

Bryxx

*A Crimson Forest Novel*

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

BRYXX

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Written by Tarisa Marie.

## Also by Tarisa Marie

### **Black Petals**

Halfling  
Changeling  
Pure Blood

### **Crimson Forest**

Bryxx  
Onyx  
Tempted  
Torn

### **Tainted**

Tainted Crimson  
Tainted Heart  
Tainted Magic  
Tainted World

**To my loving husband who puts up with my insanity.**







**by Tarisa Marie**





## Chapter 1



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looks at me with pity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Chapter 2



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh?” he encourages. “About?”

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

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

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