the others—a bit disheveled with a carelessness about him. The four of them most assuredly made an impressive showing.

“My lady, my handsome appearance is surely overshadowed by your incomparable beauty. With one word from your lovely lips, this gallant male would die happy at your feet.”

“Oh, stop. You are killing me,” Maddie grabbed her sides, laughter bubbling out of her. “You all are so full of it. Rayn, you should have told me to wear my boots.”

That comment brought out a room full of puzzled expressions.

“What does that mean? ‘Full of it?’ And why would you need boots?”

“You know... the you-know-what is getting deep in here. Get it?”

“No.”

Their looks demanded an explanation. After several attempts, Maddie gave up and said, “It’s a human expression.”

“Ahh,” they all said.

Rayn, Therron, and Rykerian were all leaning against the pool table, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles with their arms crossed over their muscled chests. They looked perfectly at ease, but their presence was most impressive.

Tessler continued with his banter, “We are thrilled our brother has chosen his female so wisely—one who is quick of wit, yet fiery of spirit. And we too, are eager for your mating, so our dear Rayn will quit wearing out all of the rugs in our humble abode!”

The thunderous laughter that erupted nearly shook the stone walls.

All the brothers gathered around Rayn, slapping him on the back. Although Maddie was shocked by this comment, she found it difficult to keep a straight face. She’d never had any siblings, so this was a fascinating new experience for her.

She looked up to see Rykerian watching her with an odd expression on his face. He realized she had caught it and quickly glanced away. She could have sworn he actually blushed. It puzzled her for a minute, but she didn’t have time to think much about it because, at that moment, Sharra decided to make her entry.

Maddie looked at Sharra and the other siblings. She could see the resemblance in each of them. Though they each looked different, they all shared common characteristics—eye color, hair color, height, facial features—and every one of them was unimaginably beautiful.

Sharra was no exception. Tall, like her brothers, she was every bit as commanding as they were. Her eyes were sparkling baby blue like Rykerian’s, and her hair was a satiny curtain of midnight black that hung past her waist. Her beauty was exceptional. She had high cheekbones and a perfectly straight nose, delicately arched brows and huge almond shaped eyes that were surrounded by lush black lashes. When she smiled, she revealed a perfect set of startlingly white teeth. She was slender but exuded a strength that couldn’t be mistaken. This girl was not someone to be taken lightly.

Maddie caught Rayn looking her way, and the corners of his lips turned up. Her first thought was how handsome he was, with his beautiful eyes, hair and that body—no, not just

handsome. He was drop-dead gorgeous. He was in the midst of this stunning family, but he somehow rose above each and every one of them. He saturated the room with his presence and left no doubt about who the leader was here.

When his face beamed back at her, she knew he had read her mind. She winked at him, and he let out a bark of laughter. He ambled to over to Maddie and placed his arm around her.

“Hello, my sister,” Rayn said to Sharra.

“Hello, and hello again, Maddie. I am glad the clothing worked so well for you. What is happening down here?”

Maddie replied, “Oh, I am being entertained by your brothers. Some of them think they are comedians.”

“Oh, yes, but do not let them fool you. They are only funny unto themselves,” Sharra informed her.

“No worries there... already got that figured out.”

Sharra looked at Rayn and noticed the smug expression he was wearing. “Why, Rayn, it appears you are resembling the animal that ate the bird,” Sharra said.

Everyone looked at her with puzzled expressions. “What I meant was, you look to be as if you swallowed a bird.”

Maddie looked at Rayn, and Rayn shrugged.

Tessler interjected, “Sharra, what on Vesturon are you talking about?”

“Well, you know, it is a human saying.”

“No, we don’t know. Maybe Maddie can help.”

“No clue,” Maddie said.

“Well, what I meant was that Rayn is looking very proud of himself presently.”

A giggle escaped from Maddie, because she had figured out where this was going. Everyone looked at her expectantly.

“I think Sharra meant to say that Rayn looked like the *cat that swallowed the canary!*”

“Yes, that is what I said,” Sharra agreed.

Therron said, “No, that is not what you said. Sharra, you must stop trying to use human slang. It does not work, and we never know what you are trying to say.”

“Do not overly concern yourself, Therron, because now we have Maddie to help,” Sharra explained.

She was given a collective sigh from everyone present.

Then everyone said, "Good luck with that, Maddie."

"Rayn, I was wondering if you have seen Xarrid? I cannot locate him," Sharra wondered.

"Yes, listen everyone." Maddie felt Rayn tense up as he spoke. "Xarrid will be away a lot. He is not in favor of my actions... with Maddie. He believes I am betraying the family. I have tried to explain how things are between Maddie and myself, but he is just not giving in on this. So... he said he was going to remain on patrol. If you need him, you will have to project telepathically. I am truly sorry about all of this," Rayn stated.

Sharra put her hand on Rayn's arm and kindly said, "Do not worry about him, Rayn. He will come around. Xarrid can be difficult when he sets his mind to something, but he is our brother and loyal to the end. He will eventually see the way of things."

"Thanks, Shar... and I do hope you are right."

To lighten the mood again, Tesslar asked, "Would anyone care to play pool?"

Rayn, Maddie, Sharra, and Tesslar decided to play a game of eight ball. Tesslar went first, followed by Maddie. She took great pains to carefully aim, but when her stick hit the cue ball, the contact was so off kilter, the ball jumped off the table and ricocheted off a chair and ended up hitting Rykerian in the knee. All eyes were on her as she turned various shades of red.

"Oh my gosh, I am so sorry. I've never done that before. Did I hurt you?" she asked Rykerian.

"Hardly! It is ok. I am more concerned for the table," he retorted sarcastically.

"Is the table ok?" Maddie inquired.

Rayn said Rykerian was just kidding and everyone had a laugh. All in all, the game was a disaster. Maddie knocked several more balls off the table, poked three of the men with her stick and concluded the game with slinging her pool stick and breaking two glasses. They finally declared the pool table was off limits to her, for safety reasons. She was only allowed to play video games, but it was still undecided if she would be allowed to play Wii.

Shortly afterward, Zanna called everyone in to dinner. It was a delicious meal and pretty uneventful except for Maddie's accidents. She initially spilled her water on herself, but then, when she was cutting her steak, somehow her knife slipped and her piece of meat flew off her plate and landed in Rykerian's lap on his new Dolce & Gabbana khaki colored pants. She was horrified.

She jumped up and ran toward Rykerian with her napkin, intending to help him clean his pants. When Rykerian saw her intentions, he feared she would just make things worse, so he quickly stood up and knocked his glass of red wine on his cashmere sweater, adding to the disaster.

"Um... yes, I will just go up and change. I will be back momentarily," Rykerian exclaimed as he hurried out of the room. Maddie again thought his face appeared as if he were blushing.

"Maddie, are you always this accident prone?" Sharra wondered aloud.

“Oh, well, it depends on what I am doing. If it is anything related to sports, I am ok. Well, except for pool! Other than that, I am a mess. My mother tried to teach me how to be more... um... refined I guess. One time she made me walk around the house with a giant book on my head so that I would learn to walk gracefully. Do you all do that?” At their puzzled looks, she continued, “No... I didn’t think so. Anyway, the book was a huge, and it ended up falling off my head and landing on her big toe and breaking it. She had to wear one of those big black boots for a long time. The next time we did that, she wore big steel-toed shoes to protect herself.”

“You are a mystery, Maddie. You appear to have such grace on the one hand, but on the other hand, you are like a cow in a glass store,” Sharra said.

Now everyone looked puzzled. Suddenly, it dawned on Maddie what Sharra was trying to say and she let out a huge bubble of laughter. “I think you mean a bull in a China shop.”

“Yes, well, that too,” Sharra replied.

Everyone agreed at the end of the dinner that henceforth, they would all wear bibs for protection from Maddie. Maddie was still horrified over the accidents. All of the members of the Yarrister family had impeccable table manners, and in just a short period of time, she had managed to disrupt the entire meal, leaving stains everywhere. She promised herself she would be much more careful in the future.

Chapter 15

Two hikers sat at Charlie's Bunion eating lunch. The Bunion was a favorite place for day hikers as it afforded one of the most rewarding views in the Smoky Mountains. It was a short spur off the Appalachian Trail, but it was a nice out-and-back hike from the Newfound Gap parking lot.

Charlie's Bunion was such a popular destination that in the warmer months you had better get there early if you wanted a place to sit for lunch. The Bunion was actually a huge outcropping of rock that jettied out from a precipice. The scenery from that observation point was a stunning view of Mt. LeConte, one of the highest peaks east of the Mississippi.

The two hikers had the Bunion all to themselves that day. It was springtime, but it was a weekday. Therefore, the place was blissfully empty. It was one of those awesome days when the temperature was an ideal 72 degrees and the sky was azure blue, or Carolina blue, as the locals would say.

Unexpectedly, an orb of light arced through the sky and headed straight toward the hikers. When it was close enough for them to touch, it elongated and took the form of a man.

He was dressed in black from the knee-high boots he wore to the hooded cape that hid his face. The hikers were awestruck, as they had never seen anything like it before. They were shocked into silence and stared at the man as he took a small device from his belt and pointed it directly at them. They heard him say one word, "Annihilate," and were then silenced forever.

The unknown man squatted down and watched as the two humans were vaporized and turned to dust. He thought about how unfortunate for them that they had chosen this particular place to hike that day. His thoughts quickly turned to the reason he was there.

It had been many years since last he visited these mountains. It was a time in his life that he had pushed to the far recesses of his mind. He never liked thinking about it, but standing on that mountain brought back memories of that time he had chosen to forget. It was a time when he had gone rogue and roamed the wilderness for several years. He remained rogue until his best friend came and convinced him to return home to his family and his duties.

He had done some heinous things then, but he never felt remorseful about it. He had returned to Vesturon and was reinstated as a Guardian, through much persuasion by his friend. He never grew fond of his wife, though he played the part well. His daughter was another matter altogether. He loved her beyond measure. She meant the universe to him, and he would stop at nothing to see that she attained her heart's desires. She knew nothing of his background, and he meant to keep it that way. He didn't want to destroy the esteem in which she held him.

He sat lost in his thoughts until he felt an electric current travel the length of his neck. Moments later, he felt his first premonition of evil. The evil became so oppressive he felt the urge to stand. He didn't fear this evil; he was surprised, however, by the intensity of it. Minutes passed by, and then he caught his first glimpse of the one who possessed this malevolent aura. It was a hunter.

The black cloaked figure was a bit astonished by the presence of a hunter in a national park. It was illegal to hunt here. He knew him for what he was though by his camouflaged clothing and the primitive crossbow he wore slung across his back. He reached into the hunter's mind and encountered something so depraved and vile that he shuddered.

Then a smile spread across his face, for he had unknowingly stumbled upon exactly what he sought after so fiercely. This was the answer he had hoped to find, and to think, it had been so easy.

He needed a way to get rid of the human that had invaded the First Born's life. He could manipulate the hunter's mind, pay him a few dollars, and the human problem could be removed. The depravity that the hunter emitted left no doubt he would be willing and able to do the task.

Now he needed to find a way to lure the human out of the security blanket of the Guardian compound. He would use his connections back home to take care of that problem. Surely there was someone in the Command Center that could be bribed. If bribery didn't work, threats were equally as effective.

The cloaked figure leaped off his vantage point and intersected the travel of the hunter. The hunter displayed an element of surprise, but that was quickly tempered and he fell under the power of the cloaked man.

Plans were laid out and contact points were made. The beginning of the end was near.

Chapter 16

Maddie and Rayn were out trail running. More aptly put, Maddie was running and Rayn was going along at a leisurely pace, watching her. Maddie was getting back into marathon form. Running had always been her favorite form of exercise, and she was fiercely competitive. As a high school student, she ran cross-country in the fall and played soccer in the spring. Each sport complemented the other and in both off seasons, she found herself competing in local road races. She had completed two marathons and had hoped to run more.

After her abduction and consequent injuries, she had obviously not been able to perform any sort of activities, much less running, but upon her return from Vesturon, she had slowly been increasing her time and distance. She had always been an avid trail runner, and the setting of Rayn's home made it a perfect place for her favorite pastime. She had also been spending a good bit of time in the gym with both Rayn and Sharra.

They had all fallen into a comfortable routine with each other. The three of them would plan to work out each day, usually together. If Rayn had things he needed to attend to, Sharra was always there to keep Maddie company. Rayn had intentionally designed it this way. He wanted Maddie to enjoy her time at their home, and he was concerned about her getting bored and restless. He also was delighted with the relationship that had developed between Maddie and Sharra.

Rayn enjoyed accompanying her on the outings. He could easily keep up with her—actually, he could outdistance her in no time—and it gave him an opportunity to check things out on the property. He had decided that Maddie could not go out alone. He was still concerned that her abductor was on the loose, and even though their property was veiled, they sometimes left the area.

Rayn was not into taking any chances where Maddie's safety could be at stake. His orders were that she would never run alone. If he couldn't accompany her, one of the others would. Sharra would usually jump at the chance. Since the two females had become fast friends, they loved to be in each other's company, as they each filled a need in each other's life.

It was a particularly warm, beautiful spring day when Maddie and Rayn were finishing a fifteen miler. They had looped around so they could finish at the mountain top—their favorite setting. Maddie was slurping water out of her Camelbak, and Rayn was pulling some snacks out of his. He had finished drinking and was unwrapping a Luna bar for Maddie when a troubled look passed over his face. Maddie had snatched the bar from him and was taking a bite out of it when she noticed his look.

“Rayn, what is it?” she asked, still slightly breathless from the run.

“He's here,” he acidly replied.

“Who's here?” Maddie was puzzled by his quick change in mood.

“My father.”

“He's here? Right now? On Earth?”

“Oh, yes, he is here alright,” Rayn said bitterly.

“At the house? How do you know?” she questioned, still bewildered.

“Oh, I know. Believe me. I can feel his presence. He knows I know too. I am sure he thinks I will be dashing right home.”

“Don’t you think we should?”

“No, absolutely not. He has played with me, with us, too long. I am not falling for that game of his. We will go home when we are good and ready. I am already getting mental strikes from everyone. Do you need something else to eat?”

“No, I’m good. I sure wish I were more presentable for him. I look a wreck and smell even worse,” she worried. Maddie grabbed her ponytail and started fidgeting.

“You have never looked better in my eyes. Your eyes are still sparkling from your run, your cheeks are flushed, your hair is magnificent when it is all disheveled like it is now, and those shorts... um... well they show off your lovely legs quite nicely. I am more crazy about you now than ever,” he said grinning.

“What do you think your father will say?” she asked, blushing.

“It is not what I think... but what I know. He will berate me for my poor judgment, tell me I am a fool... blah, blah, blah.”

“Rayn, you’re talking more and more like an American! You’ve gotten the lingo down pretty well.”

“My love, you have rubbed off on me.” He let his fingers trail along from her ear, down her neck to the hollow at the base of her throat, where he leaned down to place a soft kiss.

“Eww... you might not want to do that... I’m pretty nasty right now.”

“Babe, you are never nasty.”

“Babe, huh? I think you’ve been watching too many movies! Eau contrare, though! You are just blinded by love.”

“I cannot deny that, for it is the truth.”

He leaned into her and grabbed her by ponytail and pulled her head back, shocking her. Then he went for her lips. His eyes were burning into hers, startling her with their intensity. He kissed her passionately.

“Maddie, whatever happens, we will be together... some way, somehow. I am going back to Vesturon... either today or tomorrow. I will not have a choice, but I will do everything in my power to get back here as soon as I can. I am not saying it will be easy or quick. But as the Divine Being is my witness, I promise you we will be together.”

“I know we will, Rayn. I feel as if we are a part of each other.”

“I am going to pledge my protection to you today, in front of everyone. Remember?”

“You’re kidding, right? What do you mean ‘remember’? How could I forget?”

They remained up on the mountain for several hours. Maddie waded into the nearby stream with the intention of taking an abbreviated bath, but the water was so cold she couldn’t bear it.

Rayn laughed, “What did you think it would feel like? You are up in the mountains, and it is early June. That water is not much warmer in August.” He was thoroughly enjoying himself watching her antics in the water.

She splashed around a bit and tried to get used to the icy feel of the water, to no avail. After her unsuccessful attempts at bathing, she decided she’d better get out of the stream, but unfortunately, her foot slipped on a moss covered rock and she tumbled into the water, landing on her backside, sputtering. She quickly tried to leap to her feet but again, they slipped on the moss-covered rocks, sending her straight back into the water.

By this time, Rayn was howling with laughter and decided he’d better lend her a hand. He reached for her and when she took his hand, she gave it a hard tug and he ended up in the water next to her. Now it was her turn to laugh. They both splashed around until they started to shiver.

They were still laughing and shivering when Rayn mentioned that it was probably a good idea to head back to the house.

“We will go upstairs and bathe before I present you to my father. What he needs to say to us can wait. He has waited this long to come here; another hour will not kill him. Besides, I want to aggravate him a bit more.”

“Do you think that’s wise?” she inquired with doubt.

“I care not if it is wise. I only wish to be difficult as I am sure he will be in return,” he retorted.

Chapter 17

When Maddie and Rayn arrived at the house, he leaned into her and enfolded her in his arms.

“I feel like we are heading toward the wolves.”

“I think the saying is ‘being fed to the wolves’.” She grinned.

“Yes... you are correct.” He quickly kissed her, grabbed her hand and didn’t wait for her response as he led her up the stairs and to their fate.

As soon as they entered the house, Rayn pulled Maddie straight toward the massive staircase. A deep booming voice cut them off.

“Are you not going to greet your father?”

They both turned.

“Hello, Father, what a surprise,” Rayn replied, dripping sarcasm.

“Are you not going to introduce me?” he asked imposingly.

Rayn complied. “But, of course. Father, this is Madeline Mariah Pearce, but you may call her Maddie. Maddie this is my father, Rowan, the Great Leader of Vesturon.”

Maddie looked up and her eyes beheld an exact replica of the man with whom she was in love... however, with two notable exceptions. Like Rayn, Rowan was tall and powerfully built, and exceedingly handsome with that same thick black wavy hair. That is where the similarities ended. Unlike Rayn, Rowan was a few decades older and his stunning green eyes were not filled with warmth. Instead, they were like chips of ice and coldly focused on Maddie. She understood how he could certainly command, or rather *demand*, one’s attention.

Rowan was dressed in the traditional Vesturion robes, much like the one of Rayn’s that Maddie had borrowed. The only differences were Rowan’s robe was white, and it bore gold braiding over his shoulders. Across his hips he wore a gold belt that was embossed with symbols that Maddie correctly assumed were the insignia of the Great Leader of Vesturon. Maddie could understand how he could effectively play his role as Leader, given the authoritative figure he presented.

“Wow... you two look exactly alike! Amazing!” Maddie extending her hand said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Yarrister.”

Rayn gasped at her address. He had forgotten to apprise her of the proper way to address his father.

Rowan firmly grasped her hand and drew her toward him. He lifted her chin and inspected her from all angles, his eyes boring into hers. To Maddie’s credit, she didn’t back down and held his gaze though she felt like a piece of livestock.

“Hum... so you are the one who has stolen my son from me?” he asked in a domineering manner.

“Oh, for the love of the Deity, Father, would you stop trying to intimidate her?” Rayn demanded.

Maddie put her hand on Rayn’s arm to interrupt him. With fire in her eyes she boldly said, “It’s ok, Rayn.”

To Rowan, she continued, “You sir, may think you know me, but you do not. Therefore, I would be hesitant to assume much. Intimidation only works on the weak, and I can assure you, I am not weak... of mind, body or spirit.”

“Touche, female. Now leave us!” he demanded.

“Father... enough,” Rayn interjected exasperatingly. “Like it or not, Maddie is a female of worth, and you will address her accordingly, with respect, without intimidation and by her name. Is that understood?”

“As your Leader, I expect the same,” Rowan retorted. Rayn understood he was being chided him for not instructing Maddie on the proper way to address his father. “Madeline Pearce, leave us... please,” he grudgingly eked out.

“As you wish, sir.” Turning to Rayn she winked and had good intentions of kissing him. Instead, her toe caught on the corner of a chair, she tripped and went tumbling into Rayn, head first. The unexpected movement caught him unawares, and the momentum of her body weight propelled them both to the floor with her landing directly on top of him. Rayn took advantage of the situation and kissed her directly on the mouth as she put her hands on his chest. The kiss shocked her into motionlessness, so Rayn continued to explore her lips at his leisure. Maddie was soon as lost in the fire of his kiss, as was Rayn, until they heard Rowan clearing his throat.

“If you two could possibly tear yourselves apart from each other, I would love to have a private word with my son,” Rowan said drolly.

Maddie rolled to her side, allowing Rayn to stand. He reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet.

“Well, that was fun, my love, but you really should be more careful,” Rayn said, laughing.

“I’m sorry... you know me... I always seem to do the wrong thing at the wrong time,” she said, her face on fire with embarrassment.

“Oh, I do not know... I did not see anything at all wrong with what you just did! As a matter of fact, I quite enjoyed it!”

She snuck a sideways glance at him, and she giggled as she skipped out of the room.

“That is an interesting choice of females you have, Rayn.”

“Careful, Father, you are treading on thin ice here. Maddie and I are connected, and we intend to be together. I have broken no law in bringing her to Vesturon to have her paralysis cured.”

“BROKEN NO LAW? How dare you make so light of your actions!” he roared back.

Rayn, his face twisted with anger, shot back, “And what would you have done had it been Mother laying on her back, unable to walk? Would you have allowed her to waste away?”

“DO NOT distort your actions. YOU BROKE THE MOST SACRED OF LAWS between Earthlings and Vesturions. This is not a matter of—oh, it does not matter, because it was for a good cause. You are a Leader of the Guardians, my First Born with rights to inherit the kingdom AND YOU BREAK OUR LAWS! That is an unforgivable offense. And you have the nerve, the audacity, to show anger toward *me*. Your insolence is quite appalling.” Rowan was now shaking with anger. He was still shocked and dismayed at the behavior of his first born son, who had until this point, shown the utmost ability to make sound decisions.

Rayn, blood boiling, stubbornly fought back, “You have no idea what you are saying. There is much more to all of this than you know. I will ask you though, you and Mother were initially denied the ability to unite, am I correct? Did you not do everything possible to change that? Would you not have walked through fire for her? Would you not still walk through fire for her?”

“You know the answers to those questions. Your mother is the very reason I breathe. Without her, I am... nothing. However, “he added softly, “there is so much more to this. Your mother was of Vesturion blood. Your female Madeline is not. You know what the Council will say to that. It is strictly forbidden. I am sorry, my son, but it cannot be. Do... you... not... understand... this?” he brokenly asked. Rowan’s pain and anguish radiated from him.

“I am sorry, too, Father. I conferred with the Divine Being over this. I agonized over my confusion, my indecision. I finally sought the advice of the Deity, and in my quest for answers, I discovered through Him that Maddie is my destiny. We are connected—mind, body and spirit. She holds the key to my heart and soul... my life. Not a minute passes without her in my thoughts. And, Father, she is truly a brave soldier and a worthy mate. It is I who may not be worthy of her. But I am sure of this: my life is worth nothing without her, so if we cannot be as one, I willingly renounce my birthright and leadership,” Rayn said with deep sadness and regret as he raked his hand through his hair.

Rowan sighed deeply and dropped his head into his hands.

“Rayn, it is not that simple. You must return to Vesturon to report your actions and await trial with the Council. I am to bring you home without delay.” He leaned toward Rayn, placing his hand on Rayn’s arm. “My son, you must understand. I cannot support you in your actions; as a Leader, it is always the people and duty that come first. I regret to inform you that we must return home now. I am sorry for this, but there is nothing to be done for it. I think you need to prepare yourself for your return, and, Rayn, in all likelihood you will not be returning to Earth. I just pray the Council does not exile you to some distant quadrant of the universe.”

Rowan paused and looked into the face of his son before continuing, “I will assume you would like to go to your quarters and inform the young female of your plans. I need to speak to your brothers and sister while you are gone.”

Rayn spun on his heel and abruptly left the room. He was beyond angry. He was unfathomably furious. He entered his bedroom as Maddie exited the bathroom. When she saw the cruel twist of his mouth, she knew it did not bode well for them.

“Oh, Rayn... he was unrelenting, wasn't he?” Without waiting for a reply, she gushed forth, “I shouldn't have behaved in such a bold manner with him. I'm sure I didn't score you any brownie points, and I most likely have made him resent me.”

“Maddie, you could have thrown a punch at him and cursed at him, and the outcome would have been the same. I thought I could appeal to his sentimental side and his relationship with my mother. You know, I do not know if I have told you, but they started out like us. They had to get permission to unite. Anyway, it matters not. He is bound to his duty. And... I guess I cannot blame him for that. It is what he is supposed to be. Maybe I was never cut out for the role of Leader of Vesturon. I think my heart would rule over my mind sometimes.”

He began gathering some of his belongings to take with him.

“But, Rayn,” she countered, “that's exactly what would make you a great Leader. There are some decisions that HAVE to include the heart... and not just the mind. And... that's just one of the many things that attracted me to you.

“I am to return to Vesturon shortly with my father. He sent me up here to prepare myself for my return home and to tell you good-bye, of course. He also said it is unlikely that I will be returning to Earth. I really did not see this coming. I mean... I knew it was a possibility, but I felt so sure of the fact that I could persuade him otherwise.”

Maddie took a step back, placed her hand on his arms, looked him in the eyes and insisted, “Rayn, you listen to me... and listen good. This is not the end for us. I will not accept that and neither should you. You are a strong powerful man who is extremely influential, and you must use that to get what you want. You are going to have to dig deep and find a way. Do you understand me? I refuse... do you hear me... I refuse to settle for anything less. Where there's a will, there's a way, and it ain't over 'til the fat lady sings. You got it?”

“Yes... I understood the first part, but I am not sure of that bit about the fat lady.” He really did look confused.

“Oh, for the love of God, Rayn... it's only a saying we use on Earth. Forget it. Just get it into your head that come hell or high water, we WILL find a way to be together. I don't care if we have to rob, steal or kill!”

“What! What are you saying? We cannot kill anyone, no matter what!” he was now honestly shocked that she would even think such a thing.

“I can't help myself. I keep forgetting and using American jargon. Never mind all that. I'm not going to kill anyone, but my point is we are not stopping at anything. You and I are smart, willful people, and we are going to tap into every resource we have to survive this and be together. Got it?”

By this time, her hands were biting into Rayn's arms. He glanced down at them, and she followed his looks and realized she was putting the death squeeze on them.

“Oh gosh... sorry... sorry about that. I got a little carried away.”

She released his arms, but he blurted out, “Don’t release me. Don’t let my arms go. I can feel your strength flowing into me, and I need that right now.”

She took hold of his arms again and said, “Rayn, lean on me now. That’s what I’m here for, and God knows I’ve leaned on you enough. I promise you this. I will be here for you waiting, for as long as this takes, and we will be together. Even if we are old and gray, we’ll be together.” She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek.

“I think you are one amazing female, Madeline Pearce. I apologize for acting so weak, but your strength gives me courage and hope in us. Thank you for being here for me when I need you,” he responded.

“Now let’s get you packed and ready to go.”

They filled a large duffle bag with everything Rayn thought he would need for his trip home. Funny thing though, now he felt like his home was where Maddie was. And Vesturon, the place that he always held so dear to his heart, just didn’t hold that attraction for him anymore. He wondered if its beauty would still hold his heart as it did in the past. Somehow, he didn’t think so. He knew that the only place that would fill him with content would be wherever Maddie was.

They walked down the stairs, arm in arm, and met up with the rest of the family in the den. It was at that moment that Rayn made his pledge to Maddie with all of his siblings, minus Xarrid, as witnesses. They, in turn, promised the couple their support and protection at all costs.

If Rowan was shocked, he held it in check and did not utter a word.

Rayn turned to Maddie and walked her to the opposite side of the room. He whispered to her that she would be safe with his family, as they had made that promise. He would try to communicate with her often, but he didn’t think the Council would allow him to contact her any time soon. He wanted her to be optimistic about their situation and he would do everything in his power to return to her quickly.

Maddie maintained her composure; she had made up her mind she would present a strong front for Rayn and would not allow Rowan a view of any kind of weakness.

Although he would not say it, the family could tell he was much impressed with Maddie’s behavior. Maddie walked over to Rowan with an outstretched hand, ready to bid him farewell. As luck would have it, her toe caught on the corner of the chair she had tripped on earlier. Rowan took the full body impact of her and landed on his backside, with Maddie on top of him.

“Do you always make a habit of tripping on things, young female?” he asked sardonically.

Maddie struggled to stand but only succeeded in getting herself tangled up in his robes. Her attempts to be free actually ended up imprisoning Rowan’s arms, rendering him incapable of any movement to disentangle Maddie from within his robes. Her arms and legs were flailing around, and she was inadvertently kicking and hitting Rowan in her attempts to free herself.

Suddenly, the room was filled with thundering guffaws from all the Yarristers who were witnessing this escapade. Maddie looked like a fish flopping on the sand in an attempt to return to the water while Rowan lay helpless, taking the brunt of her flops.

“Stop!” Rowan said in a thunderous voice. “Are you trying to maim me?”

Rayn eventually extracted Maddie from the tangled robes, and she buried her flaming face in his chest.

“I cannot believe that just happened!” Maddie blurted out.

“How do you think I feel? I am the one who will be suffering from bruises for a week!” Rowan declared.

Therron reached down lending a hand to his father, pulling him to his feet.

“Rayn, can you put me down?” Maddie whispered in his ear.

“I am afraid to. Let me make sure no one else is close enough to get injured.”

Everyone in the room was still laughing hysterically, while Maddie’s face continued to burn with embarrassment.

“Mr. Yarrister, I am so sorry. I did not mean to injure you. Are you ok?” Maddie asked Rowan.

“Not to steal your own words, but it takes a lot more than an intimidating female to injure me,” he retorted.

“Touche,” Maddie returned with a smile.

That brought even more laughter into the room.

“At least you didn’t have to share a meal at the dinner table with her, Father. You would have returned to Mother tattered and stained,” Rykerian added dryly.

At Rowan’s raised eyebrows, the entire room exclaimed, “Don’t ask!”

“Well, Father, I hope you enjoyed meeting, Maddie. As you can see, there is never a dull moment around her,” Rayn said.

“I’m beginning to see that. We should be on our way then. Goodbye, children. I will give your love to your mother, and we will be seeing each other soon, I hope,” Rowan said with sincerity.

Rayn then flashed Maddie a dazzling smile, kissed her one last time, and vaporized with his father, returning to Vesturon.

Book Four

Separated

Chapter 1

A lone figure stood in a dimly lit alley. He paced back and forth, waiting for his partner to arrive. He was clothed in a long hooded robe and had anyone seen him, they would have assumed he was a Guardian. They would have been incorrect, and he was also treading in dangerous waters.

A ball of light finally appeared and another hooded figure took form. “Has the deed been completed?”

“It is done. All the files were sent, and they are now in place in the Yarrister system,” the first figure replied.

“Is any of it traceable?”

“Not to my knowledge. If anyone would search their system, I have made it appear those files were in place long ago. The only way they would be discoverable is if the person looking would know the exact source, and I have covered those tracks extremely well. I used the security system in the Command Center here so even to an in-depth observer, it would look like the files had been there all along.”

Thorgar prayed his partner wouldn't see through his ruse. He did in fact place those files in the Yarrister system, but he made it appear as though an amateur had done it. He wanted no part of this scheme, but had been coerced to do it. Thorgar knew it was a risky move, but he knew he had no other option.

“So, you think it is fail safe?”

“Yes... I would not have done it had I thought otherwise,” he lied.

“And all of this was completed... when?”

“Yesterday.” The man started to worry, as the questions were much more introspective than he thought they would be. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, and he hoped his companion didn't notice. To show fear was a weakness he couldn't afford.

“How were you able to infiltrate the Command Center so easily?” The authoritative man was demanding information that was unexpected.

“I have my connections, and let's say someone owed me.”

“How many others have you involved in this?”

“Since when was that your concern?”

“Answer me! This is a treasonous activity, and the fewer that know the better. How many others?” he repeated.

“Two, besides me.” He could feel the sweat starting to run down his neck and arms.

“Who are they? I need names,” he demanded.

“I promised anonymity.”

“That was not yours to promise. I need their names. NOW.”

“Yes, my lord. They were Lucaren Sartorious, and Dergan Calderon. They both owed me favors and had access to the Command Center.” Now he was truly concerned for his friends. He never anticipated the one giving him orders would get so deep into the details.

“They are trusted?”

“Yes my lord. I would trust them with my life.”

“How much of what you entered into the system were they aware of?”

“Not much.”

“Too vague. When I ask you a question, I desire a specific answer. Now, how much?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“They both knew I was embedding files, but they did not know where.”

“Did they know what was in the files?”

“Some of it. They had to do some of the entries because of DNA recognition.”

“Is it possible for us to use them as scapegoats?”

“My lord! I could not do that!” This was much worse than he could ever have imagined. Now he began to fear for their safety. If his blackmailer would bring harm to his family, he had no doubt his friends were in danger as well.

“Since when did you develop a conscience?”

“I... I thought...”

“I am not paying you to think... only to execute my orders. Is that clear? Now answer me.”

“Yes... it is possible. Now, I need to leave here. When can I expect my payment?” His voice shook with trepidation.

“And, I gave you permission to ask *me* questions... when? You are to carry out instructions when I deem it necessary, and no questions. You will get paid in due time. Now, we will meet again when I have proof that all is as you have said. You will be paid at that time and not before. You will speak of this to no one, and if anyone should come for you, you will deny any knowledge of it. Are we clear?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good. I will contact you when I need you.”

Seconds later, he vaporized into a beam of energy and disappeared.

The lone figure stood there, unsure of where to go. He had involved more people than he had confessed and now he feared for his life. He was involved with a very dangerous and powerful male. His conscious weighed heavily upon him. He could always turn in his blackmailer to the Council. Wouldn't that turn them upside down when they realized it was one of their own that had sabotaged the Great Leaders' First Born Son? Greed and jealousy will make many an individual do unspeakable things. Money will make others do almost anything.

He turned around and slowly made his way home. He had a lot to think about, mainly about how to handle telling his friends. He was so immersed in his thoughts; he never saw the dagger arc down and plunge into his throat, severing his carotid artery. The only thing he did see was another robed figure, much like him. He knew he had mere moments before he bled to death. With his dying breath, he knew writing the letter had been the right thing to do. The darkness came, and he knew no more.

Chapter 2

Maddie woke up and looked at the clock. It was 7 a.m. and she had promised to meet Sharra downstairs at 7:30 to go out for a run. She'd better get moving if she wanted that cup of coffee before she left. She quickly dressed in her running pants, long sleeved shirt and shoes, and padded down to the kitchen where Zanna was putting the final touches on one of her famous breakfasts.

"Maddie, dear, may I fix you a plate of pancakes?" she asked,

"No thank you, Zanna. Sharra and I are headed out, but I would like a cup of coffee."

"Here you go, dear," Zanna said, handing her a steaming mug of her favorite brew.

"Thank you... you're the best, Zanna!"

Grinning, Zanna asked, "Do you want me to keep some breakfast for you in the warming drawer?"

"Only if there is any left over. Thanks, Zanna. You sure do spoil us."

Maddie made her way to the foyer to wait on Sharra. Minutes later, Sharra traipsed down the stairs, and they both headed out the door.

Sharra and Maddie were running. The early morning air was crisp in their lungs, with little puffs of steam escaping with each breath. The night temperatures had dipped into the 30's so the ground was covered in frost, crunching beneath their feet as they quickly moved up the mountain. This had become Sharra's favorite form of activity, one they often joked about. Sharra could run circles around Maddie. Given their physiological differences, Sharra had speed on her side. Maddie could hold her own though.

While not as fast, she had endurance that was impressive to Sharra.

As they ran through the forest, Maddie reveled in the scents of the pines. It gave her the distinct impression that Rayn was right next to her. She let her mind wander to a time when they could do this together. She didn't like to think that far ahead because it often caused her great concern. "What if" was the phrase that literally drove her nuts. What if they couldn't get him out... what if the Council decided he couldn't return here... what if his parents disowned him... what if they never saw each other again... what if they never held each other again... what if... what if? It was a path she hated to take, but she was helpless to stop.

Sharra interrupted her thoughts, "Do not continue with those thoughts, Maddie. You will only succeed in upsetting yourself and ruining our run. It is a perfect morning. Look at the present. You will kill yourself with the 'what if's."

"You're right... although sometimes I just can't help myself. Like right now, I was thinking how much I love the forest because all the scents in here remind me so much of Rayn. And then... next thing I know I'm at the 'what if' part. I hate it, but it seems I always end up there."

They moved gracefully together, leaping over logs and roots, veering past rocks that could make them stumble. If an outsider could see them, he would be captivated not only by their beauty, but by their pure athleticism. They would remind him of two gazelles, flying through the Serengeti.

“He is well, you know. He telecommuned with Therron last night.”

“What? And you didn’t you tell me, why?”

“I was going to. I figured it would make for great conversation while we ran.”

“Ok... do tell, sister!”

“Well... he is doing fine. Misses you insanely... thinks of you constantly... blur... blur... blur.”

Sharra’s tendency to butcher colloquial slang was not improving, and try as she might, Maddie was dismally failing at successfully teaching her.

“Shar... it’s ‘blah...blah...blah.’ Not ‘blur... blur... blur.’”

“Whyever, Maddie.”

Ugh! “It’s ‘whatever’, Sharra. Anyway, what else did he say?” Maddie could not give up correcting her.

They continued to wind their way up the mountain. The streams of sunlight were poking their way through the trees, giving the forest an unearthly appearance... a radiance that was breathtaking. Maddie was lost in Sharra’s words, however, about Rayn and wasn’t paying much attention to her surroundings.

“He said that he is bored. They are not letting him do anything except for take exercise, and it is running him crazy.”

“‘Driving’, Sharra... driving him crazy. What else?”

“Well, if you would stop interrupting me, I would tell you. Ok... so, he is fine really. The thing about Rayn is... well, you know this... he is always in control of things.”

Maddie expelled a loud snort. “Ya think?!”

“He always has his hands on something... keeping busy with things. So I can see how this is bothering him. He asks for audiences with Council Members every day. But they are not granting any right now. He is relentless and will not give up. He is insistent on seeing our parents too, trying to convince them of things. We really thought our mother would bend his way by now, but she has not. Anyway, he is still waiting for the word on when his trial will be. They have not yet set a date.”

“Sharra, is that normal for it to take this long?”

“Oh, yes, Maddie. It can sometimes take more than six months.”

“Oh no. How will he endure that?”

“He will find a way. You must have more faith in your male, Maddie,” Sharra admonished.

“I do have faith in him, Sharra... much more than I can tell you. But I am so worried about his state of mind. I don’t want him to become depressed or anything.”

“Do not worry about that. If anyone can come out of this unscarred, it is Rayn. Did I ever tell you about the time when we were young, and he helped a friend of his with his studies? No? Well... Rayn had this friend who always struggled with his sciences. And Maddie, you know that Rayn is brilliant, right?” At Maddie’s nod, she continued, “I don’t mean intensely smart; I mean absolutely bloody brilliant. He was levels ahead of his age. They kept propelling him forward in his education because he would get so bored, but finally, Mother made them stop because he was so young. It would be like a twelve year old graduating from college here.”

“Shut up! Why didn’t you ever mention this before? He was like a prodigy, right?”

“Exactly! This is precisely what Rayn is... or was... a child prodigy. And, Maddie, it was not only his schooling; it was everything. Music, sports, anything. Have you heard him play any of his music? You must ask him to play for you. He is quite talented. Anyway, I digress.”

“So Mother refused to let him advance anymore, because it was difficult for him socially. So there was this one male who befriended Rayn. I think he may have felt sorry for him because he was out of his element due to his tender age. This male struggled in school with everything, and many of the other students made fun of him. Rayn did not like that one bit, so the two of them became close. Well, they were in the sciences, and they had all of these experiments they were required to perform, and Mejerrey, Rayn’s friend, just could not get his to work out. So... my brother did it for him... did it all from the actual experiment to the written work. Mejerrey turned it in. It was so exquisitely done, the instructor knew immediately what had happened.

“Well, you can probably figure where this is headed. My parents were called forth, and it was not very pretty. Rayn refused to confess and swore over and over he had nothing to do with it. He outright lied about it.”

“That does not sound like Rayn. He abhors lying.”

“Yes, well on this occasion, he would not stop lying. They confined him to his quarters at school, and he was not permitted to partake in any social events. They would allow him daily exercise, but that was all. The only entertainment he had was his school texts. The punishment lasted for six months.”

“Six months! That’s awful! Especially for a twelve year old!” Maddie exclaimed. She couldn’t imagine a punishment that harsh.

“It was. Mind you, I was young at the time, so I do not remember much of it. But, as you can imagine, the story has been told over and over again throughout the years. Anyway, they never broke him, Maddie. They expected him to admit everything, and he would not. He held his own, which is why I am telling you all of this.”

“You see, after many years passed, Rayn finally told the whole story. It seems that Mejerrey had struggled with school for so long that his parents had placed him under a great deal of

pressure and threatened to remove him from their family... disown him. He was a very good male and a very good friend to Rayn, so Rayn, being the loyal male that he is, could not stand the thought of Mejerrey having to deal with all of that. That is why Rayn did his experiments for him. Maddie, what I am saying is that Rayn is much stronger than you and I can ever imagine. He will come out of this just fine... and most likely stronger too.”

“Just the thought of him being caged up though drives me crazy.”

“I wish I could tell you more about him, but I feel like I am boasting. There are many things about him you have not even begun to understand.”

“Tell me, Sharra. Please... I want to hear everything about him.”

“Well... some of it you probably have already figured out. He is absolutely the best at everything. Maddie, I am not exaggerating either. All Vesturions are relatively intelligent and strong and so on, but Rayn is light years beyond anything you can imagine. His mind is fascinating. He is the greatest of problem solvers. That is another reason why I think he will get himself out of this. Although he can be demanding and overbearing at times, he is also kind. He is very stoic and proud and can be funny at times. He takes much teasing from us because of his serious temperament. My brothers are constantly playing tricks on him. We are unforgiveable when we taunt him. It is very difficult to understand him at times. He does carry the enormous burden of being First Born, and he takes that role very seriously.”

“Sharra, you speak of him with such pride,” Maddie noted.

“Oh, yes, I could not be prouder of anyone than I am of him. He is a most extraordinary male.”

“Has there ever been anyone one else... you know... another girl in his life?” Maddie couldn’t help herself from being curious about this.

“Well... that probably is not for me to say, but I will tell you anyway. There have been many who have wished it, but you are truly his one and only. I think that is what shocked everyone the most. Rayn has always been so duty bound that we never thought he would take the time to find a mate. And then you came into his life and... well, he completely changed. Maddie, he was crazed when you two were apart. When he was trying to find his way, trying to work everything out with you, he was most senseless. I have never seen him like that before. I never thought I would hear him say he would give everything up for a female. I knew then that it was more than just a physical attraction. That is why I do not understand why our mother is not bending toward him. She usually sees the softer side of things, and knowing Rayn as she does, she would recognize that this is not some whim of his.”

Maddie felt a glow inside of her, a warmth that spread throughout her body. She felt so blessed and lucky to have him in her life.

“When he left with your father, I felt like a part of me went with him. I can’t explain these feelings, but I so hope that you will experience this one day. It is... I don’t know... just unreal. Thanks for sharing all of this with me too.”

“Do not worry about him, Maddie. Just send positive thoughts his way; that will make him the happiest. Which brings me to the most wonderful of things. And I really cannot take the credit here because this was all Rayn’s idea. Maddie, he wants to talk to you, really talk.

However, he is not allowed any communication due to his confinement. So, at his suggestion, we want to try something. It may or may not work, since we really don't know the extent of your telepathic abilities. We know that you can project and receive some things, but since we are so far from Vesturon, we do not really know. But Rayn thinks it would be possible for me to be a medium for the two of you."

"Explain that. I'm lost in the weeds here."

"Ok... what we want to try is for the three of us to telecommune. I have been used as a medium in the past. My abilities are extremely strong, and I am able to project the thoughts of others. In other words, Rayn would project to me, and then I would project to you or speak to you if you were not picking up what I was emitting to you. Then we could do it in reverse. Does that make sense?"

"I think so, but I thought he and I weren't allowed to communicate."

"Ha! That is correct. But here is where we would bend the rules. He would communicate to me, and I to you, and then you to me and me to him. So... technically, you wouldn't be communicating directly with each other. A little underhanded, but we think it would work."

"I'm in... I am SO in! When can we do this?"

By this time they had reached the mountaintop and decided to take a water break. Sharra continued, "One week from tonight, we will come up here... to this place. We think it will be an easier thing for the flow of thought if we were on a higher point. You and I will come up here and then camp out. After we do this, I will have to wreck because it takes everything out of me. I will warn you, I shall be out for about twelve hours too."

"I think you mean crash... not wreck. Will it hurt you?"

"Oh no... not at all. It just takes all my strength to concentrate, and then, I am most fatigued. But it shall not hurt at all. The only thing I ask is to please keep it clean... you know... I do not want to get grossed out or anything!"

A totally shocked Maddie replied, "Sharra! I cannot believe you just said that. You know we would never do that. We haven't even done... well... it! You know! You're Vesturion. You know the rules."

"Of course," Sharra said between huge slurps of water, "I know you have not broken any oaths or vows. But that does not mean you do not think about it or talk about it. Just please do not think about that kind of stuff when we do this. That is just something about my brother that I do not care to learn about."

"Ok... ok! I promise... plus, I would never do that to you. I'll just be thrilled to talk with him. Sharra, you know it's so different here than on Vesturon. Does anyone ever break their oath... you know, cheat?"

Sharra spun her head toward Maddie and said emphatically, "Absolutely not. It is strictly forbidden, and that is one rule that is never broken on our home planet. Maddie, how could you ask such a thing?"

“I guess because it is done so commonly here on Earth. I cannot believe how chaste you all are.”

“Er... Maddie... I truly have no business asking this, but have you ever done it?” Sharra looked over at Maddie sheepishly.

“Gosh, no! That was one rule of mine that I wouldn’t break. I told Rayn about my roommate. She did it with her old high school boyfriend, and she said it was the biggest mistake ever.”

By this time, Maddie had plopped herself down on a rock and was staring across the mountains at the lovely view.

Sharra took a seat next to her and touched her arm saying, “How horrible for your friend. That is one reason why we Vesturions wait until we are united. It is much easier on each other then.”

“Sharra... um... are you...”

“Spat it out, Maddie.”

“It’s ‘spit it out’. Well... this is kind of embarrassing to ask, but somehow I think I’d rather ask you than Rayn. Are Vesturions the same as humans... you know... anatomically speaking?”

“Oh, that. Yes, pretty much. We are told that the reproductive parts are the same. I know there are differences in other areas... I think our lung capacity is a bit different and because of the gravitational differences, we are stronger. But everything else is pretty much equal. Our gestational period is like yours... approximately nine months.”

“Do you know how to... I cannot believe we are discussing this. This is embarrassing.”

“What? What is so embarrassing?”

“I was wondering if you know how to... what to do... how it all works when... you know.”

“Well, we are told during our anatomy classes how it all works, but I do not know firsthand.”

“Does it scare you? It makes me nervous.”

“Maddie, that is why it is so important to wait and do it with the one you have bonded with. I do not think of it much because I am not bonded with anyone, unlike you. But I do not think I would concern myself about it too much. Rayn is only going to have your best interests at heart when your time comes to be together.”

“You know, Sharra, on Earth, I am much too young to be thinking of being married to someone. I do worry about that. Maybe we should wait.” Maddie arose and started to pace around.

“That is certainly something you need to discuss with Rayn. But on Vesturon, men and women unite any time after they reach their maturity. It is different there than here, Maddie.”

“Much more peaceful and tranquil, without all the pressures your society has. I believe it is much simpler. People do not have such high expectations of each other either. Here, women are under such stress to look a certain way. It is not that way on Vesturon. Women do not have artificial surgery so they all can look like each other. Here it is like everyone wants to be a clone or something.”

Maddie snickered, “It’s plastic surgery, Sharra, and I agree. Too much conforming to a certain look. I have never agreed with that. I have always wanted to be me,” Maddie said as she started stretching. “You know... I can feel his presence here. This is the place where we really opened up to each other Sharra, and I can feel Rayn here.”

Sharra stood up and placed her hand on Maddie’s arm saying, “Well, sister, then we must visit this place more often. But I think we need to head on back home. We have ten miles to go, remember?”

Chapter 3

The girls got back to the house and headed straight for the kitchen. Their stomachs had been grumbling for the last five miles of the run, and all they could both think about were Zanna's mouth-watering pancakes. With any luck, there would be enough left over for them in the warming drawer.

Unfortunately, they were disappointed. "I cannot believe they ate them all. Zanna must have made fifty," Maddie declared.

"You always underestimate the amount of food my brothers can eat. They have bottomless pits for stomachs. I do not know how Zanna keeps them fed as it is," Sharra said.

The two of them went about trying to decide what to make. Maddie offered, "How about we make up our own batch?"

"Are you sure we can do this?"

Always the optimist, Maddie declared, "Well it can't be that hard."

Maddie went to the pantry and retrieved all the ingredients she thought she needed. They started working as a team, mixing up the batter. When it was time to put the pancake mixture on the griddle, Sharra excused herself to go to the restroom, leaving Maddie to actually do the cooking of the pancakes.

Maddie had poured the grease, and then the batter on the griddle to cook, but unfortunately, she caught a glimpse of Peetar outside planting flowers. This distracted her as she walked out the back door to say hello, forgetting about her pancakes on the griddle.

Therron and Tesslar were down in the security room when the smoke and fire alarms went off. They immediately looked at the camera to see where the fire was, and Therron headed straight up the back stairs that led directly to the kitchen. He was greeted by burning pancakes and a room filled with smoke, but not a cook in sight. He removed the offensive charred globs from the griddle, turned it off, and then turned the exhaust fan on high. That's when he saw Maddie outside engaged in a conversation with Peetar. By that time, Tesslar and Rykerian had arrived.

"What are we going to do with her, Therron? She is nearly a walking disaster in the kitchen," said Tesslar, shaking his head.

"Nearly? And you came by that... how? I would classify her as a monumental disaster. We need to change her name to Katrina... as in Hurricane Katrina. And to answer your question, I do not know." He pulled his hand through his hair, stopping to rub his temple. "Someone needs to be around her all of the time when she is in here cooking. I will go out and speak to her about this," Therron said. "I just hope she does not end up burning the house down."

* * * * *

Rykerian had been restless all day. He'd come in from patrol last night, hoping to get some badly needed rest. Every time he'd close his eyes, visions of Maddie would appear. He simply could not stop thinking about her. He was so envious of Rayn; he would gladly trade places with him at any time.

Rykerian knew it was hopeless for him. When he was home, he had a hard time restraining his thoughts. If any of his siblings ever discovered this, he would never be forgiven. Sharra would go berserk, given how close she and Maddie had become. It was getting more and more difficult to hide his feelings though. He acted like a tongue-tied moron whenever he was near her, like an adolescent seeing his first female. Dear Divine Being, how did this ever happen?

How could he ever forget that day when he was in the recreation room and Rayn strode in with Maddie on his arm? Rykerian truly felt like an idiot then. He could not tear his eyes off of her. He was sure he looked like a dimwit, staring at her with a befuddled look in his eyes. She was simply the loveliest thing he'd ever seen... and the way she looked at Rayn. If only he could be so lucky, Rykerian thought.

He'd been blessedly absent for the last three weeks, but his presence was required in the next few days for the beginning preparations for their trip to Vesturon. He was sick of dealing with his emotions; he needed to just let it go and move on. Trouble was, it was nearly unthinkable with Maddie living under the same roof, agonizing really.

Rykerian massaged his temples, trying to calm himself. How in the world was he going to get through the next few days here? He knew he was going to be in close confines with her. How was he going to mask his feelings? Right now, he felt like he all but had a sign painted on his back that said, "Maddie, you have bewitched me!"

He'd been tossing and turning in his bed, trying frantically trying to grab some sleep when he heard the alarm system activate.

Now what has she done, he thought.

He knew the source of this was Maddie. Ever since she had moved in the house, they had experienced one mishap after another. He chuckled to himself. One thing he knew for sure was that Rayn was going to have his hands full with this female!

He hastily threw on some clothes and headed downstairs to find out what the issue was this time. He and Tesslar met up on the stairs and Tesslar declared, "Kitchen... again!"

They barged through the entrance and found Therron already removing the blackened item from the griddle.

"I am going to have a talk with her. Divine Being, help me, please. I cannot hurt her feelings, but I am beginning to think Rayn may have brought her here to test our endurance and patience."

Therron headed outside to have his little discussion with Maddie.

Rykerian stood there, observing the scenario, with an admiring expression on his face. Tesslar, noticing this, cleared his throat to get Rykerian's attention.

“Is everything ok with you?” he quizzed.

Rykerian turned his attention back to Tesslar and felt the discomfort of his prying thoughts, trying to penetrate his mind. He immediately blocked the intrusion and harshly responded, “Er... yeah. I gotta go,” leaving Tesslar with a bemused expression on his face.

Rykerian headed up to his room and made short order of changing into his workout clothes. He needed to get to the gym... right this minute. He needed to vent before he exploded, and he knew he could take out his frustrations on the treadmill. He was determined to exhaust himself, even if it took all day and fifty miles of running. He put on some rap music to drown out his thoughts and went to town. He'd been going at it, and yes, still thinking of Maddie when Therron's thoughts slammed into him.

Therron entered the gym and couldn't hear himself think because of the loud music. He looked around and saw Rykerian on the treadmill trying to destroy himself... or the treadmill... or both. Rykerian didn't have a clue that Therron was even in the same room with him. Therron hung back and observed him for several minutes trying to understand what Rykerian was attempting to accomplish. He tried to connect with him, but everything kept bouncing back. Rykerian was undoubtedly blocking everything right now. The only thing he was emitting was a sense of anger and... hopelessness. Therron knew there was a problem here... a huge one at that, so he blasted his thoughts out with all of his strength and finally penetrated Rykerian's mind.

“Oh no... this cannot not happening,” Therron thought.

He finally threw his mind into Rykerian's and that got Rykerian's attention. Then they started their telepathic conversation.

Therron: What are you thinking? You cannot possibly be thinking that. Rayn is your brother, for the love of the Deity.

Rykerian: Newsflash, Therron! Do you not think I know that? I have tried everything I know to do. Why do you think I have been out on patrol most of the time? I cannot take being near her. I feel like I am betraying Rayn, but I am not doing this on purpose.

Therron: Then stop it... NOW. You can control your thoughts... just do not go there. She is nearly your sister, for heaven's sake. You CANNOT be doing this.

Rykerian: I KNOW that. For the love of the Deity, tell me something I do not know. I do not WANT to think this way. I have done everything I know NOT to think this way... but my mind refuses to listen to me. It is not like I am trying to be malicious or anything. I did not ask for this... I never expected this... I do not want this. And you know I would NEVER act on this either. I just CANNOT help the way I feel. I do not expect you to understand.

Therron: Oh, dear Deity, does anyone else know about this?

Rykerian: Heavens above, NO... absolutely NOT. And I do not want YOU to tell anyone. If you had minded your own bloody business and not barged into my head like that you would not even know. Do you know what torture this has been? How would you like to live under the same roof as the female you so admired, knowing there would never be anything you could do about it other than call her sister some day? How would you feel, Therron, if you

were in my shoes? How would you like it knowing that the female you felt so strongly about belonged to your brother? Tell me... how would you feel?

Therron: *OH, Rykerian, I am so sorry about all of this.*

Therron was feeling the whole brunt of Rykerian's emotions, and it was cutting him to the core. Rykerian was in pain. Therron wanted to help, but didn't know how.

Therron: *When?*

Rykerian: *The first moment Rayn brought her here. One look and I... Therron, I honestly do not know what to do. She is all I can think of.*

Chapter 4

Neither of them heard the door to the gym open, nor did they see Maddie walk in and head toward the stack of work out DVD's. They were still telecommunicating and suddenly, Maddie felt a force against her that lifted her up in the air and knocked her on an exercise mat.

Maddie didn't know what had happened at first, but Rykerian had been projecting his thoughts so forcefully, they even penetrated Maddie's mind. When she comprehended what was taking place between them, she looked up to see two pairs of eyes on her. Rykerian's face metamorphosed into a mask of pure agony, and Therron's was displaying utter shock.

Rykerian jumped off the treadmill and rushed out the door.

Maddie shook her head, as if to clear it. Her mind was not able to understand the gravity of the situation. When it all finally hit her, she exploded off the mat, chasing after Rykerian.

"Rykerian, wait... please wait," Maddie begged.

"Leave him alone, Maddie. He needs his space right now," Therron recommended.

"But, Therron, I heard everything in his mind. I need to go to him."

"No, you don't. He needs to be away from you. He is..." Therron began.

"I know, Therron. He thinks he's in love with me. I understand that... I heard him. But right now, he is in pain, and I think I'm the only one that can help him," Maddie yelled as she ran out of the room.

She quickly headed outside to try to find Rykerian. She went into the garages where he could usually be found, tinkering with things. When he wasn't there, she was headed back into the house, and that's when she saw him sitting near the fire pit.

"Hey, you," she started, as she approached him.

"Maddie, please. I cannot talk to you right now. I am humiliated beyond reason. I never intended for you... or anyone else for that matter... to discover this about me. It is my own problem, and I must learn to deal with it."

He turned his back to her. His face was flushed with embarrassment, and he simply could not bear to let her see him this way.

"But, Rykerian—"

"Do you not understand?" he shot back. "I cannot bear to talk with you. Being near you is painful for me; it is actually tortuous. I do not want your pity or anything right now. I just want to be alone. Sweet Deity, of all the things to happen! Talk about bad timing!" His agitation was disarming.

“It’s not the end of the world. I know you don’t want me to be here, but I’m not listening to you right now. You are not in love with me; you only think you are. You don’t really even know me, Rykerian, other than the little exposure you’ve had here. Right now, you are confused and embarrassed because I heard your thoughts,” Maddie tried to rationalize.

“Oh, really, Miss Rocket Scientist!” he said snidely, striking out at her. “Wouldn’t you be? Tell me any different, and I will call you a liar right here and now. My God... you know nothing about me either... how I have thought about you every waking moment for the last... however long it has been since first we met. I am not even trying to do that either; I just fell for the wrong girl. So please, leave me so that I can retain one tiny bit of my dignity.”

His voice was raised in anger, and Maddie didn’t quite know how to respond to him. She had never seen him act this way.

She stubbornly refused to back away and not try to resolve this. “Sorry, Rykerian, you’re going to have to get used to me being around and won’t it be easier now that I know?”

“You have GOT to be kidding, right? What are you anyway? ‘Miss I can solve all of your problems?’ I do not need to hear any of your psychobabble right now. I just want to be alone. What about that can you not understand?” He was rubbing his temples, as if a huge headache had hit him.

“Call me a slow learner, but I’m not walking away from you right now. Look, you know how I feel about Sharra and all the brothers. You all are the greatest things to enter my life other than Rayn. I honestly don’t know what I would do without you. We can work this out. Rykerian, we HAVE to work this out. There is no alternative. If it’s difficult for you, we’ll figure out how to deal with it. I just don’t want you to be hurting like you are now.” She had come up behind him and placed her hand on his back.

He jerked away from her, as if he had been burned. “Impossible, Maddie. We *cannot* work it out. There is *nothing* to work out,” he said through gritted teeth as he moved away from her, trying to put some distance between them. “The only way I could deal with it would be to leave. And I cannot do that right now.” He paused and then turned to her and added softly, “Please, I truly want to be alone, before I say something that I will later regret. Please? I am begging here, Maddie.”

She was deeply saddened by his pain. “Ok, Rykerian. I’ll leave it be for now, but this conversation isn’t over. Rykerian, sometimes you cannot control everything that happens to you. Just so you know, I am honored you feel this way. And one other thing, I promise not to speak of this to anyone. Just know that if you need to talk, I am here for you.” She turned and walked away, leaving Rykerian alone and still feeling humiliated.

“How had it come to this?” he wondered. He also wondered how he could ever make it through the next few weeks.

As Maddie headed back to the house in search of Therron, she heard the loud roar of Rykerian’s Lamborghini come to life, followed by the squeal of his tires as he sped down the road. She was in turmoil over what had happened. She needed to discuss it with someone, and Therron was the only one she could talk to about it.

She found him in the kitchen, and thankfully, he was alone. “He wouldn’t talk with me, and I feel just awful about all of this.”

“Not your fault, Maddie, and honestly, this is a bit uncomfortable for me to talk about as well. I think we should just leave it and let Rykerian deal with it in his own way.”

“But—”

Therron quickly cut her off, “No ‘buts,’ Maddie. Just think about it if you were in his shoes. He is embarrassed and disgraced by it all. He never intended for his thoughts to get out. I have put him in a terrible position.” Therron sat down and dropped his head into his hands. “He is at great odds with himself... you for one, but also he feels as if he is betraying Rayn somehow. It is best to just walk away and let him deal with it.”

“I guess you’re right. I feel like all of this is my fault. I somehow happen to be a bad luck charm,” she bit back.

“Why would you say that? You did not ask for any of this.”

“True... but almost everyone I have ever been close to has experienced some really yucky things. Look... you must admit... my parents, then Rayn, and now Rykerian. I have to ask myself who will be next.”

“You must stop thinking that way. Rayn is where he is because he chose that, Maddie. You had nothing to do with the deaths of your parents, and Rykerian has... well, it is not your fault in any way.”

“Not directly, but I still cannot help but feel this way. Therron, how will Rykerian handle Rayn?”

“Maddie, Rykerian would walk through fire to do anything for Rayn. Do not worry about that. That is why he is such a mess over all of this; his love for his brother is deeply rooted in him. That is also why he would never act on his feelings for you. You will always be safe around him. Let us just pretend all of this never happened... that we never discovered his secret. I am sure that would be best for everyone.”

“Ok, but on one condition: if anything happens where Rykerian is in need, I would ask that you let me know. I could not live with myself knowing that he suffered, and I did nothing to help. Can you make that promise to me?” She had taken a hold of his arm and was tightly gripping it.

“I foreswear before you that if my brother Rykerian is suffering and in need of your assistance, you shall be made aware of it,” he replied in the Ancient Tongue. He was standing before her with his hand over his heart, so she knew he had just sworn an oath to her.

“Maddie, you have my word that I will let you know.”

“Thank you, Therron.” She leaned over and gave him a hug, turned and left the room.

Therron sat there staring after her as she left, still worried about how Rykerian was going to work through all of this. *Brother, you are just going to have to dig deep and find a way.*

Chapter 5

Zanna was busy doing her usual—cleaning and laundry—when Maddie crossed her path. Zanna became slightly suspicious when Maddie began asking about dinner. She was interested in what Zanna had planned for that night. Since it was so early in the day, Zanna hadn't begun her preparations, so she explained that to Maddie.

Later that day, Zanna would be chastising herself for not picking up on Maddie's clues.

Maddie had been contemplating how she could do something nice for the family. Ever since Rayn's departure, they had gone to great lengths to see her every whim satisfied. They had entertained her, kept her company, taught her many things, and Maddie had honestly been enjoying herself. The first morning after Rayn was gone, Maddie opened her bedroom door to a large pile of boxes. They were filled with all sorts of clothing... beautiful designer tops and jeans, skirts, sweaters and also things made from Vesturion fabric. Everything fit perfectly, so she no longer had wardrobe issues.

However, Maddie had reached a point where she really wanted to do something nice for them in return. Cooking them a big dinner came to mind. She could surprise them, and it would also give Zanna a break. The only obstacle in her plans was that she didn't really know how to cook. But how hard could that be? She could turn on the Food Network and follow their instructions. That's exactly what she decided to do.

Off she went in search of ideas and recipes. She turned on the flat screen in the kitchen and decided to give Rachel Ray a try. She did have that "30 Minute Meals" show. Surely, Maddie thought, I can do this.

Her dish of choice that night was going to be pretzel-encrusted chicken. The kitchen had all the ingredients in stock so she proceeded to get everything out that the dish required.

Maddie painstakingly crushed the pretzels and added the extra ingredients. It called for a dash of cayenne pepper but when she opened the bottle, she lost her grip, it flew up in the air and landed with a plop right on top of the crushed pretzels. Unfortunately, about half the bottle ended up in there. Not knowing what to do, Maddie figured there would be no harm in just mixing it all together. She was unaware of what cayenne pepper was so she proceeded to prepare the chicken and the rest of the ingredients.

The recipe called for pan sautéing the chicken in several tablespoons of olive oil, or EVOO, as Rachel called it. Since she was making two pans, she decided she would need a lot more oil than that, so she poured a healthy dose of it in the pan. She put it over the medium high flame to heat up. As soon as she thought it was hot enough, she added the chicken after she had coated it with the pretzel mixture.

Next, she transferred the cooked chicken to the oven while she prepared the second batch. She decided to add a bit more oil and waited for it to heat up. Something caught her attention, and she realized she hadn't started cutting up the vegetables she was going to make. She headed for the sink to begin that task. Several minutes later, she heard a popping noise, turned around and saw that the pan was in flames. Maddie was in a state of pandemonium not knowing what to do. Luckily, the alarm system deployed and everyone started arriving in the

kitchen. By this time, the flames were simply out of control. Therron grabbed a fire extinguisher and hosed down the fire.

“Are you ok?” he asked.

Maddie was in a daze, not believing what had just happened. Therron came up to her and grabbed her arms saying, “Maddie, answer me! Are you ok?”

She shook her head and nodded, “Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks for getting here so quickly. I guess I’m not very good in the kitchen.”

“What happened?”

“I think my oil started on fire. I was going to chop the vegetables, and then next thing I knew, there were flames coming out of my pan. Oh... do you think the chicken in the oven is ok?”

“Here, let’s check.”

Everything seemed to be ok in the oven, but the stove was most definitely out of commission. Zanna came in next and started wringing her hands and jabbering like a crazed person. Neither Therron nor Maddie could make out a word of what she was saying. They finally calmed her down enough to find out that she was just upset she wouldn’t be able to make dinner that night.

“Oh, Master Therron, what am I going to do?”

Maddie piped in smiling, “Zanna, please don’t worry. I have chicken in the oven. That’s what I was doing. I was going to surprise everyone by making dinner. I’m sure it will be enough for everyone.”

Maddie was oblivious to the looks passed between Therron and Zanna. They would never hurt her feelings by telling her cooking was positively atrocious. They would get through dinner somehow.

* * * * *

That evening they were seated at the dinner table, and Maddie came in and placed the chicken on the table. Zanna followed her with the rest of the dinner. The kitchen was still a mess, and it would be necessary to hire some construction workers to come in and repair the damage. A new Viking range was on the way and should be delivered in a few days.

To everyone’s shock, the chicken looked pretty tasty. After they were all served, they began to eat. Rykerian was the first one who began to cough. Therron quickly joined him, and then Tesslar, and soon they were all struggling to breathe. Hands were frantically reaching for water glasses and several of them jumped up to get refills and ice.

As soon as Rykerian could speak, he offered, “Gee, would anyone like seconds? No? How about a fire extinguisher for your throat?”

Maddie blurted out, “Oh, I am so sorry. I didn’t think it would be that hot!”

“What in the Deity’s name was in that?” wheezed Sharra.

Maddie explained in between coughs, “When I was mixing up the pretzel mixture, the cayenne pepper slipped out of my hand and landed in the crumbs. I couldn’t remove it, so I just figured I would mix it in. I didn’t know it would be that hot, I swear!”

“Maddie, if I didn’t know better, I would think you were trying to kill us... or maybe kill is too harsh. How about maim us?” Tesslar sputtered.

“Oh my gosh, you know I would never do that on purpose.”

Rykerian added while still trying to breathe normally, “Alrighty then, Maddie. How about no more Food Network for a while? We need to get the kitchen back in order before Zanna has a heart attack, and we all die from a heat seizure. Right now, I am up for hunting down a block of ice to lay my blistered tongue on. Anyone want to keep me company?”

“You all, please don’t be mad at me. I can’t stand it!”

“Maddie, my dear... we are not angry with you; we are just wounded and need to soothe our burns. Honey, you put a new twist on heartburn,” Rykerian said, nearly incoherently.

They all stood up and grabbed their dishes to carry into the burned up kitchen. Someone wanted to know if they should give the chicken to the raccoons, since they had been seriously pesky lately, but everyone voted that it would be considered animal cruelty. They were afraid of PETA catching wind of it.

As they were finishing up with the dishes, Maddie commented to no one in particular, “That really was awful, wasn’t it?”

She received a resounding yes, and then the laughter and comments started. They all agreed that it was good thing Rayn could cook because they would have a serious problem if he didn’t. They also mentioned that thankfully Maddie would always be around a full time caretaker so her family would never have to worry about inadvertent poisoning.

Therron opened the refrigerator to put something away and exclaimed, “Would anyone care to tell me why there is a shoe in here?”

“Please don’t tell me that is dessert!” Rykerian exclaimed.

“Oh my gosh, I have been looking for that everywhere! I must have stuck it in there by accident,” Maddie tried to explain.

“You think?” Therron retorted.

“I think I need to... oh... maybe go for a drive...” Maddie began.

“NOOO!” they all said in unison. Maddie could barely get one of the sports cars out of the garage, much less take it for a spin. She always went for Rayn’s Reventon, and no one really had any great desire to ride with her right now. She was on a major bad luck streak, and the last thing they needed was to tell Rayn his new baby had been demolished.

“What?” Maddie asked.

Rykerian volunteered an explanation that consisted of how worn out she must be after the stress of the fire, and that her anxiety was starting to show a bit. She really just needed to relax and maybe take in a movie on the big screen here. They all let out a sigh of relief when she agreed and left the room in search of a movie to watch.

“Divine Being above, help us... quickly... please,” Rykerian begged. “How are we going to make it through this? I hope this house won’t be in shambles by the time this whole mess is resolved.”

“We must be patient with her. She was never instructed on many of these areas, and she really does try,” Sharra suggested.

With heavy sarcasm, Rykerian added, “And we are going to accomplish that how? Got any good ideas you’d like to share, besides locking her up and throwing away the key.”

“Calm down, Rykerian,” Therron admonished. “I think we need to make sure she is accompanied at all times with anything she does that involves any kind of machinery or appliances. With a constant chaperone, we may be able to head off another disaster. Are we in agreement?” Everyone adamantly nodded, so that would be their plan.

Chapter 6

Three days later, a terrified Zanna came running through the house screaming for Master Therron. She found him on the lower level in the security room, running surveillance checks.

Several minutes later, after he effectively calmed her down, he tried to decipher what she was babbling over. Finally, he was able to deduce that Maddie had tried to take over the cleaning of the kitchen, and she had effectively overdosed the dishwasher with dish soap, not dishwasher detergent. There were suds and bubbles everywhere, and Zanna was at her wits end in trying to deal with it all.

Therron headed up to the kitchen to find Maddie trying to scoop up all the bubbles with a bucket. She was covered in bubbles from head to toe, as was most of the kitchen. It was impossible to take in the scene without laughing. He immediately left the room—much to Zanna’s dismay—and came back with both a video recorder and camera. He had to capture this moment for Rayn. He was having a difficult time holding either of the devices steady, as he was in stitches... honest to God stitches. He hadn’t laughed like that since before Rayn’s departure. He could not wait to send him these images of Maddie. His amusement expanded when he realized Maddie had no clue whatsoever that he was in the kitchen, much less recording all of this.

“Maddie, what in the Deity’s name are we ever going to do with you?”

“Therron, help me please. I can’t stop these bubbles from coming out. They’re everywhere,” she cried distraughtly.

“Oh? I had not noticed. But, I think it would help immensely if you would just turn that darn thing off.”

“That is a great idea except I don’t know how.”

Therron made his way over to her, slipping and sliding, and pushed a couple of buttons. The dishwasher stopped running, but that didn’t solve their bubble problem. Maddie was frantically trying to scoop all the mess up, but it seemed the more she bailed, the worse it became. Her eyes had a wild look about them. Therron realized they would accomplish nothing this way, so he scooped her up in his arms and carried her out of there.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you out of here. We need to let the bubbles settle a bit, and then we can clean up the mess. You look like you are about to have a breakdown.”

“Well, I just wanted to get it all cleaned up before any of you found out. I know when Rykerian and Tesslar hear about this, they will give me a hard time over it.”

“Maddie, dear, I cannot believe you have not figured out that nothing that takes place in this house can be kept a secret.”

“Geez, I know. Can’t a girl hope a little?”

They reached the den and Therron set her down in a chair. He picked up her feet and took her shoes off, as they were still bubbled up. Then he rolled up the bottoms of her jeans, because they were sudsy as well.

“Better?”

“Yeah... thanks. But, how are we going to get that cleaned up?”

“Do not fret over it. I will take care of it. Promise me something though? Will you just stay clear of the kitchen for the rest of the day?”

“Therron... I was only trying to help.”

“I know, and we all appreciate you... even when you do not try to help. But right now, Zanna is a bit senseless, so it will be easier on her if she has that room to herself. Ok?”

After he received Maddie’s agreement, Therron headed back to the kitchen. He knew, with Zanna’s help, they could make short work of the clean-up.

Chapter 7

Lucaren Sartorius had tried to contact his friend Thorgar all week. Thorgar was supposed to have called him after his meeting, but he was long overdue. Lucaren was extremely worried. It was not like his friend to miss a call. If anything had gone awry tonight, it would have grave implications for everyone. He finally decided to make contact with Dergan Calderon. Maybe he would have some idea of what happened to their friend.

Dergan had not heard from Thorgar either. They both began to think something had happened to him. They teleported to Thorgar's home to see if he was there, but there was no sign of him. There was, however, a letter addressed to the both of them on a table on his terrace. They opened it and it read:

Dear Friends:

If you are reading this, then I have either disappeared or met an untimely death. I wanted to leave this letter for you in the chance this would happen so I could apprise you of what has transpired.

Under duress, I made a deal with Voldruk Monteveldo, High Elder of the Council. The deal was to send incriminating files and evidence to the Yarrister's compsystems on Earth. The files included false information about the First Born, Rayn. It was necessary to embed the files in their system—which is why I needed your assistance. Voldruk wanted these files to be discovered so Rayn would be removed from ascension as Great Leader of Vesturon.

Voldruk did not tell me why he wished this, but I have surmised that he bears a deep hatred for Rayn.

When these files were placed in the Yarrister system, their security was disrupted for several days. I am not sure if that security has been placed back online, but if it has not, and you have such a desire, it is possible to remove the falsified files.

I can only assume that Voldruk is responsible for my demise. Tread carefully with him, for he wields great power and will stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

Lastly, I hope you do not think too poorly of me for my involvement in all of this. Voldruk coerced me as he threatened my sister and her children. He told me he would see to it that one of her children would experience a horrific tragedy. I could not bear to see that happen, so I agreed to help him. He is aware of your involvement, but I did not tell him of anyone else's. I am sorry to have gotten you involved, and I hope you will find it in your hearts someday to forgive me.

Your faithful friend,

Thorgar Teldoge

After Lucaren and Dergan finished reading, they both looked at each other with horror. This was much worse than they had originally thought. The only thing they knew to do at this point was to seek out the Guardians and put it in their hands. They both were in fear of their

lives as well as that of their respective families. They decided to keep this information to themselves for the time being, until they could formulate another plan.

Chapter 8

The next afternoon, Sharra and Maddie prepared for their night on the mountain.

They packed their gear for their overnight trip. Maddie could barely contain her excitement as they headed out to transfer to the mountaintop. They took form and began setting everything up. The plan was to wait until after dark to proceed with the telecommuning.

The night was divine—crisp and clear with the stars winking their magnificence. There were millions of them scattered haphazardly across the sky, giving the night the appearance of sparkling diamonds. The full moon cast a golden hue across the landscape, bathing everything in its luminous glow.

Maddie felt like she was experiencing a dream world, with the beauty of everything surrounding her. Again, she strongly felt Rayn's presence. She knew with her soul that he was thinking of her. She projected her thoughts out to him, hoping to reach his mind. She couldn't wait to feel him beside her.

Sharra had been sitting cross-legged on a pad when she arose in a fluid motion. Maddie looked at her movements and thought how beautiful she was. She glided like water sliding over stones. Her long, midnight tresses swung around her as she moved.

Sharra was exquisite. Her eyes had taken on their elliptical shape with their color changing to neon blue. Her face had high cheekbones that created slight hollows beneath them, but it was her smile that was what stood out the most. It was heart stopping. She looked like a Greek goddess, Maddie thought.

"Sharra, do you know how lovely you are. Don't take this the wrong way, I mean... I hope you don't think I'm weird or anything, but you are really so beautiful. I don't think I've ever known anyone as pretty as you. I know your brothers don't sit around and tell you these things, but I just wanted you to know. I'm not blowing smoke up your skirt either."

"Well, thank you, Maddie, even though I am not wearing a skirt. But I appreciate your compliments. It is nice to hear something like that after all the teasing I get from the males. But they are good males and I think they try," she said as she added another log to the fire. "But seriously, Maddie, I think my looks are just average compared to yours."

"You've got to be kidding, right? You are perfect, really. Any girl I know would die to look like you."

Maddie couldn't comprehend her thoughts on this. Sharra was the most stunning girl Maddie had ever seen. She would turn heads in any environment... she was the epitome of beauty and elegance and her looks could run circles around anyone.

"You are too kind. I think you are trying to grease me up a bit, because you are about to talk with your Rayn."

"Um, Sharra... it's 'butter'... 'butter you up.'" Maddie figured she would spend the rest of her life correcting Sharra on her slang.

“Yes... well that too. Anyway, enough of this, I think it is time for you to talk with your male. What do you think?”

“Definitely!”

Sharra grabbed Maddie’s hands and dragged her to the pad they had and sat her down. They sat directly across from each other and Sharra continued, “Ok, Maddie, we will proceed. If this works, we will have about one hour before I will have to break it off due to exhaustion. Remember, please keep all, *personal* thoughts to yourself,” she said with a big grin.

Sharra closed her eyes, and Maddie watched her intently. Unexpectedly, Rayn’s thoughts burst into her head, leaving her breathless. She was hit with a succession of, “I miss you... I cannot wait until we are together... how are you... I think of you constantly,” etc.

Maddie immediately started thinking along those same thoughts when Sharra interrupted her.

Sharra: Ok you two... one at a time. You are supposed to be conversing with each other, but I am getting barraged by all of your thoughts at once. It is very difficult for me.

Rayn: You are right Sharra. My apologies. I got a little ahead of myself. Maddie, how are you?

Maddie: I am fine Rayn... other than missing you terribly. I think of you always, as well and I cannot wait for this whole mess to be behind us.

Rayn: I have been trying to get an audience with the Council Members, but they are not taking any appointments right now. I will continue to try every day until I get one. I am persistent, and they well know it.

Maddie: Is there anything we can do on our end to help?

Rayn: I do not think so right now. I have discussed all I can with Therron and he has talked with the other brothers and Sharra about everything. Therron said they are going to devise a plan for my trial, whenever that will be.

Maddie: How are you holding up? I mean, being confined and all? I worry about you.

Rayn: Maddie, do not distress yourself. I am fine, truly. I get a bit bored and antsy as I am not used to all of this inactivity, but otherwise, I am completely fine. My quarters offer me every amenity, and I am very comfortable. The only thing missing is you.

Maddie: Well, I sure you miss a lot and cannot wait to see you again. I think of you all the time.

Rayn: I know, Maddie. I sometimes get hit with your thoughts. Yesterday for example, I kept getting hit, so I was projecting back to you.

Maddie: I knew I felt your presence! I was on the back terrace watching the stars and thinking of you.

Rayn: *I always try to be in your head. I miss you so I visualize you constantly. Maddie, I miss holding you and feeling my hands in your hair. I miss your beautiful scent and the taste of your lips on mine.*

Sharra: *EEWWW! STOP! Let us not get too carried away, Rayn. That is the kind of stuff I do not want to hear, ok?*

Rayn: *So sorry Shar... and I understand. From now on, we will just discuss the weather!*

Sharra: *Why would you want to discuss the weather? Oh... you are trying to kid me! But it is kind of awkward for me when you discuss that stuff. Ew!*

Rayn: *I realize that, but can you make just one exception today? I have not seen or talked to Maddie in forever. I miss her, and I want to share my thoughts with her.*

Sharra: *EEEEWWW! That is disgusting! I cannot think of my brother that way! Just hurry up and get that part over with so we can move on.*

Maddie: *Look, Rayn, I think we can keep it pretty clean here. You know I miss you and love thinking about you that way too. But it is uncomfortable for her so let's not talk about it, ok?*

Rayn: *Ok, whatever you want. Just know that when we do see each other, I am going to tackle you and kiss you right there and then. And I will not care who is a witness!*

Maddie: *Ha! Fair enough!*

Things went on like this for another thirty minutes or so, and then Rayn's thoughts started taking on a fuzzy appearance. Maddie also had to repeat herself several times. She opened her eyes to see Sharra, and immediately knew they were going to have to cut it off. She reached out to Rayn, and he understood so they finished their goodbyes.

Oddly enough, the last thing he said to her was, "*And Maddie, honey, try not to burn the house down. Ok?*" Oh dear, Therron must have told him about her bad luck in the kitchen.

Maddie squeezed Sharra's hands and realized how dreadfully tired she was. She helped Sharra into the tent and got her comfortably nestled in her sleeping bag. Sharra's head wasn't even on her pillow before she was fast asleep. Maddie went back outside to sit under the stars for a while and to think about her conversation with Rayn. She was blissfully happy at that moment, his thoughts and feeling still washing over her.

Chapter 9

The stars were making an impressive show tonight. From Maddie's position on the mountain, they almost seemed close enough to touch. If only she could reach out her hand and grab one. The night air was crisp and the fingers of the summer heat were losing their grasp, but Maddie wasn't thinking about that. She was one hundred percent focused on Rayn. They hadn't yet spoken the actual words, but she knew she was in love with him.

Now she understood how her parents felt about each other... the depths of their love. She sucked in her breath when she thought of the pain and suffering her father must have endured when her mother had died. How could she ever deal with the loss of Rayn? She was sure she could not.

Where would this road take them? When or would they ever be together again? She prayed daily that he would return to Earth soon. She wanted to touch him, to see his face, his beautiful eyes, and his perfect smile. With a groan, she arose from the ground and started pacing, hoping to release her frustration from the hand they were dealt. She peeked in the tent to check on Sharra and heard her softly breathing, slumbering peacefully.

She decided to take a bathroom break before she turned in. She put on her headlamp and started making her way down the trail, looking for the best place. She got tickled at herself, for she felt like a dog, sniffing out the perfect spot. She was lost in her thoughts... of Rayn... of Sharra... of where they would all end up when it occurred to her that she had been walking for some time. She didn't give it much thought but started to think that perhaps she should turn around. She felt completely safe; after all, everything out here was veiled.

She took care of her needs, and started heading back in the direction of the tent. Things looked, well, different. It wasn't anything she could put her finger on. Maybe she took a wrong turn or something. She kept walking, but now she started to realize that something was wickedly wrong. The trail had flat out disappeared. She couldn't understand how she had gotten so turned around and confused.

The hairs started to rise on the back of her neck, and her adrenaline started to kick in. She HAD to get back to the tent. There was danger lurking somewhere; she could sense it. The disturbing part was that she didn't know what the danger was.

She continued to make her way in the direction toward the tent when she heard the twig snap and the leaves rustle. That sound alerted her, and made her flashback to the last time she heard that sound. Now her adrenaline had kicked in full force... heart pounding... sweating... skin tingling.

When she heard him come out of the brush, she wasn't surprised a bit. In the dark recesses of her mind, she'd always known he would return for her. He never struck her as one who would let go of something, especially when he considered that something to be his. And Maddie knew, without a doubt, he thought of her as his.

"Well, well, well. What a surprise to see you here, Red. Thought I'd taken care of you that last time I saw you. You're looking good though, I have to say."

“How did you find me?”

“Aw, well... I never let one get away, so I’ve been hunting you, honey.”

Maddie correctly perceived he was here for the kill. This was it—what she had feared the most. She found herself focusing on self-defense. She would have to choose the precise time to make her move. She had no weapon, and he still had his crossbow. If her timing was off, she would forfeit her life.

He ambled toward her with that vicious grin on his face.

When he got close enough she thought, *Now! It’s now or never.*

She threw a kick that caught him in the groin. When he bent forward, she reached up, grabbed the collar of his jacket and pulled his head down as she brought her knee up. It was a move that would have made any fighter proud, and it effectively cracked Darryl Carter’s nose.

Blood started pouring out, running down his mouth and neck. Maddie was on a roll and didn’t stop with that. When he reached his hands up to his face, he opened up his rib cage to assault. Maddie threw a right hook into his ribs, pivoted until her back was to him and drove her elbow straight into his solar plexus, knocking the wind right out of him. And then she took off running. Her plan would have worked beautifully... if she had only known where she was going.

Maddie had gotten so turned around and confused in the melee that now she was thoroughly lost. Panic washed over her, driving her forward, breaking through brush, and trying desperately to get back to the tent. In her disorientation, she only succeeded in running haphazardly in a circle.

She felt the rope land around her neck... like a lasso... and it brought her down instantly. She turned her head to look at him and... smiled. She knew her end was near, but by God, he wouldn’t take her down without a fight.

Darryl Carter was mad beyond reason. Red had gotten him like no one else... well, no one except his Ma or Pa. How that little thing could land such a wallop, he’d never know. But she was going to pay for it.

He pulled the rope until she was within reach and then unleashed his pent up anger on her. He was getting ready for payback... her payback for all those sleepless nights of his, wondering where she had gone... how she had disappeared. Payback for his broken nose she had just gifted him. He right hooked her with his entire body weight. That sent her flying and before she could hit the ground, he slammed his foot into her side, launching her in the air like a rag doll.

Maddie slammed into the ground, teeth rattling. The air left her lungs in a whoosh... the searing pain in her back and side prohibiting her from inhaling some badly needed oxygen. She reached her arms to the sides, hoping to find something within her reach to use as a weapon, only to come up empty-handed. The second her arms opened wide, he landed another kick to her side. She knew something had ruptured that time... she blacked out, drenched with the pain.

Darryl tried to awaken her, without success. He picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder and started trotting down the mountain. She was a long and lean thing, but hardly weighed much at all. She astounded him. Such a little slip of a thing had given him more trouble than any man he'd ever encountered. He couldn't remember anyone coming remotely close to breaking something of his and here this little gal had done a jam up job of busting up his nose. In his twisted, sick way, that made him like her even more. Too bad they hadn't met in different circumstances...

He jogged down the mountain for about twenty minutes until he felt her begin to stir. He heard her moaning before he decided to stop. After he tossed her on the ground, he conjured up images of how he would have his fun with her. Her movements brought him back to the moment.

Maddie was in serious pain, making it nearly unbearable to breathe. She knew she suffered some broken ribs, and she was certain there had to be some internal injuries from the kicks he had landed into her side. Maybe her spleen. She tried to hold back from making any noises, but she couldn't help the moans that escaped from time to time. She didn't know how much more she could withstand, and she saw her chances of escaping quickly slipping away.

He came to her then and dragged her to the nearest tree, winding a rope around her, securely tying her to it. When he cinched the rope tight, she crawled out of her fog and began screaming for her life. He grabbed his pack and pulled out a roll of duct tape to shut out her screams because they were non-stop... not that anyone could hear... but they were getting on his nerves.

When she was trussed up nice and neat... like a little Thanksgiving turkey... Darryl assessed the damage they'd done to each other.

No doubt about it, he had a broken nose... possible broken rib... bruised groin... bruised solar plexus. Yeah... Red was sure going to pay for this one. But he'd already gotten back at her somewhat. She looked to be in a lot of pain, which pleased Darryl. Just wait until she saw what he had in store for her. He couldn't wait to play with Red a little before he turned her lights off for good.

Maddie watched him from her prison. She was paying for what she'd done. But... she had to try and she gave it her best. Her fear was mounting... and fast. She knew that soon her ability to think coherently would be gone... because that look in his eye meant torture for her. She tried to wiggle her arms or hands free to no avail. The pain made it pointless.

Darryl Carter stood up and started pacing. He wanted to draw this whole thing out for his own personal enjoyment, but he wasn't feeling too good right now. It might be better to just kill her and get out of here.

He glanced over at Red and saw her squiggling and squirming, trying to get those ropes loose. Well... he wouldn't put anything past her. She'd survived more than anyone else he'd encountered, so he wasn't taking any chances. He knew exactly how to keep her still. He reached for his crossbow and saw her eyes widen. This is the part he loved the best. He walked up to her and from 6 feet away, fired a shot right at her quadriceps. It went straight through flesh, muscle and bone and embedded in the ground beneath her, effectively trapping her.

Her muffled screams were like a symphony to him. He could hear his commanding officer congratulating him on such a great shot.

Now for round two; he looked at her closely to determine where his next shot should be. He didn't want a kill shot... just one that would let her know who was boss. He decided to put one right beneath the clavicle. He let it fly and that one went clear through and stuck in the tree she was tied to. Yep... Red was stuck and wouldn't be going anywhere... ever.

Maddie felt the searing pain of the first shot. Her nerve endings were in high gear from her earlier adrenaline surge, but the shot from the crossbow was excruciating. She felt it rip through her leg, crunching through bone and crucifying her to the ground. Even the slightest movement would send currents of pain roaring through her. When the second shot came, her hold on her sanity began to crumble. She thankfully slipped into darkness.

Darryl was a little miffed at her for passing out. Better wake her up so he could continue with his little party. He backhanded her across the cheek to awaken her but no luck. She was really out... maybe some water would do the trick. He took one of his Camelback bladders and started squirting water in her face. He saw her eyes flutter open... good thing... time for more fun.

“How do you like our little game here, Red? Come on. You need to stay awake because the fun is just getting started.”

Maddie heard someone whimpering and wondered who was making that noise. Minutes passed by before it occurred to her that the pitiful whines were coming from her. She tried to beg for her life, but the duct tape muffled her words. She had nothing left... nothing to bargain with... or for.

She desperately started to think about Rayn. She remembered somehow, in her delirium, he would always hear her. She just had to think of him. And she did. She thought of everything that had taken place. She begged him to find her. The thoughts just kept repeating themselves in her brain... over and over.

The pain was distorting her thoughts. She started hallucinating, thinking she was with her parents. Then clarity returned. She never knew pain could take you to these depths; she must surely be in hell. Tears were streaming down her face, but her mind regained its intense focus on Rayn.

“Please find me, Rayn. I don't think I can hold on much longer. My mind is slipping, and he's going to kill me. Rayn, please find me.” Over and over her thoughts continued until she lost consciousness again.

This scene kept repeating itself. Maddie passing out, and Darryl Carter waking her up. He didn't seem to tire of it because he reveled in the pain he was causing her.

He loved the fact that she was at his mercy and couldn't wait for her to beg. That was his favorite part. Yeah... it made him feel real important. He was going to feel especially proud tonight when Red begged.

Darryl Carter finally reached the point where he was ready to hear her voice, wanted to hear her pleas for her life. This part really tickled him to no end. Like she thought that would work! Oh well... let's not spoil all the fun.

He yanked the duct tape off her mouth, and she started screaming and screaming. He didn't know where all that air came from. He thought she'd be too weak to scream, but then again, this one was just full of surprises. He backhanded her again, putting all his strength into his swing... just to shut her up for a minute. Lord, she was loud! Her head snapped back and bounced off the tree. Sounded like it cracked too. Damn... there she went and passed out again. He guessed he probably hit her a little too hard. Ok... he would just have to wake her up again. More water.

There she went screaming again. Bam, another smack across the face connected. This was starting to get fun. He sure wished she'd start to beg though.

She pinned him with those topaz colored doe eyes of hers, and he practically had to jump back. Red was spewing so much hatred at him he could feel it. If given the chance, no doubt she'd kill him.

Finally... "Why are you doing this to me? What did I ever do to you?" she croaked.

"Ha... let me see... how about... I love your red hair? Or... how about you got in my way... or maybe... wrong place, wrong time? Anyway, I've been ordered to kill you. So that's really the why of it."

"Who ordered you to kill me?" she asked incredulously.

"My commanding officer, that's who."

Maddie realized then he was not only cruel but also insane. There would be no getting out of this one. It was the end of the line.

Darryl Carter watched her think. He knew she was trying to figure out a way to get out of this. Another smack and that might change her mind.

He backhanded her again and watched the blood trickle out of her mouth. Her blood was smeared all over her face by now, and her left eye was swollen shut. That other eye was still spewing out the hatred though, and he was a little freaked out by it. He decided he'd have to take care of that. He pulled off a length of duct tape and taped over her good eye, effectively sealing off any of her vision. Now, he'd bet a dollar to a donut she'd start begging.

"Please... will you please take that off, I don't like not being able to see," she begged.

"That won't matter much because in a little bit, you won't need to see anymore."

"Please... don't kill me. I'll do anything you ask. I won't say a word or scream or anything."

"Naw, it doesn't matter anymore. Your time is about up here."

"Please..."

He walked up to her and kicked at her leg. She let out an ear-splitting scream. Her breath was coming in short little pants now, and her head was lolling side to side. Darryl was in heaven... absolute heaven. Red had sure been a tough one, but now he was getting what he'd been waiting for. He decided he'd had enough of her screams though, so he retaped her mouth.

Maddie put all her thoughts into Rayn.

“This is it, Rayn. I don’t have much longer. Please hear me. I don’t know if I can take any more of this. Please, Rayn, please hear me. I don’t know where I am, but I have to be close to Sharra. You have to hear me. Please, hear me. RAYN... HELP ME!”

Chapter 10

His quarters, as his parents and the Council referred to them, were well appointed, offering him every amenity and convenience he could possibly want. Still, Rayn paced around the room like a caged animal. He was imprisoned and would remain there until the Council rendered its verdict.

He would have an opportunity to request a jury, although he didn't know what good it would do. He had pled his case before all, trying—he believed unsuccessfully—to get their understanding of his connection with Maddie. Time was his enemy now, ticking by so slowly that every minute felt like hours.

Initially, he believed he could gain his mother's support in this. After all, her relationship with his father had a rocky beginning. Yes, she was Vesturion, but she wasn't as highly bred as one would demand for the Great Leader.

Over the years, the Council had eased its constraints on mates for highly bred families. When his parents initially met, nothing could have kept them apart or hindered their bonding. They immediately made their connection and his father forced the issue with his parents. Their relationship was contested among the Council, but Rowan threatened to abdicate in order to unite with Annalise. After much argument and debate, threats and warnings, the Council relented and granted its permission for the unification. As time told all, Vesturon could not have had a fiercer First Mate than Annalise.

Rayn tried to convince his mother, appealing to her emotions, that he was in the exact same place she had been. She was relentless in her argument of how Maddie was not a Vesturion and was disgusted with the manner in which Rayn completely disregarded his duty, family, and the Covenant. Rayn felt as if he were arguing with a brick wall.

The recognition of his desperate circumstances made him begin to create plan B. If he were refused permission to unite with Maddie, he would create an alternative that would include his renunciation of his birthright and the Brotherhood of Guardians. He would not, could not, entertain life without Maddie.

Maddie, what to do? How he missed her. He dreamed of her nightly. She was so unaware of herself. She was nothing like anyone he had ever known and she never ceased to amaze him. She was unselfishly kind, loving and so perfectly innocent. She was athletic, but he chuckled to himself when he thought of her dancing antics. She was always in high gear. She loved to run and feel the wind against her skin; she had an irrepressible urge to experience life to its fullest, almost as if she couldn't let a single thing pass her by, like she didn't want to miss out on anything.

Rayn assumed her intensity to live life to the fullest was the result of the early death of her parents. Maddie was determined to experience everything she could in every way possible because she was keenly aware of how it could be snatched away in a heartbeat. She was ever impatient to try new things. But what he loved the most about her was her honesty, sincerity, kindness, and gentleness.

Maddie had been in good spirits, and from his communications with the other family members, she seemed to be thriving. He was so proud of her... her ability to jump right in and become one of them.

His brothers were completely smitten with her, and she and Sharra had become fast friends, like sisters in fact. Sharra couldn't be happier; she finally had another female to spend time with. Now, if they could just prevent her from burning down the house, all would be well!

Xarrid still had not come around. Yes, he admitted his fondness for Maddie, but he still could not accept the relationship between Rayn and her. That grieved Rayn but he would have to deal with that later. The others had promised their support and would all be present on Vesturon for his hearing.

Rayn had thrown himself across his bed and was laying there, deep in thought, when his body wildly jerked with violent painful spasms. Searing, relentless pain began washing over him. His breath became ragged, and the pain radiated over his entire body.

With utter horror, he began to hear Maddie's voice—her thoughts of what she was experiencing, the begging for release from her torture, her imminent death.

Oh, heavens... Oh, Divine Being... NOOOO!!!

He had her again. How did this happen? She was suffering, severely, horrifically. He had to help her. Rayn flew up and started screaming, howling, roaring, shaking the walls with the strength and emotions ripping through him. Things began flying off the walls and furniture, crashing into the floor. His telekinesis was firing completely out of control. He instantly reached out to his brothers.

"Maddie... in trouble... in the woods... wounded severely... she's DYING... he has her again... BLOODY HELL, HE IS KILLING HER... HELP! HELP!"

Chapter 11

Tessler, Rykerian, and Therron were sprawled across the sofas enjoying their favorite activity—watching sports on TV—when they were simultaneously hurtled to the floor. Shocked, dazed and breathless, they all laid still for a moment, feeling like they had just been tasered.

“What the heck was that?” Rykerian asked, rubbing his head.

“Dunno,” Therron slurred in response.

“I have never felt anything like it.” Tessler was just shaking his head back and forth, trying to regain his senses.

In the next instant, all three of them were on their feet screaming at and over each other... back and forth.

“It is Rayn... in pain.”

“No, not Rayn... it is Maddie.”

“Oh, Blessed Deity. What has happened to her?”

Their thoughts were whirling around the room at light speed.

Sudden silence... and then, “We must go! We have to get to her. Right away. Gear up NOW!”

“Arm yourself, and get the first aid kit. Grab the morphine. Whatever’s happened, she going to need it.”

“TESSLAR! Get a tracer on Maddie NOW. Use Sharra’s coordinates and go from there. We do not have a second to spare.”

“On it!”

“Where is Sharra? I thought they were together.”

“Out cold... she was the medium for them tonight.”

“Bloody hell, how did he get her?”

All the conversations were taking place at once mentally and verbally, while they were gearing themselves up.

Tessler shouted, “I cannot locate her! I have found Sharra’s coordinates, but Maddie is not with her.”

“Expand your zone. She must be somewhere close to Sharra. They were to be together all night.”

Therron was frantic, tearing around the room, looking for his *shadars*. “I cannot find my weapons!” he screamed.

Once again, they all flew several feet in the air, Rayn’s thought overwhelming them.

“Rykerian, tell him to stop. We cannot think with those blasts of his,” Tesslar shouted. “I am headed to security to try to locate her using infrared.”

* * * * *

Maddie knew she was dying. She couldn’t even project her thoughts anymore.

She saw Rayn’s beautiful face, his eyes she loved so dearly, those precious lips she loved to kiss, his thick wavy hair she adored running her fingers through, and the braid she so loved.

She thanked God for sending him to her, for he made her last weeks on Earth the best she ever had.

Maddie was certain she only had a brief amount of time left.

She wished she had told Rayn she loved him. She wished she had said it every day, a thousand times a day. She wished she had agreed to become his mate. She wished she had forced him to break his vow and take her virginity. Now she would never know what it felt like to make love to someone.

She always wondered how it would feel to die. She wondered if it would be painful. She had her answer now. Even with all of her injuries, she was incredibly pain free.

She began to see white light. It cast a glow to everything. It was getting brighter and brighter. Her last thoughts before she lost consciousness were of God and how Rayn brought her back to Him.

She turned her head and saw her parents standing there.

“Maddie,” her father whispered, “we have missed you, and we know you will love it here.”

“Where is here?” she asked.

“You know... it is where you want to be.”

“I’m confused, Dad. Am I dead?”

“That’s a silly question! You know the answer to that.”

“But, Daddy, I don’t know the answer! I feel weird.”

“Of course, you do. You’re supposed to feel weird.”

“If I’m dead, where is God?”

“Well, Maddie, as with everything, God is everywhere.”

“So is He here?”

“Yes, Maddie, He is here.”

“What’s going to happen next?”

“Maddie, that is up to you. What do you want to happen?”

“I want to be with Rayn. I don’t want to be dead. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t want to be here. Why did this have to happen to me?”

“Maddie, I said that God was here. I didn’t say *I was* God! I don’t have the answer for you, but if you don’t want to stay here, there is something you can do. You can ask God to send you back.”

“Will He listen?”

“He always listens, Maddie.”

Maddie was mystified by everything. Her father wasn’t really making sense, and she wondered if this was all an illusion, created by her dissecting mind as it came apart. She was uncertain of everything now—what was real, and what was fantasy? As she looked at her father, she began hearing voices, disjointed words. She knew they weren’t coming from her father, for she didn’t see his lips moving. The voices were undoubtedly male, as they were deep and resonating. That eliminated her mother. Maybe it was God speaking to her.

Her dad began speaking to her again.

“Maddie, you must decide what you want to do. You may come with us, or you may fight for your survival. You cannot delay any longer. If you don’t decide soon, the decision will be made for you, and there will be no turning back.”

To be continued...

Look for the second installment of
The Guardians of Vesturon
Coming Soon

About the Author

A. M. Hargrove lives in South Carolina with her husband and two children. After spending years working in management for a large pharmaceutical company, she now enjoys nothing better than spending time at her Mac writing fiction. Her hobbies include hiking and backpacking in the Smoky Mountains, trail running, cooking and snorkeling.

She hopes you've enjoyed this first installment of the *Guardians of Vesturon*. There will be more Maddie and Rayn soon to follow in the second book entitled *Resurrection*. Look for it soon in ebook format.

For more information about A. M. Hargrove and her upcoming book releases, please visit her at:

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