

Crush

Book 1

The Crush Saga: Book 1

by **Chrissy Peebles**

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Chapter 1

Big Bear Lake, California is located in a lush green valley, surrounded by mountains and the towering pines, sparkling streams, wildlife, and hidden lakes of the San Bernardino National Forest. We'd just moved into a cute, two-story brick house along the south shore of Big Bear Lake, a beautiful, quaint little home left to us by my grandmother when she'd passed away. She'd spent her whole life in the house and had loved it, so my parents thought it would be fantastic to dump our city life and move out to the smog-free middle of nowhere, where we could get lost in the peace and quiet tranquility. It wasn't the easiest place to get to, and only three roads led in and out of the valley.

My parents loved the solitude because they were writers. My father wrote mystery thrillers, and Mom penned romance novels. They hated the hustle, bustle, and noise of the city and were sure they'd be better able to concentrate out in the peaceful wilderness. "It'll be a fresh start for all of us," my mother assured me just after my bad breakup with my boyfriend, "a very healthy experience all around."

I wasn't sure, though, if I could so easily adjust to the simple life after living in New York City, but once we got there, I loved the place. It was a far cry different, going from honking taxicabs and towering

buildings to honking geese and towering trees, but I knew my mother was right; it would be the perfect spot to forget about my depressing love life.

I had two brothers and one sister, but they had already moved out of the house, so now I was virtually an only child, with the two most wonderful parents. We were a loving, close-knit family, and I couldn't have been more thankful for that.

It was only June when we moved in, so I had almost the whole summer to get used to California and my new home before school started. I carried in the last heavy box to my cluttered room; everything was a mess. I bit my lip hard as I looked around at all the boxes and bags, knowing there was no way I'd get everything unpacked and put in its place in one night.

My mother pushed through the maze of boxes, toppling them everywhere. "Pizza's here."

It was past lunchtime, and my stomach rumbled. My German shepherd pranced around in a circle and barked.

"Mom," I said, "Max needs to be walked first."

She brushed her hair behind her ear and smiled. "Go ahead and take him out, then, but don't wander off too far."

I kissed her cheek. "Of course not."

She pointed to my eyes. "What's with the dark circles?"

"Uh...I'm sure it's just makeup, or maybe just because I've been getting absolutely no sleep?"

"It's your makeup," she said, smiling. "You look like a raccoon."

"See? I'll fit right in with the wildlife out here."

My mom laughed. "Well, maybe the raccoons can adopt you. They're nocturnal too."

"I just can't sleep at night. I can't help it."

She wrapped her arm around me. "Is this about the breakup with Sean? Honey, it's been six months. Remember what we talked about? We're here for a new beginning, a fresh start."

"I know," I said, wincing because the whole thing still hurt.

Sean had dumped me out of the blue, and getting dumped sucked, no matter the reason. I had given him my heart, and he had trampled all over it. The breakup absolutely blinded me, and I didn't see it coming when he called me and said, "Taylor, this just isn't working for me anymore."

I knew it was time for me to move on with my life, with whatever grace and dignity I could muster. We'd both made mistakes in the relationship, and neither one of us were perfect by a long run. Still, I refused to let that relationship define who I was. Just because we didn't work out and clearly weren't meant for each other, that didn't mean things wouldn't work out with someone else in the future. My friends set me up on stupid dates that never worked out, and I wondered if I'd ever find the "spark" again. For the time being, I decided I was done with guys. I was just going to enjoy my fresh start and focus on my passion, painting. The yard was overrun with weeds and vegetation, but my dad had hired someone to fix it up, and when he was finished, it would be the perfect place for me to pursue my art.

I threw my black, curly hair into a messy ponytail, then slid my feet into my white tennis shoes. I wore a white t-shirt and my favorite pair of skinny jeans that hugged my curves so tight they felt like a second skin. I'd washed them so many times that they were faded and super soft, form-fitting in all the right places. The right knee had a large rip in it, but that only gave them originality. Silver and leather bracelets dangled from each of my wrists, and silver rings adorned my fingers. I looked into the mirror and wiped the smeared eyeliner from underneath my brown eyes, then headed outside.

It was so beautiful there. Our yard was surrounded by towering trees that stretched high into the sky. The birds chirped, the sun shone on my face, and a cool breeze ruffled my hair. I loved my back yard woods. Inhaling the clean air, I smiled. *I'm really going to enjoy my fresh start here...and so is Max*, I thought as the dog explored the back yard, fascinated and intrigued by all the new smells and sounds.

Suddenly, Max's ears shot back, as if he had noticed an animal in the woods. Peering closer, I glimpsed a whitetail deer sipping from a puddle. My heart melted at the sight of the adorable animal.

Max's bark scared it almost to death, and the poor animal darted off into the vegetation. He wasn't used to all that natural wildlife, but I knew he was going to love it there as much as I was, if not more. He barked fiercely, then suddenly bolted through the trees, deeper into the woods, and I guessed he was chasing the deer. I decided then and there that I'd have to keep him on a leash.

"Max!" I yelled. "Come back!"

He didn't listen.

I glanced back at the house, wondering if I should get my parents for help. The woods and its inhabitants scared me, but I debated on what I should do. Finally, I decided to just go a little ways into the woods, but I did—if only for a brief second—wonder what the chances were that I'd run into a bear.

I stepped through the vegetation and took a tentative step. Glancing around, I didn't see Max, so I called for him a few times, only to get no response. When I heard a bark in the distance, I took off through the woods that surrounded our property. I pushed aside some green vegetation and glanced ahead and could finally see my beloved and ornery pet. "Max!" I shouted. "Come back!"

He gave me the dog version of the I-see-you-but-I-don't-care look, then started sniffing the ground.

As I walked toward where he was, I seriously considered obedience classes. A thorn grazed my skin, and I bit my lip to stave off the pain. I swore I'd never let that cantankerous canine off the leash again.

I stumbled left and tripped over a pile of termite-ridden, moss-covered, rotting logs, then burst through more towering ferns. Max disappeared into the thick vegetation once again. I couldn't see him anywhere, but I could still hear him barking. Panting, I spun in a slow circle. I was afraid if I went in any deeper, I'd get lost, but I couldn't just desert my best friend.

The *snap* of a twig behind me, followed by the unmistakable *crunch* of dried leaves, halted me mid step, and I strained to listen. *Was that...Max?*

The *snap* of another twig drifted through the forest.

I peered around the trees and high grass. "Max?" I yelled. "C'mere, boy."

Silence.

I swept an uneasy glance around the trees, my senses on full alert, and I whistled. "Here, Max! C'mon, boy. Let's go home."

The singing of crickets and chirping of birds was my only reply.

I jumped, startled, as a sudden flash of tan glinted to my left. I flinched. For a split second, I saw amber-colored eyes in the foliage. Panic struck me; I was sure it was some kind of wild animal. I worried that Max might have been attacked, and I knew one bite to the throat might prove fatal. I grabbed a long, sturdy stick. It wasn't much of a weapon, but I'd be able to poke those yellow eyes out if their owner came after me.

A menacing growl broke the silence. My heart thudded against my ribcage, and a shiver swept over my skin. Running after Max had been a dumb idea. My dad had warned me about black bears, coyotes, mountain lions, and bobcats. He hadn't said anything about tigers, but it was still quite the oh-my situation.

Whatever the creature was that I'd seen, it had already seen me, so I knew there was no use hiding. I had to call for Max again, as I couldn't possibly leave until I knew he was okay. "Max!" I yelled, pointing the stick at the eyes peering out from the vegetation, ready to fight with every ounce of strength I had.

Finally, Max burst through the thick plants, and I clutched my heart and let out a sigh of relief when I saw that he was unharmed. He immediately took a protective stance in front of me and started growling and barking at whatever was in those ferns. Given the fight-or-flight choice, I was sure the best course of action was to slowly sneak backward and get the heck outta there.

When the ferns parted, I gasped. I was face to face with a mountain lion, and when it let out its bloodcurdling signature roar, my heart began to pound in my chest like a high school marching band.

I turned around quickly, only to bump into a guy who looked to be about my age. He was so scorching hot that if I had wet my finger with my tongue and touched him, his chest would have

steamed and sizzled. He instinctively pushed me behind him as if to protect me, then started shouting and throwing sticks at the big cat. I joined in with some noise of my own, and in an instant, the mountain lion fled into the grass.

The beautiful stranger eyed me up and down, warmth and empathy radiating from the depths of his glare. "Are you okay?"

Those gorgeous, winter-blue eyes hypnotized me, and I was pulled into his hold with one look. My breath had never literally been taken away before, but I was absolutely suffocating under the power of his stare, and my knees began to shake. "I-I..." The butterflies that had landed in my stomach in fear of the cat were now turning flirty summersaults. My eyes slid up his towering body, gliding over his high cheekbones and the dark stubble shading his sharp jaw. He was definitely tall, dark, and handsome, and even if it was quite diché of me to be so taken by him, I felt like I'd been struck by lightning. I'd never been face to face with somebody so beautiful and angelic. He was the kind of guy who I thought only existed in movies, as if a Calvin Klein model had stepped down off of one of those big, delicious billboards for a hike through the woods.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he said when my stutter never turned into a complete answer. He didn't fidget or stumble for words like I did whenever I was standing in front of a gorgeous stranger. Rather, his cool confidence spoke volumes to me, as if he was used to girls throwing themselves at him, which I was just about to do.

My breath froze in my throat, and my stomach clenched. I'd never been so drawn to anyone before, never so instantly, so madly attracted. I couldn't stop staring at his messy tangle of dark hair, that tousled, just-out-of-bed look that I loved and found so sexy. From his piercing blue eyes to his strong, chiseled jaw to his handsome face, he was absolutely godlike, even if he was only dressed in a black t-shirt and blue jeans. I took a deep breath to try to calm down, but it felt as if time had stopped.

When our eyes locked, we seemed lost in each other's gaze, oblivious to anything else. I was fixated on his piecing stare, and the explosive chemistry between us was absolutely undeniable.

My ex had told me that sexual attraction and chemistry couldn't possibly be planned, that it was something that would just happen naturally. I knew, standing there looking at this new guy, that he wasn't lying. I had never felt like that with my old boyfriend. I couldn't even explain the uncontrollable force that was drawing me to him like a moth to flame. When he looked at me with that sexy smile on his face, I'd never felt so desirable, so wanted, and I wanted to jump into his strong embrace. He was a smoldering hot hunk, and I couldn't believe I had his attention.

"Is everything okay?" he asked a third time, snapping me back into reality.

My mouth dropped, and it took a minute for my brain to function. "Uh, huh? Oh yeah. I'm, um...I'm fine," I babbled, as if that big cat had my tongue.

He stepped forward and looked off into the vegetation. "It's gone for now, but you must be careful of predators out here." He met my gaze straight on. "Predators are always on the prowl. They'll stalk their prey until an opportunity arrives to pounce, then go for the neck with a fatal bite."

"I know. The thought of anything biting me anywhere kind of freaks me out."

"If you are not all right with fangs piercing your skin, you definitely shouldn't be out here."

"You're right. Let's get outta here before the big kitty comes back."

He stared deeply into my eyes. "It won't."

Max growled at the handsome stranger, then began to bark.

A bit embarrassed that I didn't have my dog under better control, I patted the furry beast's head and said, "Don't worry. He doesn't bite."

"Well, tell him that I do."

We both burst out in laughter; his ice-breaker had worked.

Nevertheless, even with my soothing tone and gentle touch, Max still continued.

"Max!" I scolded. "Knock it off, boy."

"Don't blame Max. It's not his fault. All dogs hate me. It's their natural instinct."

"Nah, he's just protective and loyal, that's all. You're still a stranger to him, and he is trying to look after me." I glanced around, still rattled by the mountain lion. "We'd better go, just in case that snarling menace comes back looking for dessert."

"Like I said, it's not coming back," he said sternly, then shifted his powerful stance. "It caught a whiff of my scent. It fears me, just like your dog does."

"You mean it's afraid of shouting humans?"

"The shouting, yes."

I laughed. "So you're telling me that big lion is scared of our little voices?"

He stared at me with those dazzling blue eyes and changed the subject. "Do you always hike unprepared?"

"No. It was an unintended hike. My dog took off," I said, "and I had to find him."

"At the very least, you should carry pepper spray to ward off bears."

"I don't see you sporting a can," I said with a chuckle.

He smirked. "I don't need it. I can fight off a black bear with my bare hands."

I smiled. "All right, Davy Crockett."

He grinned right back at me, nearly melting me where I stood. "But all joking aside, you shouldn't be out here. As I said, these woods are full of hungry predators."

I shot him a flirty look. "Well, then it's a good thing I'm safe here with you."

I didn't know what had come over me, but something had. *Where are these wild emotions even coming from?* I'd never been so bold and daring. It wasn't like me at all, but I couldn't keep the words and the girly giggles from coming out of my mouth. I couldn't explain it, but there was some hot, intense, intoxicating connection between us. The attraction was sizzling, but I didn't have the guts to ask him out or for his phone number. I didn't even know if I was his type or not, if he even liked brunettes with frizzy, curly hair and chocolate-brown eyes. For all I knew, he was only into boob-job bleach blondes, and that most definitely wasn't me.

"You don't know a thing about me," he said. "What makes you think you're safe in my hands?"

"Are you saying I should fear you more than that mountain lion?" I asked. "Maybe I should be carrying more than pepper spray, if that's the case."

"What I'm saying is that you need to be careful. Seemingly nice guys cannot always be trusted," he said, glancing down at the growling Max.

I smiled. "Are *you* a nice guy?"

His face lit up, and he grinned again. "I suppose there's only one way to find out."

I took the bait and engaged him. "And, pray tell, how's that?"

Suddenly, his gorgeous grin faded, and worry flashed across his features. He began to dart his eyes around from tree to tree, shrub to shrub, and he listened so intently that I could have sworn his ears perked up like a dog's.

Max started to bark and snap at the air, but when I peered into the foliage and thick brush, I couldn't see a thing.

"They're back," he whispered, then pointed to Max. "Please keep him quiet."

They? I thought, worried that he was talking about more than one mountain lion. As he suggested, I patted Max's head and tried my best to calm him, but it didn't help.

Finally, Mr. Mysterious knelt down and petted Max. "Shh, boy."

Much to my surprise, Max immediately quit barking.

The handsome stranger then placed his hand on my lower back and briskly led me in the direction of our house. He gently tapped Max's head. "Go home."

Obediently, Max bolted off.

When the house was in view, I glanced over my shoulder to thank my escort, but he was gone, as quickly and mysteriously as he'd shown up in the first place. I squinted and looked through the dark spaces between the trees, but he was nowhere in sight, as if he'd just vanished into thin air. *Who is he?* I wondered. *Where does he live? Gosh, I'm an idiot. I didn't even get his name.* Shaking my head at my foolishness, I walked to the back door and opened it.

"There you are. What took so long, sweetheart?" my mom asked. "And I know you didn't stay in the back yard like I told you to."

I pointed in the direction of where I'd come from. "I saw a mountain lion."

My dad immediately pulled me into a tight hug, then stepped back from me and began inspecting me from head to toe. "Are you okay?"

I sighed. "I'm fine, Dad. Max ran off, and I just—"

"You weren't supposed to go in the woods," he said firmly.

"What was I supposed to do? I had to find Max."

"You shouldn't go out there alone. You could have hollered for me, and I would have gone with you."

"It would've only taken a minute to get me or your dad," my mom said.

"I didn't know he was gonna go so deep into the woods, or I would have," I said.

My dad's brown gaze narrowed. "Are you sure it was a bobcat you saw?"

"Positive. I just took off running and—"

"Taylor," my father pushed, "if that was a bobcat or mountain lion, its natural instinct would be to chase you. Never run. Just yell, shout, and make yourself look bigger."

"Yeah, I know, but I panicked, I guess. Still, it didn't chase me."

"I don't want you going out there alone again," my mom said, as if I was five years old.

Dad handed me a plate with two slices of pizza on it. "Well, you're safe now, so sit down and eat."

I tried to calm my breathing. I didn't have the guts to tell them I'd met a man in the woods and that he had saved me from the mountain lion. My stomach was tangled in knots. "Thanks, Dad, but I'm not really hungry. I think I'll just go unpack a few boxes."

"All right. I guess you have had quite a day," Mom chimed in. "We'll save your pizza, and you can just microwave it later if you get hungry."

"Thanks."

On my way upstairs, I glanced out the window but didn't see anything unusual.

Later that night, when the moon began to shine and the crickets began to chirp and the wind began to whisper through the treetops, I thought about my mysterious stranger. The entire scene played out in my head over and over again in my dreams, and when I woke up the next morning, his beautiful face was on my mind. I had to find him, to see him again, if only once more, and to put a name to the beautiful face that I knew would linger in my mind for a long, long time.

Chapter 2

"Taylor," my mother called, "we're going to the lake to fish and take a paddleboat ride. C'mon, dear!"

"Can I stay and unpack?" I asked.

"No, we're all going."

I blew out a breath. "But I don't want to fish," I whined, far more interested in reeling in the mysterious hottie from the woods.

"Then you can try to get a tan. It's supposed to be warm and sunny today."

I gazed at the leaning tower of boxes that rivaled the one in Pisa. "How am I supposed to find my bathing suit in this mess?"

"I've got an extra you can borrow." She chuckled. "But I must warn you that it has a skirt."

“Mom!” I laughed and shook my head.

She smiled. “Besides, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

My mouth dropped. “No way. Tell me you’re not trying to set me up, especially not while I’m wearing a swimsuit that makes me look like a nun.”

“Honey, it’s nothing like that. I met a friend, and she has a daughter your age. I was thinking you could hang out. She’s new in town too.”

“Oh,” I said. “It’d be nice to have a friend around here. But let me look for my own bathing suit. I think I might know what box it’s in, now that I think about it.”

“Great. We’re leaving in a couple hours.”

Knock!

When I answered my door, a guy my age with short brown hair and piercing green eyes looked at me. He shot me a grin, and I smiled back. He wasn’t as built as the guy in the forest, but he was definitely a cutie, dressed like a jock in a t-shirt, shorts, and Nikes. I couldn’t fathom why this guy was standing in my doorway.

“Hi,” I said. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Your dad hired me to do some yard work.”

I suddenly remembered that my dad had told me that, but I had no idea the landscaper would be so young and attractive; I’d expected a short, balding man in a grubby old flannel shirt and clunky boots.

“Oh, okay. Let me get him for you.” I called for him, and he came to the door.

“This is Fred,” Dad introduced. “He’s going to give our back yard a makeover.”

“It can sure use one,” I said, smiling at Fred. “I can give you a hand if—”

“No way,” my father interrupted. “The last time you helped, the yard looked...well, let’s just say that yard work isn’t your forte, honey.”

Just then, my mom opened the door and peeked out. “Fred, would you like to come to the beach with us?”

Not wanting to be rude, my dad just cleared his throat and looked at her in disbelief. He was paying Fred well to do a job, and he didn’t expect it to be put off. “We’ve gotta get this jungle under control, dear,” he said, looking a bit harshly at her. “I think the sooner Fred gets started, the better.”

“One more day isn’t going to hurt anything,” my mother said. “Let him come with us. He can deal with the yard tomorrow.”

“Is it going to really hurt living in the Amazon one more day?” I asked.

Dad wrinkled his brow at me, then at Mom, refusing to relent. “Taylor, you go on and finish getting ready for the beach. Fred, please come with me so I can show you what we need done.”

His green eyes sparkled like emeralds. “See ya later, Taylor.”

I waved. “Bye. It was nice to meet you.”

I watched intently as my dad talked his ear off with all his big plans for the yard. Fred sneaked a look over his shoulder and smiled. I grinned back, then watched my dad escort him to the other side of the house. Once they were out of sight, I went back upstairs to my room to finish packing for the beach.

* * *

While I stayed on the beach for some sun and fun, Mom and Dad went fishing not too far away. I spread out a colorful towel, applied plenty of Coppertone, and slipped on a pair of sunglasses, then lay down on my back to soak up all the sun I could. My gold bikini left little to the imagination, including more cleavage than my dad was a fan of, but I figured he needed to face the fact I was growing up and was not his little girl anymore. It didn’t really matter anyway, because there were so few people on the beach that one would have thought shark warnings had been posted. I just enjoyed the solitude and the warm rays and listened to the birds and gulls soaring overhead.

“Taylor?” a girl’s voice said.

I sat up and grinned. “Yep, that’s me.”

A tall blonde in a tie-dyed bathing suit, with a large, striped beach bag over her shoulder, was holding her hand out for a shake. "I'm Julie. I've been dying to meet you. Mom tells me we're the same age, in the same grade. I just moved here last week, and I don't know a soul."

I shook her hand and smiled. "That makes two of us."

She smiled, then spread out her own beach towel, adjusted her sunglasses, and politely asked, "If you don't mind, I'm gonna catch some rays too."

"Sounds like a plan," I said. I lay back down and turned my head in her direction. "Where do you live?"

"Not far from you. My parents split, and Mom's—"

"Divorced?"

"You nailed it. Divorce, the future tense of marriage."

I had to stifle a laugh, considering that her wounds were probably still fresh, but I appreciated her cynical sense of humor. "I'm sorry," I said.

"Meh, it's fine, and I'll be fine too. I always bounce back. It's like I have nine lives. My dad got remarried and lives in Washington, and Mom got a job as a manager for Sleepy Forest Cottages. Where do your parents work?"

"In their pajamas sometimes," I said.

"Huh?"

"Heh. They work from home. They're authors, so for them, this place is like a writers' retreat, the perfect inspiration."

"Oh. Well, that's pretty cool."

"I guess. They met at a writing conference and have been inseparable ever since. I guess you could call it love at first write," I said with a smile.

She laughed. "Fairytale perfect, huh?"

"Well...sometimes. But speaking of fairytales," I said, "I think I met Prince Charming."

She lifted her glasses up and smiled. "Really? Where? Is he a lifeguard or something?" she asked, looking around.

"Not that I know of—at least not in the traditional sense. Yesterday, my dog Max took off into the woods, and when I ran in there to get him, I bumped into this super hot guy."

"Whoa!" She lifted a brow. "A hot forest boy, huh?"

Just then, another vision of the Greek god flashed through my head, his black hair wafting in the wind like some majestic stallion's mane. I grinned as I imagined the intimate touch of his lips on mine.

"Hello? Earth to Taylor," Julie said, snapping me out of my trance.

"Oh...sorry. I was just thinking about him. He was just so...hot. "

"Do tell."

I lifted my sunglasses off my face. "Smokin' ...really."

She furrowed a brow. "As in...sizzling?"

I grinned. "Smoldering."

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Um...that's the thing. I don't know."

"What!? You mean to tell me this gorgeous creature was standing right there in front of you, and you didn't even find out who he is?"

"Well, we talked for a few minutes, and I felt this amazing connection. I guess I was so caught up in the moment that I just didn't think to ask."

"You know what that was, don't ya?"

"What?"

"Chemistry."

"Yeah, I guess."

“So lemme get this straight. You met some hot guy who took your breath away, and you didn’t even get his name? Do you even know where he’s from?”

“You mean besides Heaven?”

She laughed. “OMG, that’s soooo corny.”

I laughed back at her. “I don’t know.”

She shot me a look like I was crazy. “Why didn’t you ask?”

“Well, there were mountain lions, and—”

“Mountain lions, as in *plural*?”

“Yeah. Why?”

She lifted a finger. “Clue number one. Mr. Wonderful doesn’t know much about the wildlife around here. I read up on it. Mountain lions travel alone.”

“Hmm. That’s odd. When we were out there, after we scared one lion away, my dog started acting funny, and he said, ‘*They’re back*.’”

“Only mothers and kittens live in groups, and I doubt a mama bobcat would come back with her babies. What happened after that?”

“He seemed jumpy and rushed me back home, then took off. When I glanced over my shoulder, he was gone.”

“Hmm. He does sound mysterious. I’ll keep out an eye for him. What does he look like?”

“He’s gorgeous.”

“Yeah, you already said that. What else?”

“Well, he has black hair to his shoulders.” I smiled even wider, recalling every detail of his features. “And he’s got these big, bright blue eyes, almost like he was wearing those colored contacts.”

“You mean, like, pastel or a piercing shade of bright blue?”

“I don’t know, exactly. When I was a kid, there was this crayon in my box of Crayolas that was called Periwinkle. It was kind of like that, the rarest eye color I’ve ever seen. It was the lightest blue ever, as blue as the sky. I don’t know who he is, but I’ve gotta find out.”

“So you’re calling dibs on the hottest guy on town already? Gee, I sure hope he has a brother.”

“I’m not even sure if he lives here,” I said.

“What would make you think otherwise?”

“Well, you said yourself that he made a mistake about the mountain lions. It seems like a local would know better. Maybe he was just hiking and is staying in one of the hotels.”

“Was he dressed like a hiker? Did he have a backpack and gear and hiking boots?”

“No, none of that.”

“Hmm. I do love a good mystery. We’ve gotta find your hunky hottie and see if he’s got an equally smoldering brother.”

I laughed. “And how are we supposed to do that? Stalk the resorts, hotels, and cabins?”

“No. I have a better idea. This guy named Jed is throwing a party tonight at his cabin. Lucky for us, I got invited. If this mysterious guy is a local, I’m sure he’ll be there.”

“And if he doesn’t show up?”

“Then we move on to Plan B.”

“Which is?”

“Stalking the resorts, hotels, and cabins.”

“Man, that’s gonna suck.”

She rolled on her stomach to get some sun on her back. “Yep. If he’s a tourist, he’ll most likely be here for no more than a week or two. But even if he leaves, I’m sure there are other cute guys around here somewhere.”

“I don’t want another cute guy. I want him.”

"Picky, picky, picky! When you show up tonight, make sure you look good. Wear something cute. If he happens to be there and he's single, maybe you'll snag him. At least you can find out his name this time."

"Right," I said and gave my new friend a fist bump.

"I need to meet somebody to forget about my ex," she said.

"Yeah, I know the feeling. I did meet another guy who's pretty cute," I said.

"Wow. What are you, a guy magnet? How'd you meet that one? And don't blame your dog."

"He knocked on my door."

She laughed. "Hey! How come I don't have that kind of luck?"

"My dad hired him to do some yard work. His name is Fred."

"So introduce me," she said.

"I will."

"Unless you want him."

"Nah, he's a cutie all right, but I'm all hung up on Mr. Blue Eyes. Fred's are jade green, kinda like yours."

"Well, anything to get my mind off my ex," Julie said.

"My love life isn't so great either. I was dumped about six months ago. Sean said we didn't have the spark he needs."

"Spark? The guy sounds like a jerk. Trust me, you're better off with somebody else than a guy who'd ever say something like that to a girl. If he wants a spark, maybe somebody oughtta shove a lighter up his—"

"Hey! Gross!" I squealed, cutting her off before she made me visualize something I didn't want to see.

She laughed, and I couldn't help laughing too.

"Anyway, he is a jerk, like you said. He had a girlfriend one day after he dumped me."

"Idiot!"

I sighed. "Tell me about it."

She sat up and grinned coyly, as if she was up to something naughty. "So...are you ready to forget about him and have some fun?"

"Definitely."

"Good. I'll pick you up tonight. Mom already told me where you live. Is seven okay?"

"I'll be ready and waiting."

"Cool. And look, Taylor, if your fiery forest friend isn't there, don't worry about it. I've got a feeling there won't be a shortage of hotties around here—or at least I hope there won't."

I smirked. "I've got a feeling we're going to be really good friends," I said, and I knew it was the truth.

Chapter 3

Julie's bright blonde hair was in long, beautiful waves, and her green eyes really popped, thanks to the brown eyeshadow she'd chosen. She was dressed in tight black pants, and her black, glittery shirt sparkled from a mile away.

"You do know we're going to a party in the woods, right?" I said.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You look red-carpet ready."

"Too much?" she asked.

"Maybe a tad," I said, gesturing with my index finger and thumb.

Her eyes twinkled like green jewels. "When I get the hottest guy in the room, I'll be sure to give you my Academy Awards speech."

I smiled. "Love your confidence."

"Get in."

I pretended like I was talking into a microphone. "And the Academy Award for best dressed goes to—"

"Julie Winters!" she said with a laugh.

When she pulled into the driveway of our destination, my jaw dropped. For some reason, I had pictured a cottage in the woods, but the place was far from that. Instead, it was a huge, fancy cabin with a spacious deck and bay windows all around.

"Are you ready to find Prince Charming?" she asked with a huge smile.

"You know it," I said.

She opened her compact and checked her makeup, making sure her smoky eyes were still smoky enough. "Okay. I think we're good to go."

Two thin girls with long hair and short skirts walked past us. They were so pretty that I felt intimidated; I was sure I had no shot with my mysterious guy while those two were in the vicinity. Swallowing hard, I pondered. He had so many girls to choose from, and I felt like a beat-up station wagon in a lot full of Benzes and Ferraris. I had never been low on confidence, but I suddenly felt as if I didn't stand a chance with any guy, let alone the one I wanted.

"Taylor," my new friend said, "is this the first time you've been out in public since your breakup?"

"Yeah, basically." I slammed the door shut. "But you know what? He's the last person on my mind."

"I guarantee by the time we go home, you'll have forgotten all about the scumbag. He doesn't deserve to be missed."

"I don't think about him," I lied.

She smirked. "Yes you do."

"All right," I said, "maybe just a little, but we dated for a long time, so it's only natural to—"

She grabbed my arm. "No sad stories tonight. Let's go."

Glancing around the yard, I noticed beer bottles strewn everywhere. Clusters of people were sitting around outside, and one couple was making out beside a red sports car. A drunk person stumbled down the steps, and a woman in the shortest skirt and the highest heels I'd ever seen ran over to him, laughing hysterically, probably more drunk than he was.

Somebody whistled as we walked past a group of people, and I heard a man ask, "Hey, do I know you?"

"Jed invited us," Julie said.

"Welcome to the party then," he said. "Go on in and help yourselves to some appetizers and drinks, ladies."

I smiled. "Thanks."

Inside, the music was blaring, and everyone was laughing and dancing. It was hot and sticky, and the crowd was a little older than I thought; none of them looked like high school students. It reminded me of a college frat party, and I immediately wondered why Julie had even been invited.

Whether we wanted everyone's attention or not, all eyes were on us, staring at us like we were some kind of two-headed unicorn. I swallowed hard, glancing from one open mouth to the other. Something was wrong, and I could have almost cut the tension with the proverbial knife. I wasn't sure why they were looking at us like that, so I assumed they just weren't expecting teenagers to show up at their older-crowd get-together.

When the chatter and laughter resumed, much to my relief, I nudged Julie. "We should leave. I don't feel comfortable here."

"Oh, don't be a party-pooper," Julie said. "Look at all these hot college guys. Maybe I'll even snag one."

"Really, Julie, I think it's best we leave."

She put her hand on her hip and turned to face me, then actually stomped her foot like a spoiled toddler. "Seriously? You wanna go back to your boring house? Let's just have a drink and chat a little. If you still want to leave then, we will."

I looked around uneasily and swallowed hard. "I already know I want to leave now."

"Well, you didn't drive."

My lips pressed into grim lines. I didn't like being forced into such a situation, and she knew it.

"Oh, all right. If you wanna leave, we'll go," she said over the loud music. "But we got all dressed up, and one drink would be nice."

She shot me that stupid puppy dog face and stuck her bottom lip out.

Just like that, I caved. "Fine. One drink," I said, "but then we're heading back to your house."

She smiled at the compromise. "I knew you'd see it my way," she said smugly.

I was sure one drink wouldn't kill us, but I still couldn't wait to get out of there. The stench of smoke wafted past me, and I stepped away from the girl who was blowing at me. I jumped when another girl hurled right beside my feet. I frowned when Julie pulled me away and into the crowd.

"You ladies want a drink?" asked a blond guy in his twenties.

Julie grinned. "Sure." When he walked away, her grin grew even wider. "See?" she said. "We fit right in."

"Meh, I guess it's better than sitting on the porch and listening to frogs and crickets," I said with a shrug.

"That's the spirit!" She suddenly grabbed my arm. "Hear that?"

What? The loud music or the roaring laughter? "Hear what?"

"Only my favorite song in the whole wide world!" She started swaying her hips to the beat of the music.

The music pounded louder as the guy finally returned with our drinks.

"Thanks," I said.

As I opened it, he slammed his bottle against mine in some kind of impromptu and uninvited toast, and beer splattered my face and started to fizz all over the place.

"Ah! What was that for?" I asked, trying to wipe my face.

He winked. "Gotta pay better attention, little girl," he said, then began to laugh.

I didn't see what was so funny, and in a rage, I turned to Taylor. "I've been here less than five minutes, and I'm already soaked with beer, smelling like a smokestack, and almost got puke on my shoes!"

She pulled me into the crowd. "Don't pay him any mind. He's drunk. Your shirt won't take long to dry, and then no one will even notice. C'mon. Let's have some fun."

A tall guy with pretty green eyes reached for Julie, and she giggled flirtatiously as he twirled her around. "I see you love to jam," he said, eying her up and down. "Wanna dance?"

"I'd love to," she said. "This is my favorite song."

"Mine too."

She glanced at me. "Do you mind?"

I couldn't possibly refuse to let her go because the invitation to dance with a college guy had her looking like she'd just won the lottery. I didn't see the harm in letting her bask in the light for one dance or two. "Have fun."

"You're the best!" she shouted.

After she shimmied off with the green-eyed goon, I glanced around and swallowed hard again when I realized I didn't know a soul other than her. Eager to claim my role as an unnoticed, inconspicuous wallflower, I made my way to the corner and waited for the dance to finish. I leaned against the wall, I sipped my drink.

The next song that came on was a slow love song, and I felt uncomfortable all over again, standing there by myself as couples snuggled close all around me. I decided it would be better if I made my way through the crowd and headed out to the deck for some fresh air.

Just as I spun around to leave, a towering figure with brown eyes smiled at me. He looked to be in his early twenties and short cropped hair. "What's a pretty girl like you doing here without a date?" he asked.

"Like the old song says," I said with a shy smile, "girls just wanna have fun."

"Well, dancing is fun. Would you like to?" he asked.

"Sure," I said with a shrug, as if I wasn't flattered at all.

We danced through the slow song, which was a bit awkward with a stranger, but when the fast music came on, we danced some more. Julie and I did shots, but all in all, she drank far more than I did. After the drinks loosened me up a little, I danced with a few guys at the party and made lots of small talk as the hours waned on.

After a while, she leaned on my shoulder in a drunken stupor and slurred, "He wants me to go upstairs with him. Should I go? I mean, I'm totally turned on right now, and—"

"You're drunk," I said, snatching the drink out of her hand. "Consider yourself cut off," I scolded, "and you're definitely not going upstairs with him or anybody else on my watch."

"What!? Why am I cut off?"

"Because you have to drive us home. I can't drive a stick."

"You're right," she said. "I'll start trying to sober up. Besides, the last thing I need is a bad reputation already. I just got here!"

"Exactly."

When she leaned on me with all her weight, I almost stumbled. "I'm so glad you're here to watch out for me," she said. "You're my best friend. We girls gotta stick together. And you know what?"

"What?"

"Where's the guy who promised to bring me coffee? My head feels like there's a thunderstorm in it."

"I didn't know somebody was getting you coffee."

"Not just somebody. An angel. The caffeine angel."

I almost laughed at her, but I didn't feel that would be appropriate. "You're so wasted."

"Really, a blue-eyed angel offered to bring me a cuppajo. Blue eyes like Heaven, where he comes from."

Wait...light blue eyes? Maybe...periwinkle eyes? My heart began to thump in excitement that I hoped wouldn't be for nothing.

In the next second, she turned to a guy and smiled. "You're back...and you really did bring me coffee. How sweet. Thank you."

When I could muster up the courage to glance up at her hero, I found myself staring right into the eyes of my own, the one from the forest. My heart pounded a symphony all its own as I stared into his intense, vivid blue eyes. I couldn't pull my eyes away from his high cheekbones and that sharply chiseled face. I'd never seen such a beautiful face before, such a masterpiece of strength, contours, and beauty, like something off the cover of a romance novel or some dapper leading man in a classic romance movie. This time, he was wearing a white shirt, dark blue jeans, a well-worn bomber jacket, and I immediately began to envy that cotton, denim, and leather.

He held out his hand and smiled. "Hi. I'm Jesse."

"Taylor," I said, unable to put a whole sentence together.

"Nice to officially meet you. Mind if I get your picture?" he asked, holding up a camera.

"Um...sure, okay. But...why?"

"To prove to my friends that angels exist."

It was a ridiculous line, like one some cliché some sleaze-bag idiot would say in a bar, but coming from his lips, it seemed sincere. I couldn't help but smile at his blatant flirtations, and the heat in my blushing cheeks scorched my skin. With him, it wasn't just a pick-up line. He was trying to break the ice, and it worked; again, I was absolutely melting.

"Well, in that case, I need to take yours too," I said.

"You're more than welcome, but I don't show up on film."

I laughed again.

Another slow song began, and Jesse casually took off his jacket and smiled. The fabric of his long-sleeved shirt clung to his broad shoulders and muscular chest, and the white cotton made his shoulder-length hair stand out even more. "Would you like to dance?" he asked like a gentleman, offering me his hand.

I grinned. "I'd love to."

He shot me his leading-man smile and wrapped his arms around my waist as I placed my arms on his shoulder. My heart jumped into a new rhythm of excitement, dancing to the music drifting around us as we stared intently into each other's eyes. I was nervous, but at the same time, I felt comfortable and safe; scared but happy. I'd never felt such a strange mix of emotions before, and I couldn't stop smiling. There was a thrilling, rushing, euphoric something going on between us, and for that one timeless moment, everything in my life seemed perfect.

We swayed back and forth to the music, slow and close, and I rested my head in the crook of his neck. I never would have imagined myself dancing with someone like Jesse, someone so beautiful. I couldn't believe *he* was holding *me*. I felt I was walking on air. I'd always laughed at that cliché before, but for the first time, I suddenly knew what it meant.

Some of the guys I'd been chitchatting with at the party didn't seem to be fans of his, and I could feel the tension like daggers in my back as they shot me glares. As much as I wanted to be with Jesse, I didn't want to cause any trouble, so I thought it was best that we head back to Julie's house. I had a nice buzz, but I wasn't trashed like she was. When I glanced over, I noticed that she was drinking a second cup of coffee, so I hoped that would sober her up enough to drive us home in one piece.

"I hope she's okay to drive," I said to Jesse.

"If not, I'm sure you'll get her home safe and sound."

"Do you live around here?" I asked.

"Yes, in Big Bear."

Excitement flooded through me when I discovered he wasn't merely a tourist who'd be taking off anytime soon. I smiled up at him, then glanced down and noticed a bracelet on his arm, leather woven with silver beads and decorated with weird symbols. "I love that," I said, nodding toward it, "but what do the symbols mean?"

He shot me the most beautiful grin, a movie star smile. "You've gotta get to know me better before I can tell you all my deep, dark secrets," he said. He smiled when he said it, but I got the feeling he wasn't joking.

I gave him my best flirty smile. "Is that a promise?"

"You have my word...and my word is my bond."

I smiled again, then nervously fidgeted with my hands like some silly little middle-schooler. I really had no idea how to keep up the conversation with such a hot guy, and every word was a struggle. "How old are you?" I finally asked, since I couldn't think of anything else.

"Seventeen."

"Really!? Me too."

"So is this a new school year for you?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe we'll be in some of the same classes."

“Nah, I’m homeschooled. Like I was telling you a while ago, my mom is a bona fide control freak, and—”

“Taylor!” Julie called. “I feel sick. I think I’m gonna pass out.”

When I glanced over, she was teetering. I rushed over, but before I could reach her, she swayed to the left and toppled over. She tried to grab a side table on the way down, but it didn’t help; she crashed to the floor, knocking a huge vase over in the process.

“Oh my gosh! Julie!”

The alcohol was one thing, but I couldn’t understand why blood was gushing from her neck, trickling down onto her shirt.

Chapter 4

When I ran over to my friend and looked down at her wounds, I assumed the shattered vase shards must have cut her during her fall. I only hoped she wouldn’t need stitches, because she was bleeding pretty profusely. Someone handed me a kitchen towel, and I applied pressure to the wound. “She needs a hospital or a doctor or maybe some stitches and—”

“No!” said a woman who was suddenly standing over me, looking down at Julie. “It’s a shallow cut, nothing a bandage and some peroxide can’t fix.”

I looked up. “Are you sure? I mean, she’s bleeding really bad, and—”

“Positive,” she said, cutting me off. “I’m a medic. Let me go get my medical kit from the car.”

I squeezed Julie’s hand. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes fluttered open. “I-I think so.”

“Just lie still and hold on. There’s a medic here, and she’s going to help.”

“A medic? Wow. Lucky for me. I drank way too much, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s putting it lightly. Do you remember me cutting you off?”

She offered a half-smile. “Yeah, but I still sneaked drinks behind your back.”

Knowing it was important to keep Julie awake, I engaged her in conversation until the woman came back.

“Can you give me a hand?” the woman said to Jesse.

“Sure,” he said.

She then went to work to cleanse the wound and put a sterile white bandage on it.

Once Julie was all fixed up, Jesse and I helped her back up to her feet.

“See? Good as new,” Julie slurred.

“It’d be best if she gets some rest now,” the medic said.

“But I-I can’t drive,” Julie stuttered. “I’m toasted...and now wounded from a pissed-off vase.”

Jesse pulled me to the side. “Can you get her home?” he whispered.

“This is so embarrassing, but her car’s a stick shift, and I’ve got no idea how to drive one. I probably can’t drive any safer than she can right now.”

“Lucky for you, I can.”

“But then how will you get back?” I asked.

“I can walk.”

“No, it’s way too far, Jesse.”

“I’ll be fine.” He bit his lip and looked down at Julie as if he was worried. “It’s best we sneak out of here.”

I furrowed a brow. “Sneak out? Why?”

“You see that guy she was dancing with?”

“Yeah. She told me his name, but I forget.”

“It’s Jonathon, and he’s an absolute psycho. I’m afraid he might follow her home if he sees her leaving.”

I shook my head in disbelief. "Are you sure? That's insane."

"I heard him claim her, and I heard some of the other guys claiming you. They may look like your average drunken frat boys, but they're beyond dangerous, Taylor. The nice guys are outnumbered here. I've got a couple of buddies here, but we're no match against the others. They'll jump us, and I'm not sure I can protect you."

"Wait...claiming people? Just what kind of party did she bring me to?" I muttered to myself.

"A dangerous one," he retorted, overhearing my conversation with myself. "My buddies will distract them while I sneak you two out the back door."

"Great idea," I said. "Maybe they won't see us leave."

"That's the plan."

Jesse wrapped his arm around Julie and helped her walk out the back door of the cabin. Gripping my purse tightly, I followed. A cool breeze blew through my hair, and I shuddered, wishing I'd worn a coat. I couldn't believe the extreme temperature change; earlier that day, I'd been sunning on the beach, and now Mother Nature had invited Jack Frost over for a nightcap.

"How much did you have to drink?" Jesse asked Julie.

"She's had way too much," I answered for her. "I bet she'll puke all over the truck."

"Hey!" Julie said. "I can answer for myself." Her gaze turned to Jesse. "Mr. Gorgeous, Handsome Prince, I had lots of beers, a Long Island iced tea, beers, and some shots," she answered. "Oh, and there was this one bubbly purple thing the color of that dinosaur on the kids' show and—"

"Do you remember where the keys to your truck are?" he said, cutting her off before the confession could continue.

"Hmm. Maybe you'll have to frisk me, Officer McHottie," she said in a flirty tone.

I rolled my eyes, mouthed an apology to Jesse, then reached into her pocket and grabbed them. "They're right here."

"Hey!" she said. "I didn't want *you* to frisk me!"

"This isn't the time for games, Julie," I said. "We have to get out of here and back home."

"I'm freezing!" she retorted. "Who turned on the air?"

I reached in the back seat and handed her a blue sweater. "Wear this."

She put it on and smiled. "Mmm...so warm. Gosh, I'm so drunk. Thank you though."

Jesse helped my intoxicated new best friend into her pickup. She sat between us and laid her head on his shoulder, and when he glanced at me questioningly, all I could do was shrug and apologize again on behalf of my drunken friend.

"I guess she had a little too much to drink," I whispered.

"A little?" He laughed.

Julie tapped him. "Are you Prince Charming?" she asked.

"What?" he asked, turning the key in the ignition. "Because I helped bandage you up?"

"Are you the hot guy from the woods?" she asked. "The hero who saved Little Red Riding Taylor from the big, bad mountain lion?"

My cheeks blushed. "Julie!" I said.

Before he could answer, she continued, "You have black hair and eyes like that crayon. Taylor told me all about you."

My cheeks grew even hotter with embarrassment, and I suddenly wished with all my heart that my life had a rewind button.

"And Taylor was right," she continued. "Your eyes are gorgeous, like the sky."

I cleared my throat and glanced at him awkwardly. "You do have pretty eyes," I admitted.

He grinned back at me. "And so do you."

I couldn't stop grinning from the compliment as we sped along the road, until something jerked us forward.

"What the heck?" Julie said, stunned.

"Feels like we blew a tire," I said as we came to a jerky stop.

"That sucks," Julie slurred. "I don't have a spare."

"We can just walk," I said. "I don't think we're that far away."

Jesse shook his head. "Absolutely not. I'll call somebody." He flipped his phone open and began talking to one of his buddies.

"Julie," I said, "how are you feeling? Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine. I forgot to tell you I drank a Long Island iced tea. Do you know how much liquor they put in those things?"

"Yeah, you told me already. How's your neck?"

"Fine, but that stupid vase nailed me real good. Wanna know the worst part though?"

"What?"

"I didn't even get the blond's phone number. He was so hot."

Jesse cut in. "Trust me, you don't want that guy's number."

"Yes I do."

"He's way too dangerous."

"A bad boy, huh? I like that."

"Not a bad boy. He's a bad man—a real bad man—and like many of the guys back there, he's nothing but trouble," Jesse said. "You two had no business being at that party out in the middle of the woods with a bunch of older strangers."

"Yeah? Well, I guess we were lucky you were looking out for us," Julie said.

He smiled.

"So what can we do about the tire?" she asked.

"My friend's coming," Jesse said. "I'll wait outside for him. You two stay put."

"Why not stay in here with us?" I asked.

"Because I have to make sure the big, bad wolf doesn't come and eat you."

"Ooh. Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" Julie slurred.

I laughed as he slammed the door shut.

"He's cute," Julie said, "and funny too."

"Yeah, but if that party was so dangerous, what was he doing there?" I asked.

"Maybe he's just as dark and dangerous as they are," she said in a creepy voice. "Boo!" she said as she grabbed my arm.

I jumped and screamed, "Julie! Stop that!"

She began laughing like a crazy person. "Oh, man! You...Taylor, you shoulda seen your face! Priceless."

"Ha-ha. Very funny."

"I'm sorry the party didn't work out, but at least you found Prince Charming. Wasn't that the important thing?" She shot me a sly smile as she gave me a fist-bump.

Grinning, I bumped her back.

"Look at you, all lust at first sight for our bad boy."

"There's definitely a connection, but I don't think it's lust...and I don't think he's a bad boy."

"That's too bad. But anyway, it's obvious that you're attracted to him like there's no tomorrow."

I smiled and couldn't possibly deny it.

"You've got it for him big time, don't ya?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Then why are you sitting in here talking to me when he's out there all by himself, glistening in the moonlight?"

"Meh, I'm sure girls throw themselves at him all the time. I don't wanna be like that."

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