

Prologue: Wedding Bells

I walked impatiently back and forth in the bathroom. Hasn't it been three minutes yet?! Just then, my phone buzzed on the sink as I rushed to pick it up the stick and my mouth dropped to the floor. Two pink lines stared back at me. I am pregnant... A million different emotions rushed through my mind.

My head snapped to the left when someone started banging on the door. Quickly, I hid the test away in my makeup bag. I had to tell Nate the news fast. Excitedly, I opened the door and ran past Siri out the door and down the hallway. The excitement died down the further down the hall I went. How would Nate feel? Would he love me more or would he hate me? Would he want me to get rid of the babe or want it? Indecision started to crawl up my spine.

"Nyssa, you're not supposed to see him till the wedding! It's bad luck!" Siri said following me, trying to stop me from going to the groom's quarters.

"I just want to talk to him really quick. I won't look, I'll stay on the other side of the door." We giggled with excitement, but the knot twisted tighter in my stomach. I was supposed to be the happiest girl in the world, or I should be, but the truth was, I wasn't sure I could go through with this. I was about to marry my boyfriend of the last three years of my life. Nothing could ruin today for me, or could it?

Flashes of my dream boyfriend, what *I* called him, flashed in my mind, his touches and love made my heart swell. He's who I wanted but he wasn't even real. Nate was real and here, waiting to marry me. The thoughts of Nate and his anger sent a chill of fear down my spine.

I could hear his voice still, "No one wants you, without me you are nothing. You will be alone forever, and if any man does come along, then he'll only use you for the one thing you're good at." He'd snickered as his eyes had roamed down my

body. “But you’re good for something, at least.” More doubts filled me, and confusion of what to do ate at me.

I shook off the memory, feeling worthless like usual. Siri watched me closely, she was suspicious of Nate and our relationship. She really didn’t like him, but I could tell she had been trying hard to hold her tongue so we wouldn’t fight today.

“What’s that noise? It sounds like moaning?” Siri asked as we slowed down getting closer to the room at the end of the chapel hallway.

“It’s probably Bree and Johnny, they’ve been flirting non-stop this whole week that we’ve been here. She’s been MIA for the last hour, anyway, you know Johnny, always the playboy, I warned her, he would try and get in her pants.”

“I still don’t know why you invited her, especially after she slept with your prom date in high school. I would have cut all ties with her long ago, Nyssa.” Siri said, shaking her head.

“Yeah, but we made up in college about that. Just let the past stay in the past, Siri. Besides, she would never do something like that to me again.” I said rolling my eyes. Yet, a feeling of uncertainty gnawed at me, but I brushed it off. Siri always worried too much about me.

The moaning was getting louder and we giggled as male voice shushed her, but the knot squeezed tighter in my stomach. Why, I didn’t know, maybe my intuition was screaming at me and as always, I was just choosing to ignore it.

“Wow, Johnny sure has some stamina...” Siri joked beside me.

We were leaning into the door and whispering, when a voice behind us made us jump out of our skins.

“Dang, I didn’t know you two were into voyeurism, that’s pretty hot.” As Johnny’s voice rang out loud, my heart dropped from my chest.

I slowly turned around as Johnny's eyes practically bulged out of his head before me. I froze in shock.

"If you're out here, then who's in....?"

"Son of a..." Siri kicked the door in as she yanked me into the room with her.

Bree let out a scream and Nate struggled to pull his pants up. Siri didn't even waste time as she yanked Bree by her blonde hair and dragged her to the window.

"I was only just reminding my sister that you were a whore and you just proved me right. Nobody hurts my sister and gets away with it." She didn't even hesitate or stop to think as she shoved Bree, naked as a jaybird, through the tall glass window.

"My clothes!" Bree squealed trying to get back inside.

"What clothes?" Siri yelled as she threw them into the fireplace. Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion as my eyes and Nate's locked, in that moment my whole world fell apart. Siri was throwing every glass thing available at Bree, keeping her from coming back in the window. All our family and friends who were gathered outside were watching the scandal unfold first hand.

"Hey Dan! We have a streaker here! Why don't you call the boys and take her in, and book her for public indecency." Giggled Siri.

"What? You're forcing me to be out here! You threw my clothes in the fire!" Bree shot back, panic evident in her voice.

"Already on it, partner." Dan said with a wink, as a couple of uniformed officers handcuffed Bree and took her away in the squad car.

Dan leaned into the window, "you know that'll probably never stick."

"Yes, but it will teach that slut not to mess with the Liddell sisters." Siri fired

back. Dan shook his head, laughing at my sister. He walked off to do, what I assumed, was crowd control.

Nate came up to me trying to take my hand but I yanked it back while stepping away from him as Siri stepped between us. “Don’t you even think about touching her!”

I hesitated, unsure of what to do as I watched Siri face off, protecting me from Nate’s hidden wrath.

My mind was blank, What do I do? Something broke inside me, thinking about the baby growing and the pathetic man before me. It was time for me to walk away.

“Baby, it was nothing. Just a last hoorah before we are bound to each other for the rest of our lives.”

Disgusted, I turned to walk away as Siri wrapped her arm around me to usher me out of the room.

“Hey! I’m talking to you, maybe if you put out more I wouldn’t have to find other means to satisfy myself,” Nate snarked angrily at me as I continued to walk away.

I paused in the doorway, his jab stung and he knew it. “Maybe if you could get it up without hitting me, I would be more inclined to *want* you.” I said, raising my head high but not turning to look back at him, I knew if I did, I would cower like the weak fool I am and give into him. Nate, furious, stepped up behind me and yanked my shoulder back. I knew what was coming but this time I was done being his victim. I swung a right hook clipping him in the nose. A loud crunch sounded and pain shot up through my knuckles.

“Shit... Shit... Oh my god that hurt!” I said, curling my hand to my chest.

“He did *what* to you?!” Siri asked, infuriated as she kicked her foot right into his

ball sack. Nate squealed about ten octaves higher than I had and dropped to his knees.

“Let’s get that hand looked at and then we’re getting you far away from this hellish nightmare.” Siri soothed. I numbly nodded my head in agreement allowing her to lead me away from the room.

Welcome to The Happy Endings Resort

“Nyssa! Earth to NYSSA!!” Siri yelled at me from the driver’s seat.

“What! I’m right here!” I grumbled irritably, we had been trapped in the car for two days, sightseeing and blowing off steam. Even though only a few days had passed, the nightmare of what I had almost done to my life haunted me.

“I’ve been talking to you nonstop for the last twenty minutes and you’ve been in la-la-land doing only who knows what again.” She said sternly but then she added more with concern, “are you okay? I mean really, I thought...well, I don’t know what I thought, but you’re rather calm, all things considering. I’m not mad at you anymore for not telling me about how much your boyfriend was an abusive jerk, but you do need to talk about it.”

“There’s not much to talk about sis, I’m free... Can I just revel in that right now? Please?” I asked, pressing back at her.

The truth was, I didn’t want to talk about how many times I’d lived in fear of him or how I’ve walked on eggshells every day for the last three years of my life. What a fool I was to think that marrying him was the best thing I could ever be afforded in this life.

Siri reached over and squeezed my shoulder and I almost jumped out of my seat. Lost in my own thoughts, the unexpected touch scared me, remembering the things Nate did. Siri threw her hands up in surrender but I could see the anger in her eyes at my fear.

“I’m sorry sis, I wasn’t thinking. I’ve seen many women go through what you have, it just takes time to work through it. But that’s what this week is all about, relaxation, forgetting the past and onwards to the future!” Siri said trying to perk up my mood again.

I shook my head at her in disbelief, a cop shouldn't be so optimistic about life. I changed the subject. "It's a good thing I booked these nonrefundable tickets to this resort."

"Yes, I'm personally looking forward to working on my tan and swimming in the water. My farmer's tan is out of control!" Siri said feigning dramatic horror over the state of her body.

Laughter burst out of me in fits and snorts which sent Siri into tear-filled laughter at me. It was an endless cycle for the next ten minutes of the car ride. But we calmed down when we saw a huge sign, no, more like a billboard, we had arrived at our destination. *Finally.*

Welcome to The Happy Endings Resort

Where happy endings are guaranteed...

"Well, this sounds promising..." I giggled as Siri parked at the front office.

We were met at the front desk by a geeky man with thinning hair and glasses. My guess, he was in his mid-forties?

"Welcome to the Happy Endings Resort, ladies. My name is Edwin and I'm the manager of this establishment. What can I do for you?"

"We have a paid reservation for two, under Liddell." I said. He adjusted his glasses nervously while typing into the computer.

The bell on the door jingled making us turn around, only to see two guys walk inside. Immediately, my eyes went to the dark haired, blue eyed guy but Siri's attention went to his surfer-boy-looking friend. Exactly her type, long sandy blonde hair, and a tan that could only have come from endless hours in the sun. I could practically see Siri's tongue starting to waggle from her mouth, I elbowed her in the side.

“Oww! What was that for?” Siri said scolding me. “I think you dropped something...”

“I what?” She said, before she caught on and rolled her eyes at me, making me barely able to suppress my giggles. “Excuse me ma’am. There’s been a mix up.” Edwin said wringing his hands nervously.

“What kind of mix up?”

“It seems your reservation has been switched from the trailer to a tent site.” He replied.

“Wh... *Ugh, Nate, that asshat.* I know exactly who did this. *HE* did it on purpose, I thought you said he was in jail, Siri? “He is, but even inmates can make phone calls, unfortunately,” Siri said, rubbing her temples. She was about to lose her mind. I intervened before Siri gave the poor guy a heart attack with her dominant personality.

“Edwin, can you fix it? We drove so far to get here.” I wheedled.

“Will a cabin be okay? It’s all we have available this week.” I could tell that he was waiting for the meltdown to happen but it was his lucky day. “Yes, we’ll take it.” A cabin was far better than a tent.

Siri and I squealed in excitement as we unlocked the door to the beautiful cabin. The open layout of what appeared to be a small place, was actually quite big inside. A fireplace to left when you walked into the living room, the first room you see when you walk in through the front door. The two bedrooms were on the opposite sides of the place with their own bathrooms and the kitchen was straight past the living room. It had a very open and homey feeling to it. The resort keeps it very rustic with stained not painted interior. We dropped our bags inside the door, running to one of the bedrooms, which turned out to be the master bedroom, and jumping on the bed like we did as little girls. Giggling, I picked up

the big fluffy white pillow and bopped Siri on the head.

“Hey! Not fair!” She said as she fought back with her own fluffy pillow.

We fell back onto the bed laughing for the first time in years feeling carefree. There was a soft tap on the door, Siri and I looked at each other shocked, then burst out in a fit of laughter.

“It’s that manager come to ask you out, Nyssa!” Siri teased.

I rolled my eyes, “No, no, Sister. He likes a more dominant personality like yours, but you did almost give the poor guy a heart attack from fear you were going to rip his head off.”

I jumped up and ran to the door, throwing it open. I was shocked to see the blue-eyed stranger from the office standing at my door.

I groan outwardly, “Oh No! Don’t tell me they double booked us to the same room.”



He smiled sheepishly, “no worries, Little Raven, they didn’t. Edwin forgot to give you this.” He said, as he handed me a flyer for a Resort picnic that was being held tonight.

I felt drawn to him, this stranger I have never seen before in my life. Something about him was familiar and yet trusting in his tone. I swore I should have known

him from somewhere.

“Have we met before? You seem so familiar to me.” I asked curiously.

“No, we have never met.” He said firmly, yet his eyes told another story.

“I’m sorry. I’m so rude, my name is Nyssa and that, lurking in the background, is my sister, Siri. You can put the gun away now.” I said annoyed as I heard her clear the chamber.

Siri shrugged unapologetically. “You can never be too careful,” she said walking up beside me as she holstered her weapon on her hip, “And you are?”

“My name is Maddox.” “And your friend is...?” Siri pressed. Maddox smiled devilishly. “Well that would be my best friend,

Jack Knaves, but everyone just calls him Jack.” “So Maddox...” Siri slurred playfully. “Are you and your friend, Jack, going to be at this picnic tonight?” “We most certainly are, Jack and I never miss a party.” He said with a wink. Taking my hand, he softly planted a kiss across my knuckles in an old-fashioned manner.

“And I hope to see you there tonight as well, Nyssa.”

Butterflies bounced around my stomach as his light touch sent an electric, fiery current through my veins. He was trouble with a capital T. Locking eyes for a few seconds, we stood, studying each other, yet it seemed like minutes before he winked playfully one more time and turned, walking off towards the lake. Siri and I admired his round bottom in his tight jeans as he walked away.

“You know what the old saying is, Nyssa?” “No Siri, I guess I don’t. What is it?”

“The best way to get over a man is to get under another one and he is definitely worth getting under.” She said, whistling in approval. Shaking my head, I turned and walked back towards my room. Maybe she was right? I mean, not about getting under someone else, but just giving life after Nate a chance. I’ve been a

prisoner of his for far too long.

“What are you doing?”

“I have a party to get ready for and possibly a hot date to impress.” *Single and pregnant but he doesn't need to know the latter part of those details.*

After unpacking, I donned my yellow polka dot bikini under my red and orange flower flamed sundress with matching flip-flops. I glance at my reflection in the standup mirror in my room, I turned sideways at my flat belly. Pretty soon I wouldn't be able to hide my secret of the baby from anyone, especially Siri. How was I going to tell my sister that that evil... I paused, stopping myself from saying anything else horrible about Nate. Yes, he was evil, but he would never know about the baby. I would figure it out when I had too but for now, I would just allow my mind some much needed relaxation and peace.

The sun was already setting, and the smell of BBQ frequented the air around the resort. Siri wore her cut-off Daisy Dukes and black bikini. We painted each other's nails and talked about nonsensical things. For a while, we were just sisters, enjoying a vacation and freedom from everyday realities.

“Are you going to get to know Mr. Jack Knaves tonight?” I said, waggling my eyebrows as I walked to the fridge and grabbed a few Smirnoffs. Knowing Siri was distracted, I poured one Smirenoff down the drain as to give the illusion of me drinking. Popping the tops, I chunked some ice into our arctic cups and poured the drinks, then topped it off with some pink lemonade and strawberry slices.

“I don't think Dan would be too pleased about that.”

“Oh please, Nyssa. Dan is my partner and nothing more.” she said rolling her eyes at me.

“Does he know that? I've seen the way he looks at you and it's obvious he thinks of you as more than just a friend.”

“What? No! We’ve been partners since we graduated from the academy. Nothing less and nothing more.” Uncertainty fluttered across her face.

“Sure, sure. Heed my warning, Siri, it’s definitely something more. Think about it.” I said more firmly.

“You’ve officially lost your marbles, my dear sister. I do believe I need to call the asylum!” Siri said jokingly, in her best fake British accent...

Feigning mock horror, I answered back, “why, my dear sister, haven’t you heard?”

“No... What?” “We’re all mad here.” I said as we burst out in a fit of giggles.



The sun was getting ready to set as we headed to the Sweetbay Lake. Siri studied the little map as I carried the tote bag with our towels and swimming necessities. The warmth of the coming night air felt good, spring was ending and summer was right around the corner now.

“We might be able to get an hour or two of tanning and swimming in before the food is ready.” Siri said, with her nose stuffed into the map.

“Well I hope there’s some finger foods waiting because my stomach is not happy that I ate no lunch.” I said as my stomach protested loudly.

We were deep in conversation, bickering over me not eating when I hit something hard, head on, and fell onto my rear with an “Ooaf.”

“I’m so sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was going and...” I was quickly rendered speechless when Maddox scooped me up in his arms and stared deeply into my eyes.

“It’s okay, Little Raven, happens all the time, but you can run into me anytime you want,” He teased playfully.

Rolling my eyes, I brushed myself off as his eyes wandered appreciatively up and down my body as I cleared my throat, hinting at him to let me up.

I stared at Maddox unable to take my eyes off him as he did the same. A knowing feeling pulled at me, “Have we met before?”

Maddox didn’t miss a beat, “No, I don’t believe so. I would remember meeting someone as beautiful as you.” He flirted while winking at me. A slight blush colored my face.

“While Maddox so rudely ignores us, my name is...”

“Jack Knaves.” Siri said. Giving her attention to the gentleman standing beside Maddox. “Why yes, it is. Are you stalking me?”

Siri burst out laughing, “No, not at all. Your friend over here spoke fondly of you earlier at our cabin.

“She’s a cop too.” Maddox said without breaking eye contact with me. It’s like his eyes were searching for some unknown answer within mine. I admired the depths of his ocean-blue eyes with flecks of white in them; his eyes were the oceans themselves. I felt my breath catch as if I could feel a kindred spirit before me reaching into my soul.

Siri pulled me to her side, breaking the connection between us. My face flushed with embarrassment at myself so I did the only thing I usually do in an awkward situation. I made snarky remarks...

“Handcuffs and all, which she has packed in here somewhere I’m sure...” I said as I pretended to look through the tote bag she was holding. Siri punched my arm.

“She’s kidding.” she said, laughing nervously.

I yanked them out of the bag, “Nope! Here they are! And they’re the real deal!” I teased with a wink as Maddox chuckled and Siri turned red.

“May I walk you to the Sweetbay Lake, Siri?” Jack said, mischievously, holding out his arm in an old-fashioned gesture. He bent down and whispered loudly in her ear, “And bring your cuffs with you.”

I nodded encouragingly, “I’ll be right behind you, holding our stuff so no worries.”

I held up the bag slightly, a big smile plastered ridiculously on my face, both of us knowing her gun was tucked safely inside. I pretended the alcohol had gotten the best of me. But honestly, I just didn’t care. For years, I walked on eggshells and now, I felt free. I would do whatever I had to, to keep this freedom now. I would never live in fear of another as long as my body held breath. “What are you drinking there, Little Raven?” Feeling a little braver thanks to my liquid courage, I stood a little taller to him while trying not to stumble in my tipsy state.

I was about to ask him why he kept calling me Little Raven when a vague memory of a man with dark hair comforting me in his arms, in my dreams, as he held me tight to him flashed before my eyes. Between his lingering kisses across my body he whispered, “*My Little Raven*” over and over again, his touch driving me mad to the point of insanity. Whispering promises of endless days of passion and a love for eternity.

I hadn’t even realized I had stopped walking when a rough hand held my cheek.

“Are you okay?” Maddox asked with concern in his eyes.

“Oh yeah, I think my drink and the warmth of the day is getting

to me.” I lied and shrugged off the dream, yet it felt real, like a memory. “Come on, before Siri thinks you kidnapped me I joked as I began walking again. We all swam and hung out for the last few hours of the day’s daylight. As twilight and stars appeared, the music started playing as the smell of food wafted past my nose.

“So who are all these people? There’s a lot of places to stay but some of these people don’t look like guests.” Siri asked curiously.

Jack brushed her hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear, she was obviously stumped by this guy. Much like the way I was taken by Maddox and his personality.

“Not all these people are guests, some are residents here and they live on the opposite side of the Sweetbay Lake from us. Curiosity filled me at his answer.

My stomach growled angrily at me and my face flushed with embarrassment. “Sorry guys, but I’m going over to the food table to get something to eat.”

“Well, we’re going to dance while you eat.” Jack said excitedly. If he kept playing his cards right, Siri will be more distracted most of the night and give me some breathing room with Maddox. All afternoon she’d stuck close to me. I can’t blame her though. She’d just found out days ago that her one and only sister was used as a punching bag for the past three years.

“Feel like some company?” Siri pressed, but I shook my head.

“Nope. Tonight, you’re off duty from police work and protection detail just have fun! Should you decide to stay out late, just put this scrunchy on my wrist before you leave.” I took off my scrunchy and placed it on her wrist, turning her towards Jack, I popped her bottom, pushing her to him.

“Would you like to dance after you eat some food?” Maddox asked with eyes full of unspoken promises.

Another flash of a dark-haired man came into view, but this time, Maddox's face became clear as he fed me chocolate covered strawberries. Him, sipping on some kind of bubbly champagne and kissing me deeply, as it passed from his mouth to mine. Maddox taking ice from the bucket as he teasingly kissed me from head to toe. Shaking my head, I chuckled at myself. I was losing it, three years of torture and the first time I meet a sexy man, I start hallucinating about him. Yet, once again, it felt so real... Like a memory rather than a dream or hallucination.

I was breathless under his gaze, there was power behind it that dragged me into him. "Yes. Give me a few minutes and I'll be back."

"You got it, Little Raven." It was hard to walk away from him, his eyes said another story, like he knew what I was watching in my mind. I walked through the crowd, wandering to the table of food where a sweet gal, who had to be about twenty-one with long brown hair, stood with a pair of tongs and an apron.

"Hi there! What can I get for you?" She had such a sweet personality, that I couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm.

"Can I have a little bit of everything?" I asked politely.

"Why sure ya can! You just grab yourself a drink and I'll fix your plate right up!"

"Thank you, I'm starving. I'm Nyssa, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Nyssa, I'm Callie. Welcome to the Happy

Ending Resort." "Do you work here or are you a resident?" Callie laughed, "No, I don't work here. Edwin asked me if I would serve food to the guests tonight because he was busy. So I agreed. Poor guy can get bad allergies, sometimes. I can give you the lowdown of everyone while you eat though."

"Sure!" I said as she handed me my plate.

"Okay, you see the chunky, old couple sitting together, staring and whispering to

each other? That's Bess and Herbert, the gossiping guineas around here. They see and know every little detail that happens around the resort," said Callie as she rolled her eyes and I couldn't help but laugh. "Now, do you see the creepy-looking man trying to look casual by the tree, over by the water, and staring so obviously at the girls laid out in their bikinis?"

"Yeah, kinda a pervert, in my opinion."

"That's Chapman, he's a veteran and was one of the only friends my grandpa had."

I clamped my hand over my mouth embarrassed, "I'm so sorry Callie, I..."

Callie held up a hand and giggled, "No, you're right, he's a huge pervert. I'm surprised Wayne's not over there. Oh wait, he's the not-so-sneaky guy by the DJ's booth." We both giggled. "That big guy over there by the bar area with his arms crossed is Ross, he's a retired cop but he sometimes does security around here when Edwin needs it."

"Who's the one smoking pot behind the DJ booth over there?"

"That's Bear. He's laid back except when you bring up war. Geez, whatever you do, don't get him started. We've had a few arguments here and there over it. My man is in the military actually."

"Oh, well tell him thank you for his services." I said smiling. I liked Callie, she was easy to get along with.

"Okay then, in the white tent over by the bar is a tattoo place. Cyber is the tattoo artist and that's his old lady behind the bar mixing drinks. He's pretty good at his job, you should get one while you're here. He's just doing small tats here at the party but if anyone wants something big then he has them come to his shop. We're a pretty good community working together for business during the tourist season."

“Wow.” I said impressed with the town. Out of the blue, my mouth started watering. Something was wrong, I could feel it. Automatically my hands went to my stomach.

“And unfortunately, that chick over there all over that handsome blue-eyed devil is Kiki. She’s a stripper and well, obviously you can make up your own mind about her by the way she dresses. My eyes wandered over to where Callie nodded, and bile rose in my throat again. Kiki was hanging all over Maddox as he leaned back against a tree by the dance floor smiling. Kiki whispered in his ear, she wore a very revealing triangle bikini top that only covered her breast and her shorts were cut so short that her butt cheeks and pockets from the shorts hung out past the jean material.

I dropped my food, as the tears welled up in my eyes. “Nyssa? Are you okay?”

Not taking my eyes off of Maddox’s face, I said, “Yeah, I think I might be coming down with something. I don’t feel very well. I hope to see you again while I’m here, Callie, and thank you for your kindness and talking to me. I need to go.”

I didn’t wait for a response as Maddox’s eyes locked onto mine and his smiled disappeared. I didn’t know what else to do but to run away from the embarrassment and the situation I was facing. It was like Deja vu all over again. I quickly dodged into the portable bathroom and locked the door behind me.

I felt like was going to throw up at any moment. I was about two weeks late, could morning sickness really be hitting me already? My mouth watered again and my skin felt cold. A cold sweat broke out across my face as I heaved for breath but turned and gripped hard onto the toilet. Everything I ate was now gone. Nate. He could never know or I would be stuck with him in my life forever. Needing air, I threw open the door. I just wanted to get back to my cabin and pretend none of this was happening.

As the door opened, Maddox stood with his back to me over by the food table,

arguing with Callie, but she had no pity for him, she spotted me and nodded for me to run. I smiled and mouthed a silent “Thank You” as I took off, but Maddox turned around, noticing her attention was elsewhere.

Maddox took a step towards me as I bolted away from the party. I saw the sign pointing towards the hiking trail, *Rhapsody Ridge*. I could hear footsteps not far behind me. I was overreacting, but I didn’t care. It hurt for some reason, flashes of Nate and the wedding hit me hard. The emotions I had been locking away were front and center. They weren’t going anywhere anytime soon. I was damaged goods, for sure.

I ran through the trail as I heard Maddox curse not far behind me. I didn’t want to face him and I didn’t want him to see me like this. He wasn’t mine to begin with. Was this me now? Or was it the fake-acting getting the best of me and my messed-up emotions?

“Nyssa, stop! Wait! It’s not what you think!” “Go away, Maddox!” Seeing an opening off the main path, I ran through it in the dark when a hand suddenly reached out and grabbed me, pulling me off into some brush.

A big hand clamped over my mouth, muffling my screams, as I thrashed around. “Scream and I’ll kill you,” He whispered in my ear.

That voice, the one that haunts my nightmares, sent chills like ice down my spine. *Nate*. He was not only out of jail but he had found me.

As if to make his point, his other hand squeezed my waist as I struggled to break free. My mind went straight to the baby and its safety.

Maddox stopped no more than twenty feet away as I silently pleaded in my mind for him to look at me.

“Help! I’m here! Don’t leave me! HELP!”

But Maddox went on. Nate slowly turned me around to face him.

“I see it didn’t take you long to replace me. I should’ve known that you’d be whoring around while I was in jail, but you belong to me!” He said menacingly as he punched me in the stomach. My breath left me and I gasped for air, falling on my hands and knees.

“Nate, don’t do this please!” He stalked towards me, there was nothing good left in his eyes. “Nate! Stop! I’m pregnant!”

Nate gave pause at my words. Mixed emotions ran across his face as I took advantage of the moment to try and stand up. I held onto a fallen tree for support.

“Liar! It’s probably not even mine.” The anger returned in his eyes.

I had to figure a way to get away from him. I had to distract him. So I did the only thing that I knew would work... I begged. “It’s true. The baby is yours and I have never been with anyone else. Nate, I was wrong. You’re the only one for me. I love you baby. I’m so sorry I left you. I need you. Take me home, Nate.” I said, caressing him to me. I wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him, all the while trying not to vomit from the contact. Nate relaxed into my kiss, then went deathly still. I paused and pulled back, “what’s wrong?”

“You don’t deserve to be a mother, in fact you don’t deserve to even breathe the same air as me. You don’t want me, you’re just saying all of this to distract me, and if I can’t have you, then no one can.”

I took advantage of the moment and locked my hands behind his neck as I cut my knees up sharply to connect with his balls. Nate howled in pain as I shoved him away from me and turned to run but he grabbed my ankle and pulled. The result caused me to fall, hard, onto my stomach. I cried out in pain.

I felt it before I saw it, a warm liquid accompanied by a sharp pain that hit me

from my stomach down to between my legs. I kicked Nate across the face making him lose his grip on me as he cradled his face in his hands. Staggering to get up, I felt my leg, bringing my hand up I saw blood on my hand. Survival kicked in as I took off through the woods trying to find my way back to the resort.

I looked behind me to see if I had lost him, giving myself a moment of rest. Tears flowed down my cheeks at the realization that after I just found out I was pregnant that I might lose the baby. I could feel death at my doorstep but he wasn't here for me, he was here for my child.

As I finally saw the lights from the resort, I took off running not paying attention to my surroundings as the ground gave out below me. My head hit something hard and then there was nothingness.

The Shadow Forest

When I awoke it was dark all around me and my head pounded relentlessly through my temples. I looked around to gather my surroundings, I could smell the dirt covering me and see the stars and clouds through the treetops above the hole.

After a few minutes, my bearings came back to me. *The woods, Maddox, Nate, the baby... The baby!* I felt around my flat belly but felt nothing. How could I possibly know if he was okay or not? I couldn't be more than four weeks along.

"Help!" I yelled as I stood up, trying to gather my bearings. "Siri! Anybody help me!" I could feel my clothes were dirty and sticky from blood. Actually the blood was almost dried in some places. I could feel it. The baby was gone. I don't know how I knew and I can't explain it, but deep inside of me, I just knew. I wailed into the night, pain tearing through me. My heart felt like it was being shredded and ripped out of my chest one piece at a time. I curled up into a ball and just let the tears fall. I cried for what seemed like hours. I gathered myself to my knees and let out a wail that sounded as if a Banshee, herself, was calling to the night.

Nothing but owls and crickets greeted me in return. *I was not a weak woman anymore, I didn't need anybody. I could get out of this all by myself.* I thought to myself with determination.

I felt around blindly in the dark for anything to get a grip on. It was so dark that I couldn't even see my hands in front of me.

"Seriously, what does a gal gotta do to get some light around here!" I shouted in frustration. Within minutes, the moon's light showered brightly down on me.

Above my head, thick tree roots surround the edge of the hole. Planting my feet onto the roots I pulled myself up one foot at a time till I found myself lying on the

flat surface of ground, finally. As I stood up, I realized I didn't recognize my surroundings. In fact, I had no idea where I was anymore.

Everything looked different, warped even, there was a purple-tinge color, like fog, to the air as if someone had photo-shopped the forest, but in reality. Below my feet was a leafy pathway leading through the trees, I hadn't noticed it before when I had run off. Maddox! He must think I'm a nut for sure. How could I overreact like that, he wasn't mine to even get jealous over! And Siri must have the FBI looking for me by now. She is going to kill me for sure. As I walked up the winding path a three-way-split stopped me in my tracks.

"Which way do I go? I have no idea where I am..." Great. Talking to myself now. I must really be losing it. Well I could always go with the eenie-meenie-minee-moe trick, I decided as I held my pounding head in my hand.

Starting with the left road I counted, "eenie-meenie-minee-moe, catch a tiger by its toe. If he hollers, let him go. eenie-meenie-minee-moe." My hand stopped over on the left road, but uneasiness settled in my belly, I had a bad feeling about the pathway but what else was I to do?

Slowly, I eased down the path ready to turn back at any moment. The hair on the back of my neck stood up and goosebumps rose on my arms. I could feel eyes on me. Someone or something was watching me now. The moon stood high and bright guiding me still, but a light feathery touch drifted across my shoulders. I turned around faster than lightning could strike but nothing was there. My heart beat erratically in my chest as if it would burst out at any moment.

"Wh... Who's there?!" I shouted into the night. Quickly, I grabbed the biggest stick I could find on the ground to protect myself.

"I have a stick and I'm not afraid to use it!" But all my bravado earned me was a whispering snicker from out in the shadows... My hair lifted from my shoulders, making me freeze where I stood. My hair twisted into a braid as I swung the stick

in my hand to hit whoever was standing behind me once again. But once more, there was nothing and no one behind me until more giggles burst out of the shadows as they started moving in the moonlight.

I must have really hit my head harder than I thought because the shadows became smoky figures surrounding me. They held ghostly hands with one another and danced in circles around me, teasing and taunting me...

“Red rover, red rover. Let Nyssa come over!”

“Stop! Stop it!” The faster they spun the dizzier I became and the pain in my head intensified till my face became numb and everything started to spin as if I was on a Ferris wheel.

All of a sudden, I couldn't stand up anymore. My body felt weak and I simply didn't want to move at all. Through the blurriness, I saw Callie, the sweet girl I met earlier at the picnic party standing above me. I reached for her weakly –only to feel fur under my fingers.



“Callie, help me...” Then everything went dark.

I awoke screaming and found myself laying on some kind of a giant leaf bed next to a blue fire. The pain in my head was gone but the air was replaced with a sweet incense odor that almost smelt like roses and peaches mixed together. All around me, the room was dark, but neon smoke and designs floated around the room. The floor was covered in some kind of bio-luminous flower bushes and bright

green grass.

A voice shook me out of my stupor, “Ahh, I see our guest has finally woken up from her beauty sleep...”

“Who said that? Who’s there?” Fear threatened to take over as a man with long blue hair appeared in front of me, smoking a hookah pipe. The smoke, the colors of orange and pink, wafted around my face as if caressing me.

“Bear?! Is that you?” I stared at the familiar features that underlie his new face. Yes, he favored Bear impeccably.

“Who’s this Bear that you speak of? I am Caterpillar. Mouse brought you to me when she found you in the shadow forest. Lucky one, you are. If Mouse hadn’t found you when she had, the shadows would have taken your soul and you would be one of them now.” Caterpillar said as he took another puff off his hookah.

“Wait, hit the pause button for a minute... Took my soul? And Mouse? Who’s this Mouse? Callie was the one who found me.” I said as confusion took over my mind.

“Yes, she said you called her that but I think you were only hallucinating my dear. You had quite the head wound when she brought you in. Actually, she should be back any moment. Here, come sit with me on the sofa.”

As Caterpillar turned, I saw he was no full man at all, from his back a long caterpillar body slithered behind him. A scream escaped my lips as his skin pulsed with different colored patterns down his long body.

“You... You’re not human...”

“Well, that’s very rude of you. So what if I’m not fully human!” He snapped. “This is The Crazy Depp Resort. What did you expect to find here?” Anger was quickly replaced with curiosity.

“The what Resort? No, I was at the Happy Endings Resort.”

“Who are you?” With every word he spoke, smoke formed the words before my eyes.

“I’m Nyssa, Nyssa Liddell.”

“Well Nyssa, let’s get you sitting down on the sofa before you faint on me.”

Slowly, he led me from where I was lying to a small loveseat and gently sat me down. The cushions were so soft that I felt like I was sitting on clouds. A feminine voice came through the blackness as Callie appeared by us. But it wasn’t Callie. Now I could see, even though she appeared to look like her, she had white fur all over her, with mouse ears on her head and a long tail coming from behind her. But she wore clothes like me and had hands like me. Was she some kind of hybrid? No. No, no... That is crazy talk now. I hit my head and apparently I’m seeing things. Yup, Siri was going to put me in the looney bin now. This must be what a nervous breakdown is like, losing your mind is not what I thought it’d be like. That’s for sure.

“My love, why didn’t you tell me that our guest was awake?” She said with a slight squeak to her voice. Smiling, she extended her hand to me. “I’m Mouse, it’s nice to meet you and I see you met Caterpillar. I hope he wasn’t too rude while I was gone. His curiosity can get the best of him sometimes.”

Gulping down my awkwardness, I smiled politely at her, “No worries. He was the perfect gentleman. He was just explaining to me where I’m at, actually.”

“Ohh silly me, you’re in the backroom of the Incense Emporium. I brought you out of the Shadow Forest. Why were you there to begin with?”

“I fell into a hole that a fallen tree had left and when I awoke, I had no idea where I was or how to get back to the Resort...”

“I overheard you tell Caterpillar that you’re from The Happy Ending Resort, but Honey, there’s no such place here. Unless, that’s what everyone’s calling the Red Queen’s Bar. Are you sure you’re feeling all right, Nyssa?” The concern on her face was palpable. Yeah, they must definitely think I’m crazy.

“No... I’m not losing it, if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m not from here or any place that has monsters in the forest. This must be a dream. That’s it! I’m dreaming!” I pinched myself really hard on the arm, trying to wake myself from this crazy dream I seem to be stuck in. “OWW! Well I’m obviously not dreaming.”

“We don’t think you’re crazy, Nyssa, we’re wondering how you ended up in our world. It’s been a long time since someone has come here, as far as we know the only ones who have access to travel to different realms are the two Queens of the Crazy Depp Resort. Something is going on, something big, Caterpillar.”

“Aye, I agree, Love. It’s no accident that you’re here, Nyssa.”

“Whoa, whoa... I’m going to stop you there. Say I believe the both of you. All I want is to get back to my sister, Siri. I can’t believe I’m going to say this... In my world or realm or wherever I’m from, I’m sorry but shadows that take your soul? Are you freaking kidding me?! There’s no way I’m staying here to find out more about this place.” If my face showed anything, it would be that my mind was made up.

Caterpillar puffed his hookah some more looking rather bored by my outburst but Callie – I mean *Mouse* – nodded in agreement. Her nose twitched slightly as if she was annoyed with me as well. “The White Queen has one of the two looking-glass mirrors to travel between realms. That is your way home.” She paused as if considering what to do.

“Fine, in order to get you back to your realm we need to see the White Queen. She will help you get home but in the meantime you will need different clothes. You stick out like a sore thumb in those dirty rags. Follow me, this way...”

Mouse led me through the luminous grass down a glowing swirling stone path to a door. She pulled a ring of skeleton keys from her belt loop. I noticed on her right side a gun sat holstered on her hip.

“What’s the gun for?” I asked curiously, staring at what appeared to be a nine-millimeter.

“Protection. This.” She pointed to it, “Is what saved you from the shadows taking your soul. This gun can do more than one thing. Maybe I’ll show you sometime.” She said with a genuine smile.

Unlocking the door, Mouse led me into a clothing shop. Tons of leather pants and Lacy Doyle tops were spread from one side to the other. “Wow, I’ve never seen such crazy awesome clothing before!”

“Thank you, I design them. We have to make you look like one of us or the Red Queen will know. If she finds out, you’ll be arrested and tortured for intel.”

“But Mouse, I don’t know anything.” I could feel the fear threatening to swallow me up. I was afraid.

“It doesn’t matter. She won’t care. The Red Queen is crazy, if you get on her bad side then it’s off with your head.” Mouse made a motion with her finger across her throat. “But we have to go to the Red Queen’s Bar to find out where the White Queen is hiding.

A loud gulp sounded from my throat, “Who’s the White Queen?”

“The Red Queen’s sister. A war broke out when their father decided to crown the White Queen instead of the Red Queen as Ruler over the Crazy Depp Resort. It was a disaster, the Red Queen’s followers assassinated their parents and the White Queen went into hiding. She moves her palace every day to avoid detection from her sister.” Her shoulders sagged slightly almost in defeat.

“You’re one of her followers, you and Caterpillar I mean...?” Panic crossed over her face as she covered my mouth with her hand.

“Shu shu shu.... Are you trying to get us killed? You mustn’t say such things allowed. The Red Queen’s spies are everywhere!”

I held my hand up in surrender as she took her hand from my mouth. “I’m sorry, watch what I say... Gotcha.” I said taking a deep breath as Mouse nodded, turning to search through the racks.

I pulled out a pair of black leather pants and sighed, I wish there were blue jeans here in this realm. But this isn’t for long. I hoped.

Mouse came up behind me with an ace of hearts top that v-cut down the front and diamond cut outs across the back side, fringing around the bottom.

“This would be right up your alley... go try these on.” I turned to walk away to the fated dressing room. I hated trying clothes on, things never seemed to fit right. “Oooh, don’t forget your hat.”

She tossed a mini top hat like a frisbee towards me, I caught it, midair. “Nice reflexes, Nyssa.”

“Thanks.” I said smiling grimly and shutting the door behind me. Little did she know I acquired those skills over three years of abuse by my ex-boyfriend.

As I slipped the clothes on, I was amazed and gratified to find they fit just right. As I turned to look in the mirror with nervous fear my mouth dropped in shock, the fabric hung in all the right places. Who was this girl staring back at me?

“Slip these on too, you’ll need them.” Callie said, slipping quickly into the dressing room and back out again.

I admired the pair of black biker boots that had a metal strap over the ankles before I slipped them on. The belt with built in sheaths with knives in them.

“Why do I need this belt of weapons?” I yelled out.

“For your own protection, this realm is dangerous, and one needs a means to defend herself.” Mouse said bluntly.

With one last glimpse in the mirror, I cradled my stomach in my hands as tears welled up in my eyes and slowly slid down my cheek. The pain threatened to rip me in two as I stifled a snuffle.

“Nyssa, is everything okay in there?” asked Callie in a concerned voice.

“Yes! Everything is fine. Ready or not, here I come.” I wiped my face on my shirt that was now trash.

I stepped out of the little room as Mouse gasped at my appearance. “What? Do I look that bad?” I said worried as I covered my body with my arms, I was definitely feeling subconscious now.

“No honey! You look marvelous! I’m afraid we won’t be very incognito with how good you look. Now your makeup and hair, how does smoky eyes and a warrior’s braid sound?” Mouse said enthusiastically. She must do this stuff all the time.

“I say you’re the boss, I’ll just let you work your magic.” Mouse led me to a small section of the boutique and to a beauty station in the shop. I sat down in the barber shop-like chair as she slightly reclined the seat back.

“Now just relax and close your eyes and I’ll be done in a jiffy.” She hummed a sweet yet strange melody as she attended to my face first, taking her time and diligently working away. Then I felt her soft fingers wash and dry my hair while I never moved once in the chair. It felt as though she was massaging my scalp while she work through the knots.

I must have drifted off to sleep. I awoke with a start as she softly shook my shoulders. “Nyssa, I’m all done now honey. Wake up.”

Confused in my sleepy state, I became unaware of my surroundings again. I grabbed Mouse's arm defensively. But she just stared at me with knowing eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Mouse. Did I hurt you?" I asked, panic lacing my voice. I was horrified at what I could have done.

Rubbing her wrist, she shook her head. "No, you didn't honey. It's okay I'm fine. I pity the fool who tries to hurt you." She said as I laughed nervously. "You ready to see yourself?"

I nodded as Mouse spun the chair around, facing me towards the mirror. With a girlish giggle we both jumped up and down excitedly, "Wow, Mouse! You did a fantastic job!" She squeaked with excitement as I further examined myself.

She'd highlighted my brown eyes with eye shadow, powders of silver to black smoky eye shadow and dark red lipstick. My hair was only partly pulled back into a tight Navajo braid. Just enough to keep my shoulder length hair out of my face. The black mini top hat sat crooked on my head with an ace of hearts card stuck in the silver ribbon wrapped around the bottom.

Mouse came up behind me, snapping me out of La La Land. "You're also going to need these as well. Do you prefer a gun or a bow? The knives at your hip and ankle are non-negotiable, also."

"Why do I need these? I'll be with you, won't I?" I said scared to death at the thought of being alone in this realm, without anyone I know or trust.

"Yes, but in the event that we get separated, you will need something to protect yourself. Now choose your weapon. Better yet, take both." She said as she handed me the bow, while she strapped the gun holster to my hip and the quiver over my shoulder. "Is it heavy?" She asked concerned.

"No, it fits just right actually. I'm actually better with a bow than a gun. I've had more practice hunting with them."

“Now listen up.” Mouse said as she pulled out clips for the gun, each one of different colors. “White clips are light bullets for your shadows, like what attacked you in the forest. Red clips are for the Red Queen’s soldiers. It takes a special type of metal to take them down. Blues are for any kind of water creature that may attack you, and black clips are for the Queen’s pet, the Jabberwocky. The same color code goes for your arrows as well; the tips and features are all color-coded. Can you remember that?” Mouse said with a serious note in her tone. I nodded. This was important and I could not forget. This could mean life or death for us.