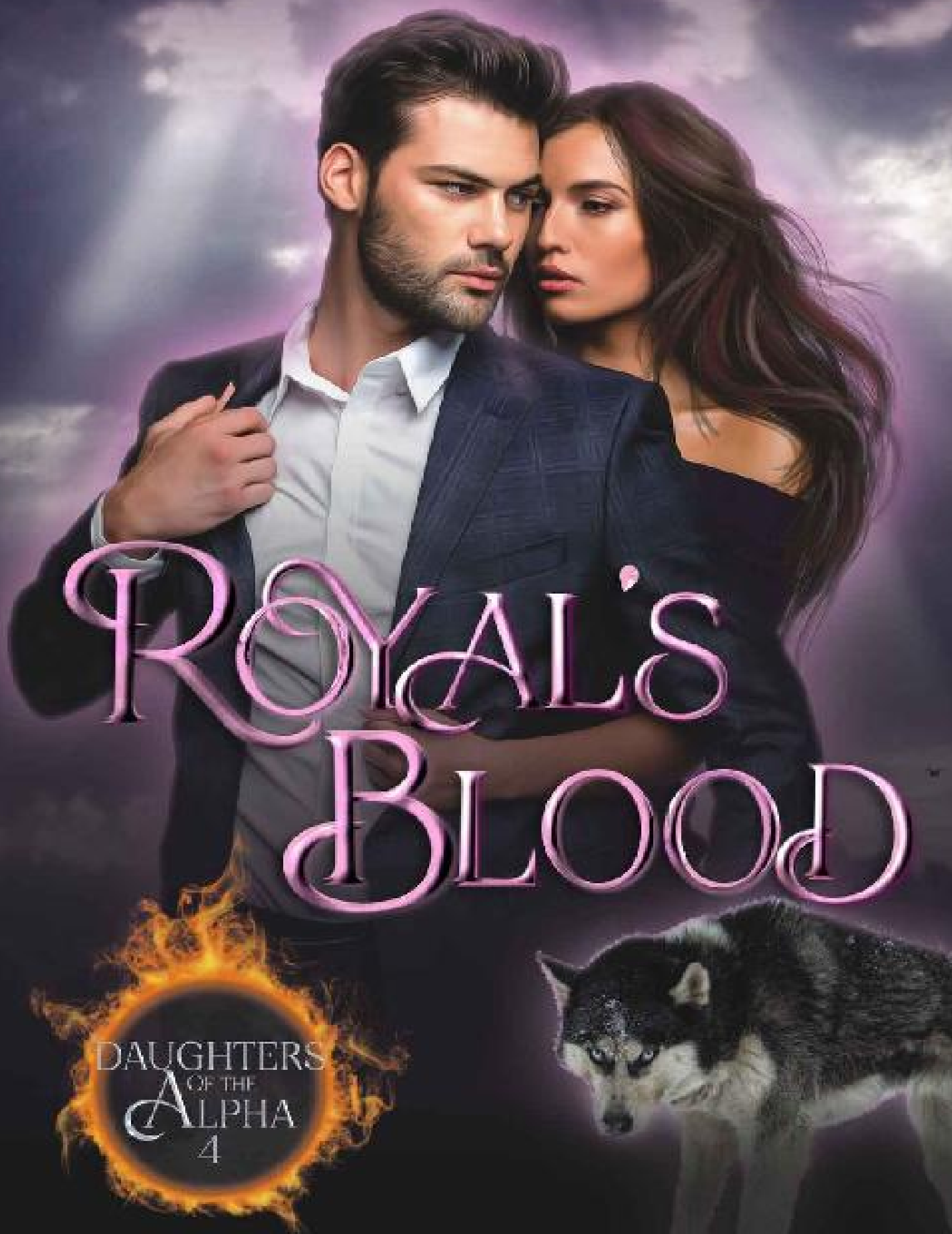


ADDISON CARMICHAEL



ROYALS'
BLOOD

DAUGHTERS
OF THE
ALPHA
4

ROYAL'S BLOOD



BOOK -4-

ADDISON CARMICHAEL

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ROYAL'S BLOOD

Prologue

Timber Ridge, Washington – August 13, 2008

“Just breathe, Your Grace, breathe.”

“J-Jake! I need..!”

“He’s been called and should be here shortly,” the intern said. “Here, let’s get you inside.”

The woman’s arm was around Nicole Bryant, helping her through the rear door of the community hospital. That’s when another roiling contraction hit Nicole’s midsection like a lightning strike, and she doubled over with tearing agony.

Something was deadly wrong. This birth was unlike any of her last three. There had been a few concerns during her pregnancy, but her obstetrician, Dr. Solchuk, had assured her that in the end all should be well.

What no one counted on was the car accident that killed him five days ago.

“Alexia! You must get her—!”

Another ripping contraction bent her over again.

“Dr. Bryant is away just now,” the intern said, rubbing Nicole’s back. “But I paged the on-call doctor, and he’ll be here any minute. Everything will be fine, just fine.”

When the massive contraction wave subsided, Nicole painfully worked her way down the corridor then into the next room. The woman then helped her into a hospital gown and up onto the surgical table. That’s when Nicole noticed they weren’t inside the labor room used during her last three deliveries.

Where was she?

This whole thing didn’t feel right. Not the sudden onset of blinding contractions that happened less than an hour ago. Not the young intern’s technical explanations why it happened

right after she gave Nicole the vitamin injection. Not why her own personal bodyguard took violently ill right before...

Another searing pain made Nicole scream and curl into herself. That's when the masked on-call physician bumped into the room, snapping on latex gloves.

"Are we ready to proceed, doctor?" he questioned.

"Yes, everything's set, doctor," she answered with slight relief. "The nurse is upstairs, but she'll be back down here in a few minutes to assist with the delivery."

"Then let's begin. Start the I.V. drip with..."

Nicole didn't have time to ask what was happening before an oxygen mask was shoved over her nose and mouth, and the doctor injected the anesthesia into her intravenous line.

Then all faded into blackness.

* * *

"Dearest love, please wake up. Please, don't leave me. I can't do this life without you. I love you. I love you so much."

The dreamlike sound of Jake's desperate voice slowly brought Nicole out of her death sleep. With great effort she forced her heavy eyelids open to see her one true mate bending over her, tears washed over his handsome face.

Awareness of her surroundings slowly crept into her foggy brain.

Where was she?

Nicole made out the railed hospital bed she lay in. The bouquet covered room was filled with flickering machines, most of which were attached to her in some way.

She swallowed painfully, her throat as dry and scratchy as sandpaper.

"J-Jake?" she croaked.

A sharp intake of breath, and Jake Bryant was on his feet, dashing into the hallway, yelling for the doctors and nurses.

He was back at her side in seconds, grabbing up her limp hand.

“Thank God, Nicky,” Jake said kissing her head, her hand that he desperately gripped. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“No such...luck,” she rasped weakly.

Suddenly she remembered why she was here, and she reached down to feel her soft, doughy abdomen. Now empty.

Her eyes shot up to him. “The baby!”

Jake kissed her palm. “She’s fine. She’s in the nursery now giving the nurses what-for. A true royal.”

Nicole frowned. “She?”

Jake swiped back tears from his sky blue eyes. “A beautiful girl.”

“No. Dr. Warner said it was a boy. There was no doubt this time!”

“Guess she fooled us all,” he said.

“But the ultrasound...”

“There was some mix-up. The original technician misread ours, then lost our records along with some others...” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Our daughter is here now, and she’s healthy and perfect and you’re fine.”

A ball of ice lodged in Nicole’s heart at this cruel trick of fate.

After having three girls, their wolfpack’s Elder Council was growing concerned that their High Alpha wouldn’t be able to sire the male heir needed to one day succeed him. This last pregnancy was a surprise and gift both. There had been more than one assurance that she was finally carrying the true heir to the Bryant throne.

How could something like this happen with today’s technology and the pack’s own checks and balances regarding a royal birth? Particularly this one.

They didn’t even pick out female names!

“Jake, I-I’m so sorry. We can try again.”

His cobalt eyes shined with unshed tears as he gripped her fingers. “There were major complications. They had to do an emergency...Nicki. My truest love. I’m afraid we can’t have any more children. Ever. I’m so sorry.”

“What? No! That’s not possible! I don’t—!”

Jake pressed his forehead to hers, shushing her. “It’s okay. It’ll be okay, love. As long as you’re alive, I don’t care if we never have a son. We have four beautiful daughters together, and we have each other, and that’s more than any man could ever ask for.”

For just a moment though, they wept for their loss and braced for an uncertain future. Without a male heir, the Bryant wolfpack could easily split and dissolve, the entire Pacific Northwest territory claimed by rival packs and were-tribes. Everything Jake’s late grandfather, Rufus Bryant, created over a century ago, would be burned up with the ending of one generation.

“It’s my fault,” Nicole cried.

“No, love. It’s mine, if anyone’s,” Jake said. “I can always fight the Council on this issue at a later time. Walt mentioned that the archaic bylaws created by my grandfather might be able to be altered somehow. He and Sean are looking into the blood contract right now. Who knows? Maybe the Bryant wolfpack will finally have its first female High Alpha someday.”

“But I don’t—”

“Until then, let’s just enjoy the new addition to our family,” he added, kissing and nuzzling her cheek. “Oh, Nicki, she’s so amazing. She looks so much like your father’s family with her jet black hair and serious face. As soon as you’re strong enough, I’ll bring her in to meet her gorgeous mother.”

Nicole took in a ragged breath, let it out, then looked up to her husband’s welling dark blue eyes.

“Jake, what are we going to name her?”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 1

23 Years Later

With fiery yellow eyes, the black and gray wolf crashed through the executive office window and disappeared into the forest behind the Great Lodge.

In shifted form, Mariah Bryant furiously raced with inhuman speed through the woods, not caring where she was going. Anger and denial pushed her further and further down the valley until she finally skidded to a stop on four white paws at Aurora Lake edging the Timber Ridge community, her one place of refuge.

This was some sick joke. Had to be.

Or maybe a fearful, anxious nightmare?

Yes, that was it! A nightmare. That's all.

Any moment she would startle awake to her entourage of frenetic stylists ready to take her in hand before her coronation as the new Direct Heir of the Bryant wolfpack and everything would be back to normal.

Lowering her muzzle, Mariah nipped her furry foreleg, but the sharp sting only confirmed this was all horribly real.

No, she refused to believe it.

This was all too crazy! Just this morning she watched the event planners decorate the Great Lodge in traditional evergreens, flowers and banners. Food, drink and delicacies enough to feed a small city were right now being prepared by their army of five-star chefs. In less than four hours all of the Bryant wolfpack's high-level guests would be arriving decked out in formal attire to witness her walk down the grand staircase in her velvet lilac gown to kneel before her High Alpha father and take the oath that would officially make Mariah his successor.

Cancelled now.

Mariah stared out at the rippling blue-green lake, fury melting into numbness that reached down to her core and gripped her chest painfully.

How could her life upend so fast?

Again! Because she was still reeling from the shock that her three older sisters had declined this position for their own personal reasons and the mantle had been ultimately passed down to her.

As the youngest of four daughters, the crown had never been a possibility for her. Until it did.

It was a daunting, but heady honor. So dutifully Mariah had accepted the overwhelming responsibility, then jumped through every political hoop and requirement set forth by their Elder Council. The only thing left had been the tedious DNA verification that she carried the same royal blood as her High Alpha father, Jake Bryant.

Until twenty minutes ago when she had been called to meet him inside his executive office, along with her mother and the five Elder Council members of their pack.

“What do you mean that I’m not your daughter?” Mariah yelled in disbelief.

“It’s been authenticated,” her father said, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder. “After the first sampling was accidentally compromised, your Aunt Alexia tested everything herself. She wanted to make certain there were no more mishaps.”

“Well, have her take it again!”

“Sweetheart, she tested your blood samples three different times and ways. There’s no mistake. You’re not my biological child. Your mother’s either.”

Mariah blinked hard at him, then at her mother beside him.

She turned to the five Council members standing in front of the closed office doors. Her light brown eyes met with those of her godfather, Walter Paxton. He reflexively took a

step towards her, but was stopped by his younger brother, Sean. His distressed expression only confirmed that this was no cruel trick.

She whipped back to her father, yelling, “This is ridiculous! Of course, I’m your daughter! Who else would I be?”

Both of her parents eyed each other, holding a tense, silent conversation between themselves.

“Mom?” Mariah appealed to her mother. “There’s some mistake, right? You tell me that I’m the one who looks most like the Juarez side of our family. You tell me that all the time!”

Nicole Bryant forced a trembling smile, reaching up to smooth Mariah’s sleek, raven black hair.

“You do, lovey,” she assured. “You look just like... We’ll have Alexia run the tests one more time. You’re right, there must be some mistake. I know for a fact—”

Her father gestured her mother to stop, then motioned for the five Council members to leave them. Her godfather sent her an apologetic, sympathetic look before letting go of a tired breath, then turned to leave.

Jake waited until the last man exited the office and closed the door before guiding Mariah to sit beside him on the couch, then took her hand in both of his.

“There’s no mistake, sweetheart. Your mother and I have something to tell you. It’s about the circumstances the night of your birth.”

Mariah roughly shook her white and gray wolf muzzle, trying to erase that dreaded conversation out her brain.

It was a cruel lie!

Had to be.

She knew with every fiber of her being that she was the true blood daughter of Jake and Nichole Bryant. She knew in her heart...

Do you, though?

Once again, this same demonic voice whispered inside her brain. It was a dark feeling she had battled most of her life that she didn't belong at the Great Lodge, or Timber Ridge, or with her family.

God, this explained so much.

Why she didn't look anything like her father or three fair-skinned sisters. Why she always felt different from the rest of the Bryant clan for reasons she could never put her finger on.

Hell, even her thought process was different from all of theirs. Like she was sending and receiving things on a completely different wavelength or radio station.

Mariah stood on the rocky bank of the lake, defeatedly gazing out over the glittering water. The afternoon sun was lowering in the sky, shining down on the snowy peak of Bryant's Mountain where their community had called home for almost a century and a half. A peaceful place, her personal refuge. One that had always been a balm to her fractured soul during moments of high stress.

Now this mountain ridge mocked her. Accused her. Reminded her that this wasn't *her* family's mountain home, because she wasn't a Bryant at all. Never was.

Her worst fear realized.

"Thought I'd find you here sulking in your own tears," the lanky, brown haired man called out as he lumbered from the woods.

Mariah whipped her muzzle around to growl at him.

Liam Paxton raised his palms in surrender, then laid folded black slacks and a pink blouse on the nearest rock. "Now, now. I'm on your side. And if you're quite through throwing your royal tantrum, you can thank me for the change of clothes, so you don't have to return to the Lodge naked as the day you were born."

Another vicious growl from her.

With teeth.

“Sorry, poor choice of words,” Liam said, sitting on a driftwood log. “Here, shift back and get dressed. Don’t worry, you can still brood to your heart’s content. It’s just better in human form.”

Liam was right. As usual. It would do no good to complain or pout about this. It didn’t change anything. And she had things to say which couldn’t be done in wolf form.

With her emotions ramped up, Mariah’s transformation from wolf back to human took less than a minute. Liam didn’t bat an eye as she dressed, not sexually attracted to her in any way. Their friendship since childhood was more like siblings than prospective lovers.

“Your dad called you then,” Mariah surmised, buttoning her blouse.

It was against the law for an Elder Council member to share confidential details of their high-level meetings with anyone, including his own family. But Mariah knew that her godfather loved her enough to break this strict edict in order to send his only son to console her.

Liam grunted in confirmation.

“Thanks for the clothes,” Mariah grumbled, plopping down beside him on the log. “But I’m not going back to the Lodge. Ever.”

Liam slung a lazy arm across her shoulder and kissed her temple.

“You’ll have to go back sometime, kid,” he said. “Don’t worry, Dad will make sure all the decorations are taken down, and Uncle Sean will shoo away any accidental guest that shows up for the cancelled ceremony. You can even sneak in the back way, if you’d like. You won’t have to face anyone.”

Maybe not yet, but eventually she will have no choice.

Very soon the humiliating news of her questionable birth will spread throughout the entire pack like wildfire.

At first all of her rich, socialite friends will openly sympathize and pledge their undying support and devotion, of

course. But then they will subtly avoid her more and more, until she was silently and completely ousted from their privileged, wellborn crowd.

She will become friendless. Then a pariah.

Untouchable. Repellent.

“Want to talk about it?” Liam asked quietly.

“No.”

“Want me to shut the hell up?”

“Definitely.”

Together they sat in silence, gazing at the rippling lake. One thing she could always count on from Liam—his silence. It was one of the many reasons he was her number-one confidant and very best friend. She had always been able to tell him absolutely everything, no matter how outrageous, never fearing it would boomerang back through malicious gossip, making her life even more miserable.

Suddenly Mariah whipped her widening eyes up to Liam’s. “Oh, God! What will the pack do now?”

Because only then did she realize the disastrous implications of Jake Bryant having no heir to succeed him.

“Everyone’s discussing that,” Liam said. “So far, it doesn’t look good. None of the Council members can find a work-around the original bylaws. Dad and Uncle Sean would know every loophole, too, since they were there when your great-grandfather blood-sealed the laws.”

Beyond disastrous then. It could mean the very destruction of their entire wolfpack.

Mariah knew the pack’s history well when it began in the mid-nineteenth century.

After fighting a vicious internal political battle with their powerful Irish Callaghan wolfpack, Rufus Bryant and several other rebel members were expelled from the pack and country, then immigrated to America.

But the power struggles didn't end when these excommunicated families arrived in the new world. Many had been Alphas themselves and vied for the title of High Alpha of this fledgling pack.

Battles were fought. Blood was spilled. Loyalty lines were drawn. In the end, Rufus Bryant became the new High Alpha by popularist vote.

Needing a place for his new pack to settle, Rufus Bryant sent his eldest son Michael west to unclaimed wilderness. A year later, Michael sent word back that he found an ideal mountain and valley in Washington State, then purchased the entire area.

At last, everything was looking up for the Bryant wolfpack. But as the families began the process of moving west, tragedy struck and Michael Bryant, their Direct Heir, was killed under extremely suspicious circumstances.

Rufus was no fool and suspected foul play, particularly about his allegedly *loyal* supporters.

Nothing he could prove, unfortunately. But fearing that his remaining son, Robert, might suffer his own fatal "accident", Rufus dictated that no one outside his direct bloodline could ever claim leadership, mystically sealing this new bylaw in his own royal blood with the help of a Snoqualmie shaman. If broken, the Bryant pack would be cursed and destroyed.

"Maybe Tawnya will come out of hiding and take up the Direct Heir position again," Liam posed.

After all, her eldest sister held the title only two years ago. Until she met her brooding, genius scientist, Philip Heath.

"No, she and Philip can never publicly surface again without threat of deadly exposure to him," Mariah sighed heavily.

A true dilemma.

Philip had discovered a formula that could turn any metal into the purest form of gold, and every evil organization and

country from Arcan Hunters to greedy cartels and dictators would do anything to extract that priceless information from him. Many had tried before. One very nearly succeeded.

In the end, there was no other choice but for the man to continue his secret, reclusive life, and Tawnya loved him too much to let him live that alone. Even if it meant relinquishing her own claim to the Bryant wolfpack crown.

“She would never leave Philip to surface and take up the position again,” Mariah added. “Tawnya loves the pack, but her ultimate loyalty is to him. I can’t blame her for that.”

He was her one true mate after all.

“Can’t see that love trumps a crown,” Liam grunted. “Then again, I’ve not had the pleasure of a love-mate myself. And since you don’t have one either, you’re still the best choice between all of Jake Bryant’s daughters.”

“Don’t start, Liam.”

Because her second oldest sister, Katrina, was now married to a very important human city mayor, Jonathan Ryker, and their public life would put their werewolf species’ secret existence in dire jeopardy.

Jon offered to end his own political career, if she wanted to accept the crown, but Katrina wouldn’t hear of it. She had never wanted it to begin with, and the man’s altruistic goals and increasing influence to their corner of the world were too vital.

Which meant the title was then passed to the third in line, Avril, who fully intended to take up the Direct Heir position. She would have been good at it, too.

Until she fell in love and married her werewolf pirate prince and the Direct Heir of his own pack, Drew Kingston-Cross, becoming their pack’s future Prima Alpha. A step upwards, in Avril’s opinion, understanding more than anyone the critical importance of a battle strategic queen in the chess game of wolfpack life inside their volatile were-world.

Which then left Mariah as the youngest Bryant daughter to be offered the position as Direct Heir.

Until it was discovered that she wasn't Jake and Nicole Bryant's daughter at all.

Posing another horrible question.

Whose daughter was she?

* * *

"Who?" Ben Gallagher demanded through gritted teeth.

The paunchy suited man with a bad comb-over laced his fingers on top of the desk, eyeing Ben like a misbehaving student.

Harold Jennings was the dean of their small college outside Inverness, Scotland, which the flatulating Cretan ran like his own personal prison. It took all of Ben's strength to cool his heating eyes and force his vibrating body to retain its human shape.

"Confidential sources," Jennings said.

"Of course, they are," Ben muttered, feeling his temper rising and his body aching to shift into his black wolf form.

Keep control, man. You can't lose it in human public view.

"I'm terribly sorry, Ben," Jennings said, sitting back in his squeaking chair. "Truly, I am. But I'm afraid this matter is now out of my hands."

Sure, it is, you obnoxious, cowardly jackass.

"Where's Dr. Lintal now?" Ben questioned.

"Don't concern yourself," Jennings said. "Security met him an hour ago and informed him that his speaking engagement this afternoon was cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances."

"Without even contacting me?"

"It was a unanimous decision."

"Again, by whom?" Ben questioned through his teeth. "No, don't tell me. Let me guess. Meyers, McCafferty and the rest of the Hateful Eight here."

Jennings didn't refute it. Not that Ben needed any confirmation.

"So once again," Ben added, "those narrowminded sycophants who dare to call themselves educators didn't want Dr. Lintal, a renown historical expert, to provide *my* students with ideas possibly opposed to their own. Hell, this wasn't even a public speaking event in the Manor Hall, just a two-hour lecture during my own class on the rise of British government."

"I'm terribly sorry, Ben," Jennings said, leaning forward in his groaning chair, "but I just received too much pushback by staff and students alike who are offended by the man's controversial leanings. Richford University just cannot handle the unfavorable attention it would receive if a subversive personality such as Carl Lintal—"

"Subver—!"

Ben pulled a rough hand down his black stubbled jaw to calm himself. His own unpopular viewpoints wouldn't be made by losing his cool, no matter how well justified.

He took a deep breath, then tried again in a calmer tone.

"Look. Don't we as educators have a moral obligation to show all sides of any debate, so our students can discern and decide for themselves which is the better choice for them?"

"Our job is to teach them *how* to think for themselves, not *what* to think based on our own personal opinions. If these young people don't learn how to listen openly and respectfully to everyone whether they agree with them or not, how are they ever going to grow up and lead this world fairly when it's their turn?"

The dean narrowed his eyes at Ben, saying, "Of course, I would expect this sort of radical thinking from an American such as yourself, but that is not the opinion of the average British citizen. No, no. I'm not the only one who believes this."

"I'll just bet," Ben grumbled.

“Which brings me to my true reason for calling you here,” Jennings continued. “This last attempt of yours to bring in yet another offensive speaker to agitate the vulnerable young people here at Richford cannot go unanswered. It is apparent that you do not hold to the same values of our institution, so it is in the best interest of all to amiably part company. Therefore, it is with greatest regret that I must accept your quiet resignation from your teaching post as of today.”

Ben’s mouth dropped open. “You’re *firing* me?”

“It will allow you the opportunity to pursue other venues that best suit your, well, unorthodox belief systems. You can stop by Personnel to collect your final salary payment. I have generously added three additional weeks of severance. Please don’t forget to hand over your office and classroom keys in Seaton Hall. We will send you any personal belongings still there.”

That triggered it.

Ben’s eyes glowed neon green, and his eyeteeth lengthened to monstrous canines and fangs. Growling, he picked up the wooden desk with superhuman strength and threw it against the wall, splintering it into pieces and smashing the mounted glass framed diplomas and certificates.

Shrilly screaming, Jennings tumbled over his chair and scrambled to the window, calling for help, his white comb-over strands literally raising on his head.

Ben burst out of the office and building before the campus police arrived, running at blurring were-speed across the college grounds. Furiously, he kept running to keep from spontaneously shifting into his black wolf form in full public view.

Down deserted roads, through woods, over green hills and fields, he stopped only when he reached the ocean and could go no further.

Pulling a rough hand through his wind-whipped dark hair, Ben squeezed his eyes shut to regain control. It took a few

minutes, but finally his illuminated eyes cooled to their light green again and his canines retracted back to normal human teeth.

God, that insufferable ass had no idea how close he came to becoming shredded dogfood.

So close.

He would have to do better.

His father warned him too many times about his fiery trigger temper. A dangerous trait in a werewolf.

Fortunately, he was only half.

Calmer now, Ben headed down the grassy knoll until he reached the city outskirts. Not ready to take a taxi back to the college to retrieve his vehicle and go home to his flat, he meandered through the touristy streets and byways until he reached the bay.

Leaning against the dock railing, Ben watched as the tugs, skiffs and trollers cut in and out through the green water, working to calm himself more.

It was his own fault. He shouldn't have let Jennings and his brainless minions work him up like that.

What was wrong with him? This hadn't been the first time he had been fired from a teaching position for his rebellious political views. He hadn't been raised to be a mindless sheep that blindly followed the fickle crowd and had always grated against those in power.

It was never fun though.

Dammit, what was he going to do now?

Not that he needed the college's pathetic stipend. His family was obscenely rich. But like his mother, he loved teaching and needed a solid purpose and mission in life. And like his warrior father, he needed an honorable cause to fight and evil foes to vanquish. Right now, he had nothing. He was a floating satellite lost in the cosmos.

His cellphone buzzed.

Ben considered ignoring it, not in the mood to talk to anyone. Especially if it was someone from his college.

Former college.

Curiosity made him at least glance at the caller I.D., then with a snarl he answered it.

“What’s up?”

“Hello to you, too,” his mother said with a nervously chuckle. “And nothing really. It’s just that I felt...Is something wrong, hon?”

How does she do that?

The woman always seemed to know what was going on in his life, sometimes even before he did himself. It went way beyond unnerving and creepy.

Still, he might as well admit it. She would find out soon enough anyhow.

“Just got fired,” he grumbled. “Again.”

“No! What happened?”

Reluctantly, Ben gave her a brief rundown of the events leading up to his final confrontation with Harold Jennings. Although he left out the part where he partial-shifted and literally scared the piss out of the old fart before he demolished his office.

“Ignorant, dictatorial administrators,” his mom huffed. “Lord knows, I’ve suffered my own battles with them through the years. Well, that tiny, backwater barber college never deserved you anyhow. Fools, the lot of them.”

Ben smiled at his mother’s furious indignation. As a former history teacher herself, she could empathize with his plight, too. He was glad to have taken her call now.

They talked it over a few minutes before he didn’t want to think about the black situation anymore.

“Anything going on down under for you these days?” Ben asked to change the conversation.

Although they had lived all over the world, his parents were currently residing incognito on a ranch in northern Australia. He had visited there once. It was nice enough, but he still preferred living in the British Isles himself.

Maybe he should teach at Oxford again. They were unimaginative traditionalists, but at least they didn't balk his teaching methods. Much.

With this opening, his mother eagerly shared her latest archeological dig. She was a hardcore Indiana Jones archetype who loved all things historical. Ben enjoyed listening to her adventure stories and discoveries.

"...but the Dundee wolfpack in Sydney very nearly shut it down," she continued. "Fortunately, your dad convinced their Alpha to allow us temporary entrance into their territory, or our team never would have discovered that mammoth fossil."

"That's great, Mom."

"Speaking of wolfpacks," she added hesitantly. "Have you heard the latest about the Bryant pack in Washington State?"

Ben leaned over the dock railing, watching a fishing troller pull into port. Immediately its ocean ravaged crew went into frantic motion to tie off and unload their bounty.

"Haven't been to the States in over a year, so no."

"Thought you might've talked with Garret McGuire."

"Not lately, no," Ben said. "Why, what's up?"

Not that he cared about the gossip and scandals and politics of any werewolf pack. His own life was complicated enough without concerning himself with the problems of others.

"As of last Friday, they're officially without a Direct Heir," she said. "So you know what that might mean."

Ben straightened, his gut dropping.

Yes. Yes, he did.

Dammit, why now, of all times?

Then again, maybe being fired from his teaching position today had been a blessing in disguise then. In case he needed to suddenly disappear.

“Wait. Jake Bryant has plenty of kids. How can he be without an heir?”

“Daughters, and three of them are unable to accept the position for various reasons,” his mother explained. “Now it was discovered that his fourth isn’t his biological child, so she isn’t a viable candidate.”

“How is that even possible?” Ben questioned. “Aren’t there checks and balances in place to assure lineage at the time of a royal’s birth?”

His mother explained what she knew of the details of this newsflash.

“So no one knows where this newborn came from,” she concluded, “or what happened to the Bryant’s infant at the time of its birth.”

“Whoa. That’s crazy.”

“It is.”

This Mariah Bryant was a changeling then. A fairy child replaced with another human infant to trick her parents into accepting her into their family, or so the ancient Celtic legends claimed. Just replace fairies with werewolves, and the story was the same.

The real question was—why would anyone do such a thing?

A true, intriguing puzzle.

And something for Ben to investigate himself, if he had a mind to. Heaven knew he had plenty of time now to do so.

It would be a distraction. A purpose.

“Benjamin James, don’t even think it.”

He quirked a grin, remarking, "I know you'd like to think that you can read my thoughts, Mom..."

"I can," she laughed. "I can hear your thoughts buzzing like a bunch of angry bees clear across the Atlantic."

Ben hooded his eyes, unable to rebut her comment. The woman was an old soul, and she knew her headstrong son much too well.

"How did you even find out about all of this?" he asked.

"Logan Thorne called me yesterday. He still deals a lot with the Bryant companies there in Washington State."

"I thought he retired," Ben remarked.

"That man will never retire, and stop redirecting the conversation to something else. Where did you think you learned that trick anyhow?"

Ben twitched another smile.

"Why bother me with this problem of the Bryant pack then?" he asked as he watched another fishing troller head out to sea.

"To warn you," she said. "Your father and I have done well to hide from them all these years. But with that last trick you pulled, there's a possibility of Rob Bryant confessing what he knows. Especially about you."

Damn.

She wasn't wrong. Last year, his father warned him that something like this might happen. Loudly.

Ben switched the cellphone to his other ear. "Yeah, I thought about that." *More times than he cared to admit.* "I really believe we're in the clear though. I covered my tracks well. Rob Bryant vowed not to talk, and no one will figure out what really happened, particularly those old coots on the Elder Council who can't see past the end of their pompous muzzles."

"Unless..."

"Unless what?" he prodded warily.

His mother let out of a heavy breath. “Even if *your* stunt didn’t cause repercussions, and I’m still debating that, *I* might have inadvertently...”

“What, Mom?” he prompted at her pause.

“Well, I might have left them a physical clue to our... ability,” she said with a wince in her tone.

“What!”

“It was right before you were born,” she quickly added. “I didn’t just give Rob Bryant a verbal message from your father. I gave him an actual letter that your father wrote to him. After I came back in 1988. That’s the real reason Rob approached you last year. He’s a brilliant man and figured out how I got it, what I did, can do. He must’ve assumed you could, too.”

Ben muttered a black oath.

“I’m sure he didn’t divulge our secret to anyone,” his mother added quickly. “I trust him. Rob Bryant’s an honorable man. But there’s always that slim chance of someone else getting a hold of that letter and, well, they need an heir now. They’ll want to search for you to see if it’s true.”

Ben’s gut dropped at the implications of physical proof of their dangerous, supernatural ability. Their enemies all over the world would be able to at last find and use them for their own despicable purposes.

Arcans, in particular.

“Great, so changing our names and moving around the planet twenty times all my life was in vain?” he growled.

“Not twenty,” she protested. “Well, not much more than that.”

Ben wanted to hit something, hard. He wanted to shift into his black wolf form and furiously run clear to the other side of the Scottish Highlands, biting anyone in his path.

Once again, he wasn’t safe. Now his enemies might find him, all because this desperate wolfpack who he shares ties

with would turn over every stone to find him and his family to avoid their own destruction.

Unless...

Unless he found this changeling's doppelganger first.

Because if Mariah Bryant had been switched at birth like everyone suspects, there was still a true heir to the Bryant crown out there somewhere.

So the best, the *only* thing to do was to find this missing heir, solving everyone's problem.

Especially his own.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 2

The briny ocean wind whipped her long black hair across her face. Mariah barely noticed as she numbly stood in front of the castle ruins with its moss and vine covered walls and rock-harled towers. It was a grim monument to her own ruined tale, something once so opulent and regal, now a crumbled relic. Castle Callaghan—the root of the family tree that was no longer her own.

Never was.

Maybe.

Because in truth, she had no idea what her true lineage was or whose werewolf pack she had come from.

A choked sob lodged in her throat. It had been a bad idea to come to the port city of Drogheda, Ireland to follow up on this minor lead into her unknown birth past. Still, after two grueling months of covered whispers and illicit rumors and conspiracy theories, she needed to get as far away from Timber Ridge as possible.

Her mother and father had been lovingly supportive about her search for her true identity. They pretended not to be hurt by the fact that she could no longer consider them her real parents, of course, even in the midst of their own political struggles in having no official Direct Heir now.

Not to mention, their own desperate questions on what really happened to their own biological child.

God, what a mess.

The head of their pack's security, her Uncle Neil, had discreetly investigated the details of her birth and those involved. So far, he could only locate the current address in Ireland of the at-home nurse who cared for her mother during her first weeks of convalescence twenty-three years ago.

It was something, however. Something she could follow up on personally, giving her the excuse to escape the

community and people and drama back home.

It would also give her time away to figure out where her life would now take her. Now that she was no longer a royal.

Never was.

“What am I going to do?” Mariah sighed, tugging the whipping strands of hair away from her cheek.

“Well, and that would depend upon you, wouldn’t it?”

Yelping, Mariah whirled around to face the dark-haired man sauntering up to her through the misty sea grass. He was tall, solidly built and ruggedly attractive, dressed in jeans and blue cable-knit sweater underneath a black leather jacket.

She had seen him before. Almost every night at the Black Lion pub this week, in fact. Always with friends, always watching her from a distance with piercing green eyes that slanted slightly at the corners like some great cat you needed to be wary of.

Several times he looked on the verge of approaching her as she sat alone at the corner table each night, but always held back. Last evening, however, he downed his mug of beer, bid his friends goodnight, then headed in her direction.

Mariah quickly slapped down some cash, then double-timed it straight for the door.

“I’d like to be alone, if you don’t mind,” she grumbled, turning back to the castle.

“Seems to me that you’re alone now, and you’re not a’tall happy,” the man said in a light Irish brogue.

Mariah shot him a fiery glare that easily cowered the most dangerous military enforcer. This man, however, didn’t appear intimidated the least little bit.

Of course, why would he? She no longer held any power or authority over him or anyone else now. She was just another lowborn werewolf in her pack.

Not her wolfpack, she reminded herself.

Maybe.

“Go. Away,” Mariah ground out.

“Why?” he asked, curious.

“Because I told you to!”

“Well, and it’s a free country, isn’t it? I’ve a right to stand here and see the old sights of Drogheda as much as yourself, don’t I?”

Mariah started to argue, then closed her mouth and turned back to the ruins.

He was right, of course. He had every right to be there. Nor did she have the power to order him or anyone else, for that matter. Not anymore.

Another bad royal habit she would have to break. Liam reminded her of this when driving her to the airport last week.

“Fine, then I’ll leave,” she growled.

Mariah turned to stalk back across the field to her rental car parked alongside the deserted road, but the man stepped into her path.

“Stay, and I’ll tell ya all about the castle’s history,” he said, cracking a mischievous, dimpled smile.

“If I’m interested, I’ll buy the book,” she said, moving to walk around him.

He stepped into her path again. “Ah, but no human-written book will have the insider stories about this place and its mysterious were-kind people now, would they?”

“And you do?” she challenged.

“I do.”

“How?”

“They were my people, once upon a time,” he said with a shrug. “I have special sources, you might say.”

Mariah had picked up the scent of werewolf on the man, but it held an odd note of something else as well, something she couldn’t define, almost alien in nature.

“You’re a Callaghan?” she questioned doubtfully.

“Indirectly,” he said, extending his right hand. “Ben Gallagher.”

Mariah reflexively shook it, then roughly retracted her hand. A knee-jerk reaction, playing the political diplomat since childhood.

“And your name?” he asked, not offended by her rudeness.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “No reason. Just a bit more pleasant than talkin’ to you without it.”

“Who said that I wanted to talk to you? Go away.”

He didn’t.

Mariah was about to step around the man again, then stopped. Liam had reminded her not to wallow and to make some new acquaintances while she was here for the next few weeks.

Making friends was never something she had been good at though. They had always been plentiful to her growing up in Timber Ridge, of course, but most always approached her first, and then only because of her royal status. Those vapid society friends quickly scattered like roaches now that she no longer had it.

She was Cinderella in reverse.

“On holiday here, then?” Ben grinned wider at her gaping mouth, adding, “Your American accent gave ya away, darlin’.”

“Oh. Well, yes, I’m here...” She cleared her throat, then answered, “I’m Mariah. Mariah Bryant.”

Why was she still talking to him?

Yes, he was attractive. Very much so. And something about him was extraordinarily appealing. But his overly sunny disposition was spoiling her dark mood, and right now that emotion was preferable to her depressive self-pity.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mariah Bryant,” Ben Gallagher said. “I’ve seen you at the Black Lion a few times.”

“Have you?” she muttered testily.

“Always by yourself, too. Seemed a bit lonely. I was tempted to offer you a drink a time or two, but didn’t want to push in.”

Mariah startled as she fixed her stare with his. Now she knew why she was still talking to this stranger. It was his voice. She recognized it from that man who called her a month ago.

“You!”

“Me?”

“You called me!”

He frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t give me that,” she spat. “That was you. I know it. Did you follow me here to Ireland? Let me warn you that stalking is a punishable crime, and I have enforcer uncles who will come here at a moment’s notice to grind you to dogmeat!”

“No, no,” he chuckled with palms raised in surrender. “This was purely a chance meeting. I was out walking the hills to clear my head, you see. I often come to the old castle when I’ve the need to sort things out. It’s a good place for that. There’s rich history here and lots of ghosts to converse with.”

“Ghosts?”

“Ah well, a practical American such as yourself might not believe in such mystical beings,” he added. “Still, they make for good stories and companionable listeners.”

Mariah narrowed her eyes, studying the man harder. On second thought, he couldn’t be her phone harasser, she decided. That man had an American accent, and Gallagher was obviously a local.

“All right, well, just don’t follow me anymore. Goodbye.”

“Did you know that Brenna Callaghan, daughter of the Callaghan High Alpha, was part mage?”

The man’s comment halted Mariah in her tracks just as she turned to leave. The disbanded Callaghan wolfpack was originally connected to her own, and she knew their history fairly well. Somehow this odd tidbit had been left out from the school textbooks though.

“Mage? No way.”

“It’s true, then,” he insisted, his green cat-slanted eyes teasing.

“How would you know this?” she questioned.

Ben cracked another dimpled grin. “Come with me, and I’ll tell you.”

“Come where?”

“Just around the corner there,” he said, pointing at the building’s crumbling section that still boasted its three stories height.

“I don’t...”

“The tale’s always better with a visual.”

Mariah considered a long moment. Half of her wanted to hotly leave, but the other was too intrigued by this unknown fact. If it wasn’t an outright lie, of course.

“How do you know that Brenna Callaghan was a mage?”

“*Part* mage,” Ben corrected holding up a forefinger. “A cousin of mine knew the wolf princess herself, and even had a part in her fascinating tale. If you’ve a care to hear it.”

Mariah didn’t a few minutes ago.

* * *

Ben knew he successfully hooked the wolf beauty then.

A natural born detective, it would be Mariah Bryant’s intense curiosity that he discovered that he had to play on.

And nothing tickled interest better than a thrilling mystery.

After almost two months of his own detective work in locating the lost Bryant wolfpack heir, Ben had come up with nothing. It didn't help that the family kept all information close to the vest, stonewalling him on every clue and document in their possession.

He could have approached their High Alpha privately and come clean on his true identity, but that would put himself and his own family at risk, defeating the purpose of his need to find their missing heir.

No, he had to continue his investigative work under their radar.

There was a stroke of luck when he learned that Mariah Bryant herself was heading to Ireland to meet with a local private investigator working to locate her birthparents. All Ben had to do now was gain her friendship and trust to learn what their wolfpack was hiding.

He had to be strategic about it though. Mariah was a smart, savvy lady who would quickly smell a rat and run back to the safety of her cloistered home in Washington State if she learned who he was and the reasons he was doing this.

So Step One—the “accidental” meet-cute right now with an Irish local.

It was easy to bribe the hotel housemaid last night to leave a tourist brochure of Castle Callaghan in Mariah's room for her to find this morning. Then he covertly followed the woman until she came here.

Mariah didn't move as Ben trudged forward. He didn't look back, allowing her to decide whether to follow him or not.

Rounding the corner out of sight, he was afraid she wasn't going to take the bait. Then she jaunted around the crumbling rock wall and quickly caught up with him.

“I can only spare a moment,” she said with lifted chin. “Make it quick.”

“As you wish,” Ben said as he guided her towards the rear entrance. “To begin with, have you ever heard of the Red Moon Prophecy?”

“It’s an old folktale, isn’t it?”

“Not a’tall,” he said. “It’s the true story about the triplet daughters of Brenna Callaghan.”

“Daughters?” Mariah remarked with souring expression. “No, Brenna Callaghan never married or had any children.”

“Or so you were told,” Ben pointed out, stepping towards the rotted wood casement door. “But her daughters existed nonetheless. And all three were equally the same and equally different—werewolf, vampire and mage.”

Mariah shot him a withering look. “Now you’re just making that up. That’s not even possible.”

“Very possible and very true,” Ben returned with hiked brows. “My cousin Garrett McGuire confirmed this, and he was there when the sisters met.

“He was a remnant of the scattered Callaghan pack, you see. No, that’s not widely known, so please don’t repeat it for his own safety’s sake. In any case, Garrett knew Brenna herself, knew her three daughters, and even had a small hand in bringing them all together. Right before an evil mage rose up against them.”

“Mage? But I heard...”

Mariah’s brows drew together, and Ben bit down a smile, watching her furiously puzzle out these details unknown by even her own High Alpha father. For the first time, he was glad for this rare insider information.

“An interesting story, to be sure. Do you wish to see where it all began?” he asked, gesturing towards the remnants of the rear door. “Where the daughters themselves discovered the hidden lair of this wicked mage that was conniving directly under the noses of the Callaghans themselves.”

Mariah grimaced at the rotted door. “Is it safe?”

“Safe enough. We’ll watch our steps to be certain.”

Ben carefully guided her inside the dilapidated kitchen that must have once boasted a small army of staff in elegant days gone by. It was sad to see the grand old castle withered from the ravages of war and time.

Waving dust and cobwebs away as they stepped cautiously, he led her through the main kitchen proper, around one corner, past two storage rooms to a narrow hallway passage, coming to the door Garrett had once told him about. Ben hoped it led to where it was supposed to, since he never personally ventured through the bones of this place.

“Here it is,” he said, relieved to find it. “There’s a stairwell that leads down to the mage’s lair. Ready?”

Mariah coughed as Ben yanked open the sticking, dusty panel to reveal rock hewn steps leading down into a dark abyss.

“I don’t...”

“Or we could call it a day, if you’re a bit afraid,” Ben added with a wince, as if sympathizing with her female distress.

He knew well that her fierce Bryant pride would flare up at that insult. She was a princess, yes, but a warrior princess. In spirit, if not by blood.

“I’m not afraid,” she ground out. “It’s just...Oh, just lead the way already. I have things to do.”

“If you’re sure now?”

She gestured impatiently. “Let’s go.”

“As you wish.”

Ben bit down a smile, aiding her down the slippery stone steps.

At the bottom lay another door that opened into a small, dank room. Both of them were werewolves with natural night vision, so they could see everything clearly enough inside the pitch blackness.

It was even better than Garret described. The historian in him craved to go through this musty room filled with ancient arcane artifacts, but that wasn't his true purpose for being there. He needed to pique Mariah Bryant's curiosity further, not his own.

"Wow," Mariah breathed in awe as she looked around the room. "Yes, this is definitely not a place that a werewolf would use."

"Indeed not," he agreed. "And yet, it is."

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning to him.

"Well now, that would take some telling, to be sure," Ben said, brushing a floating cobweb out of his face. "How about we drive back into town, and I tell it to you over a nice fish sandwich."

Mariah sent him a hooded look. "How about you tell me now, and we skip the impromptu lunch?"

Ben cracked a slow smile, feeling the slight tug of the baited fishing line. Now he had to be careful not to lose Mariah's interest as he slowly reeled her in.

"My story, my way," he said. "If, of course, you're a'tall interested."

* * *

It had been a great idea, Mariah reluctantly admitted.

Fully sated, she sighed as she sat back in the deck chair, nudging her empty fish and chips basket aside. She gazed out at the rippling bay water with boats weaving in and out of the port, feeling at genuine peace for the first time in two months.

Ben took a pull from the bottle of lager, his green cat-slanted eyes never leaving her face. His intense focus unnerved Mariah in a disturbing way she couldn't pinpoint. Not that she wasn't used to attracting male attention on a regular basis. She had inherited her mother's dark, exotic beauty...

Not her mother. She wasn't related to Nicole Bryant in any way, dammit!

Whose looks did she inherit then?

Depression crashed over her like an ocean undertow. She viciously fought it back, recalling Liam's reminder not to wallow in self-pity. To consider this a sabbatical from her problems.

"And don't forget to enjoy yourself on your wee Irish excursion," he teased when dropping her off at SeaTac Airport. *"And don't wallow. Make a friend or two. That's an order from someone who loves you."*

A friend.

So far, Ben Gallagher was the only person that came close to that description this entire week.

Maybe she had been wallowing then. And it was time to stop.

"I almost didn't come to lunch with you," Mariah admitted, sipping her frosty lemonade.

"Glad that you changed your mind then," Ben said. "A meal is always better eaten in beautiful company. At least for me."

She twitched a smile and looked down, feeling her cheeks heat at his indirect compliment. He was flirting, but in a gentlemanly manner. No doubt with his own dark good looks and Irish charm, he didn't eat his meals alone when he didn't wish to.

"So what about this story of Brenna Callaghan and her daughters?" she said. "You did promise to tell me over lunch."

"Ah, yes. I did, at that," Ben said, relaxing back in the classic storyteller's posture. "Well then, it's best to start off by sharing the love story of Brenna, daughter of the Callaghan High Alpha, and Davin, son of the Laith vampire sire."

She scrunched her nose. "A wolf and a vampire? No, never."

"It's true, then," Ben insisted. "They started as enemies, of course, both in competition to find the legendary *Firestone*

that would provide its possessor of hidden knowledge of things to come. A powerful seer stone, if you will.”

He took another sip from his lager, then began, “One night, Castle Callaghan was set upon by an army of evil Laith vampires who burnt and ravaged the Keep to the ground.

“It was a bloody battle, and the wolves fought bravely, but they were eventually overcome. It had been a planned and coordinated effort by the vampires to eliminate the only wolfpack in Ireland. And they were successful. Not a werewolf remained here on the Island, except for the odd remnant who then scattered to the four winds. But that’s another story.”

“Quinn Callaghan and his heir were both killed in the midnight attack,” he continued. “It was by chance that his daughter Brenna escaped the massacre.

“How, you ask?”

“Always the rebel princess, Brenna disobeyed her father’s edict to stay inside the castle that fateful night. Sensing something amiss, she sneaked away to spy on the Laith vampire coven in the south.

“After gathering evidence that they were up to no good, Brenna sadly returned the next morning to the smoking ruins of her home and the deaths of her friends and family. At that moment, she vowed to avenge her loved ones and wolfpack.”

“I imagine she would,” Mariah remarked. “So she went to find this... What was it?”

“*Firestone*,” Ben answered. “Yes. Her mother’s sister who was a powerful sorceress—”

“Wait,” Mariah interrupted with raised hand. “That’s how Brenna came to be part mage then. From her mother’s side.”

Another shocking revelation.

A mage marrying a werewolf was just as incomprehensible as a mage and a vampire, or a vampire and a

wolf. All three supernatural species were intense rivals and very different in so many ways.

“It was,” Ben confirmed. “So Brenna and her brother were both half wolf and half mage.”

“The brother who was killed by the vampires.”

He nodded, taking another pull from his beer. “Brenna’s sorceress aunt told her of the *Firestone* hidden in a cave off Spanish Point near County Clare. The other side of the Island here, if you’re wondering. Oh, you knew that.

“Well, it was this power that the Laith’s mage, Maximillian Valerian, wanted for unspeakable reasons. That’s why he tricked the Laith heir, Davin, into retrieving it for him.”

“So Brenna Callaghan needed to beat him to the punch and find it first.”

“Indeed.”

Ben continued the story of how Brenna and Davin collided in competition for this seer stone, and in the process fell in love while overcoming a common enemy neither knew even existed.

“In the end, they located the legendary *Firestone*,” Ben continued, “but now understood it would be catastrophic in the wrong hands. So Davin made plans to hide it away where not even Brenna herself could be persuaded to give away its location to those who would torture it out of her.”

“Smart move. Was it ever recovered?” Mariah asked, now caught up in the story. “And where is Davin and Brenna now? Did they ever—?”

Ben held up a finger. “Ah now, that’s where the story takes a most tragic turn. With plans to meet and hide away together after the dangerous *Firestone* was well hidden, they parted company at the Dublin International Airport. Only after Brenna flew off did Davin Laith learn that he had been betrayed by the very woman he loved and trusted.”

“Betrayed? How? Why?”

“Not only did Brenna secret away with the stone’s power, but pregnant with his three daughters that he would know nothing about until many years later.”

Mariah waited for Ben to continue, frowning when he didn’t say anything.

“Then what happened?” she prodded.

“Much,” he said, checking his cellphone. “But sadly, that’s all the time I can spare now for the telling.”

Mariah blinked hard. “What? No! If you’re going to leave me hanging there, buddy, think again.”

He downed the last of his beer and stood. “I’ll have to, I’m afraid. I promised my friend Cutty to help him with his boating tour group in twenty minutes. I’m free tonight, if you wish to pick this up again at dinner, however. I’ll be at the pub as usual around eight. Until then, it’s been a great pleasure, Mariah Bryant. Hope to see you tonight.”

“No, but...”

Ben touched his forehead in goodbye, then jaunted down the deck stairs before Mariah could finish her sentence, leaving her gaping after the man.

Two minutes later, the waitress set down the tab tray in front of her, asking, “Will this be all for you, ma’am?”

And the jerk left her with the check!

With pursed lips, she dipped into her purse and withdrew three large bills to cover it, along with a generous tip.

“Yes, that’s quite enough,” Mariah grunted, standing and roughly shouldering her purse strap.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 3

Before Mariah could catch up to him, Ben ran for his car, jumped in and zoomed away. It was all he could do not to throw his head back and belly laugh at her bobbing goldfish expression when he made his quick escape.

Actually, it was only a half-lie that he had given her. He did have a local friend named Cuthbert "Cutty" O'Brian who owned a troller he rented out for tourist groups. Ben had helped the old man on fishing trips, baiting and gutting for the customers, but that had been years ago when he was a teenager.

He would have to make a call to Cutty to back up his story though, just in case Mariah inadvertently ran into the old man. This was a small city, and it was always a possibility.

His cellphone buzzed, and Ben snarled at the incoming number.

Why the hell was he calling?

He considered ignoring the call, then reluctantly hit the connect button, knowing to avoid him would do no good.

"Hey, what's up?" he said in his normal western American accent, all traces of his false Irish lilt gone.

The heavily Irish male voice on the other end was very broad and authentic though. And very displeased by the dark, familiar sound of it.

"And I should be askin' you that very thing, boy."

"What do you mean?" Ben remarked.

"Don't be actin' innocent with me, Benjamin James. I know you're this very minute in Drogheda on this reckless scheme of yours, when I told you to stay out of it."

Ben sneered at the twisting rural road leading to his family's ocean view house outside of town.

"There's no use denyin' it."

“Who’s denying it?” Ben remarked.

A growling rumble made Ben reflexively straighten and made his blood run cold, just like it did when he was a kid.

“You’re just like your mother, ya know that?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Ben returned.

“Don’t. Not in this case. Ah well, come down to Sydney then and we’ll call it quits, yeah?”

Ben fumed. “No, Dad. I’m not a child and can do whatever I wish. With or without your approval.”

“The Bryants are not your pack, Benjamin. You’ve no business interferin’ with theirs.”

True enough.

Still, he had spent too much time in planning and preparation to stop now.

Not to mention that having met Mariah Bryant in person, he was all the more compelled to see this through. For her sake, if not for her wolfpack’s.

“If you’re concerned about the Arcan organization findin’ you and your mother, I’ve taken extra precautions to cover your tracks. I haven’t worked all these years protectin’ you both to have you captured and used by them now. Come down here to the ranch, son, and we’ll all go into the backcountry again—”

“No! I’m done running and hiding, Dad,” Ben cut in. “Mom is, too. Maybe it’s time we all confronted the Arcan bastards and finally had it out with them. We could approach the Bryant High Alpha, the entire Were High Council, get all of were-kind together for a—”

“A what?” his father cut in. “An interspecies world war? Do you think I’ve not considered this for over a hundred years, son? That others haven’t considered this for centuries? No, Ben. That could easily lead to the elimination of our entire species. Maybe even the entire human and were-kind population both.”

Ben growled low. “Fine. You’re probably right.”

As usual, damn the old man.

“Now your mother suspects that you might want to jump again,” his father added.

“Never said that to her, Dad.”

“Didn’t need to. Need I remind you of the last time when you nearly lost your life trying to help out the Bryant High Alpha?”

“No, since you do that for me almost every week.”

“Well, and I’m doin’ it again. If nothin’ else, last year should be a hard lesson to you that it’s always best to let things unfold as they are meant to.”

“Not to change history,” Ben remarked, hooding his eyes.

“Exactly.”

“Which means that I shouldn’t have jumped back in time to save Rob Bryant’s heir from assassination before his coronation.”

“Yes.”

“And that Mom shouldn’t have gone back to save you in 1888, meaning that I would never have been born. Mom, either, for that matter, since Grandma McEwan did the exact same thing with her eighteenth-century highlander.”

Silence.

Yeah, that tidbit got his father good.

“Those are different matters entirely,” his father finally said.

“Of course, they are,” Ben muttered. “Let me also remind you that because of my time jump last year, Jake Bryant *lived* to become the current High Alpha and his own daughters were born. A happy ending to that tale, wouldn’t you say?”

Even if Ben almost lost his own life in the process, as his dad constantly reminded.

More tense silence.

“You’re not leavin’ the Island, are you?” his father questioned.

“No,” Ben confirmed. “Look, Dad. I need to help Jake Bryant find out what really happened when his youngest was born. Maybe even find his lost heir. Don’t we owe the Bryant pack that much?”

“We do not,” his father stated hard.

“So you’ll just sit back and let the entire pack destroy itself without lifting so much as a finger to help them?” Ben shook his head. “Well, I can’t, Dad. Sorry if you don’t agree with me, but I can’t.”

* * *

It was her own fault being taken in by an attractive grifter who knew his trade very well, who no doubt preyed on lonely, innocent tourists like herself all the time.

Mariah turned the ignition of her rental car, revving the engine hard a few times.

“See you tonight, my fat ass,” she growled low.

She wasn’t about to foot the bill for dinner and drinks, too. Hurt me once, and all that.

At least she always learned from the mistakes she made.

“He probably made up that entire stupid story, too. God, I’m so gullible!”

Her cellphone chimed. Mariah was about to let it go to voicemail, until she saw the incoming number. Quickly she cut the engine and answered the call.

“Mariah Bryant? It’s Kathleen Clark.”

Mariah’s breath caught. *Oh God, did her contact decide to cancel their meeting at the last minute?*

Please, no! This was the reason she came to Ireland in the first place.

Her Uncle Neil had arranged for Kathleen Clark, a local private investigator and werewolf, to interview Barbara Donnelly who lived thirty kilometers east of there. Now married and going by the name of Barbara Gregory, she had been her mother's convalescent nurse during those first few weeks after that dangerous delivery. It was sheer luck that her uncle had located the woman after twenty-three years.

"Ms. Bryant?"

Mariah startled out of her anxious musing. "I'm sorry. Yes, I'm here. What's up, Kathleen?"

"Would you be available to stop by the office today for a few minutes?" she asked. "I'd like to go over some things before we meet with Mrs. Gregory tomorrow. If you're unable ___"

"No! I mean, yes, I'm available. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Mariah clicked off, then drove across town to the rural outskirts. Several small office buildings were lined along the highway, and she parked in front of the fourth. Inside, she was immediately greeted by the businesswoman with curled copper hair who then offered a seat in front of the corner desk.

"Thank you for taking the time to come here," Kathleen said, sitting behind the desk. "On my suggestion, your aunt, Dr. Alexia Bryant, accessed the hospital's employment records the week you were born, then sent them to me yesterday. I spent half the night and most of the morning scouring over everything. As hoped for, I found a glitch."

"Glitch?"

She pulled a document copy out of the manila file folder and handed it to Mariah.

"Dr. Richard Collins, the on-call physician who allegedly performed your mother's emergency caesarian section, wasn't officially employed by the hospital. Not on that particular day anyhow."

"What?"

“He was previously,” Kathleen added. “One day prior, to be exact. See the date here on his resignation letter? So Richard Collins was not the official physician the night your mother delivered.”

Mariah frowned at the letterhead, aligning it up with the numerous times her mother shared her birth story.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “He had to have been there when my mother delivered. The intern who brought Mom into the hospital that night even said his name—Dr. Collins.”

“That’s another thing,” Kathleen said, pulling out a list of staff employees. “The intern who allegedly assisted Collins is nowhere to be found. Are you certain you have the name, Tia Cassidy, correct?”

“Definitely. My mother distinctly remembers Dr. Cassidy coming into our home to give her prenatal care. It was right before Mom’s contractions started, so the doctor drove her to the hospital personally.”

“Because your family was away and the Prima’s bodyguard suddenly became violently ill herself,” Kathleen added.

Mariah nodded. It was a strange coincidence.

“You’re saying that these doctors, Richard Collins and Tia Cassidy, illegally sneaked into my mother’s OR, delivered her baby, switched me out with the Bryant child, then took off, never to be heard from again.”

Which meant that this was a planned incident, not an accident.

“Not necessarily,” Kathleen answered. “It’s questionable, to be sure. This still may only be administrative error on both parties though. I’ll have to look into it more.”

“Can you locate them?” Mariah asked.

“I plan to try,” Kathleen said. “Either one might be able to explain what truly took place that night. It’s going to take some doing though. I haven’t had much luck so far.”

“A bust then.”

“A starting place,” she corrected. “The fact that Richard Collins and Tia Cassidy aren’t easily located makes a curious statement in itself, since they are physicians.”

Another dead end then.

“Barbara Donnelly...Gregory,” Mariah added. “We’re still meeting tomorrow though, right?”

Kathleen nodded. “Yes, she’s still in agreement to meet with us. But I must ask you to stay silent during my interview with her. It’s the only way we’ll get any helpful answers.”

Mariah agreed.

“All right then,” Kathleen said, standing to end their discussion. “I’ll see you tomorrow at eleven o’clock. I’ll call you if anything changes.”

“Changes?”

“Not to worry, but it does happen. Most people are overcautious about revealing their private lives. But I’ve done my homework on the woman. She loves to talk.”

Mariah thanked her and took her leave.

Back at her hotel, she dropped her room key and purse onto the side table when her cellphone chimed.

“Liam,” she breathed, tears automatically welling to hear his voice. “I’m so glad you called. What time is it there?”

“Too early,” he grunted. “But I didn’t want to miss you if you decided to go out on an exciting evening romp.”

Mariah plopped down on the bed and pulled off her leather boots. “No worries there. I plan to just hole up in my hotel room and cry myself to sleep.”

He tsked. “Dark blue is a horrible color on you, dearest.”

“Beast.”

“I told you to make friends, didn’t I?”

She arched a brow, recalling her lame attempt this morning that ended in humiliating disaster and fifty bucks

lighter.

“Don’t start, Liam.”

“So, no.”

Mariah brushed out her long hair, ignoring his jibe. “How’s the pack holding up?”

“Not good,” Liam said. “Dad can’t officially tell me the latest, of course, but I have my own inside sources.”

“You mean your mom.”

His parents were very close and shared everything, and Liam knew how to subtly squeeze information from his overly doting mother.

“Some dissenters amongst the Elder Council are threatening to split the pack, if a consensus isn’t reached who the next Direct Heir will be,” Liam said. “And soon.”

“Who are these dissenters?”

“The other three old farts grumbling about respecting the old ways. No shock there. Don’t worry, Dad and Uncle Sean won’t let them take it to the next level without a fight. They’re hardcore Bryant loyalists.”

“Bless them both.”

“They love you desperately and only want the best for you. This is all gotten out of hand, in my opinion. If those three blind mice would just tear up that blood document of your great-grandfather’s...”

“Rufus Bryant is not my great-grandfather,” Mariah reminded him.

Never was.

“I still say the time is right for our pack to finally move into the twenty-first century,” Liam added. “The outdated days of lineage monarchy have long been over in human history. It’s time for were-kind to begin voting on ranking and leadership positions as well, allowing its own citizens to choose who best to lead them.”

“Which would eliminate me as future High Alpha,” Mariah reminded.

“Not at all,” Liam said. “I would nominate you personally.”

She grinned. “You would?”

“Absolutely. Then you could appoint me as a Council member and your cousin Laila to take up her own father’s position as Prime Enforcer. Think of it. We could bring a new generation into pack leadership.”

Mariah sighed at her best friend’s familiar political rants. “Always the revolutionary.”

“Scares Mom to death.”

“And gives your dad vicious migraines. Mind your unpopular tongue around everyone, Liam. Especially the old fart Elder Council who would find any way to toss you out of the pack for treason.”

Liam grunted, unintimidated.

Mariah often wondered if half of him wished that would happen, giving him the excuse to live life finally on his own terms as a free rogue. She didn’t put it past him to instigate things to force the issue, either.

“Besides, you said that they’re all still hashing out the possibilities, right?” she added. “No matter what they finally decide, I’m certain the pack itself won’t split. Someone will... do something.”

Her friend’s pause told Mariah that he disagreed with her assessment if a formal agreement hadn’t been reached.

“Oh! I almost forgot to tell you,” Mariah added. “My investigator, Kathleen Clark, just found out that the obstetrician who delivered me, or I guess the other baby I was switched with, wasn’t officially employed by the hospital the night I-we were born.”

“That’s news.”

“So now Kathleen is going to try and locate him and the intern who assisted him.”

“Interesting, but not much to go on,” Liam remarked.

“Not yet,” Mariah agreed. “But it’s a start.”

“I hope you’re right, Mar. It’s been as dull as brown paint around here without you, and I’d love for you to end your search and come back home.”

She smiled at his warm tone. “Love you, too, beast. Call you tomorrow.”

“Not too early. I do have to get in my beauty sleep.”

* * *

As predicted, Mariah Bryant didn’t go to the Black Lion that night. Not after the stunt Ben pulled in purposely skipping out on the lunch check.

The only other decent restaurant in the city was the Flying Dutchman that would be recommended to Mariah by the hotel concierge whom Ben generously paid off earlier.

It was in their parking lot where he now sat in his car, watching as Mariah stepped around the corner and into the pub.

He checked the time on his cellphone—seven-twenty.

Another forty minutes before she would ask for the check, only to be told that it had already been taken care of. By him, as an apology for unthinkingly leaving her with the lunch tab earlier.

Another hour of Mariah fuming and questioning and debating and writing him off, before she broke down and called the phone number on the note. Just to clear the record. End things politely. Amiably.

She wouldn’t be able to help herself. Diplomacy had been drilled into her since the cradle.

That’s when he would make his next move.

It wasn't usually so difficult for him to garner a woman's trust, but Mariah Bryant was the exception. She was an influential royal who was used to having phony adoring fans and ambitious wolf males hotly pursue her at every turn. Her protective shields had been hammered into place from puberty, and it was going to take every strategy Ben could think of to tear them down.

Only then could he truly help her and her wolfpack from self-destruction.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 4

“Any dessert today, mum?” the Flying Dutchman waiter asked, refilling her water goblet.

Mariah shook her head, nudging her empty plate of rosemary grilled chicken and roasted red rose potatoes forward. “No room. Everything was delicious. I’ll just have the check, thank you.”

The young man gave a little wave, saying, “No need, ma’am. It’s been taken care of.”

“Taken care of?”

“Yes, mum. Are you certain that you wouldn’t want some cake or pie to take away? Our fresh apple is the house specialty.”

“By whom? The check, I mean,” Mariah said, frowning.

The waiter dipped into the pocket of his tan slacks and retracted a small slip of paper. “The gentleman said to enjoy the meal with his compliments.”

“Gentleman?”

Tentatively Mariah checked around to see if this man in question was sitting nearby to give her an inviting smile and wave, but no one looked in her direction.

Confused, she unfolded the note and read:

Mariah—

Greatest apologies for unthinkingly leaving the lunch bill in your charge this afternoon. I was running late and didn’t want to leave my friend Cutty without a boat hand for his charter. I hope this makes up a bit for my earlier blunder and ungallant rudeness. I truly enjoyed...

With pursed lips, she crunched the note into her fist, ready to pitch it back at the waiter’s head. The last thing she planned to do was contact the jerk...

“Will that be all for you, ma’am?” the waiter asked.

Mariah shoved the note into her pocket, grumbling, “Yes. Thank you.”

“Have a pleasant evening then. I do hope you’ll join us again soon.”

After the waiter left to attend another customer, Mariah pulled out and read Ben Gallagher’s note again.

An honest mistake then?

Maybe. After all, he did pay her dinner bill.

Nor did the man try to force himself into spending the evening with her. Then gave her the option to call him, but only if she wished it.

“Which I don’t,” she muttered, shoving the note back into her pocket.

Because mistake or not, it was best if she ended further contact with Ben Gallagher. He was much too...too everything. And her life was too complicated right now to add anyone else into it. Especially a very hot, charming and interesting Irish wolfhound.

Mariah stood and shouldered her purse strap, then stalked out of the busy restaurant.

Outside, the frigid bay air hit her face and blew around escaped strands of her braided hair. It was too late to do any shopping, and too early to go straight back to her hotel. She finally decided that an evening stroll along the shop-laden boardwalk would be a nice momentary distraction.

Darkness slowly descended as she meandered along, twinkle lights blinking on, arraying the various cafés and shops like fireflies.

She pulled Ben Gallagher’s crumpled note from her pocket and read it again.

Maybe it was a simple mistake, nothing more. She still didn’t plan to contact the man. Not that there was any need.

Okay, maybe a slight need. It would be impolite not to at least call and thank him for paying her dinner bill.

Would Gallagher see it as an open invitation to meet up again though? She had been down this awkward road before.

Not that she had to accept any plans he wanted to make, of course.

But then, what would be the purpose in calling him?

“Right. That’s it then,” Mariah stated aloud.

She *wouldn’t* call Ben Gallagher. He would get the message that she wasn’t interested, then leave her alone.

Best for everyone involved.

Decision made, Mariah sighed as she leaned against the waterfront piling, watching the fishing boats chugging into port for the night. The peaceful scene slowly relaxed the tension from her mind and shoulders. The first time since she came here...

Not true, she had to admit. This morning with Ben had been equally nice, and the spontaneous Callaghan mystery tour a pleasant distraction.

Lunch, too. Even if she did have to pay the bill.

Which he more than reimbursed tonight, in all honesty.

Maybe she should call to thank him. Her mother would be horrified by her lack of manners.

Why did it all bother her so much?

“Infuriating wolfhound,” she grumbled.

Another mystery, since there were no wolfpacks and very few individual werewolves still living in Ireland after the Callaghan pack disbanded.

The man must be a loner then, a rogue.

Mariah wondered what it must be like to be a werewolf completely alone to his own devices. It had to be lonely, no pack community to associate with or back you up during times of trouble. It must be a frightening way to survive.

No wonder Ben Gallagher was eager to befriend her when he spotted her this morning.

Maybe I should call him then.

“Ugh, stop thinking of the man already!” she growled at herself.

Mariah turned and stalked back down the boardwalk, hotly dodging bystanders heading in the opposite direction.

Getting into her car, her cellphone chimed. Thankfully, it was only Liam.

“Hey, hound,” she answered, raking windblown strands of hair from her face.

“Hey, yourself,” he said warily. “You sound stressed. Something you want to share?”

“Not really,” she grumbled. “How are you holding up there without me?”

“Bored to tears. Hurry and solve your personal Nancy Drew mystery, dearest, so you can come home and remedy that.”

Mariah grinned. “You told me to make friends, so why don’t you take your own advice?”

“Because you’re the only friend I can actually trust. Maybe the blue-haired ladies in Mom’s garden club have the right idea when they said that you and I should join forces in matrimony.”

“Ew,” she snorted. “Don’t spoil a good friendship with sex and marriage and a bunch of snotty kids. You’re the last person I’d want for that.”

“Ouch?”

“You know what I mean,” she countered. “Besides, don’t you have your eye on Amanda Livingston these days?”

“She was good for a couple of romps, but nothing more. No substance.”

“In other words, you got bored and dumped her,” Mariah tsked. “Hope you at least paid the dinner check when you told her.”

The offhanded remark made her own back go up, the image of Ben Gallagher's dimpled smile flashing through her own mind.

"Hey, I'm a gentleman, if nothing else," Liam said. "Not to worry. It was a mutual parting. When I told her that marriage was off the table, she raced away in her yellow Porsche faster than an Indy Five-Hundred driver."

He wasn't wrong. Mariah knew the Livingston girl and her greedy marital ambitions. It was a sad reminder that women had their own manipulative agendas, too.

"I'm sorry, Liam. You deserve a woman who truly loves and appreciates the real you. Not your family's position and wealth."

He grunted. "I don't know if I deserve it, but experiencing true love and all that would be a nice change of pace. Speaking of which, have you found a local cabana boy of your own to tumble in the sheets with during your Irish vacation?"

She pinched her expression. "You are so crude, Paxton. And no, nor do I intend to."

The image of Ben Gallagher's sexy smile made her squeeze her eyes shut and grit her teeth.

Why couldn't she stop thinking of him?

"Good. You deserve better as well, kid," Liam said. "Just remember that if you do connect with anyone, make sure to have the last word, or he'll haunt you until the end of your days."

Mariah's back went up again. Her best friend always had a weird sixth sense when it came to her. "What do you mean by that?"

"Later. Mom's calling on the other line, so I need to rush off and let it go to voicemail."

She rolled her eyes. "You are so bad, Liam. You have the best mom in the world, and you know it. You should treat her better."

Natalie Paxton had been a second mother to her since birth. Anytime Mariah needed advice that she couldn't ask her own mother, she went directly to Natalie who would give her the honest wisdom she needed to hear, wanted or not.

That included this messy business with the Direct Heir position.

Loyal to the core, Natalie made her own rebellious opinions of Mariah's disqualification heatedly known. Fortunately, it didn't go any further than their own family dining room, since it would put her husband's tenuous Council position in jeopardy.

"Say hi to your mom for me. Love you, creeper," she said before clicking off.

Mariah started to pocket her phone. But it was Liams last bit of advice that stopped her.

Perhaps he was right. If she didn't at least thank Ben Gallagher for dinner, it would niggle her as a diplomatic task undone and ruin her entire vacation. Then she would never get the infuriating man out of her head.

Pulling the note from her pocket, Mariah placed the call, prepared to speak to him with the least amount of words possible, making it known in no uncertain terms that she wasn't interested in...

"This is Ben Gallagher. Greatest apologies that I can't speak with you right now, but if you would do me the pleasure of leaving a message, I will get back to you. Have a grand day."

Mariah gaped, hearing the recorded voicemail message.

She should even leave a message?

Maybe she should just call back...

At the beep, she bumbled out, "Hi, uh, it's Mariah. Bryant. Uh, thank you for paying my dinner check tonight, but, well, I just wanted to thank you, that's all. Nothing else. Bye."

She clicked off and dropped the cellphone onto the passenger's seat as if it had been a fiery coal brick.

What did she just do?

God, now the man had her cell number and would try and connect!

Stupid, stupid.

“Doesn't matter. I just won't...”

What? Accept the call? Talk to him?

Right. She would make sure to check the caller I.D. and ignore any call from the man. Maybe even block his number. He would eventually get the message and back off.

“Besides, I have enough to worry about right now than some hot, pushy Irish wolfman,” she ground out, throwing the car into reverse.

Then tramped on the breaks when she almost backed into a honking, oncoming car.

* * *

Ben grinned wide, listening to Mariah's stumbling recorded message left seconds ago as he watched the woman almost collide with an oncoming car, then race away from the dimly lit restaurant parking lot.

Now it was time to arrange their next “accidental” meeting.

He punched in the number and waited until the line was answered.

“It's me,” he said. “We're a go.”

“Right then, Mr. Gallagher. Everything's arranged. I'll send my man out in three hours as requested.”

* * *

Mariah fretted over what to wear to their meeting in an hour, finally deciding on a simple red cable-knit sweater, dark blue jeans and black boots. This was supposed to be a casual

chat with her mother's former private nurse, so it was important not to appear intimidating in any way.

Slipping on her wool jacket, Mariah then headed out of the hotel to her rental car in the parking lot.

The morning fog still hovered around the landscape and chilled the briny sea air. It made her crave a steaming cup of strong coffee. Maybe a warm blueberry muffin. Her stomach had been too tied up in knots to eat earlier, and now her stomach was grumbling its protest.

"Not now. We have people to see," she muttered, turning the ignition.

Maybe Kathleen will have some snacks at her office.

The engine gave a groaning rev, then clicked and silenced.

Frowning, Mariah turned the key again, but again the engine gave a stomach gripping *rrr—rrr—click*, then died.

"No, no, don't you dare!"

Growling, she turned the ignition again, only to hear a struggling rev of the engine, followed by metallic clicking.

"Damn you, car!" she growled, pounding hard on the steering wheel with both palms.

She tried the ignition again, but it was futile. The car was utterly dead.

Mariah yelled out, sitting back hard in the seat. She let out a long breath and looked around, but no one was in sight.

Great, what now?

Back home, she could grab keys to another car at her ready disposal. Here in another country and continent, in this rural port town away from everyone she knew, she was completely stuck.

Immediately Mariah called the rental agency.

"Your stupid car won't start," she growled at the unlucky agent who cheerfully answered her call. "Now I'm stuck here

at my hotel, and I'm going to miss my extremely important appointment!"

"Greatest apologies, Ms. Bryant," the man said, the sound of a clicking keyboard in the background. "We'll send someone out to you straight away. Where are you staying? The King's Court?"

"No, Sterling Inn on Broward," she said, yanking a stray lock of hair from her face. "Please hurry. I need to make my meeting."

"Of course, ma'am. Greatest apologies for the inconvenience. We'll send our emergency roadside team to you immediately."

More apologies from the agent. And no, they had no other rental cars available at this time, but he assured her that a mechanic would be there in a few short minutes.

Fuming, Mariah clicked off, then checked the time on her cellphone. There might still be time to make the meeting if the problem was something simple like a bad car battery needing an electrical jump.

Too stressed just to sit there, she stepped out and furiously paced, hugging herself against the damp ocean breeze. She debated whether to call Kathleen and have her postpone the interview with Barbara Gregory, then dismissed it. It was a miracle the woman agreed to meet them in the first place.

"Calm down," she muttered to herself. "I don't need to be there. Besides, the woman probably won't have anything significant to share anyhow."

And this entire trip to Ireland would be a complete bust.

More disappointment. For her family as well as herself.

Shame washed over Mariah then. Her parents had been so loving and supportive in her quest to find her birthparents. But neither could they hide their own hurt after she declared that she no longer considered them her true parents, that she couldn't consider herself a true Bryant.

“Mar, you are such a spoiled brat,” she muttered to herself.

That day, it was Natalie Paxton who told her what she didn’t like, but needed to hear.

“That was cruel of you to tell them that, Mariah,” she chided. “The bonds of family go further than blood and genetics. You are their true daughter, and deep down you know this. You should apologize.”

“You don’t want me to find my birthparents then,” Mariah said.

“That’s beside the point,” Natalie said. “But no, I don’t see the benefit. I’m still not sure how the hospital staff could have mixed up the infants, but it’s been almost twenty-four years now. This woman would have raised and loved...”

“The true heir to the Bryant wolfpack,” Mariah added for her at the awkward pause.

“Maybe,” Natalie said, frowning. “Maybe not. The real question is—will everyone be served with you finding the truth of what happened? Will all of your problems be solved, or will it only create more?”

Wise advice as usual.

“But the pack,” Mariah countered.

“That not your worry,” Natalie said. “Something will be decided. No one wants to dissolve the community over a minor technicality like this. Besides, your father still has centuries to live. By then, who knows? Anyhow, you just need to let the Elder Council deal with these issues and focus on taking care of yourself.”

“That’s not the only reason that I want to seek my birthparents out, Aunt Nat,” Mariah protested, pacing the atrium of the Paxton estate there in Timber Ridge.

“No?”

“Of course, not. Don’t you get it? Those people are now the only ones in this world that I share blood with. I’m their

true daughter. They also have a right to know about me, about what happened that night.”

Mariah plopped down on the side couch with frustration. How could she make her godmother understand? This unanswered question would haunt her to the day she died.

“I just need to know,” she said defeatedly. “I’ll never be able to move forward with my life until I do.”

Her godmother sat next to Mariah and hugged her tightly. “Then go and find your answers, sweetheart. I just don’t want you to be hurt at what you might find, that’s all. Remember, most stories aren’t romantic ones that end in happily-ever-after. Be prepared for the ugly truth.”

Which Mariah believed she was, ready to meet the first person who might have some insight into what really happened the night she was born.

Until her frigging car died!

Mariah stalked back and forth beside the rental car, checked the time on her cellphone again and again, gave the front tire a vicious kick that almost blew it out, forgetting her superhuman werewolf strength.

“Where are you already?” she growled, again checking her cellphone.

Mariah let out another long breath.

Maybe Natalie was right. Maybe she should just forget this entire...

Just as she was about to call the rental agency again, a gray work van with the name of McNalley’s Emergency Motor Care painted on the side pulled into the parking lot.

Mariah eased with relief as she waved it over. Her arm dropped when the van parked beside her, and the thermal shirted mechanic stepped out.

“No,” she groaned. “You! What are *you* doing here?”

Ben Gallagher cracked a dimpled smile, giving her a nod. “Well, now. Mariah Bryant, isn’t it? I do hope that I

haven't kept you waiting long."



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 5

“Why are *you* here?” Mariah ground out.

Ben Gallagher frowned. “Didn’t you call in that you were having a bit of trouble with your motor?”

“Yes, but...I thought you said that you’re some kind a sailor.”

“And a mechanic, among other things,” he said. “A Jack Master of all jobs, as you Yanks like to say.”

“Jack-of-all-trades,” she corrected offhandedly.

Mariah narrowed her eyes at the man. This was all just a little too convenient and coincidental.

“Now what seems to be the problem here?” Ben asked, jutting his chin at the car.

“How should I know? All I do know is that this blasted thing won’t start. Please tell me that you can just jumpstart it or something quick, so that I can be on my way. I have a very important meeting to get to.”

Ben gave her a wink with his green cat eyes, saying, “Well now, I find that most vehicles are a bit like a woman. If you wish for them to treat you kindly, you have to give them a little tender loving care first.”

“How original,” she grumbled. “Get to it then.”

“At your service, ma’am.”

Ben took the keys from her, then sat down in the driver’s seat to turn the dead, clicking ignition. He popped the hood, then walked around to raise it and fidget with the internal combustion engine.

Mariah checked the time on her phone, then growled and looked skyward for divine help.

“Hmm, interesting,” Ben said, his head hidden behind the upraised hood.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Looks like you might have a broken distributor cap here,” he called out, fidgeting with a few wires and cables. “And your battery is as dead as a doorpost.”

“Doorknob,” she corrected. “How fast can you fix it?”

“Oh, not long a’tall. I’ll just have it towed into the shop —”

“Towed!”

Ben looked around the hood, saying, “Unless you want me to return to my shop and retrieve the things I’ll need, then return here. I can do that, if you wish.”

“How long will that take?”

“Oh, a few hours, no more. Then I can have you on your way.”

Missing her entire meeting with Barbara Gregory.

Mariah blinked back hot, furious tears. Ben wiped his hands on an oilcloth, frowning at her obvious distress.

“Are you alright then, Ms. Bryant?”

“Just frigging peachy,” she ground out, roughly swiping the angry tears away.

“You say you’ve a meeting to get to?”

“Yes. One that I won’t be able to make now.”

Ben rubbed his stubbled chin. “Well, there’s nothing I can do about getting your auto running at the moment. But if your appointment isn’t too far away, I can always drive you there myself.”

“Drive me? In that thing?”

“No problem a’tall. Then I can return to the shop to gather the things I need, return here to fix your car, then pick you up when your meeting is finished. Would that help you out a bit?”

Mariah fixed her stare with his green, triangle eyes. It was more than generous of the man, actually. Especially after

the cold brush-off she had given him. Or planned to give him.

“Well...all right, I suppose,” she said reluctantly. “Thank you.”

She grabbed her purse from the car, then Ben opened the left passenger’s door of his work van for her. Mariah tried not to rudely sour her expression at the warring smells of tobacco, oil, grease and remnants from stale lunches gone by, sitting stock still in the worn upholstered seat.

Ben climbed up into the driver’s side on the right side, then turned the ignition. “Where to, Mariah? Or should I refer to you as Ms. Bryant, since I’m on the clock.”

“Mariah’s fine,” she offered, then gave him the address to Kathleen Clark’s office.

“No worries, I’ll have you to your meeting in two shakes, not to worry,” Ben said, then pulled out of the parking lot and drove through town.

“By the way, I didn’t get a chance to thank you for paying my dinner check last night,” Mariah remarked as they drove out of Drogheda.

Might as well kill two tasks with one stone.

“But you did,” Ben said with hiked brows. “I picked up the message you left. And I was only repairing what damage I left in my thoughtless wake yesterday. Apologies, again. My mother did raise me with better manners after all.”

“Hmm.”

After an awkward pause, Gallagher turned on the radio to break the stale silence. Mariah was shocked to hear the soft, classical music. Ben gave her an amused glance, then relaxed back in seat, one hand leisurely guiding the top of the steering wheel.

“Surprised by my taste in music, are you?”

Mariah flushed. “No, of course...Well, a little.”

He chuckled. “Ah well, you can thank my mother for that as well. She was a teacher, you see, and always made

certain to broaden my horizons where possible growing up. My father was an educated man as well, and both had their influence on me. Made certain I graduated well at Oxford in my own time.”

“Oxford? No way. You’re a...I mean, not that you couldn’t...”

“I know what you mean,” he remarked. “Fishing crew hand, part time mechanic, Jack-of-all-trades, and probably a drunken reprobate, instead of a college educated man listening to *Claire de Lun* over breakfast tea.”

On cue, he picked up his travel mug sitting in the middle cupholder and took a swig. With her heightened werewolf sense of smell, it was in fact Earl Grey and not Jamison.

“You must think me a pretentious snob,” Mariah shamefully admitted.

Because he was right. She had naturally assumed the man to be some low-born commoner who barely graduated high school and spent his nights carousing with his revolting quarry buddies.

As if her own true background might be any higher. For all she knew, her own mother was a two-bit prostitute and her father a jobless drug addict.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I have a tendency to misjudge people. And look down on them. I’m learning the hard way that I have no right to.”

“Ah well, no harm done. A person these days must always be cautious in whom they associate with.”

Mariah eased at his generosity.

“If you’re an Oxford graduate, why are you working as a mechanic?” she asked, honestly curious about the man now. “Not that this isn’t gainful employment, of course. It’s just that it’s, well, unusual. I mean for someone like...”

She pursed her lips to stop them from flapping. Everything she said made her sound like some self-centered elitist.

Maybe she was. If so, it was time to remedy that.

Ben grinned wider. “Not unusual a’tall. Actually, this is a bit of a holiday for myself as well. I took a sabbatical from teaching and returned to my hometown here. There was a temporary opening at the local auto shop, so I hired on to pay for my expenses while on the Island.”

“Oh. That makes sense, I guess,” Mariah said, now studying the man harder.

She had to admit that her opinion of him leveled up slightly.

Okay, more than just slightly.

“You said you’re a teacher?”

He nodded. “History at a small college outside Inverness, Scotland.”

“A college professor?” she remarked, now very impressed with the man.

“World history is particular interest of mine,” he said, taking another sip of tea. “My mother taught the subject for many years herself. Retired now, of course. I supposed she had some influence on me growing up.”

“Very impressive. Is she here in Ireland? Is that who you’re visiting?” Mariah asked.

“Not at present. She’s on an archeological dig in the north of Australia,” Ben said.

“Really? Wow.”

“Yes, she loves to travel, my mother. My father tolerates it, a true homebody, if he’d have his preference. He goes where she does, however. He can’t be parted from her.”

“True life mates then,” Mariah remarked.

“Very much so,” Ben said with a slanted smile at her. “Theirs is a love story for the ages. Gives me hope that perhaps there’s a special someone out there for me as well.”

The man was single then, and with no one on the romantic horizon.

Not that it mattered, of course.

“You mentioned yesterday that you’re from the old Callaghan wolfpack,” Mariah said. “Is that really true?”

“Very true. A distant connection though,” Ben admitted. “No, my family holds to no official pack themselves. We can’t, you see.”

“Why not?”

Ben gave her another grinning glance. “For one thing, my mother isn’t a werewolf. She’s fully human.”

Mariah’s mouth popped open at this shocking declaration. Humans and were-kind never, ever mixed. Never. Ever.

Of course, her Uncle Adam married a semi-human, but it was later discovered that her Aunt Scarlet was descended from the original werewolf, a true rare being, but still less of a human connection than other humans.

Ben chuckled at Mariah’s shock. “You’re not the first to wonder at the attraction.”

“No, I’m not... Well, yes, I am actually. Sorry.”

“Ah well, my father loves my mother with his entire soul, regardless of her species. She could be a three-eyed giraffe, for all that it matters to him. He’s always been a bit of a loner himself anyhow, so not belonging to any wolfpack is to his preference. There are advantages to being away from the strict rules and politics of pack life. Or so I’ve been told.”

“There are,” she grimly confirmed.

Mariah swallowed hard, turning to the passenger’s window to hide the tears stinging her eyes. She envied the man. Her life would be so much less complicated if it wasn’t rigidly dictated by her own wolfpack.

“Myself, I tend to side with my father on this,” Ben added. “I’m very much an independent. Most packs wouldn’t

take on a half-breed like me, in any case.”

“That explains what I couldn’t detect on you yesterday,” she said. “I scented wolf on you, but there was something else I couldn’t define.”

Ben chuckled, sniffing. “Yes, well, you’re not the first to make that observation. Not that I encounter a lot of our kind here on the Island.”

“Yes, I was told there aren’t any more wolfpacks in Ireland,” she remarked.

“Not many, no,” Ben answered. “There are a few small family communities here and there, but they keep to themselves and don’t make a show of it.”

“What of you, Mariah?” he asked after a short pause. “What pack does your family hail from? Or are you yourself a wild rogue?”

Mariah snorted at the joke, then studied the man’s profile as he focused on the rural highway. Did he not recognize her royal family name then?

After living her entire life under the scrutiny of the public and paparazzi, it felt odd to talk with someone who had no idea who she was.

Refreshing, in a way. Freeing.

“I’m from a pack in the Pacific Northwest,” Mariah answered cautiously. “It’s a rather large one. Lots of interconnections and similar last names.”

In case he did recognize her name and put it together with the Bryant High Alpha that controlled the territory.

“What brings you here to our beautiful country then?” Ben asked.

Mariah eyed him warily. It was probably just casual, small talk, but she still didn’t trust him enough with her true reasons for coming to Drogheda.

“My father’s people originally came from here,” she said instead. “The old Callaghan pack, too, in fact. I wanted to get

away on vacation, so I decided that it would be interesting to check up on the local family history.”

“Ah, that explains the private investigator you’re seeing,” he said. “You might try the local kirks and courthouses, if it’s family lineage you’re seeking. Historians and the like are more apt to find what you need than hired investigators. And they’ll work for a sandwich and lager, rather than the exorbitant fees your P.I. will surely charge you.”

“Thank you, I’ll try that,” she said.

“And if it’s an historian you need, well now, I’m also available,” Ben added. “It’s what I do after all, and I’ve nothing else to bother my time with other than rescuing the occasional damsel-in-car-distress while I’m here.”

“No, I...well, maybe. I’ll think about it.”

“You do that. Here we are then. You still have my number to ring me when your meeting is finished? Good. Give me a call, and I’ll race right on over. In the meantime, I’ll be working on your own motor to have it up and running again.”

Mariah thanked the man, then climbed out of the work van. Ben gave her a nod, then made a U-turn and chugged away.

Standing in front of the office building entrance, she checked the time, relieved to see that she still had another five minutes, then braced herself and headed inside.

* * *

Kathleen was waiting for her with a reminder of allowing her to do the questioning. She then led Mariah into a cozier office where a woman with flat shoulder-length brown hair sat on the couch. Introductions were made and tea was poured. Mariah understood that Kathleen was trying to put the woman at ease, making it feel as if this was a friendly chat amongst friends.

“These lemon squares are delicious,” Barbara Gregory said, nibbling on one.

“Aren’t they, though? I stopped by Ida’s Bakery in town to pick up a few things before you came,” Kathleen said. “You should try these jam cookies, too. She makes the best.”

“Yes, I know Ida. Did you know that?” Barbara remarked, grabbing one.

“She did mention your name this morning when I picked up my order,” Kathleen said, sipping her tea. “Told me to say hello. Her and Moira both.”

“Moira was working there today? I did hear that she’s quite the baker herself.”

“Indeed, she is,” Kathleen agreed. “She’s living with Kent and Ida now, in fact.”

Barbara grunted. “I heard that, too. Left that cheating husband of hers two months ago, or so the talk of our town goes.”

Barbara turned confidentially to Mariah, adding, “She and her husband Dan have a farm five miles from me, so I know a bit about them.

“Last I heard, he was sneaking around with some young thing working at the local coffeehouse. Poor Moira was heartbroken when she learned of it. Not from me, of course, none of my business. That’s why she left Dan and moved to Drogheda to be with her sister. Just awful. These things never end well.”

Kathleen and Mariah agreed they never did.

Fifteen minutes later, the local scandal was shared in full detail, and Barbara Gregory was properly warmed up. Kathleen then strategically redirected the conversation to the true information needed.

“Speaking of nursing, Barbara, how much do you recall of your time in the United States caring for Mariah’s mother, Nicole Bryant?” she casually asked, nibbling her tea cake, then hummed, “Oh, that’s good. Try one of these.”

“I will at that,” she said, snagging one. “Bryant? Bryant? Oh yes, I remember her now. The Prima Alpha of her

pack, living in the Great Lodge itself. You were just born, Mariah. My, but you were the sweetest little thing with the longest eyelashes I had ever seen in a newborn, and I've seen my share."

"That's kind of you to say," Mariah said, careful only to interject when it was a subtle prompt or appropriately needed reply.

"You were the very spit of your mother, and I said so many times. Poor thing. Mrs. Bryant was so very sick after her delivery. That's why they hired me on to take care of her for a few weeks before I returned home, you know."

Mariah nodded, smiling warmly.

"My, that must be twenty years gone now."

"Twenty-four in two months," Mariah corrected.

"Right, you are. Isn't that amazing?"

"I'll bet you have some interesting stories to tell of your time there at Timber Ridge," Kathleen prompted. "How did you come to hire on the Great Lodge to take care of Mrs. Bryant?"

"Hmm? Oh, from my friend, Darlene Ryan, to be sure," Barbara said with a little wave.

"Darlene Ryan?"

"Yes, Darley and I trained together at St. Anne's Hospital in Dublin a few years before then? We connected after scenting that we were both wolves. It's a rare treat to find one of our own kind amongst the humans here, as you well know, Kathleen."

"Yes, I do."

"We ended up becoming great friends back then, Darley and I," Barbara continued. "Two wild wolf-girls on the night prowl. Hahaha. We were something in those days, let me tell you.

"Anyhow, Darley left Dublin to work at the Timber Ridge hospital in the States three, maybe four months earlier? Sadly,

I thought I had seen the last of her. Then out of the blue sky, she rings me and asks do I want to come to visit her there on holiday. I could stay at her place, and she would even help me with the flight expense. Who would say no to that?"

Kathleen and Mariah agreed they wouldn't.

Barbara bit into a brownie, hummed with ecstasy, then continued, "Anyhow, I flew out to visit Darley in this pack community she now lived in."

"We don't have any of them here on the Island," she explained to Mariah, "and it was such a treat to be with others of our kind. So nice not to worry about being who and what we are without fear of suspicion or being hunted down."

"Of course, once I arrived there," she added, "I realized the true reason Darley begged me to come visit her."

"What was that, Barbara?" Kathleen prodded at the pause.

"Darley was feeling very glum, having just broken up with her American boyfriend there. So sad. She was utterly heartbroken."

"One of those toxic affairs, you know," Barbara explained confidentially to Mariah. "Not that I knew much about the whole thing. Darley was very secretive about the man. But after one crying jag, she admitted that he was married and refused to divorce his wife, telling her that the situation was too complicated to overcome."

She grunted. "*Complicated*. Isn't that what they all say? Men can be such rotten beasts."

Kathleen and Mariah agreed they can be.

"Do you remember this man's name, Barbara?" Kathleen asked.

"John? Jim?" The woman shook her head. "Darley was in blind love with the man, that's for sure. A real golden tongued con artist, in my opinion. She swallowed his every selfish excuse to start things up again. She didn't say so, but I

knew she finally hit her limit after she stopped wearing the man's pendant that he gave to her."

She turned to Mariah, explaining, "Would never take off what she considered to be a charm without good reason. It had an emerald stone, you see. A very strong charm, in her opinion. She told me so herself."

"Can you describe this emerald necklace?" Kathleen prodded.

"Oh yes. It was quite beautiful. A large teardrop shaped stone inside a yellow gold setting in the interlace Celtic pattern."

She arched a brow at Mariah, adding, "The man said it was a family heirloom, a token on how special she was to him. Right. The emerald probably wasn't even real. Ten pounds says the man had a bunch of them on hand for all his sideline flings."

Kathleen gave a notepad to Barbara to make a rough drawing of it. She questioned if there had been any engraving on the setting, but Barbara didn't think so.

"If you were staying with your friend Darlene at her rental cottage," Kathleen prodded, "when did you move into the Great Lodge?"

"Oh, well, that was just a day after Mrs. Bryant was discharged from the hospital, of course," Barbara said. "As I said, it was Darley herself who told me about the Prima ready to give birth and would probably need professional help, if I wanted to earn a bit extra during my trip. She worked at the community hospital and heard all the scuttle and said the Prima was having a rough pregnancy."

Kathleen and Mariah looked at each other.

"Was Darlene at the hospital when the Prima gave birth?" Kathleen questioned.

"Oh, most definitely," Barbara said. "Even helped in the delivery itself. She called and told me so that very night. That was the last time I saw her."

“I don’t understand,” Kathleen prodded.

“Well, the reason Darley called me so late that night was that she had to hop a plane for the east coast immediately. She had just been offered a prestigious position at Johns-Hopkins, you see, but they needed her to start that very next morning. Very inconvenient of them, if you ask me. I wouldn’t work for such an inconsiderate place.”

“She never came home at all that night then?”

Barbara shook her head. “No. Said that her ‘Indian spirit guide’ told her to leave Timber Ridge immediately and never come back, or she’d be cursed for all eternity. I loved Darley dearly, but the girl was as crazy as a chicken superstitious.”

“It was no bother, Darley leaving so suddenly,” she continued. “The rent was due, but I was set to work at the Great Lodge after the Prima delivered her baby anyhow. I told Darley that I’d pack up her belongings and send them to her as soon as I could. She said fine, that she’d call with an address when she got settled.”

“Do you remember the forwarding address she gave you?” Kathleen asked, readying her notepad.

“No. Actually, she never did ring me after that,” Barbara remarked. “I called her a few days later, but her line was disconnected. Strangest thing. I tried contacting her new hospital to give me her address, but they told me that all personnel records were confidential, so they couldn’t help. Silly rule, if you ask me.”

“Did you ever hear from Darlene Ryan again?” Kathleen asked.

Barbara wiped her moist fingers on a paper napkin. “Not after that night, no. I did try and find her a couple of times through the years, but never could. I figured she married and changed her name or just plain moved on with her life to parts unknown. Shame. I do miss her from time-to-time.”

“Did anything else happen that night Darlene left Timber Ridge, or even afterwards?” Kathleen questioned. “Anything unusual.”

Barbara scrunched her face in concentration. “Well, not to say unusual exactly.”

“Anything would be helpful.”

“It was that married lover of hers,” she said, sniffing dryly. “The next morning before the sun even comes up, this man came pounding on the front door of the cottage, shouting and demanding to see Darley, waking me from a sound sleep.

“Scared the bejesus out of me, that’s for sure. I didn’t know who he was, but figured out quick enough. I flatly told him that Darley was gone for good, and he would be wise to do the same, or I don’t know what.

“Then I grabbed his cheap necklace off the table and threw it into his face for good measure. Told him that he was never to come around looking for her ever again, or I’d call the local enforcement.”

“Anyhow, the man turned five shades of white in sheer shock,” she added. “Probably thought no woman would ever dump him, the dog. He drove away with his tail between his legs, let me tell you.

“No, the last thing poor Darley needed was for that cheating mongrel to come back into her life, just to string her along as his sideline plaything. No sir, Darley did right by running from him as fast and as far as she did.”

“What did Darlene’s ex-boyfriend look like?” Kathleen asked.

Barbara shrugged. “Dark hair? Brown eyes? Attractive enough, I suppose, but nothing that would churn my butter. I do remember him all dusty and sweaty as if he’d been run over by a steamroller, and smelled to hog heaven. Honestly, I never did see what was so special about the man.”

“Did you ever see him again during your time working at the Great Lodge?” Kathleen asked.

Barbara shook her head. “No, never. Then again, I was too busy with Mrs. Bryant and her newborn. Oh, that would have been you, Mariah! It still seems so hard to imagine you so grown up like this. You were the most beautiful baby girl I

had ever seen, and you've grown into such a stunning woman.
The very spit of your mother."



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 6

“Your meeting didn’t go as well as hoped for then?” Ben asked as they drove the meadow-lined road towards town.

Mariah startled out of her distracted thoughts, then admitted, “Honestly, I’m not sure. My investigator, Kathleen Clark, said that she might now have another piece of my confusing puzzle. Or not. Or this entire trip is just one big waste of time.”

“Care to talk things over to sort them out?” Ben offered.

Mariah studied the man, considering any repercussions if she did disclose her dilemma with him.

“It’s a long, tedious story,” she warned.

Ben cracked a one-sided smile saying, “I’m an Irishman who enjoys a good tale, darlin’. You’ll have to make it interesting though.”

She snorted. “Oh, it has plenty of bizarre twists and turns and scandals to it.”

“Well then, I’m all ears.”

Should she?

What could it hurt to share a few things with him?

It might even be beneficial to talk to a disinterested third party to make sense of everything. Ben would see things from a different perspective, might even offer a few helpful suggestions. If nothing else, she could vent her frustrations in order to move forward with her next steps.

“I’ll have to have your oath that you can’t disclose anything that I tell you,” she said. “I mean it. Not one word.”

His brows hiked. “Now you’ve truly caught my interest.”

“Your solemn vow.”

“Yes, of course,” he agreed. “I promise never to repeat whatever you wish to tell me, Mariah.”

“Okay, then.” She studied Ben harder as he focused on the bumpy coastal road, deciding what to share. “Well, first off—”

“Wait, I want to give you my full attention,” Ben cut her off, then radioed in that he planned to take his lunch break.

He pulled over to an outdoor fish and chips shack next to a bait shop along the sea cliff highway. They placed their orders at the open window, grabbed their baskets of fried cod and seasoned potato wedges, then sat down at a picnic table overlooking the bay. Mariah only took a few nibbles before she was ready to share.

“First off, I haven’t been upfront with you on who I really am,” she admitted. “Not that there was any reason to tell you before. I don’t know you from Adam after all.”

Ben frowned. “You’re not Mariah Bryant then?”

“Yes, that’s my name. But I’m, well, I’m the youngest daughter of the Bryant wolfpack High Alpha, Jake Bryant.”

His brows hiked. “Is that a fact?”

“Or at least I thought I was, until recently,” she added, deflating. “Now, I don’t know who I am.”

Ben halted his chewing, then nudged his fish basket aside. “Go on.”

Bracing herself, Mariah shared her confusing story in full. Like a pressure valve released, she unfolded the details faster and faster. It felt so good to voice all of her frustrations, suspicions, confusions and fears. Especially to Ben Gallagher who made it too easy to share everything.

After she finished, Ben narrowed his green cat-eyes in deep consideration. He hadn’t interrupted or remarked at any point. Now she wondered what he really thought.

“Quite a story, Mariah,” he said after long silence.

“I know,” she admitted. “Feel free to call me a paranoid loon.”

He gave her a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'd never do that, darlin'. Tales as strange as yours often tend to be true, I've learned."

"So what do you think?" she posed after another thoughtful pause.

He rubbed his stubbled chin. "Well now, there's ample reason to believe that your newborn self was switched with the Bryant royal infant. So the true question would be by whom and for what purpose."

"Not to mention where my parents' real child is now," Mariah added. "What happened to her? Or him?"

"A true mystery, to be sure," he agreed. "And you believe that if you find your own birthparents, this question will be answered."

"I hope so."

Ben considered harder. "A good possibility that you may be right. You're right to pursue this."

"Even if they don't, my birthparents have a right to know about all of this, too. Don't you think?"

Ben nodded, then asked, "This Gregory woman you met with swears that her friend was the nurse who aided the doctor in delivering your mother's child?"

"Definitely. Darlene Ryan called Barbara the night after it happened and said as much. Then she hopped a plane, allegedly for another nursing position at a prestigious hospital. Kathleen is going to check into that."

"You're thinking she was in on the birth switch then," Ben said. "With the doctor and intern."

Mariah shrugged. "Or at the very least saw something that made her run."

"Very suspicious indeed," Ben agreed. "You say that your aunt was a physician at the community hospital then? She must have known this Nurse Ryan as well. Perhaps even the two doctors?"

“She was working at the hospital then, yes,” Mariah confirmed. “But Aunt Alexia’s specialty has always been in forensic research, so she typically doesn’t have a lot of contact with the regular hospital staff. She doesn’t remember the doctor or intern, but I’ll ask if she remembers the nurse. Even more unlikely though.”

“What about this nurse’s mystery lover?” Ben questioned. “I’d like to know more about him, find out if he was involved in any way.”

Mariah shrugged. “Why would he be? Wouldn’t that only call attention to his extramarital affair with Darlene Ryan?”

“It would depend upon who the man is,” Ben said. “And what interest he might have in helping the birth switch of a royal.”

Good point.

“You’re suggesting that this may have been a coordinated political coup?”

“Another point to consider,” Ben said.

Mariah thought about it, recalling every detail shared about this affair.

“I don’t know. Barbara mentioned that Darlene’s lover was very shocked to learn that she was suddenly gone that next morning,” Mariah added. “Sounds like he was clueless about the whole thing.”

“Perhaps,” Ben said. “Or perhaps he was worried that she would divulge his part in it.”

Another great point.

“Either way, Katheen is going to search for Darlene Ryan,” Mariah said. “If she came to the U.S. from Ireland, then it stands to reason that she returned home at some point. If she did, then we can contact her and find out what she knows about the night of my birth.”

“Tell your investigator to check the personnel archives at Dublin General Hospital,” Ben said. “If she did return to the

Island, she would want a local employment reference.”

“Right. Great suggestion.”

“In the meantime, you and I will be doing our own footwork,” he added. “I’ve found that the internet can help only so much. It won’t know the local tales and gossip that could lead us to the truth.”

Mariah frowned. “Us? Shouldn’t we wait to see what Kathleen comes up with first? Besides, don’t you have a job to go back to?”

Ben shrugged. “This was my last day before I return the job back to its rightful employee. This was only a temporary position after all. Now I’ve nothin’ else to do, but help you out where I’m able. It’ll give me somethin’ to do with my spare time.”

“Oh. Well, okay. If you’re sure.”

“I am. Now, what more do you know about your mother’s emergency delivery?” he questioned.

Mariah shook her head. “Not much else. My aunt scoured the hospital archives for any records pertaining to it. Everything seems to be in order.”

“How many infants were born there that week?”

“None,” Mariah said. “No other live births for three days prior, so I couldn’t have been switched with another baby born in the hospital. They would have been discharged already.”

“*Live* births,” Ben echoed. “What about any others?”

“No, I…” She frowned, adding, “Actually, I don’t know. I just assumed Aunt Alexia… I’ll have her find out. So you’re suggesting that another baby—me—could have been recorded as a stillbirth, then was passed off to the Bryants as their own live child.”

Who was, in reality then, deceased. Then given to her true birthparents to grieve and bury with the hospital’s sad condolences.

What a sick, twisted thing to do to two unsuspecting couples.

“If that was true,” she added, “why would anyone do such a horrible thing?”

“Several reasons,” Ben said. “But it would be a good way to cover the unwanted death of a royal birth in order to continue the Bryant succession. You did mention the blood-sealed contract your great-grandfather made over a century ago.”

“No,” Mariah reasoned. “It wasn’t needed, not with my three older sisters living at the time.”

“It’s something else to consider,” he said, then pulled a small notepad from his worker’s jacket. “Let’s write everything down, then work through all the possibilities systematically.”

* * *

It was only a failsafe. Ben never intended to act on it, but he needed to know if there was the remotest possibility if the need ever came up.

After dropping Mariah Bryant off at her hotel, he drove the work van back to the auto repair shop, paying the owner a generous donation for the use of it, then jumped into his own car and raced out of town to the three-story manor overlooking the ocean cliffs.

His family’s original home was remote and constantly vetted for listening and recording devices, his father being a bloodhound with their personal security. So it probably would have been safe enough to discuss this particular question with his mother.

Still, after a lifetime of caution being drilled into him, he took no chances.

Grabbing his smartphone, he walked outside and trudged across the green field towards the sea cliffs before placing the secured video chat call. The sun was setting over the ocean horizon, stars already dotting the darkening blue sky

overhead. It was a bad time to call his mother, but this conversation couldn't wait.

"Hey, sweetheart," she said, smiling, broadening the tanned laugh lines in the corners of her blue eyes.

Although having only a typical human lifespan, Callista McEwan still looked great for her semi-advanced years. With her braided gray-blond hair and khaki safari shirt and shorts, she looked every bit the outback archeologist.

The last time he talked to her, his mother was still in the Australian bush country close to their family's third ranch. By the background scenery, it looked as if she was still there.

"I hear you went to Ireland anyhow against my wise motherly advice."

"The old man told you then," Ben said.

"Your father and I don't have secrets between us, especially when it comes to our reckless only son."

"Fine, then I'll eliminate the conversational warmup and get right to the point. You know what I'm going to ask you."

Callista sighed heavily. "It's not a good idea, Benjamin. You of all people know the lethal risks involved with time travel."

"I do," he said. "I'm not saying that I will. I just need to know if there's still the availability of me going back to the cave."

His mother muttered a very unmotherly oath that made Ben hike his brows.

"Why would you even want to?" she questioned disapprovingly. "What's really going on, Ben?"

"Nothing. And I would never jump again unless there was no other option. It would be a last resort."

"Your father disagrees, of course."

"Of course. Do you?"

Callista brushed away red clay smudging her forehead. “You know the reason Maggie Thunders had the entrance collapsed and all records of its discovery destroyed back in 1988.”

He did. So the few hunters in the Arcan organization who knew about it wouldn’t find a way through themselves in order to lethally alter time and events to eliminate all were-kind forever.

Fortunately, those monsters had been permanently eliminated themselves, and Dr. Thunders had her people close off the cave. Ben was still getting his ass chewed out by everyone in the know after he and Logan Thorne reopened it last year for him to time jump again.

“It was for a good cause,” he reminded her.

“One that very nearly ended your life,” his mother reminded him. “I’m not thrilled with the idea of you trying again, sweetheart. Forgive me, but I’m a little partial to seeing your handsome live face from time to time, even if it’s only by remote phone calls.”

“Your fault for being off on dangerous digs all the time,” Ben said, twisting a grin.

Callista chuckled. “Ticks your dad off to no end.”

“I know. The old coot.”

God, he missed his parents. Ben knew he inherited his adventurous spirit from both of them.

“So?” he prodded.

She growled quietly. “No, Maggie didn’t collapse it again after you left it last year. Just boarded it up. But don’t take that as an open invitation to use it.”

“I won’t. I have another question though.”

“Shoot.”

“Is it possible to take someone else with you? Back in time?” he asked.

Not that he planned to. He just wanted to know if it was possible.

“Anyone in mind?” she asked warily.

“No, I was just thinking about it. Academically.”

His mother cleared her throat, squinting in the sun as she held up her cellphone that sent her image to him.

“Intriguing question,” she commented. “There have been other time travelers besides us, of course. Lots of recorded history about them. Some weren’t very discreet, the reckless idiots.”

Callista considered, then shrugged. “Two travelers might be able to jump to the same place at the same time, I suppose. They would need some kind of physical attachment to each other. Something strong enough not to break them apart during that awful stretching and pulling process. It’s a physical manifestation after all.”

“You think it can be done then?”

“Possibly. That’s just a working theory, of course. I’ve only ever traveled alone, and only four times, much to your father’s dismay. He’d like me to have never traveled after that first time before we met. Well, maybe the second.”

Ben understood. If his mother Callista McEwan hadn’t accidentally fallen through that time fracturing portal in Washington State back in June of 1988, she never would have met Michael Bryant a century earlier, saving him and the fledgling Bryant wolfpack.

Not to mention if Callista and Michael had never met, they wouldn’t have fallen in love, and Ben himself wouldn’t have been conceived.

It was because of the Old West Arcan Hunters discovering his mother’s dangerous talent that his father was forced to send his wife back to her own time, then faked his own death to throw them off her trail. Then with his expanded werewolf lifespan, Michael Bryant waited another century for his wife to be born, grow up and return to Washington State in order to reconnect with her.

They suspected their son might carry this same genetic ability to travel through time that Callista and her mother both possessed. But Ben didn't even know about their unique talent, until he was sent that letter from the Bryant pack High Alpha last year, and he confronted his parents with the truth.

Benjamin,

I plead with you as your uncle and High Alpha to do what only you can do. You need to save my son and heir, Jake. You must find a way to go back to April of 2004. There was a political coup that killed him the night of our annual Spring Gala.

One by one, these men were successful in murdering my remaining sons as well, my youngest, Luke, just two days ago. So now I am without any heirs, and the wolfpack itself is in threat of dissolution.

Because I know of your mother's ability to travel through time and change history, I believe you might have inherited this same gift as well.

Please, nephew. I beg you. Go back and save my sons by finding and eliminating these men the night of the '04 Spring Gala before they murder Jake. The entire Bryant wolfpack itself is at stake.

Your beloved uncle, Robert Bryant.

When Ben confronted his parents with this letter, they reluctantly confirmed everything.

Ignoring their protests, Ben left their most recent guarded estate in Brazil and traveled north to Washington State. With the help of a local friend of his mother's, he and Logan Thorne worked to open the mountain cave that hid the ancient time portal and followed his mother's instructions on how she traveled through time.

Ultimately, he successfully jumped to the correct time and saved Jake Bryant from the Arcan Hunter assassin disguised as a caterer. If a coup existed, he didn't find the others involved, but it was enough for them to reconsider

knocking off the other Bryant sons, all now alive and thriving to this day.

Now the wolfpack was in jeopardy of being destroyed again, this time because of this last Bryant heir of Jake's being switched at birth with Mariah.

Could this be the same group looking to usurp pack power who tried to eliminate Rob Bryant's heirs?

"How about a traveler carrying a non-traveler?" Ben posed to his mother. "Do you think that's possible?"

"I don't know," Callista said, scrunching her nose. "Probably not. The ability wouldn't be in their blood like it is in ours. And we still don't even know what that element is, or where it originates."

That's what Ben thought too, but he needed to hear the confirmation from his mother. Callista McEwan was the expert in what they were, after all.

"One more thing to seriously consider, son," she added.

"What is it?" Ben asked.

"The Arcan organization would love the answer to this question as well."



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 7

Every day that next week, Mariah met with Ben to review their research and continue their hunt for new leads. Knocking on doors, scouring through every kirk, library and county recorder's office within driving distance, it was becoming a long, tedious, and thus far disappointing venture.

State-side, her Aunt Alexia had checked the hospital employment records in Timber Ridge. Darlene Ryan had worked there as a nurse for a short time, but she had been officially terminated after not showing up for her scheduled shift three days after Mariah's birthdate.

At least this verified Barbara Gregory's account that her friend abruptly left that night for another position elsewhere. But through her aunt's professional connections, they also learned that no employment was ever offered to Ryan from Johns-Hopkins. Or any other hospital in the country for that matter.

In fact, it appeared the woman had never worked anywhere at anything since that fateful night twenty-four years ago next month. No licenses, no addresses, no registrations of any kind for Darlene Ryan anywhere in North America, the British Isles, or anywhere else in the world. It was as if the woman had utterly vanished from the earth.

Just like Richard Collins and Tia Cassidy.

By Friday afternoon, Mariah was ready to give up. That evening, Kathleen called her with this next huge break.

Miraculously she had located a first cousin of Ryan's who might know how to contact the former nurse. Suggesting Mariah meet the woman in person in order to subtly glean Ryan's current whereabouts, the next morning she and Ben drove thirty kilometers north towards the rural hamlet of Dunbillow.

One farm, two town shops, and they were again redirected to the local church secretary who sadly informed

them that Sarah Ryan-Murray no longer lived in Dunbillo. However, a relative on her aunt's side, Lydia O'Dwyer, still lived in the small blue house two kilometers off the main road, you couldn't miss it.

"Tell her that Katie Reynolds sent you to her," the secretary told Mariah. "She's a bit skittish of strangers. Foreigners like yourself, in particular."

After thanking the woman for her help, they headed out of the town proper and down the single lane country road.

As indicated, a sagging blue cottage surrounded in wildflowers of cinque, broom, mustard and multicolored foxgloves loomed over the last rolling green hill. An elderly woman with tightly curled white hair wearing a tattered smock worked vigilantly inside the picket fence making personal war with the unwelcomed weeds that dared invade her lush, colorful garden.

With Ben bedside her, Mariah walked up to the picket fence and greeted the woman. Using the church secretary as a personal reference, she made her introductions and inquiry.

"Darlene Ryan, you say?" Mrs. O'Dwyer grunted, leaning on her garden hoe. "Oh, I remember her right enough. Met her once at my sister's birthday gathering. Neice to Eliza's husband, Rex Ryan."

"Great! Do you know how I might get a hold of her?" Mariah asked eagerly.

The woman shook her white head. "Afraid not. Haven't seen the girl in twenty-odd years ago before Eliza passed."

"But you must have kept in some kind of contact with her," Mariah insisted. "Or maybe someone else in your family might know of her whereabouts."

"Not likely," O'Dwyer grunted. "I always steered clear of that family. Strange ones, the lot of them."

"Strange?"

"Secretive. Clannish. Eliza talked about some of their odd habits. Said as how they were all fixated on hunting.

Sometimes they would go in groups and be out all night, coming home the next morning looked bloody and beaten up. But they never came home with anything.

“Only the immediately family ever went on these outings. Never invited those outside, not even my sister. Not that she ever wanted to. Strange ones, the lot of them.

“Yes, Eliza made a big mistake marrying into that odd family, in my opinion, not that anyone asked. But Rex Ryan was a very handsome man, and I could see that she was hopelessly gone on him the minute they met at the harvest festival that year she turned nineteen.

“Then once Rex set his caps for her, he wouldn’t let up his hot pursuit until Eliza married him and moved out of Dunbillow for good.”

Ben gave a pointed look to Mariah. She had also detected the scent of human on the elderly woman. Apparently her sister had inadvertently married into a werewolf family, accounting why Darlene Ryan herself was able to work at Timber Ridge.

“Do you know where any of the Ryan family lives now?” Mariah asked.

“They used to live outside of Cramden Corner,” Mrs. O’Dwyer said. “They all moved on from there though. Eliza told me that they were like a bunch of gypsies and never liked to stay in one place for long. Don’t know where they are now, and good riddance.”

Mariah continued to scrape for any other bit of information about Darlene Ryan and her family, until the elderly woman looked tempted to contact the local constable if they didn’t leave.

“Mariah, darlin’,” Ben finally whispered into her ear, tugging her away. “The woman doesn’t know how to get a hold them. She can’t tell you what she doesn’t know.”

He was right, of course.

And once again, she was at a dead end.

“Thank you for your time, Miz O’Dwyer,” Ben said to the woman. “We’ll be on our way. Sorry to have disturbed your mornin’. Have a grand day now.”

Mariah allowed him to defeatedly tow her to back to the car parked along the road. Neither said a word until they were driving out of the hamlet and winding their way around the green, twisting highway back to Drogheda.

That was it, then. Her search had come to a screeching halt with no answers whatsoever.

She turned to the passenger’s window to keep Ben from seeing the frustrated tears welling in her eyes.

“This isn’t the end, Mariah,” he said quietly, reading her tight expression. “Don’t give up all hope just yet. This is only the beginning of our search. I know from my own research projects that it can take weeks, even months to find what you’re looking for.”

“I don’t have weeks or months,” she said, swiping back the tears. “I may not even have days.”

He frowned at her. “I don’t understand.”

Against her better judgement, Mariah broke down and explained the political consequences of her wolfpack not having an official Direct Heir.

She began with the supernatural contract made by its founding father, Rufus, that no one outside of the Bryant bloodline could ever rule without the pack being destroyed. She concluded with the latest discussions the Elder Council were secretly holding, considering their options if there wasn’t blood heir to accept the crown.

“With the blood contract made by Rufus Bryant, there aren’t any other options though,” Ben remarked.

“Exactly,” Mariah said. “That’s why I don’t have much time to find out what really happened when I was switched at birth.”

“That does put a kink in the works,” he agreed, frowning at the highway ahead.

“Let’s go over what we do have,” Ben said, gripping the top of the steering wheel. “We know that Nicole Bryant’s original physician was killed in a car accident five days prior to her delivery—suspicious, if you ask me.”

Mariah lifted a shoulder and turned back to the passenger’s window, not wanting to get pulled into this twisted mystery again. It was over, she was done, and it was best to graciously accept defeat.

“Then your aunt, Alexia Bryant, took over your mother’s case,” Ben continued, undaunted. “But she was suddenly called away, far away, the night your mother goes into labor. Coincidentally your father and uncles also joined this same investigation out of communication reach.”

It had been a high-level homicide, requiring the presence of High Alpha himself, his top enforcers, and the best forensic doctor in the community to examine the remains. The homicide of an Elder Council member was always a sensitive situation.

Nothing much came of it though. No evidence of foul play was uncovered.

No real answers either.

“So with your aunt away,” Ben continued, “the hospital had no choice but to use the on-call physician there when your mother’s contractions started.”

“Of course. There was no other choice.”

Ben shook his head. “But according to personnel records, Richard Collins was no longer employed with the hospital at that particular moment. He shouldn’t have been on the premises in the first place, much less helping in the delivery of a royal.”

True enough.

“But the doctor was there, so it was just a clerical error in date,” Mariah said.

“Was it?” Ben posed.

Wasn’t it?

Because if not, Richard Collins had no purpose in being at the hospital to deliver her mother's baby. And there should have been another on-call physician on duty who should have taken the case.

Maybe there had been. It wasn't something she thought to question.

"Not to mention that intern showing up to your home just when she was needed," Ben added. "As well as your mother's bodyguard becoming violently ill at that moment. More suspicious coincidences, it seems."

Before Mariah left for Ireland, she had her mother recount the entire night in detail. One thing that still bugged her was the sudden appearance of Dr. Tia Cassidy.

Every few weeks her mother's obstetrician paid her a house-call at the Great Lodge for a prenatal checkup. When she reached her eighth month, the checks became weekly.

Then Dr. Solchuk had been tragically killed in a car accident, so a temporary replacement was sent to take care of her mother's prenatal care—Dr. Tia Cassidy. All seemed well. The young doctor gave her mother a brief exam, a vitamin shot and some literature.

They chatted a while. Then the doctor was about to leave for the hospital when Nicole was suddenly racked by blinding pain in her midsection. When they called for her personal guard, their housekeeper stated that the woman took violently ill herself and had to leave. So Dr. Cassidy herself escorted her mother to the hospital.

Strangely her mother's bodyguard recovered a few hours later just as suddenly as it came on. By then, Nicole had already delivered her child and was recovering in her hospital room.

No one thought to connect the events. No one considered foul play whatsoever.

"Your aunt confirmed that there were no births whatsoever the night you were born, live or dead," Ben listed.

Mariah nodded. Per her suggestion, Alexia had scoured every last jot and note and recording from the Timber Ridge Hospital archives. Hers was the only birth recorded for three consecutive days.

“Then you must have been born from a woman who had previously given birth, then brought you into the hospital,” Ben added.

Mariah hiked her brows at him. “You’re suggesting that my birthmother would have been in on the switch?”

“Along with Collins, Cassidy,” he added. “And perhaps Darlene Ryan.”

And both doctors were in the wind, along with the assisting nurse.

Were they all in on it together?

Mariah rubbed her forehead hard. “It’s so frustrating that we can’t find a single trace of any of them. No employment. No flights or mortgages or licensing of any kind. Nothing. Nada.”

“Odd, indeed,” Ben agreed. “Which tells me that they must have been paid a great deal of money to live the rest of their lives without the need of surfacing as themselves again.”

“Someone with the resources to provide them with alternate and untraceable identifications,” Mariah added.

And with werewolves possessing longevity, typically living five to six hundred years, it would take an awful lot of cash to provide a healthy living for that length of time. So their handlers must have been extremely rich.

“If your birthmother was in on the deception, what about your birthfather?” Ben questioned. “Was he in on it as well?”

“If he evens knows of my existence.” Mariah groaned, adding, “I feel like I have more questions than answers now.”

“What about that jeweler who designed Darlene Ryan’s pendant?” Ben questioned. “Has your uncle been able to locate the store?”

“Nothing,” she answered with an absent wave of the hand. “I’m not sure what can be gleaned from that information anyhow. I’m sure the business didn’t keep purchasing records that far back. Most destroy records after seven to ten years.”

Mariah turned to him sighing, “Look, Ben. You’ve been really great about helping me out and listening to my annoying tale of woes. I think it’s time we called it quits and I went home.”

Ben faced the rural road ahead, his brows drawing together. “No. It’s still too early to end this, Mariah. You can’t...”

“Can’t, what?”

He dragged fingers through his hair, his jaw muscles bunching. “Look, I can see that you’re frustrated.”

“Dead ends can do that to a person.”

“Then might I suggest what I instruct my students to do whenever they have a moment of academic block?”

Mariah let out a long breath. “What’s that?”

Ben quirked a small smile, answering, “To set your current work aside and do something completely different.”

* * *

Ben restrained his panic when Mariah announced that she wanted to end her search and fly home to Washington State.

Yes, he could have continued on his own. Actually, he preferred to do these research projects alone. No hinderance. No deadlines. No negotiations.

Then why can't you just let her go, mate?

Complications.

He had grown too attached then.

Always a risk when he spent a lot of time with one person. It didn’t help that this one was beautiful, intriguing,

intelligent, fascinating and in desperate need of his help that made him want to swoop down and rescue her.

In any case, this was a definite stall tactic on his part.

The real question was—stalling for what?

“I don’t know,” Mariah said, souring her expression at the fishing troller rocking in the bay. “I’m not even dressed for this.”

“You’ll be fine, darlin’,” he assured her, taking her hand to guide her down the boardwalk to the end of the pier.

Expecting their arrival, Cutty O’Brien was waiting for them on deck. Introductions were made, and the grizzled seaman helped Mariah shakily board the troller.

Ben guided her into the wheelhouse, then sat beside her on the guest bench. Cutty took the wheel, started the engine, then cut through the rippling water and out to sea.

Not far though. Cutty’s typical sightseeing tour consisted of several loops around the more interesting sea cliffs and caves.

Ben watched with amusement as Mariah listened with apt attention to the old seaman’s historical recitation. Most of it was true. A lot was peppered with intensity, scandal, humor and a bit of the Irish malarky for added flavor. He had heard these stories a hundred times before, unchanging since his summer working as a deckhand when he was a teenager.

There was a pit stop next to a solitary beach between the cliffs. Ben lazily strolled along the shore next to Mariah. At some point his fingers found and laced through hers. It felt natural, peaceful.

Boarding again, the troller made its way a little further out to sea. Cutty cut the engine and weighed anchor.

“Uh, what’re we doing?” Mariah asked warily. “Why aren’t we going anywhere?”

Cutty brought out a pair of ugly goulashes in her size, and a couple of fishing poles. Ben wanted to throw his head back and laugh at the look of utter horror on Mariah’s face.

“You can’t be serious,” she said to Ben.

“Very serious, darlin’,” he returned, taking a pole. “Trust me, it will give you the peace of mind you’re in sore need of right now.”

It took all of his charm and persuasion that Ben could muster to convince Mariah to give it a go. Then more when handing her a can of slithering bait.

To her credit, Mariah managed to catch a few herrings, which she quickly donated to Cutty’s home freezer. Ben knew he would never forget the many comical scenes of this painted nail princess baiting a hook and tossing the line into the water.

After a few fun and frantic hours, they stood together along the aft, the evening sun setting over the horizon in a blaze of orange and amber light. But it was the purple and blue gleam off Mariah’s hair as she leaned against the railing that held Ben spellbound. He had never seen such a striking woman in all his...

Yes, you’re growing much too attached, mate. Knock it off.

Right. He needed to remember why he was here. And it wasn’t to snag this werewolf beauty.

“Thank you for today,” Mariah sighed. “This was really fun.”

“You’re very welcome,” Ben said. “I hope it distracted you from your distress earlier.”

“It did,” she said, smiling warmly. “Funny, but I never knew how wonderful doing normal, everyday things could be. It’s been so nice not having to play the proper lady at every turn. To just be a typical tourist seeing the sights like everyone else with no special treatment or bodyguards or annoying photographers following you around every corner.”

“A problem for you then?”

“A constant problem.”

“How did you manage to be let out of your community without a guard tagging along then?” he asked.

Mariah gave him a mischievous grin that nearly stopped his heart. “I sneaked out alone one night, raced to the airport, then phoned my parents after I was halfway across the country that I was taking a European vacation. Guess I pulled a Brenna Callaghan.”

“She would be proud,” he said.

“Maybe.”

Mariah took his left wrist and turned it upwards to see his forearm tanned and bare with no wolfpack alliance symbol.

“It must be wonderful to never worry about pack rules and politics,” she said quietly, lightly tracing the protruding veins of his wrist and arm. “Free to go where you want to go, be who you want to be, never to answer to anyone.”

“It has its advantages,” Ben stated, flinching at her feather-light touch.

She looked up and fixed her golden eyes with his asking, “Do you like being a rogue, Ben?”

“I’m not certain whether ‘like’ has anything to do with it,” he said, his jaw muscles bunching. “I never had a choice.”

“Would you, if you did? Being part of a pack, I mean.”

He shook his head. “Not my style. I’ve never been a joiner. I’m like my father in that way, I suppose.”

Ben absently brushed a strand of her hair behind her shoulder, asking, “Mariah, why is it so important for you to find your birthparents? Weren’t the Bryants good to you? Were you not loved and cared for by them?”

“No, my parents—adoptive parents—were very good to me. The best.” She shook her head. “It’s hard to explain. What if you suddenly found out that your parents weren’t actually your true birthparents?”

Ben grunted. “Couldn’t happen. I look too much like my father, and I have too much of my mother’s tenacity to question my parentage. Even so, I couldn’t imagine having two finer people to call me their son, blood ties or no.”

Mariah studied him, frowning. “I do love Jake and Nicole Bryant. And my sisters. With all my heart. I have the best family. It’s not that.”

“What then?”

Mariah closed her eyes a moment, then let go of a long breath. “I’ve always been the odd-man-out, never a part of the royal Bryant family. I was the Ugly Duckling besides my strikingly beautiful sisters and the rest of the amazing Bryant clan.”

She looked at her perfect manicure, adding, “I know people believe I’m horribly vain, but I think that’s why I always spent so much time and effort and expense on my outward appearance. I was overcompensating, hoping that at least in my looks I could measure up to the rest of their perfect family.”

“That’s not true, Mariah,” Ben said. “You are the most breathtaking woman I’ve ever met. If anything, you outshine them all.”

She sent him a withering look, not believing his compliment. “Well, it never mattered, because no matter what I did, it was never enough. Deep down, I’ve always known that I was different from all of them.”

“Different isn’t bad, love.”

Mariah sent him a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Anyhow, I’ve always sensed our differences, even as a little girl.”

She cracked a slight smile, adding, “At first, I thought it was because I took more of my mother’s Juarez Coyote side than wolf. I’m a quarter Coyote, if you didn’t know. But when my first shift happened and my wolf surfaced in full force, there was no hint to any coyote whatsoever.

“I don’t know if I was disappointed or relieved. Either way, I felt again that there was something inherently wrong with me. That’s why I poured on the pampered princess act. But inside I knew that I was just faking everything, that I was still the outsider to the magnificent Bryant royals.”

She lifted a shoulder adding, “Then my worst fears were realized when I learned the truth of my birth heritage. I wasn’t a Bryant. I wasn’t one of them. Never was. I was just an imposter.”

Mariah gazed back out at the ocean horizon.

“People talk about identity crises,” she said. “Most times I think it’s because they just want to be different than what they already are. But it’s usually something they can choose and change if they had a mind to.”

She frowned, adding, “Me? I’m the one experiencing a true identity crisis. I wanted to be a Bryant royal. With all my heart. I was happy to be one of them. Then I learned the truth that I’m not and never was and never can be.”

Mariah swiped the welling tears. “Now, I don’t know who I am.”

Ben touched her cheek and turned her to face him straight on.

“You want to know who you really are, Mariah Bryant?” he said seriously. “You are the most beautiful, amazing, intelligent, intriguing woman I have ever met, and I find myself craving your attention at every turn. Royal or not.”

Mariah’s moist, red lips parted as she looked up at him in question.

Ben couldn’t pull his own intense focus away. Any other time, any other woman, he would have grabbed and kissed this tempting she-wolf until she couldn’t walk straight. Then he would rush her to shore and up to her hotel room...

Idiot! Keep your wits about you, man!

Mariah Bryant was his mission, not his girlfriend.

Nor would she ever be.

No point in cruelly leading her on.

“So are you rested enough to go back to our detective work?” he asked, pushing his dark imaginings out of his head.

Mariah sighed, looking back out to sea. “Not really. What’s the point anyhow?”

“Ah, don’t be discouraged, darlin’. We’ve only just started.”

She shook her head. “I’m done, I think. I’m just...tired of it all.”

Not good. This afternoon’s excursion didn’t set her mind at ease at all.

He had failed her.

“Then we’ll extend our tourist play a bit longer,” he suggested, hoping to perk her up. “How about a personal guided tour of Dublin by me tomorrow? You can’t leave Ireland without trying some of our famous pubs and picking up a souvenir or two.”

Mariah grunted, saying halfheartedly, “Sure, why not?”

“Good. Anything else you want? You need only ask.”

Mariah fixed her caramel brown eyes with his, and he felt the very breath go out of him. He swore that if she asked him anything at all right then, he would travel to heaven and hell and back again for it.

“A friend,” she said, lacing her fingers through his. “An honest and true friend.”

“I’m your man then,” Ben said with a sincerity that physically rocked him.

So tempting. It wouldn’t take much more than for him to lightly brush her blue-black hair back with his fingers, then draw her down into a kiss meant to console her, but he knew would quickly progress to something hungrier.

Why was he doing this to himself?

Oh, right. Because he was an idiot and masochistic moron. He should end this thing between them now before he completely lost it and pushed things too far. For himself, as well as her.

Keeping things in the friends-zone was growing more difficult with every day that he spent with Mariah Bryant.

Dangerous.

Risky.

Right up his alley.

Still, if he did push the boundaries even a little bit, he would only hurt Mariah. Because at some point her heritage search would end. Then he would go back to his own reclusive life, and Mariah Bryant would return to her royal world and take up with some prince, get married, have children.

As it should be.

“Something wrong, Ben?”

He snapped out of his distracted thoughts and offered Mariah a cheerless smile. “Nothing a’tall, darlin’. Think we’re done for the day.”

* * *

The next week, she and Ben drove through towns, cities, historical sites, country fairs and open-air markets. He had several acquaintances who ran farms, wineries, breweries and other businesses that ended up being fun distractions.

With no attention-seeking pack members bombarding her, Mariah finally began to relax and enjoy her Irish getaway. No pack problems to worry about. No rules, no protocol, no leaders or guards hounding her every waking moment. True freedom.

It was glorious.

Was this what it was like to be a wild rogue then?

If so, Ben Gallagher didn’t realize how lucky he was.

It was past midnight, and after doing some serious pub crawling, Ben escorted her back to her hotel room. After three embarrassing attempts to unlock her door, he rolled his eyes and took the keycard from her fingers and easily slid it into place.

“Thanks,” Mariah snickered, opening the door and stumbling inside.

“My pleasure,” Ben said. “I hope you enjoyed yourself today.”

“More than you know.”

“Good. Ready to go back to our research project then? I have some new ideas that you’d be interested in.”

Mariah gave him a black look, annoyed by this same nagging question he asked at every turn. He was ruining her great mood with the reminder of her problems across the ocean, and it was ticking her the hell off.

Maybe she would never go home again.

Maybe she would become a rogue herself. From what she experienced so far, the life and freedom suited her magnificently.

Who knew? Maybe being a rogue was in her blood as well. At this point, it was a possibility.

“Actually, *I* have an idea that *you* would be interested in,” Mariah said, grinning slyly.

“And what would that be?”

“Coming inside for a last call,” she said, tugging onto his shirt as she backed into the room.

He halted halfway inside, pulling her grip away. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough for the night, darlin’?”

Mariah lifted her forefinger, saying, “Hey, an Irishman isn’t drunk, so long as he can hold onto one blade of grass.”

“Hmm. Even that feat might be a challenge for you right now. At the moment you’d make any Irishman proud. So I’ll say my farewells and leave while I still have my own wits about me.”

“Spoiled sport,” she grumbled, then lazily slid her arms around his neck. “At least come inside to make sure I’m properly tucked in for the night. You’re my temporary bodyguard after all.”

“I am, am I?”

“You are,” she declared.

“And do all your guards tuck you into bed each night?” he asked with an arched brow.

She grinned wickedly, saying, “Only the hot ones. Come on. No one will know.”

“I’ll know,” he said, gently pulling her arms away from his neck. “So thank you for the very generous and tempting offer, but I should be going before we both regret our reckless actions in the morning.”

But Mariah was determined not to let this steaming wolfman spoil her vacation fun by refusing her. Not again. She knew that Ben wanted her as much as she wanted him. The physical attraction had boiled between them for several days now. It was time to take Liam’s advice and thoroughly enjoy her Irish cabana boy.

He just needed a little persuasion.

Mariah pressed her palms against his solid chest, then lifted up on her toes and nipped his bottom lip.

“Stay,” she whispered, teasing his lips with her tongue.

God, he smelled delicious. A smoky blend of whiskey, brandy and a musky male scent all his own.

His jaw muscles bunched, but he didn’t pull away either. “I don’t think it’d be a good idea, Mariah. I think we’re both feeling the fiery buzz of inebriation right now.”

“It’s a great idea,” she tempted him again, sliding her hands up and around his neck. “And I don’t intend to let you go home tonight without a fight, wolfman. Now kiss me before I literally go up in flames.”

Ben stared at her flushed face a long, tense moment. His warring expression almost made Mariah believe he did have the strength to turn and walk out of her hotel room. And once again, she would wake up the next morning alone.

Then without warning, Ben's lips crashed down onto hers, and his arms pulled her against him with a force that stunned her. And Mariah wanted to whoop with victory that she was finally going to experience what she had imagined with this hot wolfman for the last two weeks.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 8

Mariah lazily stretched in bed like a contented housecat as the morning rays beamed through the curtains. She then turned to the pillow next to hers and irritably growled that it was uninhabited. As it had been all night, damn the stubborn wolfman.

They came extremely close last night though. By micro-inches at several points.

She grinned wide, recalling the volcanic scene after Ben almost gave into her seductive demands and finally lost himself in their blazing kisses and caresses.

Until he slammed on the breaks, huffing that he couldn't take advantage of her vulnerable state.

Mariah tried to reignite the fire between them again, but he turned and stalked out of her room faster with his eyes glowing dark green with need.

"This isn't over," she grumbled, punching her pillow. "Not by a longshot."

This was *her* wild vacation, and Benjamin Gallagher was not going to refuse her tonight. It was full-fledged war now. One she intended to win and claim her prize.

Her cellphone chimed. Grinning wantonly, Mariah rolled over in bed and grabbed it off the end table, then deflated to see that it wasn't Ben's number on the caller I.D.

"Hope I didn't wake you," Liam said on the other end.

She yawned, shaking her head. "Almost. But I beat you to the punch."

"I'll try harder next time then."

"Brat," she chuckled, scooting to sit up. That's when her slight hangover hit her straight between the eyes with an iron poker. "Ow. So what's going on in your neck of the world?"

“Same old political bunk,” Liam said. “Dad and Uncle Sean went to bat again to install you as D.H. regardless of your bloodlines, but the other three hardcore traditionalists on the Council shot the vote down again. Sorry, Mar.”

“Tell them both thanks anyway. They were sweet to try.”

Still, Mariah wasn't all that disappointed by the news. She was sorry for her parents' problem having no heir, of course. But for herself? No, she was enjoying her new rogue life with Ben Gallagher too much.

“What's the latest on your own lineage search?” Liam asked.

It had been over a week since she last spoke with him, so Mariah gave a rundown of the last lead that ended in a bust.

“I'm sorry,” Liam said.

Mariah shook out her mussed hair, saying, “No worries. It had been a longshot anyhow.”

“You must be devastated. Come home then. It's long past time. There's nothing more for you there in Ireland.”

“Well, I wouldn't say that,” she said, cracking a sly smile. “Things are most definitely looking up for me here on the Emerald Isle. Maybe I'll stay a while longer.”

“Hmm. You do sound very chipper for someone whose life is on the precipice of personal destruction,” Liam remarked warily.

“Or someone who's finally figured out that there's a lot more to it besides pack politics and power.”

“God, Mariah. What happened to bring about this major transformation?”

She laughed, exalting in the excitement of true freedom and improper, reckless, non-royal living. Maybe this was what she was meant for all along.

“I took your advice and am having a blast here,” she said. “I've been sightseeing and shopping and pub-crawling

and dancing. I even took a local boat cruise, then went deep-sea fishing.”

“Stop it,” he snorted.

“I did,” she insisted. “And I’ll have you know that I was very good at it, too. Even caught some kind of slimy creature the captain took home. Ben took a picture of me holding it up on a string. I’ll text it to you.”

“I’ll wait with bated breath.”

“Hold onto your socks, but I also did some sheep-shearing.”

“No.”

She chuckled, explaining, “Ben has a friend who’s a farmer. He has a large flock, and he showed me how it’s done. I wasn’t too bad. Ben snapped a pic of me doing that, too. I’ll send it on with the other.

“Then he introduced me to the owner of a local brewery who gave us a personal guided tour. And last night he took me to all the best pubs around here where I definitely had too much to drink. I’m still reeling a bit from the aftereffects. Hey, I thought you told me that werewolves aren’t affected by alcohol.”

“My, my. A very Helpful Harry, this one. Is the charming Irishman there with you now, perchance?”

Mariah heard the disapproval in her friend’s tone. “No. Not that it’s any of your business, nosy. Ben was very much the gentleman last night and left before anything untoward happened.”

“Do I detect a note of disappointment?”

Mariah bit her bottom lip, her mind flashing back to the humiliating moment when in a desperate, heated frenzy she grabbed Ben’s shirt to tear it off. Much stronger than her, he pulled her hands away in time, then turned tailed and left the room.

“Not disappointed...exactly.”

“What, exactly?”

How could she explain to a purebred, legacy pack member like Liam the ultimate adrenaline rush of living as a reckless, wild rogue? She never knew how addictive it could be.

“He was probably right to push me off,” Mariah admitted guiltily. “Ben has this incurable honorable streak and refused to take advantage. Honestly, Liam, you would wholeheartedly approve of the man. He’s honorable generous and kind and patient and smart. He just...gets me. I can’t explain it.”

There was a five second pause.

“Liam?”

“God. You’re infatuated with the mongrel,” he remarked with revulsion.

Mariah’s entire body went rigid. “That’s ridiculous. I am *not* infatuated with Ben Gallagher.”

“No?”

“No. Grow up, Liam. This isn’t high school.”

“Then what is it, Mariah?”

What, indeed?

No doubt that she and Ben had grown extremely close since they first met two weeks ago. Much closer the last few days.

She definitely had developed some very strong feelings for him that went far beyond just physical lust, too. She would admit to that. But it was much too soon to consider anything more...

More what?

She gave her head a hard shake.

No, she couldn’t think of Ben in stronger terms. Nothing romantic or solid or meaningful. It would spoil everything.

“You *are* smitten with the dog,” Liam accused. “God, Mar. Have you not learned one thing from my own disastrous

relationships?”

Mariah narrowed her eyes, gripping the cellphone harder. “As a matter of fact, I’ve learned that you have no place giving romantic advice given your numerous failures.”

“Granted,” he admitted. “But think about it. There aren’t many werewolves living in Ireland anymore, so it wouldn’t take much for a loner male like Gallagher to sniff out a rare, available female and go in for the takedown.”

“Oh, please.”

“I mean it. Why do you think that some wolfmen there settle for human women, like in your last story with the O’Dwyer woman?”

Mariah felt her cheeks heat with fury.

“I’ll wager this Gallagher clown figured out who your family is and what they’re worth,” Liam added. “Any lone, broke, down-on-his-luck werewolf would be extremely motivated to attach himself to a rich heiress with a royal pedigree.”

Okay, Liam did have a strong point.

Still, Ben wasn’t like that, and this wasn’t some adolescent, hearts-and-flowers crush. She wasn’t in love with Ben. She just had a healthy, robust lust for the hunky wolfman. What was the harm?

Not to mention that he was a nice, decent and honorable man, a true rarity. Ben was everything she listed to Liam and then some.

Plus, Ben already knew about her royal family. He wasn’t with her because she was rich and connected. He may be a rogue, but he wasn’t...

That stopped Mariah for a heartbeat. Actually, she didn’t know much about Ben’s background. Whenever she brought it up, he was always vague about the details.

Evasive.

Secretive.

“Just keep your guard up, Mariah. Please,” Liam ended in a gentler tone. “At least until I do my own check on this mongrel.”

* * *

She couldn't help it. Liam had thoroughly sowed that weed of dark doubt of Ben's motives and character, and now she couldn't shake the negative feelings and suspicions.

That's why her gut gripped when Ben finally called at noon.

And why he instantly picked up the ice in her tone.

“Hello to you as well,” he said warily. “Is there something the matter, Mariah?”

“Why would you say that?” she remarked testily.

“Uh, call it instinct.”

She sniffed dryly. “Well, everything's fine. Just fine.”

“O-kay.”

Frowning, Mariah gripped the cellphone tighter. “What did you need, Ben? I was just about to go out and do some shopping.”

“All right,” he said hesitantly. “I could ring back later, if it's more convenient.”

“What I'd like is for you to get to the reason you're calling.”

There was a tense pause.

“Am I in the doghouse for some reason?” he asked. “Look, if you believe that I took advantage of your inebriated state last night, I'm truly sorry—”

“Don't be ridiculous,” she cut in. “You were fine. I was fine. We're both adults and we were both fine. End of topic. Besides, I wasn't drunk. A happy buzz, at the very most.”

“Uh, all right. Look, I know you said you're going shopping, but I'd like to get together later, if you're available.”

I've been doing some research on our case all morning, and I have some promising news to share."

"Again with the case," Mariah ground out. "I told you that I didn't want to continue researching my birth history. Why can't you just drop it? I have."

Another pause.

"We can, if you really want to, Mariah," Ben said. "It's just that I might have a new lead. But if you don't care to follow up on it, we can still get together and not discuss it. If you wish to, of course."

At the wince in his voice, Mariah loosened her grip on her cellphone. She shouldn't let Liam's undeserved warnings get to her. Innocent until proven guilty and all that.

"Fine, that sounds...fine," she said, softening her tone. "Pick me up here at three-thirty. I should be done by then."

"Good," Ben said sounding relieved. "I'll see you then. Happy shopping."

* * *

Mariah anxiously waited in the hotel lobby, pushing hard against Liam's accusations. He had called her back while she was in a strip mall boutique with news that his family's private investigator couldn't find anything substantial on Ben Gallagher. At all.

"Are you sure that's even his name, Mar?" Liam questioned. "It's sounding more and more like he's some anonymous grifter. How often has he 'misplaced his wallet', forcing you to pay the dinner check?"

"None," Mariah answered.

At least not since the first lunch, she added silently. Even then, Ben more than made up for it with that night's dinner check.

"He might be playing the long game then," Liam said. "Prime you until he charms a marriage proposal acceptance from you."

“Marriage?” she snorted.

“He wouldn’t be the first gold digger, dearest. Just another cliché. You said he was a professor at a U.K. college?”

“Please tell me that he didn’t lie about that,” she said, her stomach once again gripping.

“That was true enough,” Liam said. “*Was* being the operative word. He was fired a few months ago for cause. His previous college, too. Watch yourself, Mar. This man isn’t all that he seems to be.”

Okay, so Ben had been terminated from his teaching post, Mariah considered, her crossed leg pumping furiously. That only confirmed that he was telling her the truth about his education and employment.

A sabbatical. That’s what he first told her. A lie.

Still, it was reasonable that he wouldn’t want to share that he’d been fired to a potential girlfriend.

Not his girlfriend! Never will be!

So what did it matter?

None, really.

Ben’s business was his business. It didn’t affect her at all. Not if she kept an appropriate distance. He was still fun to be with. As long as she kept it casual between them, everything would be fine.

It was probably best to cool it in the sex department then.

Maybe she should take Liam’s advice and go back home. Cut ties with Ben permanently before things escalated to emotionally dangerous levels.

Tomorrow, then. One last day of fun today, then she would head home for Timber Ridge in the morning.

Her stomach tightened at that daunting prospect. Back to her rigid royal life. Back to the shadowing bodyguards and paparazzi. The insipid events and formalities and social pressures. The covered whispers and innuendos and stigmas.

Maybe a quick trip to Fiji first.

Ben walked through the hotel entrance and smiled, lifting a hand to her. Mariah bucked up and stood as he walked up to her, kissing her cheek.

“Did you have a nice time on your shopping trip?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I found a few things.”

“Good. Are you up for another outing?”

“As long as it doesn’t involve boats,” she said. “I’d like to keep my designer boots in decent shape this time.”

“No boats,” he chuckled. “I’d like to take you to my place, if you’ve no objections.”

His place?

Ben had been so private and secretive about his private life up to this point. Understandable, if what Liam told her was true.

Did this mean that Liam had been right when suggesting Ben was leveling up to squeeze his way into the prominent Bryant clan by way of marriage? Inviting her to his humble home being the first in a line of calculated steps towards that end.

“Will I be impressed?” she asked.

“A princess who lives in her very own castle?” he grunted, taking her hand. “I doubt it seriously. Don’t be too disappointed.”

They drove out of town and through lush countryside of rolling, green hills. Ben turned off onto an unpaved road, then drove along the windy ocean cliffs.

Five kilometers in, they finally reached a long, stone fence, and Ben opened the iron gate with an electronic device. Another half kilometer up the crunching gravel drive, he finally parked in front of a three-story stone manor.

It looked like something straight from a Jane Austin classic. Old world elegant and very inspiring.

“Welcome to my family’s home,” he said. “My mother named it Brier Rose, after my grandmother.”

“You’re...home?”

“One of them. This was where I was born.”

Mariah gaped at the pink and red rose vines climbing the red brick siding, the enormous bay windows, the immaculate and artistic landscaping.

“You’re...*rich!*” she accused.

And Liam was dead wrong about him!

Ben didn’t want, didn’t *need* her money. He obviously had enough of his own.

“No. My parents are rich,” Ben said, guiding her up the stone steps.

She sent him a withering look, saying, “That’s what all rich kids say. I should know.”

Shrugging, Ben unlocked and opened the front double doors made of rich cedar and colorful stained glass. Mariah walked inside the main room and whistled low at the incredible vintage furnishings, the classic oil paintings, even the walk-in size stone fireplaces with elegant arrangements of antique muskets, rifles and swords that spoke of a wealthy nobleman’s castle.

“This is wonderful, Ben,” she said, scanning the amazing area. “Why didn’t you bring me here before?”

He winced, admitting, “In truth, I’m not certain why I’m bringing you here now.”

Mariah pulled her attention from the room, and looked up at him with wide eyes. “You’ve never brought another woman here?”

“Not really, no,” Ben said. “My folks have had many visitors throughout the years, of course, and we have staff that comes in and out. But I’ve never felt comfortable enough to invite anyone else here myself.”

“Why not?”

“Long story,” he said. “Anyhow, welcome to Brier Rose. I’ll give you the grand tour, if you like.”

“Yes, definitely,” she said.

Ben walked up to the man-sized fireplace and pulled a Bowie knife off the mantle. It was old and well worn. Definitely used on a regular basis.

“My father built this place for my mother before they married,” he began. “Dad was always a simple man, and a loner, never one for crowds or elegant trappings himself, but he wanted to give her something grand. In fact, when he met her, my father was living in a one-room log cabin in the mountains that he built with his own hands. This was his knife that he used back then.”

Mariah took and examined it. “Impressive. He must have been very rugged and dashing in his day.”

“That’s what my mother thought as well, I suspect,” Ben chuckled, setting the knife back into place on the mantle. “It wasn’t love at first sight for either of them, you see. But the moment they met, my dad would never be parted from her. By choice.”

“True mates then. You were the product of true love.”

God, what made her say that?

“The truest,” Ben agreed.

Mariah nodded, flushed. “I envy you that knowledge. I used to believe that of myself. Until I learned the truth.”

“You have no way of knowing how your existence came about, Mariah,” Ben said, touching her shoulder. “We will find the answers to all your questions, I promise you.”

“Hmm.”

She wouldn’t tell him that she was leaving tomorrow. Not yet.

She was such a coward.

Mariah forced a cheerless smile, saying, “Tell me more.”

With every incredible room they entered, Ben recited an intriguing history lesson on the unique furnishings and portraits and interesting visitors over the decades. Mariah felt like she could wander around this place for months and never learn all there was to know of it.

After exploring the expansive manor, they descended the winding staircase back down to the foyer where they originally started.

“As you saw, my father built this for my mother’s taste, both in historical interest and modern convenience,” Ben concluded. “But the most important aspect of this place is its security.”

Ben took on a serious tone then saying, “My father is over six-hundred-years-old, past the end of a typical werewolf lifespan. As such, he’s developed many enemies. Arcans, in particular. He would never build a permanent residence for his new family unless he could be certain of its safety from those who would hunt us all down.”

He jutted his chin to the west adding, “We own one hundred acres of land along the coastline here, and all of the perimeter is highly secured. There is no safer place in all of Ireland.”

“Sounds like my community back in Timber Ridge,” Mariah remarked.

“Perhaps. But as rogues, we have no pack to ban together and protect us from the outside world. That’s why I stay here when I’m visiting the Island. This is the one place that I know I’m safe from Arcan Hunters. You, as well.”

Mariah turned back to him, hearing the open question. “What are you saying, Ben?”

His expression darkened. “I’m asking if you would consider staying here for the duration of your trip, Mariah. Arcan Hunters are everywhere. They’ll find you. And you are grossly unprotected where you are.”

“Stay here? With you?”

He nodded. “There are plenty of rooms, as you saw. You’re welcome to any. But only if you wish it.”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 9

Where did he go wrong?

After a few sketchy moments yesterday in Darby when they dodged who he suspected was an Arcan Hunter, Ben hoped the redheaded man hadn't followed them back to Drogheda. That hope was smashed when he spotted the same pit-faced, bearded man in town this afternoon right before he picked up Mariah from her hotel.

He couldn't be certain the man was an Arcan. It was just a strong hunch, a strong one.

There had only one, very risky way of finding out.

Sliding off the pub bar stool, Ben downed his drink, then staggered towards the entrance, bumping the man as he passed.

"So sorry, man!" Ben apologized, gripping the man's arm to steady himself. "Guess I've had one too many already, yeah?"

The man grunted, jerking off Ben's hold. Too late. Ben had already spotted the half-covered Arcan symbol tattooed on the redhead's right forearm.

Acting nonplussed, Ben touched his forehead in apology, then stalked fast for the door, while pulling out his cellphone to contact his father's security people to tighten things up at home.

His next step was to convince Mariah to stay there with him at Brier Rose. She was too exposed alone at her hotel.

Everything within him relaxed when she reluctantly accepted.

He offered her the best guest suite. His own room was on the top floor, the perfect vantage point if any Arcans managed to breach the perimeter and somehow made it up to the second floor where she slept.

The distance between them was in itself another security measure. A personal one. Because for some infuriating reason, he couldn't seem to keep his greedy, lecherous paws off the enticing woman.

Mariah was an extremely desirable she-wolf whose pheromones screamed at him like a siren. But she was a princess not to be bedded without the expectation to be wedded. And that could never happen between them.

"So it's hands-off, mate," Ben told his reflection in the steamy bathroom mirror after finishing his morning shower.

Not an easy feat when Mariah kept hungrily throwing herself at him, offering a tempting fast and furious tumble in the sheets at every turn.

Until last night, of course.

Something had definitely shifted between them. Ever since their phone conversation yesterday, Mariah had been stiff and cool and practically formal around him.

Did she finally get wise to him? Guess that he had been playing with her affections to gain her trust and insider information?

Or maybe she was having second thoughts to their friendship herself. After he almost grabbed and threw her down on the bed to fully claim her for his own hungry appetites.

"Damn you, wolf," he growled at himself. "From now on, keep your frigging hands to yourself."

* * *

Damn that sexy, too sweet wolfman.

Just when Mariah had been set to despise the man for lying to her, Ben shamefully admitted that he wasn't on a sabbatical from his teaching position, but had been terminated because he dared disagree with the college dean and his political cronies.

It was during their dinner of homemade shepherd's pie, rolls, salad and cinnamon apple cobbler. With a few probing

questions on her part, Ben shared the details of the final incident that infuriated him to the point of partial-shifting and shredding the dean's office.

Suddenly Mariah's opinion of Ben Gallagher had leveled up from class-A grifter to courageous hero. Admittedly she would have done far worse to the stogy, ignorant dean.

That's why Mariah accepted his offer to stay at Brier Rose. Not that it wasn't already a spectacular place to stay for the remainder of her vacation. She just couldn't say no to him after his guilty admission.

You need to tell him," Mariah chided herself.

Because even though she had accepted his accommodation there at the manor, things were becoming too close, too complicated. And nothing could come of them together. Or at least should. Their lives were too different—rogue and pack member. Her life was back in Timber Ridge. His was all over the world.

Like it or not, she needed to break off whatever was brewing between them. Then go home.

And she needed to tell him today.

Showered and dressed, Mariah braced herself, then headed out of the room and down the hallway to the staircase landing.

"Ben?" she called out.

"Down in the office," he called back.

Mariah descended the stairs, then turned down the left hallway to where she remembered the office library was located. At the corner cherrywood desk Ben sat typing furiously on a desktop computer.

She meandered up to him, heatedly admiring his solid chest muscles and bunching biceps pressing against his blue thermal shirt, imagining what he looked like without it.

Quickly she shoved her wanton musings back down. It was now important to view him as nothing more than a casual friend. Without benefits.

“What’re working on?” she asked.

Hyper-focused on the screen, Ben startled, then frowned up at her. “Something you don’t want to hear about.”

“Why wouldn’t I want..?” Mariah hooded her eyes, remarking, “You’re still working on my birth search, aren’t you?”

“Guilty. But don’t be angry. I promised not to talk about it with you, and I won’t. Unless I found something of interest.”

There was a long beat, and Mariah could see the man twitching like a livewire to tell her what he discovered.

“Okay, fine. Tell me what it is,” she said.

Eagerly Ben pulled a chair around for her, saying, “I found him.”

“Found who?”

“Richard Collins,” he said, flushing with excitement. “I found the man who delivered Jake and Nicole Bryant’s baby the night you were born.”

Mariah plopped down hard. “Are...are you sure? Where is he?”

Ben turned the computer screen towards her. “I haven’t been able to locate an exact address for Collins, no. But I did find a transaction he made when you were born. See here? He had booked flight out of Seattle.”

Mariah checked the flight that scheduled for three days after her birthdate headed for Buenos Aires.

“He left the country then,” she said, deflating.

“No.” Ben clicked onto another document copy. “Here’s the flight manifest. The man never boarded.”

Mariah read it, twice, then shook her head. “So you didn’t find him.”

“I found a solid starting place,” Ben corrected, returning to the previous document copy. “This is real progress,

Mariah. See this booking date? One week *prior* to your birthdate. Your mother's regular obstetrician was killed the day after Collins booked his flight. A flight scheduled to exit the country three days *after* the Prima gave birth."

"That doesn't make sense. How would Collins know that my mother's obstetrician would be killed before she went into labor?"

"He wouldn't," Ben said, gaining steam. "Nor would he know to be at the hospital at the exact day and time she went into labor. Unless it was all planned and executed perfectly. And he was in on it."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"I'm telling you, the man must have been involved with the switch in some form. That's the only reason for Collins sticking around the hospital after he officially resigned, and for leaving the country so quickly after the Prima gave birth."

"Circumstantial evidence at best," she said.

"But the good doctor never boarded the plane," Ben added, pointing to the flight manifest. "Meaning that he remained in the country. Maybe even in the state, or Timber Ridge itself."

"Or caught another flight at another time, even to somewhere else," Mariah countered. "Either way, the man disappeared into the wind right after the delivery, so we're still back to where we started with no way to contact him."

"But if Richard Collins did stay in Timber Ridge back then," Ben added, "he would show up somewhere in the community's business receipts. If we find one, we might find another, then another, eventually leading us to his current location."

"Two decades-old receipts," she reminded him. "And most, if not all, would have long ago been destroyed. Even the digital ones."

"Like you said—most, not all. Something is bound to turn up."

Mariah looked at the documents, disappointment and logic warring with the new hope of actually finding the answers she longed for.

She was furious at Ben for luring her into this again, just when she had resolved to let the past stay in the past.

Why was he doing this to her?

* * *

“No,” Mariah said. “It would be impossible. It would be like trying to find a needle in a mountain sized needle stack.”

“We need to try,” Ben said.

She was right though, he had to admit. It was a flimsy lead, one that would probably end with no answers after weeks of searching. It was cruel of him to give her this microscopic hope.

Still, his inside sources informed him that they were losing time before the pack Elder Council planned to push for leadership reform. And because of Rufus Bryant’s mystically charged blood-contract, the pack itself would dissolve and end. Then the various were-tribes would descend like vultures scenting ripe carrion to fight over the newly unclaimed territory.

War on a very brutal, bloody, massive scale.

His father had witnessed this same carnage in the late eighteenth century. It was the reason his own father, Rufus, sealed this blood-lineage provision into the original pack bylaws to avoid potential battles for political takeovers.

“I suppose I could ask my Uncle Ian to look into it,” Mariah posed halfheartedly. “If anyone has access to archived community documents, it’ll be him.”

“We’ll find something, Mariah. I’m sure of it.”

She offered him a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

Ben powered off the computer. “Let’s table this for now. Let me make you breakfast. Then we can go for a walk along the ocean cliffs.”

“Breakfast sounds great, but I’m really not in the mood to stroll along the windy cliffs. I might be tempted to jump.”

Mariah nervously laughed, but Ben wasn’t fooled. She was losing patience and heart. He needed to find something soon, or she would give up altogether and go home.

And what if she did? What’s it to you, mate?

“How about a drive to the castle instead then?” he suggested. “It’s a nice morning. I never did finish the Red Moon Prophecy for you.”

“That’s right, you didn’t,” she said, perking up a little. “Okay, but let me help in the kitchen. Oh, don’t look so astonished. I’ve dabbled a bit here and there when allowed by our finicky cooking staff. At the very least, I can toast some bread and scramble a few eggs.”

* * *

It was a pleasant stroll through the grassy hills towards the ancient ruins. Ben was amused at the shocked delight Mariah expressed as he shared the end of the Callaghan tale.

“Wow. And the three sisters are still around?” she remarked meandering up to the outer stone wall of the castle.

“Alive and well with their respective mates and people,” Ben assured. “Scattered around the world now, or so Garrett tells me.”

Mariah gazed up at the ruins, the wind whipping strands of her braided black hair across her face. “But none ever reclaimed their Callaghan birthright here. So sad. To think that this place was once so stately and grand.”

“All things have their own time, which eventually must come to an end.”

Ben wondered if he meant the platitude for himself. Being with Mariah Bryant these past couple of weeks had been the most satisfying time he could ever remember. And he darkly sensed that it was coming to a close.

“I suppose,” she sighed. “Like me.”

Ben took and squeezed her hand. “Not like you, Mariah. Your proper time is only beginning. Just you wait. We’ll make sure to put things right again.”

She lifted a shoulder, unconvinced.

Ben felt like a jerk. Here he thought the minor update on the physician would encourage her to keep searching, when all it did was lengthen her torturous disappointment.

“What is it then? Have you no more faith in our efforts to find the truth?” he asked.

Mariah frowned up at him, tempting him to reach down and lightly smooth the worry wrinkling her forehead.

“Ben, I have something to tell you.”

His body reflexively straightened, electrified with a panic he didn’t understand.

“What is it?” he asked calmly as his pulse ratcheted up.

“I...”

“What, Mariah?” he prodded at the long beat of silence. “You can tell me anything.”

She let go of a long breath, then said, “It’s about us. Me. It’s really about...”

Ben suddenly went rigid, the back of his neck crackling with a dark, familiar sensation.

“What’s wrong?” Mariah asked.

Holding a hand up for her to quiet, Ben checked around, sharpening his wolf hearing, focusing his sight.

Nothing untoward. Now.

But there had been a few seconds ago. He was sure of it.

“Ben?”

He eased and shook his head. “Nothing, darlin’. Let’s continue this conversation back home. Whatever needs saying —”

“Ben, behind you!” Mariah screamed.

He whipped around, instantly recognizing the redheaded Arcan Hunter on the grassy rise, raising his rifle.

A ripping growl tore from Mariah, and Ben turned in time to see her flash-shift into her black and white wolf form, gold eyes glowing.

“Mariah, no!” he warned with raised hands.

Too late.

Snarling, she launched herself in a high arc over his head, just as a shot rang out. The bullet zipped through the air, and Mariah’s wolf whined and flew backwards, collapsing on the ground near his feet.

“Mariah!”

Ben reached down in disbelief at the deathly still carcass, a red-gray ooze spilling from the wound in her shoulder. Instantly he picked up the acrid, metallic smell of hot silver—the one poisonous element lethal to werewolves.

Something inside him snapped.

Gravity shifted.

Then primal instinct consumed him like a raging inferno.

The Arcan Hunter shot again, missing Ben by an inch.

Ben’s eyes heated and teeth and claws enlarged. Not bothering to fully shift, he launched himself at the Arcan and clamped down on the man’s neck with his lethal fangs, ripping the man’s larynx out with one fluid, bloody motion.

He checked the dead man’s pulse, then his Arcan tattoo. His stalker was no random shooter or contracted hitman then. This hunter knew exactly what he was, and what was needed to kill him.

And Arcan Hunters always traveled in pairs.

Another shot rang out, the bullet whizzing past Ben’s ear nearly nicking him.

Growling, he leapt back to protectively stand over Mariah’s unconscious wolf, shifting his narrowing glowing

eyes this way and that to locate the second hunter.

Where are you, bastard?

With his heightened wolf smell, Ben scented him to the left.

He turned, instantly spotting the second man hiding behind a laurel tree, his scoped rifle trained on him.

With inhuman speed and height, Ben leapt in an impossible arc, coming down on the hunter just as the man pulled the trigger.

A miss.

By the widening terrorized eyes of the hunter, he knew it, too.

Ben snapped his razor-sharp claws open, then swiped down the hunter's face and throat. The man's scream was drowned by the gurgling of the gushing blood from the deep scratches.

Listening hard, Ben heard when the hunter's heart beat its last. Only then did he run back to Mariah's wolf still lying there in the grass unconscious.

With the liquified silver poisoning racing through her system, he had to get her back to the house as fast as possible if he stood a chance to save her life.

"Don't worry, love. I've got you," he said, picking her up into his arms. "Hang on now. You'll be all right. Just hang on."

Ben ran at superhuman speed over the grassy knoll to the car, then laid the limp wolf in the back seat. Then he jumped behind the steering wheel, tramped down on the gas pedal and sped away.

Back at the house, Ben laid the wolf down by the living room fireplace. Grabbing his dad's hunting knife off the mantle, he quickly dug the silver bullet out of the wolf's oozing wound, then tossed it into the fireplace.

Finished, Ben raced to the kitchen and scrambled into the back of the pantry for the herbs taught to him by his father that would counteract the silver nitrate.

He pounded and mixed the gelatinous concoction, then raced back with the medicine to Mariah still lying on the carpet. Widening the wound, he then pushed all of the mixture deep into the bloody gap, gritting his teeth at the agonizing whines from Mariah with each prod. Finished, he wrapped a gauze bandage around her body to keep as much inside as possible.

Now there was nothing more to do, but wait and let the medicine do its job.

Mariah's weak whines clawed at his own heart. Ben cursed himself on the danger that he had selfishly placed her in, the torture she was enduring now, the very real possibility that she couldn't survive this.

His fault. If he just would have listened to his father in the first place and stayed out of the Bryant pack's business...

The wolf cracked her golden eyes open a bit.

"It's going to be okay now, sweetheart," Ben said, smoothing back her furred head. "Just lie still now. You'll be fine."

A false promise.

In truth, he didn't know if she would survive. The bullet was out and the mixture was in, but the silver poisoning already had too much time to work its way through her system to stop her heart forever.

Minutes passed, then an hour, then two with no visible improvement.

Ben continued to check her pulse again and again. Weak and thready, and growing weaker. A few times it even stopped, before stuttering and restarting again.

Dammit, this was his fault.

He had been careless with her safety.

He knew that Arcan had been following him. Probably had been tracking him for days, even weeks. Yet, in his mad quest to win Mariah's trust and affection, he had toured her around openly in public without added protection or safeguards.

Stupid. Stupid.

Another hour passed. Finally Ben broke down and called his father, then gave him the rundown on what happened.

"I don't know, Dad. What if I mixed the wrong things? What if I was too late?"

"Then there's nothin' more you can do, son," Michael Bryant said. "If she dies—"

"She can't," Ben stated through gritted teeth.

"If she dies, you must contact her father. Jake Bryant would want to bury his daughter properly. You owe him that much."

Ben squeezed his eyes shut, gripping and almost crushing his cellphone. "No, she can't die. Not her. There's got to be something else I can do. She has to live. She has to."

A five second pause.

"Ah, so you're in love with the girl then."

"No, of course..."

Was he?

Ben's mouth opened to vehemently deny it, then closed it again. There was no denying that he had come to appreciate, enjoy, even care for her deeply. But love?

No. No way. The idea was insane.

"It's not like that. I owe her, because she...she sacrificed herself for me," Ben said.

His father grunted. "And what do you think real love is, boy? It's not the silly, simpering feelings of movies and stories. It's self-sacrifice. It's denying your own happiness and wants and needs for that other person's best interest. If

your mother has taught me one thing, it's that real love is caring enough about the other person to forget yourself. A rare gift in our self-serving, narcissistic world."

Ben heard a whimpering sound, and he turned in time to see the black and white wolf slowly transforming back into Mariah's human form. Everything within and without him eased with grateful relief.

"She's changing back," he said, letting go of a long breath.

"Good. That means the herbs are counteracting the poison," his father said.

"So she'll live," Ben remarked, swallowing hard.

"She should, yes. But Benjamin, you have another problem now. Arcan Hunters know of her because of her connection to you. She's no longer safe. Not there anyhow."

"I had security tighten the perimeter."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

Ben knew what his father was insinuating, suggesting. He knew what was right, what was needed. He just didn't know if he could let her go. Not now. Not ever.

So maybe you do love her, mate.

And if so, what was he willing to do the sacrificial thing for Mariah Bryant's wellbeing?

After another pause, his father added, "Somethin' else you should know, son. Especially if you do what you're about to do, in spite of my wise advice."

Ben swallowed hard again. "What is it?"

"I need to tell you what really happened with the Bryant wolfpack when it was newly formed," Michael Bryant said. "Why it's a miracle it came into existence back in Virginia. And who would want it destroyed now in Washington State."



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 10

Mariah sat her first class seat on the commercial flight across the United States, gazing out the window at the patchwork landscape below.

Once again, her mind replayed the moment she awoke in the four-poster bed at Brier Rose, her left shoulder throbbing from the bandaged bullet wound. Somehow, Ben had been able to cure her from the deadly, poisonous shot. She was grateful to him.

And furious as hell.

Mariah foggily remembered the moment she had spotted the rifleman on the grassy knoll near the castle ruins, her spontaneous wolf change, then being shot and the excruciating sting and burn of the silver bullet. She had faded in and out of consciousness as the agonizing silver nitrate crept through her veins and muscles like a vicious snake.

At some point, Ben must have picked her up and deposited her into the car, raced back Brier Rose. She vividly recalled the initial slice of the blade on her shoulder and the eye-rolling heat and pain of his fingers digging around in her wound.

That's when she heard a ghostly, inhuman groan as cold slime was shoved and prodded deeply into her fiery wound. Only when she woke the next morning did she realize that the unearthly sound had been coming from her.

Ben had saved her life then.

So she shouldn't want to viciously rip his throat out with her deadly werewolf fangs.

Mariah squeezed her eyes shut and breathed slowly to calm the rage boiling deep inside her chest.

Somewhat better, she gazed back at the mountain range below, focused on what she would do when she finally disembarked the plane and faced her family.

It didn't help.

Once again, her mind replayed that horrific moment when she weakly staggered out of the bedroom, clutching her patched shoulder wound. She called out for Ben and received no answer.

Carefully she picked her way downstairs, calling again, staggering in and out of various empty rooms, finally realizing that she was utterly alone in the mansion.

It was on the front entrance table, propped against a crystal vase filled with dried flowers. Beside it was a hand-painted dish that held a set of keys and banded roll of cash.

Swallowing hard, Mariah again pulled out this note from her jeans pocket, reading the malignant words, somehow hoping they would be different:

Mariah,

Apologies for abandoning you to your own devices like this, but there's been a family emergency, and I must leave the country immediately to attend to it.

Feel free to make use of the house and car while you stay in Ireland for your holiday. However, due to the incident with those hunters, I suggest you return to the safety of your home back in the U.S.

Thank you for a lovely time. I do hope I haven't led you on to inappropriate lengths. I did enjoy our brief time together, but in the end I am a loner and rogue, and my kind never makes permanent ties.

I wish you well and success in your search for your personal history.

Best wishes,

Ben Gallagher

Pursing her lips, Mariah crushed the note into a ball in her fist.

God, the man was cold, unfeeling.

A lovely time? Never makes permanent ties?

It shouldn't matter to her.

It didn't really. Before that hunter showed up, she was about to say pretty much the same thing to him. Planned to end things and part as good friends, then pack up her belongings still at the hotel and head to Dublin International Airport.

So why did it bother her so much that Ben did it first?

Was she that much of a spoiled princess that she couldn't bear being dumped by him first? Even if the results were exactly what she wanted.

"Garbage, ma'am?" the flight attendant asked, carrying a plastic trash bag. "We'll be landing very soon."

Sneering, Mariah tossed Ben's wadded note into the bag, along with her empty coffee cup. The flight attendant then turned to the next passenger just as the pilot's voice came over the loud speaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing in San Diego in four minutes. Please be sure that your seat and tray table are in the upright position and your..."

Tuning out the typical announcement, Mariah braced for the jet's rough touchdown onto the tarmac and her next steps after that. This was not going to be an easy day. Or week. Or rest of her life. Her entire world had been shaken, then shaken again. Now she had no idea what lay ahead.

"Jerk," she muttered in a decibel too low for human ears to pick up.

After disembarking the plane and gathering her luggage, Mariah exited the terminal. She grimaced as she stood on the busy outside sidewalk, checking up and down and through the bustling travel-goers.

At last she spotted an athletically built man with shaggy blond hair wearing a green tee shirt and cargo pants. Leaning against a dusty sports vehicle with folded arms, he spotted her, then broke into a brilliant smile and lifted a hand.

The tightness in her chest immediately relaxed, and Mariah double-timed it towards him with rolling luggage in tow.

One muscular arm embraced her in a familiar bear hug, and she knew she had made the right decision in flying south to San Diego instead of returning home to Washington State.

“Hey, Finley,” she said with a tired sigh.

“Hey yourself, cuz,” he returned, releasing her. “Looking stellar as always.”

“You, too,” she said, then fingered through his mussed golden locks. “You still need a decent trim though.”

“Hey, no knocking the hair,” he grunted, pushing her hand away. “Especially since I’m letting you crash at my beach shack free of charge.”

She twisted a smile. “You’re right. Sorry, Finn. I do appreciate you letting me visit you last minute.”

“No worries. Glad for the company. Here, let me get your bags, and we’ll head for home.”

Finn loaded her luggage into the back of his vehicle, while she climbed up into the front passenger’s side. Soon they were pulling out of the busy airport and driving towards the coastline.

Her cousin’s “beach shack” was a huge Spanish style, six-bedroom manor with its own private beach. Finley Bryant was a world-renowned surfing champion whose high-market commercial sponsors compensated him well. Retired from competition, he only surfed with his buddies for fun and exercise now.

“You can hole up here for as long as you like,” he said opening the first bedroom door on the right.

“Nice,” Mariah commented appreciatively as she stood in the middle of the spacious suite.

“Suz’s room is the one across from yours.”

An anxious jolt shot through Mariah as she whipped a look around to him. “Oh. Uh, is your sister here?”

Her reluctance didn't escape her cousin as he narrowed his feline shaped eyes at her. “Not at the moment. She's down in Costa Rica helping build a medical facility for the next month or so.”

“Oh, good. I mean, good that she's working on another charity project. Suzanna always needs a humanitarian purpose to keep her going.”

“Hmm. So how long are you planning to stay down here in no-wolf's land?”

Mariah flushed, turning away from her cousin's scrutiny. “No set timeline really. Why? Ready to boot me out of your place already?”

“Naw,” Finn said. “Stay as long as you like. *Mi casa et su casa*. But I'm not as dumb as I look, Mar-z-pan. I know there's some reason you're secretly hiding down here from the rest of the fam. Naw, don't sweat it. No one knows you're here, and they won't find out from me.”

She eased again. “Thanks, Finn. I owe you bigtime. I hope this doesn't get you into any trouble with your folks if they do find out though.”

He twisted a grin. “Their problem, not mine. Besides, they both have played the family rebel in their own time.”

True enough. Her father's youngest brother, Luke, disavowed his allegiance with their wolfpack before she was even born. He escaped to Southern California were-neutral territory where he met the love of his life, Jade Lamarche, who had also broken from her were-cougar pride.

An unlikely match between wolf and cat that most were-kind couldn't accept, so they remained in Santa Barbara neutral territory to this very day.

“After you settle in, come out back to the patio,” Finn said. “My cook Rina is making her famous grilled fish tacos with homemade salsa and tortillas. Melt in your mouth

perfect. Then I'll mix up some slushy Margaritas, and you can vent all you want about the jerk who dumped you."

"Jerk? Who said anything about—?"

Finn embraced her into another bear hug, kissing her temple. "No need, cuz. It's written all over your excuses. Hurry up, I'm starved."

* * *

It was a huge risk, but after talking in length with his father and gaining insight into the volatile origins of the Bryant wolfpack, Ben knew what he had to do. This plan had to work no matter the cost to his own safety.

In the lower level baggage claim area of SeaTac Airport, Ben watched from behind a post as the werewolf lady shuffled up to the blond security guard a few hundred yards away.

It was common for rookie pack enforcers to be assigned airport security to watch for other were-kind illegally entering their territory. Disguised as a uniformed airport policeman, the young enforcer listened to the woman recite the message Ben had paid her well to say.

The enforcer frowned and whipped glowing blue eyes in his direction. His nostrils flared when catching Ben's wolf scent.

Here we go.

The enforcer spoke into his shoulder radio as he stalked fast towards him. Ben turned and jaunted to the parting exit doors towards the long-term parking garage. The enforcer followed, picking up his pace.

Reaching the garage and out of direct public view, Ben broke into a full run.

That triggered the enforcer who poured on the were-speed. He was very agile and very fast, closing in on Ben as he reached the second, then third echoing level.

No need to check over his shoulder. Ben knew the blond enforcer was right behind him. In thirty more seconds, he should be caught.

Tires squealed up ahead, and an unmarked black van skidded around the corner to a screeching halt.

Good move, ace, he mentally congratulated the boy.

That's when said enforcer tackled him from behind, body-slamming him to the concrete ground.

"Keep down, mongrel," the enforcer ordered, gripping Ben's wrists and zip-tying them behind his back. "You're under arrest for illegal trespassing."

Ben pretended to struggle, but a second enforcer braced him back down with a boot to the back of his neck.

"Let me go," he growled in his Irish brogue. "You've made a huge mistake, both of you!"

"Sure, we have," the blond enforcer said. "You can straighten it all out back at the basefront."

Both enforcers roughly hauled Ben to his feet, then shoved him into the back of the van. The driver climbed back upfront, while the young enforcer sat on the metal bench opposite Ben's to keep guard.

It would be him that Ben would have to work with to gain information then. Perfect. He was new and inexperienced and would be easy to manipulate.

"I'm tellin' ya, boyo," Ben said, broadening his Irish accent, "you've made a dangerous mistake. Release me now, or you and your pack will face dire consequences!"

Ben narrowed his glowing green eyes and lengthened his canines, rumbling a lethal growl. The young enforcer gave him a hooded look, unintimidated.

"My pack will destroy yours for this insult," Ben snarled.

"Your pack?" The enforcer gripped Ben's bare left forearm and turned it upwards. "Try again, rogue."

"Fine. But you'll suffer all the same."

"Sure, we will. Sit back and be quiet."

Ben waited a few calculated beats, then questioned, “Where are you takin’ me? I’ve a right to know that much.”

“You’ll see soon enough. Now, stop talking before I tape your mouth shut.”

Ben complied, grumbling a couple of black curses for effect. He couldn’t appear too happy with this situation, or the whole plan would backfire.

Five minutes. Then eight.

That should do it.

Noting the enforcer’s airport identification, Ben sniffed dryly, giving the enforcer a long assessing look. “Lance Martin, is it? Private in your pack military then?”

“Corporeal.”

“Ah, greatest apologies. But I wonder why such an important man as yourself is pullin’ menial airport screening duty? Hmm. Got yourself into a spot of trouble with the boss, did ya? Slept with your C.O.’s wife? Daughter?”

“Shut up, mongrel,” the enforcer growled at him. “It’s an honor to serve in any capacity in the Bryant military.”

“Honor, is it?” Ben remarked doubtfully.

“Yes! That way I can catch stinking illegals like you and throw your asses back out of our territory.”

A talker then. One who couldn’t resist a verbal sparring match. Perfect.

“Perhaps you have a strong point, Corporeal Martin. My apologies for any insult to your very important position.”

The young enforcer wasn’t mollified by this lefthanded compliment. Ben noted that he continued to press a tense hand to his sidearm, too, taking no chances.

Ben leaned forward, sizing up the enforcer. “You know, I’ve been sitting here lookin’ at you and wonderin’ something.”

He paused for more effect. A more experienced enforcer would have ignored the opening. He knew this one wouldn't though.

"Wondering what?" the man irritably questioned.

Ben kept his smile in check. "Ah, it's just that I truly believe we have met before somewhere, my good man."

The young man snorted and turned away.

"Oh, but I'm certain we have," Ben insisted. "Have you ever been to Dublin before? Derby, perhaps?"

"No. Now shut the hell up, or this is going to be a very rough ride for you!"

"Will do. Just one more question, Corporeal Martin, if I might?"

The enforcer glared at Ben, then finally gave his chin a jut to go ahead.

"We are we headed? Ah come on, now. It's not as if I can escape your van trussed up like a turkey, can I?"

The man considered a long minute, then answered, "The basefront at Timber Ridge. So don't get any foolish ideas about trying anything. That place is more secured than the White House in D.C."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Ben said.

"Now keep your muzzle shut until we get there."

Ben silenced as ordered, then sat back, covering a hidden smile.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 11

A meaty fist crashed into Ben's jaw, making him see stars. Reeling a few painful seconds, he gave his head a hard shake, then spit sour globs of blood and saliva onto the concrete floor of the interrogation room.

"Does that jog your memory now, mongrel?" the burly sergeant growled.

Ben glared up at the enforcer with dark glowing green eyes. He was bound hand and foot to a metal chair bolted to the floor, while the man pummeled him with cheap shots. It was overkill that two other enforcers stood behind him to finish the job when the first one was winded.

He expected the rough questioning, of course. But these sadistic gorillas were enjoying their task a little too much. This was one of the rare times he wished he could disclose his true identity just to watch the three bastards drop to their knees and beg his forgiveness.

Still, his true mission was too important. He just hoped to keep most of his teeth in the process.

"Perhaps I just caught the wrong flight, is all," Ben said. "If you'll just take me back to the airport—"

"Perhaps I'll beat the living shit out of you, dog. One last time—where do come from, and why are you here in Bryant territory?"

Ben spat another mouthful of blood onto the floor, then gave the man a wicked, bloody grin.

"Weel now," he said, broadening his accent. "Me dear muther assures me that I came straight from her blessed womb, and I'm here in Washington State to take in a little of the Lavender Festival. I heard their homemade soaps and lotions are divine."

The iron crack on his jaw nearly split it in two and made Ben see double for several blurry seconds.

“Okay, fine,” he huffed, giving his head another hard shake to clear his vision. “It won’t please you to know it, but I’ll tell you what you want.”

“Speak, dog.”

Ben swallowed hard, then let out a breath and hung his head. “I’ve just come from Dublin. You can check the flight manifest.”

“We have. Why are you here?”

Ben frowned up at the sergeant. “I’ve vowed on pain of death not to tell anyone but your High Alpha and his Council.”

“Tell me now or—”

“Tell Jake Bryant that I must speak with him immediately,” Ben continued. “It’s about the future wellbeing of this pack. Tell him that the message comes straight from the *Firestone* herself.”

* * *

Enforcers gripped both of Ben’s biceps as they roughly marched him down the basement corridor to the freight elevator. They took it up three stories. Then he was marched through more hallways, passing office after office until reaching the largest one at the end of the building.

Inside stood Neil Bryant, the pack’s Prime Enforcer, along with five other men hovering together along the rear window. But it was the suited man with dark blond hair and steely cobalt eyes honing in on him that made Ben reflexively straighten.

“Leave us,” Jake Bryant ordered his guards.

Snapping a salute, they exited and closed the doors behind them.

Neil Bryant came up to Ben and cut his ties. Freed, Ben rubbed his sore wrists and gave the man a nod of thanks.

“I am Jake Bryant, the High Alpha of the Bryant wolfpack,” the man stated.

Yes, you are.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, I’m sure,” Ben said.

“You have a message for me.”

“I do. Along with your Council.”

“From whom?”

No assumptions or polite small talk then. Fair enough.

“The rightful head of your wolfpack,” Ben said.

Confused silence for five seconds. Then low growling, glowing eyes and lengthening canines as the insulting remark registered through the group.

“I am the High Alpha of this pack,” Bryant ground out.

Ben lifted a shoulder. “Of this territorial group, perhaps. But I come on behalf of the true pack in authority over yours—the Callaghan pack.”

Shocked silence.

The Bryant brothers frowned at each other.

The Council members closed ranks and whispered amongst themselves in decibels too low for even his supercharged wolf hearing to pick up.

“Impossible,” Jake Bryant said, narrowing his eyes. “The Callaghan pack disbanded decades ago.”

“Not entirely,” Ben countered. “You yourself know this, sar.”

“He’s lying,” Neil Bryant muttered to his brother. “He’s a rogue, much less part of a pack that no longer exists.”

“Because I have no allegiance symbol on my arm? The Callaghan remnant wishes to remain anonymous to the world for reasons you yourself know, Mr. Bryant,” he said, addressing Jake. “We cannot call public attention to ourselves even now. The implications would be catastrophic. Sar.”

The Council members whispered to each other, reasoning this out. The Prime Enforcer grunted his doubt. It was Jake Bryant himself who scrutinized Ben harder, half convinced.

“Who is the head of your alleged ghost pack?” Jake questioned.

“A complicated question, to be sure,” Ben answered. “There’s a small band of us living in California run by the granddaughter of Quinn Callaghan himself—Roselyn Callaghan. I believe your younger brother, Luke, can verify that for you.”

“You’re from Dublin, you say?”

Ben gave a nod. “Close to, yes. In Drogheda, near the old castle ruins.”

“There is no wolfpack in Ireland. Anywhere.”

“None that wish to be acknowledged, no. But Brenna Callaghan herself still lives there with her vampire husband, Davin Laith, in County Clare. It is she whom I speak on behalf of.”

More silence and cautious looks.

“Impossible,” Jake said. “She’s dead.”

“Sorry to disabuse your good opinion, sar, but she is alive and well.”

“Prove it.”

Ben grunted. “Well, I’m no half-mage as she and cannot conjure her here with the twirl of a fairy wand. But I can give you a message that should put your mind at ease as to her living status.”

“Which is?”

Here was his one chance to find out whether he should take the next step in his plan to uncover the truth of the Bryant pack origins. Ben only hoped he could pull it off without giving his own identity away. All he could do was trust his father’s advice that it would work.

And prepare to make an emergency phone call to him, if it didn’t.

“The original *Firestone* was allegedly hand delivered to your son-in-law, Philip Heath, by Davin Laith who knew of

Heath's hidden lair. What Laith didn't know at the time was that the *Firestone's* power was previously sent into Brenna herself first. A power she still holds to this day. Brenna Callaghan admitted this to you the day you helped her escape Ireland."

A few snorts of disbelief echoed throughout the room. But Jake's cobalt eyes never left Ben's. He knew the truth of what was just shared, that Brenna Callaghan herself was now the seer stone that could predict the future.

"Go on then," Jake prodded. "She has something to say about the Bryant pack?"

Ben gave a nod. "She says it is in peril. You must find the true heir to the crown immediately, or it will be destroyed."

"Common knowledge."

"I have more," Ben added. "The pack will only be saved when you find out what took place the night your youngest child was born. But be wary. Everything is not as it seems. Those claiming true loyalty are false friends. That is all."

Frowns all around.

The Bryant sons both went rigid, lifting their chins. Two Council members startled and looked at other in question. Another one whispered to his neighbor.

Just as his father predicted.

* * *

"You'll excuse any harsh treatment inflicted upon you," the High Alpha said.

Ben rubbed his bruised, swollen jaw. "Painfully forgiven."

"You'll also forgive me for not completely trusting anything you said," he added.

"That is your choice, sar. I am merely a messenger."

"And that you cannot remain in our territory."

"Understood."

Jake Bryant gave a tight nod. "I'll have a driver take you back to SeaTac and assist you in boarding the next flight back to Dublin. We will, of course, absorb all costs."

"Not necessary, but appreciated," Ben said. "I suppose our business is concluded then, yeah?"

"Have a good trip home, Mr. Gallagher. Give my thanks and regards to your High Alpha."

With that, Jake Bryant stalked out, flanked by his uneasy Council. Ben noticed that both members who reacted strongest to his cryptic message gave him a second glance over their shoulders before following the other three. He needed to find out who they were to verify his suspicions.

"Ready, Mr. Gallagher?"

Ben's focused attention pulled to the dark Prime Enforcer who looked so much like the former High Alpha, Rob Bryant, that it startled him slightly. There was no doubt their familial link.

"Lead the way, sar."

Down another hallway and elevator, they stopped outside the main entrance of the military administrative building where another young enforcer stood at attention beside a Jeep.

"Private Morrison here will take you back to the airport," Neil Bryant said. "He will purchase your ticket back to Dublin and watch as you board the plane. I suggest you make no attempt at delays or side trips. Our people are everywhere."

"I'm anxious to return home, Prime Enforcer. You needn't worry."

With a tight nod, Neil Bryant stalked back inside the building. The young private opened the passenger's door, and Ben took his cue to climb in.

They drove through the beautifully modern, upscale community, making Ben want to whistle in appreciation. When they passed by the Great Lodge itself in all of its ski lodge grandeur, his jaw dropped.

So this is where you grew up, Ben thought, picturing Mariah once again.

But not born to.

And that was another reason he needed to continue with his search for the truth of that fateful night.

“Been on the job long, my good fellow?” Ben asked the young enforcer as they drove out of the wondrous community proper and onto one of the rural wooded roads.

“Long enough,” the private said. “So don’t try anything.”

Ben’s brows hiked. “And why would I be doing that?”

“They say you’re a spy.”

“Well, *they* are wrong as usual. If I was, would your superiors be letting me go so easily of my own volition?”

The enforcer’s brows drew together, glancing warily at him. “I guess...”

“Nor am I bound and gagged. If you’ve noticed.”

“Okay, well, just don’t try to escape. I’m warning you.”

“I have been so forewarned,” Ben said, touching his forehead in acknowledgement.

“Good.”

Ben settled back into his seat, sighing as he gazed out at the lush forest surrounding them.

“No, sar,” he continued, lacing his fingers behind his head. “I myself will be as happy as a crow eating corn to return home to the Emerald Isle and my own gracious people. I was merely sent here to deliver an official message by my own Alpha, which I’ve done.”

“Oh?”

“Yessir. But I cannot divulge the contents, you understand,” he added, raising a forefinger. “Confidential and all that.”

“No, of course, not.”

“Very important. Could’ve even been the destruction of...Well, never you mind. All should be well now. I do hope.”

The young private gave Ben a nervous side-glance.

Ben let out a long breath, gazing out to the landscape racing alongside of them. He could feel the nervous curiosity burning from the rookie enforcer.

One more minute to properly marinate, then...

“Yessir, it would do no good to tell you, much as I’d like to. Although in my humble opinion, every citizen in your pack should know so you can all be on alert when the man rumored...Well, I can’t really say, of course. I will be only too happy to escape this territory in time.”

Another beat.

“In time for what?” the private asked.

“For everyone to get out...” Ben shook his head, adding, “No, I’m unable to share it. Your Alpha made me swear to keep quiet. Never you mind. I’m certain you will all be perfectly fine before the man has a chance to...well...”

“So there is a spy.”

“I wouldn’t classify him as that, no. Terrorist would be a better description, in my opinion.” Ben’s brows drew together, adding, “I cannot officially say, of course. I’m very certain the man will be caught before it happens. Your leaders are aware now, that’s the important thing. They’ll make certain to take care of everyone. Not just themselves.”

“Hmm.”

Ben darkened his look, then leaned over to say confidentially, “Just a word to the wise, boyo. Keep your eyes open for any...Crickey, there he is!”

“Who?” the private gasped.

“The terrorist I came to warn your people about!” Ben shouted, pointing to the woods. “Stop the car! He’s heading for the woods!”

“No, I can’t—!”

“Stop now, you pup!” Ben yelled, gripping the door handle. “Before he gets away and all will be lost! Quick, he’s making for the trees!”

The Jeep skidded to a stop. Both of them jumped out, the young enforcer with sidearm drawn following Ben into the woods at lightning speed.

Suddenly Ben halted and turned to face the flustered enforcer.

“Where is he?” the young man asked, checking all around. “Did we lose him?”

“We did,” Ben said, huffing hard. “Greatest apologies, my good man. And I do hope that you don’t get into too much trouble with your C.O. later.”

“Trouble?”

With lightning strike speed, Ben kicked the gun out of the private’s hand, then picked up a fallen branch and slammed it into his skull, knocking him unconscious. Pulling the zip-ties he sneaked from the glove compartment a few minutes earlier, he bound the boy’s wrists and ankles.

“Sorry, kid,” he said down to the unconscious private in his normal western accent. “I’m sure they’ll look for you when you don’t show up for check-in tonight. Have a nice sleep until then.”

Ben jogged back through the woods towards the road, then drove the Jeep off the side of the road out of direct sight.

Then he took off at were-speed back towards town.

* * *

Mariah laid back in the lounge chair and sipped her lemon mint iced tea as seagulls squawked and circled overhead.

She gazed at the pool, rock hewn waterfall and tropical garden designed like some island escape. A lazy, peaceful scene. She should be rested, happy, contented. But after two

weeks of shopping, swimming, beachcombing, nightclubbing, even binging television, movies and novels, she was utterly bored out of her skull.

What was wrong with her?

It had all been a nice distraction at first. Now, she just felt stuck. Even gloomy.

“Is this seat taken?”

Mariah juggled off her sunglasses and sat up in shock as her sister Avril dressed in shorts and tank top draped a beach towel on the adjacent lounge chair.

“What are *you* doing here?” she accused. “No, don’t tell me. That traitorous cousin of ours called to tell on me.”

“Yes, he called me,” Avil said, swirling her long platinum hair up into a bun off her neck. She sighed and laid back, slipping on her own sunglasses. “He said that he can’t get your sorry ass off his sofa, and that I should come and collect you.”

“You can tell him to go jump in the ocean and drown.”

“Tell him yourself,” Avril said, lifting her face up to the blazing sun. “I’m not your messenger.”

“Apparently you’re my guardian, or you wouldn’t be here,” Mariah shot back. “Don’t you have a wolfpack to run in Virginia?”

“Drew’s doing fine without me for the time being,” her sister said. “He’s going over the transfer of Royal Alpha power coming up next month. It’s better if I stay out of everyone’s snarling way. Well, better for me anyhow.”

Mariah narrowed her eyes at her sister. “I’m not going home. If Finn is tired of me staying here, then I’ll just go somewhere else that’s not Timber Ridge.”

Avril poured herself a glass from the filled pitcher on the table between them. “Ah, perfect,” she hummed after a sip.

“I mean it.”

“I’m sure you do,” her sister said. “Far be it from me to tell you where to go. Not that I don’t have a few suggestions.”

“Ha, ha.”

They sat in silence for over five tense minutes before Mariah couldn’t stand the unspoken accusation any longer.

“Finn just thinks I’m sulking over this guy I met in Ireland,” she admitted. “I’m not.”

“Hmm. He mentioned something about that,” Avril said, not turning her face from the warm sun rays.

More silence.

Her sister was baiting her, Mariah knew. Avril was a world class chess player who knew just when to make the correct and most effective moves.

“Okay, so Ben dumped me back there,” Mariah admitted. “It stung for a bit, but I’m over it, over him. He’s not even a blip on my radar.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” Mariah insisted.

Avril pressed the frosty glass to her forehead. “God, it’s hot here. Let’s go for a swim later.”

“Been there, done that. And don’t change the subject. Why are you here, Avril?”

Her sister took a sip of tea, set the glass down, then sat up and faced Mariah directly, preparing for battle.

“Maybe the real question is, why are *you* here?” she questioned. “Running away from the social or political pressures at home is one thing, but you’re running away from some charismatic man who dared reject you, plain and simple. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

Mariah glared daggers at Avril. Her sister was dangerously close to a forbidden, sensitive area.

“Fine. The guy may have slightly charmed me, then left. He was a hound, had his fun, then left me alone in a country not my own to fend for myself. End of story. End of him. Good riddance to bad rubbish, as Mom always says.”

“Has he called you to explain why he had to leave so suddenly?” Avril asked.

“No.”

“Did you think to call him and ask?”

Mariah pursed her lips, feeling her cheeks heat, and not from the sun. “Actually, I did call him. Last week.”

“And?”

“His number was disconnected. A definite shutdown answer, if there ever was one.”

Avril shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Tell me about him.”

“About Ben?”

“No, the Easter Bunny, num-nuts. Yes, about your Ben. What was he like?”

Mariah narrowed her eyes at her sister. “There’s nothing to tell. Forgot about the jerk the moment I stepped off the plane two weeks ago.”

“Uh huh. Pull the other leg now. It’s shorter.”

Mariah turned away from her sister’s scrutiny. Avril was much too observant for her own good.

“Since you’re so interested, Ben Gallagher was just another arrogant, stubborn and self-centered rogue, nothing more,” she ground out. “And he was way too opinionated and self-important.”

“And using you for your money.”

Mariah frowned. “No, not that. I mean, he didn’t need to. Ben’s actually very rich in his own right.”

“But you were bored with him,” Avril posed.

“No, actually, he was a lot of fun to be with,” Mariah admitted. “He has a lot of friends in Ireland, and he always took me...”

“Ah, so there wasn’t any chemistry between you,” Avril suggested at her pause.

Mariah hiked her brows. “To be truthful, there was a lot of chemistry. I practically threw myself after his sexy butt even. Several times. But he has this infuriating stubborn honorable streak that didn’t want to take advantage of me. Can you imagine that?”

“I can, actually. Drew was like that with me. At first. Now he can’t keep his hands to himself. I keep telling him that it’s not dignified for a High Alpha to swive his wife in a kitchen pantry when the staff aren’t looking.”

Mariah chuckled at the image. “I’ll bet.” She sighed adding, “Still, Ben may be sexy and funny and smart and exciting to be with, but he is and always will be nothing more than a reckless rogue and lifetime loner, living only for himself.”

“Sounds perfect for you,” Avril snorted.

Mariah glared at her sister. “Very funny. In any case, things never would’ve worked out between us. Our lives are polar opposites. We’re as different as the sun and moon. I’m a princess, and he’s a rogue.”

“Don’t be such a spoiled diva,” her sister remarked. “What if it were reversed? What if somehow you were just some average she-wolf, and he was a royal wolf prince?”

Mariah rolled her eyes at the ridiculous idea.

“I think the real question is, sis, how do you really feel about Ben Gallagher?” Avril questioned.

Mariah frowned at the dripping iced tea glass in her hand. In truth, after two weeks of fuming about the man, all of her furious steam had evaporated.

In hindsight, Ben had been a decent man. Honest and helpful and friendly and honorable in his own way. There was

no real reason for her to be injured by his need to leave the country due to some family emergency he didn't share with her. After all, she had planned to do the same thing to him with no good reason at all.

Maybe you do care about him, the reason you're so hurt by his abandonment.

"Do you love him?" Avril asked quietly.

"No! God, no. What a ridiculous idea."

"Hmm."

"I don't," Mariah insisted. "I don't even know what love truly is. How could anyone? I'm beginning to believe that this one true mate magic is all a bunch of malarky."

Avril slid her sunglasses down her nose to look at Mariah straight on, saying, "I know that Drew is my true mate. I didn't at first, of course, but later when I let down the guarded wall around my heart.

"You know, Drew was just some rebel rogue when we first met, too. Only later did I learn that he was actually the Direct Heir of his wolfpack. But I knew that I truly loved the man when I realized that neither position made any difference to me. I loved and appreciated and wanted Drew himself, no matter what he was or where he came from."

"You're lucky then," Mariah admitted tiredly.

"You'll find it, too, sis," Avril assured her. "Maybe not this Ben Gallagher, but someone. In order to find him though, you need to let down your own heart guard and open yourself up to risking the possibility for something more. It's not an easy feat, but very worthwhile. Love always is."

"I suppose."

"Now, about Mom and Dad," Avril added.

"Don't start, Avi."

"What's really keeping you from going back home?" she questioned.

Mariah let go of a long breath, saying, “Because it’s not my home. Never was, not really.”

“Bull hockey. You know in your heart that you’re the true daughter of Jake and Nicole Bryant, even if you have different genetics. No, don’t try to say otherwise. You’re my sister, and I know you too well.”

“Well...”

“Mariah, you’re going to be twenty-four next week. It’s time for you to grow up and acknowledge what you know in your heart to be true. And stop being a martyr. That’s so common.”

Avril was right. Mariah knew that Jake and Nicole Bryant were her real parents, by heart, if not by blood. It was time to come off the self-pity wagon and admit the truth. They loved her, and she loved them. Nothing could or would ever change that.

“You want to know the real reason I’m staying away from Timber Ridge right now?” Mariah remarked. “Because I just can’t stand being there anymore.”

“Why is that?”

“All the events and formalities and pomp and rituals. God, it’s infuriating! Avril, I’m suffocating with all the protection details and scrutiny by the public and leadership. I can’t stand all the looks and whispers and...”

“And rejection by those who you’ve tried all of your life to impress?” her sister added for her.

Mariah flushed. “Yes, if you want to know the truth of it. Mostly I hate the lack of privacy and personal freedom. Avril, I’m just sick of it all. I have been for years. I’ve only now just come to realize it.”

“You’re actually relieved not to be chained with the Direct Heir position now, is that it?” Avril posed.

Mariah blinked hard at her sister’s incredible insight. “I am. I am relieved. I never expected or ever wanted the job to begin with. I just...want to be free from it all. I want to be

free to live life on my own terms. Go where I want. Do what I want. I had a taste of that in Ireland, and now I know that it suits me perfectly.”

“Have you expressed all of this to Mom and Dad?” her sister asked.

Mariah was about to respond, then realize she never had talked to either of her parents about her true desire to live her life apart from the rigors of royalty.

Maybe that’s why she took up with a wild rogue like Ben so quickly. Inwardly, that’s what she had always wanted.

Now it was time to tell this to her parents. In person.

“Avril? I need to go home.”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 12

Dropping her packed bag on the wood planked floor, Mariah gazed around the lakeside fishing cabin belonging to her Uncle Neil.

It had been a happy, tearful reunion when she ran into the arms of her parents inside the Great Lodge. For the first time since this birth debacle began, Mariah felt truly at home again. She may have only been adopted into the Bryant family, but now she understood that it didn't diminish its power and importance and love.

Still, it had taken only three nights for Mariah to understand that she had more to discover about herself outside the safety of her home. It was time to grow up and strike out on her own.

It was luck that her uncle wasn't using his fishing cabin on Aurora Lake. It would be her temporary refuge until she decided her next step forward.

There was a knock on the door.

Mariah groaned, not wanting to be unsociable, but not really wanting company either. She would never find the solitude she needed to get her head and life together, if she was bombarded with people seeking her out at every turn.

Another knock.

"Hey, brat," was called from the other side. "I know you're in there. I can hear you breathing from out here. You'd better open up, she-wolf, or I'll huff and puff and blow this door to smithereens."

A smile twisted her lips, and Mariah walked over to open it. Liam stood on the rickety porch with wine bottle in hand.

"Huff and puff, huh?" she remarked.

"Mom always says I'm a big blowhard," he said hugging her, then walking inside without invitation. "She also sends you her love and your favorite cabernet."

“Bless her to heaven and back. I’ll get some glasses.”

Liam looked around the rustic cabin with souring expression. “Primitive, but... Well, just primitive. And not too tidy. Wouldn’t your purpose in escaping the royal clan be better served at my clean, modern townhouse?”

“You’re such a city snob,” she said, opening the wine bottle with a pop. “And no, my purpose for getting away from the bustle of High Alpha life isn’t creature comforts, but solitude. Which you’re intruding upon, by the way.”

“Sue me. Besides, we have to christen your new rebellious lifestyle,” Liam said, taking the filled wine glass from her as he slid onto the bar stool. “Of which I couldn’t be prouder.”

“As expected,” Mariah said, clinking her glass with his. “Here’s to new rebellious ways.”

“I’ll drink to that,” he said, then swirled, scented and sipped. “So what do you plan to do, now that you’ve officially separated from the family? I know, I know. Not a separation, just a temporary sabbatical.”

She sipped her wine. “Not much. Just lay back and figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

“That won’t last long. You’ve never been one to sit around and contemplate your navel. Don’t expect me to make a habit of leaving town to visit you here in the sticks either.”

“Your loss. So tell me the latest scandals,” she prompted to change the subject of her current hermit abode. “Did you ever hear from Amanda again after she dumped you?”

“Hey, now, it was a mutual parting. Don’t worry, she recovered nicely. I saw her two days later riding away in some guy’s Jag looking as gleeful as a glowworm. I think it was Keith Sorranto, I can’t be sure. Poor guy. He won’t know what hit him, once that barracuda sinks her ambitious teeth into his bank account.”

For the next hour, they drank and caught up. The bottle was emptied by the time all news was shared, and they moved to the living area and couch.

“You never did say what happened after that Irish rogue of yours dumped you—Barney, was it?”

Mariah grimaced, sniffed dryly. Just when she was beginning to feel really good, Liam had to go and bring up that sore subject again.

“Ben,” she muttered. “And no, I didn’t.”

Liam studied her. “Touchy subject?”

“Not touchy,” she said. “Just nothing to share. We met, we played, he left Ireland, then so did I. End of story.”

“Just a vacay fling then?”

“Something like that,” she said. “It meant nothing and came to nothing. Just someone to pass the time with there. Found another cabana boy down in San Diego. He was half-Coyote, one of Finn’s friends. Very steamy, but as empty headed as an oil can.”

“He made absolutely no impression on you in the least then? The Irish rogue, not the Coyote.”

Mariah lifted a shoulder. “Well, he did help me see the futility in continuing my useless search for my real birthparents.”

“Which also came to nothing, I take it.”

“Dead end,” she said. “None of it matters anymore. Jake and Nicole Bryant are my real parents, even if we don’t share a bloodline. If my mad search showed me that, then I’m grateful. Although I do wonder whatever happened to my parents’ birthchild.”

“On this, I think your Irish mongrel was correct,” Liam said. “It’s likely that the poor thing was stillborn. And if your own birthmother didn’t make it out of her own delivery alive, some misguided, but well-meaning hospital staffer probably replaced the Bryant’s infant with you to help everyone out.”

“You think my birthmother died in childbirth?”

That was a disturbing thought.

“Perhaps,” Liam remarked. “It would be a very kind and natural accommodation for both living child and parents. Still, it’s all water under the bridge now, don’t you think? Everything turned out for the best, and you said yourself that you’re grateful the Bryants raised you.”

True. But it would still be nice to know what really happened that night she was born.

Of course, there was no stopping her from researching on her own. Ben had provided her with a solid lead on the Collins to follow up on. It would be something to do while she was there in social hibernation.

“I suggested this theory to my dad last week,” Liam added. “He told me it was ridiculous and to drop the whole thing before everthing got out of hand.”

“Before what got out of hand?” Mariah asked, frowning.

Liam grimaced. “Oops, probably shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Okay, now you have no choice but to tell me.”

“Right. Well, there’s been more open disagreement with the Council on how the pack will continue to exist without a Direct Heir. They won’t take Dad or Uncle Sean’s recommendation to install you, regardless of your bloodlines. So that opens the possibility of discontinuing the traditional monarchy altogether.”

“You mean general elections?”

“Not that far, yet,” Liam said. “But some form of appointed pack leadership in lieu of genetic lineage to the original High Alpha. Which won’t go very far anyhow, since no one can’t come up a reasonable method for appointment selection. The pack would have a revolt of at least half of its citizens.”

Mariah lounged back on the couch, considering the ramifications of what Liam was suggesting.

If the Council got the other pack leaders on their side, then her father could easily be ousted from his High Alpha

position now, Direct Heir or none. There were always dissenters who would never follow anyone who wasn't a Bryant blood relative though. And visa-versa.

This could mean the split and dissolution of the entire pack. Just as her great-grandfather Rufus predicted.

This was bad. Very bad.

Unless she could somehow locate the true Bryant heir herself.

* * *

Eleven o'clock. Perfect. The hospital shift change would have taken place hours ago, and the night staff should be well settled into their quiet rounds and routines.

Most importantly, all of the administrative employees would be home snug in their beds, including the clerks responsible for the basement records.

Mariah hated the idea of illegally breaking into the hospital archives, but after the last few days of research, she had no doubt someone inside the pack was a traitor trying to instigate the fall of her father's position. Going through normal authority channels to get the information needed to prove this would only tip them off though, so this operation had to be covert.

After braiding her hair back, Mariah donned a black hoodie, leggings and shoes. Every person living inside Timber Ridge was a werewolf with natural night vision to various degrees and could easily spot her in the dark, of course. But there was no sense in calling added attention to herself.

Hiking through the misty woods towards town, she almost chickened out. She had to remind herself that she might be saving several people and family members by learning the truth. She might even be saving the pack itself from self-destruction.

Reaching the hospital, once again she considered backing out. It was risky and illegal and she could get a few people indirectly involved into serious trouble if discovered. In the end, Mariah checked around, then stealthily sneaked around

the five-story building to a rear door marked with “Authorized Personnel Only.”

She pulled on the metal door, confirming that it was locked. Dipping into her pocket, she pulled out an electronic identification badge with the photo and name of Dr. Alexia Bryant.

Mariah felt guilty over the deception of spontaneously dropping in to visit her aunt and uncle that evening. Using the excuse of a restroom break, she sneaked into her aunt’s office, then snagged the I.D. badge off the desktop. Tomorrow, she planned to pay them another visit to return the badge with no one the wiser. Hopefully.

Checking around again, Mariah pressed the electronic badge against the flat security panel. The door lock buzzed and clicked, and she quickly opened it and slipped inside.

The stairwell was directly to the left, and she took it down one floor to the basement. Another press of the I.D. badge on the electronic panel, and the door lock clicked open.

The corridor was dim with overhead security lights. From previous conversations, Mariah knew generally where the archived records were located and stored. It was still going to take some exploring to find it though.

Down a few bleak hallways searching room after room, she finally came across the rear freight elevator next to the hospital laundry rooms and one door labeled *Storage/Records*.

“Here we go,” she whispered, then pressed the electronic badge against the wall security panel.

The door clicked unlocked, then closed and locked behind her, surrounding Mariah in utter darkness. Although she was probably safe enough, she didn’t push her luck by switching on the overhead lights and instead used her own sharp wolf night vision to make her way around in the darkness.

Aisles of floor-to-ceiling racks holding accounting boxes filled the vast room. Her stomach churned at the daunting task of locating the right box with the needed files.

“Like looking for a needle in a needle stack,” she grimly muttered, remembering the phrase she used with Ben.

So where to start?

The first banker box with patient files was dated only last year. So were all the others on that particular shelf, the months in descending order from top to bottom.

Okay, then. They must archive all physical records annually, which meant the year she needed would be much further and deeper into this large department.

The room was set up like an organized maze. Following the various years up one aisle and down another, Mariah finally came to the last shelf. Unfortunately, the date on the last accounting box listed only ten years back. Which meant that all of the records prior to last decade were probably digitally scanned, then destroyed.

And she had nothing.

“Drat.”

Still, her aunt had somehow pulled the medical files of that time and sent them to Kathleen Clark. That meant she had access to them.

In the rear corner there was a small desk with a dusty, outdated computer. Mariah powered it up. It took a long groaning moment, but finally the hospital’s internal Sharepoint appeared with the prompt to log in.

Another dead end then. If only she had her aunt’s password to login and access the hospital records. That, or somehow hacking into...

Hack?

Ian Townsend!

Her mother’s best friend and brother-in-law was their wolfpack’s top I.T. specialist and a computer super-genius. For fun, her Uncle Ian showed Mariah minor hacking and computer tricks when no one was watching. Not that she was any good at it. Avril was the numbers and coding specialist in

the family. Too bad her sister returned to her own pack back east.

No choice then. She had to call him.

Pulling out her cellphone, she autodialed her uncle.

“Townsend,” he answered groggily. “This better be important.”

“I woke you,” she remarked, wincing. “I’m so sorry, Uncle Ian. But it is important.”

“Mariah?” Ian cleared his throat. “No, don’t worry about it, hon. What’s up? Wait, is something the matter? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Well, sort of. I need your help with something. Computer related.”

That perked him up.

“Oh! Okay. No, wait a minute. Let me go into the next room. I don’t want to wake your aunt.”

Mariah heard him slip out of bed, the footfalls of his long stride, then the opening and closing of doors.

“Okay, I’m in my office now,” he said quietly. “What’s your question? Having trouble with your laptop again?”

Mariah winced. “Not exactly. But if I ask you something, will you promise not to ask why?”

“Why not?”

“And to keep what I’m about to ask you to yourself?” she added.

“Again, why?” he asked suspiciously.

“Because it’s, well, I need you to tell me how to hack into a secured system.”

There was a beat of silence before he said, “Mari, you’re not doing something illegal, are you? Because if you are—”

“Not illegal. Per se. Just...I need you to trust me.”

“Mariah Jewel Bryant, you’d better tell me what the hell you’ve gotten yourself into before I call your parents this very minute.”

She let out a long breath. She knew it wasn’t going to be easy gaining her uncle’s trust and compliance, darn his pure scruples. But he also understood the dangerous situation the pack was in now because of her newly discovered non-royal heritage. He might be sympathetic.

“I need to hack into the Timber Ridge Hospital’s system in order to pull up archived records. Mine and Mom’s.”

She briefed him on her own suspicions regarding her birth switch and the possible political conspiracy surrounding it.

“I need to find out if there are any inconsistencies in the records that night,” she concluded. “Something to prove my theory.”

“Didn’t Alexia already check those records out?” he asked.

“Yes, but I don’t know how deeply she looked,” Mariah explained. “Or thought to look. Or where. You know that I’m better at figuring out puzzles than most people, including her. You tell me that all the time. Please, Uncle Ian. Will you help me out?”

He rumbled a deep growl, but Mariah could sense his reluctant compliance on the horizon.

“You don’t need to hack into the hospital’s system,” he grumbled. “I’m the head of all our companies’ servers. I’ll give you my master authorization codes.”

“Oh, Uncle Ian, thank you! You won’t regret it, I promise.”

“I’m sure I will. And this is a one-time shot, young lady,” he warned. “Get what you need, then get the hell out of the system. And just in case you’re tempted to try it again later, I’m changing my passcodes in exactly one hour. You have until that time to find what you need, then I’m shutting you down myself.”

“Thank you so much again,” she said, then gave him a phone kiss. “You are the best uncle ever.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just don’t get caught, or your father and other uncles will have my tail in a very painful sling.”

“I will, I promise.”

Mariah jotted down the links, username and passcodes she would need, then hung up and typed in the special web address needed. Connection made and access granted, she then surfed to the hospital’s records, scrolling and clicking until she at last located Nicole Bryant’s hospital admission almost twenty-four years ago.

There it was—her mother’s emergency caesarian procedure, delivery performed by Richard Collins, M.D., but signed and initialed by another physician.

Odd. Why would any doctor sign off on another physician’s surgery?

More importantly, why didn’t anyone question this?

Mariah read the brief, clinical notes with terms only her aunt would understand. There were lists of meds and machines and the like, but nothing suspicious.

Newborn girl delivered, no complications with her health.

God, that would be me.

Another in-house physician had taken over her mother’s case, examining and caring for both mother and newborn, signed the birth certificate, then discharged both three days later.

Everything was in perfect order. And the only mention of Richard Collins was the C-section itself.

Mariah scrolled through all the records for that day, but didn’t find any other procedures Collins performed. One the day before. None after.

She pulled a thumb drive from her pocket and copied the records, hoping she could find something later when she returned to the cabin.

As the information slowly downloaded, she sat back and stared at the screen itself. She was missing something. She felt it.

Then there was the obvious million-dollar question.

“How could anyone on the staff not have seen two infants being switched in the nursery?”

Clicking off her mother’s records, Mariah scrolled through the records for any deliveries prior to that time and date who hadn’t already been discharged from the hospital.

Nothing. Just as her aunt had verified previously.

“Then how did I come to be there in the hospital?”

Mariah checked the time. She had ten minutes before her uncle shut her down. No doubt he would make good on his threat, too.

Returning to her own birth record, Mariah read the brief notes again. She frowned at the birth certificate, reading each detail—time, weight, gender...

“So you were a surprise to everyone,” her mother chuckled over the years. *“The technician had misread the ultrasound and told us...”*

“That I was a boy,” Mariah repeated aloud.

It was a familiar funny story, usually told during Mariah’s birthday parties. How they had trusted the inept technician and had the nursery painted blue-green. How the technician and a few other departmental staffers lost their jobs because of the loss of vital records.

Then her parents’ own hard copy of the ultrasound was somehow misplaced at home. Her mother only noticed when she attempted to complete Mariah’s souvenir baby book information two months later and couldn’t find it.

“After Barbara Gregory returned to Ireland.”

Quickly Mariah checked her cellphone—five minutes left.

She exited out of the patient records, then scrolled and clicked into the ultrasound records, reaching back into their own archives.

With two minutes left to go, she at last pulled up the image of Nicole Bryant's seventh-month ultrasound. Not wanting to waste the time interpreting what appeared to be only fuzzy gray static, she downloaded the image onto her thumb drive.

Just as the computer link disconnected.

"Really? You couldn't have given me just another couple of minutes?"

Still, she was grateful for the amount of time her uncle had granted her, no questions asked. Yet.

Mariah pulled the thumb drive out, then switched off the computer and turned to head for the exit. She would ask her aunt to interpret the image tomorrow at breakfast, giving her a logical excuse to visit and covertly return her electronic badge.

Turning down the second aisle, Mariah froze hearing a faint, shuffling sound.

She waited five beats, then heard a whirring sound. She looked up, spotting the security camera in the ceiling corner, its red light on and the lens moving in her direction.

Dang it, her aunt's badge must have activated some kind of security alert to the nightguards.

Did one already decide to come down and check things out? Was that the soft footfall that she thought she heard?

She should have counted on this.

Dumb, rookie mistake.

There had to be other cameras around that would catch her illegal entrance, too.

And exit.

What now?

She could allow herself to be caught in the act, ‘fess up, then face the consequences with her father, uncle and aunt.

Or she could play cat and mouse around the aisles, then make her escape. It wouldn’t be good for the daughter of the High Alpha to be caught breaking-and-entering into hospital archives.

Her heart racing, Mariah pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head. If they hadn’t already captured her image on some camera, no need to give them that advantage now.

Stealthily Mariah crept around one shelf, checked around, then silently stepped to the next shelf. Peering around the corner, she scanned the area, listened hard, then took another silent step.

And was tackled to the ground from behind.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 13

Viciously Mariah fought to get up, but the man's solid body pinned hers to the cold tiled floor.

"Get off me!" she yelled.

"Shh," the man hissed her ear.

"The hell I will! Hel—!"

The man clamped his hand over her mouth.

Mariah lengthened her canine fangs and chomped down on his palm. Blood instantly filled her mouth, instinctively heating her eyes and shivering her body with the primal need to shift into her wolf and attack.

"Calm down," the man hissed through gritted teeth and he held onto her.

Too late. Her body ignited like a fuse and flash-shifted, shredding her clothes. Now in wolf form, she twisted and bit and growled in his arms, but the man held onto her with superhuman strength.

As only another werewolf could.

"Calm down, Mariah, or you'll get us both caught," he ground out.

Her name.

His voice!

His voice in an American accent!

No. Not possible!

Mariah shifted her muzzle around enough to verify her shocked suspicion that it was in fact Ben Gallagher holding onto her.

"Yes, it's me," he whispered. "Now, will you refrain from chewing me up, if I let you go?"

Her glowing eyes narrowed, and she rumbled a lethal growl.

“Okay, fair enough,” he admitted. “I have some explaining to do. Will you at least give me the chance?”

It took a long minute, but Mariah finally gave her muzzle a reluctant nod.

Warily, Ben released his hold around her furry body, and she took a cautious step back. She juttred her muzzle for him to continue.

“Do you want to shift back first?” he asked.

She shook her head, not about to stand naked in front of this jerk, since her own clothes were now in tatters.

Understanding, Ben unzipped his own black jacket and handed it to her. She picked it up with her teeth, then padded around the corner to shift back into human form, donning and zipping it up. Fortunately it was long enough to come down to her bare thighs.

Returning, she noticed Ben’s flushed expression as he subtly gave her an up-down. She felt her body traitorously respond, but she refused to give him the satisfaction that she was affected by him in any way. Especially since he had been playing her all the time they were in Ireland.

“You’re really an American,” she said.

“Yes, and no,” Ben admitted. “I was born in Ireland, and my father is from there. My mother is from Virginia though. Mostly I’m from all over, my family never staying in one place very long.”

She hugged herself tightly. “Did you know who I was from the start?”

“Yes.”

“Did you follow me to Drogheda and trick me into trusting you with that charming Irishman act?”

“Yes. With a caveat.”

“Explain. Fast.”

Ben dragged a hand down his stubbled jaw. “I knew about the issues your pack here is experiencing having no Direct Heir after the discovery of you not being Jake Bryant’s biological child. I wanted to help, that’s all.”

“Why? You’re a rogue with no pack. What’s it to you?”

Ben fixed his green cat-eyed stare with hers for a long moment before saying, “Because ultimately they’re my pack, too.”

It took a few seconds for Mariah to process his words. His straight expression said that he *might* telling the truth.

That, or he was a very good liar.

“You’re a Bryant pack member?” she questioned doubtfully. “Where’s your symbol?”

“I don’t have one, because I’m not an official citizen,” he said. “But I am a Bryant pack member by bloodline.”

“Really?” she snorted.

“Yes,” he insisted. “In fact, Rufus Bryant is my grandfather. My father’s name is Mike Bryant, his firstborn son.”

Mariah’s eyes narrowed. “Impossible. Michael Bryant was killed in in the nineteenth century and had no children.”

“Very possible, and very true. He faked his death and passed the Bryant crown down to his younger brother, Robert, then continued to live in secret. And he did have a son—me.”

Mariah shook her head. “No, that would make you...”

“The rightful Bryant heir, yes. Something I can never claim without risking mine and my mother’s lives.”

“What?”

The entrance door buzzed and clicked open. Ben placed a finger to his lips, drawing her behind him against the storage shelf.

Overhead lights switched on. Ben motioned for her to follow him around the corner, then tucked her against him

around a bearing post out of direct sight.

“Is anyone in here?” was called out.

Silence.

Footfalls walked towards them. Mariah pressed herself into Ben’s broad back to hide herself better.

One step, two, three.

The footfalls stopped, then quickly headed back to the entrance. The overhead lights switched off, and the door closed and locked again with a solid, metallic thud.

Mariah instantly relaxed and let out her held breath.

“Look, I promise to explain everything,” Ben whispered. “You won’t believe it, but I’ll tell you anyhow. But not here. We need to leave before we’re discovered, then neither of us will have a chance to find your father’s true heir.”

Mariah gasped. “Then you believe the birth switch...”

He nodded. “To hide the true heir, yes. Which means the child Nicole Bryant gave birth to must have been a male.”

“I knew it!”

“That also means there was a political coup to stop the crown from being passed to another generation of Bryants,” he added. “Whoever was involved and why they would do this, I don’t know. Nor do I have any proof of my theory.”

“But I might,” Mariah said, then rushed back to rummage through her shredded hoodie for the thumb drive.

* * *

Dressed now in jeans and red blouse, Mariah exited the bedroom to see Ben sitting on the couch, scrolling through her laptop notes. She didn’t want to invite him back to the cabin, but there was nothing for it. She needed to know everything he had discovered regarding the night of her birth.

“Your real name is Ben Bryant then,” she said, sitting next to him.

He arched a brow at her. “Officially, yes.”

“Making you my, what? Uncle? God, that means when we were kissing and..? Ew. Ew.”

He cracked a one-sided smile, correcting, “Second or third cousins technically, and only by adoption. We share no blood, so it would be okay if we had—”

“Yeah, okay,” she cut in, holding her palm up to stop him. “Let’s just get back to what happened when I was born.”

She sat beside him and looked at the laptop screen, seeing the original ultrasounds image from her mother’s records.

“There’s no doubt then that my mother—Nicole Bryant—was carrying a boy.”

Ben pointed to a smudged area of the fuzzy image. “Boy parts.”

She squinted, focusing on it. “How can you tell? They sure didn’t have very great technology back then.”

“Trust me.”

She snorted. “What, were you—a radiologist during another one of your supersecret missions to save the world?”

“Something like that.”

That piqued her interest.

“Really? What happened? Come on, you can’t just drop a cryptic bomb like that and leave it there.”

“I thought you were still mad at me,” he said.

“I am. Furious. This might help make it up to me though, so spill it.”

Ben considered another minute before finally explaining, “Six months ago, my mother got herself into some...trouble. No, I’m not telling you what. Let’s just say that some very powerful people used all their muscle to kidnap and lock her away in a hidden and well guarded medical facility to experiment on.”

“Experiment? Why?”

He shook his head. “Another story. Anyhow, they would’ve been able to recognize my father too easily, but not me. So I took the night to study a few subjects like pathology, forensic science—”

“Wait,” she broke in with raised palm. “You studied them in one night?”

“Yes.”

“One night?”

He arched a brow. “I’m a quick study.”

Mariah blinked hard at him.

“You mean you’re a genius,” she figured out. “You’re actually a frigging certified, bazillion I.Q. super-genius?”

“Yes,” he said, frowning. “It’s an anomaly because of my human-were genetics. That’s my own hypothesis anyhow.”

“Wow. Then why did the evil Dr. Frankensteins wanted to dissect your mother? To see if she could produce more baby geniuses?”

“Maybe one reason, but not the main one,” Ben said. “In any case, to gain entry I needed to pose as a specialized medical professional. So I studied several medical textbooks enough to passed muster and gain access to the facility.

“Once inside, I then studied the facility itself, along with its normal routines. Finally I located my mother, then Dad and I sneaked inside after we had strategically set off their perimeter alarms and rescued her.”

“And?”

“That was all,” Ben said. “We left for Switzerland where my father had people who helped my mother recover from the near-fatal injuries she sustained while at the facility. Then he took her to one of our homes in Brazil.”

“Wow,” Mariah said. “I’m glad she’s okay now.”

“Me, too.”

“You do live a very dangerous life,” she admitted, remembering the Arcan Hunters that had tracked and almost killed them, almost killed *her*. “I still don’t understand why though. What’s so special about you and your mother that everyone wants to hunt you down? None of it makes any sense.”

“You won’t believe me, if I told you,” Ben said.

“Try me.”

He shook his head.

“Look,” Mariah said, “if you and I are going to work together to solve this mystery about my parentage in order to help the pack, I need to know everything about you, too. Fair is fair.”

“This knowledge is too dangerous for you, Mariah. Already you got too close, and it nearly cost you your life.”

Something inside her brain clicked then.

“Is that the real reason you left me alone in your parent’s house that last day?” she questioned.

At his silence, Mariah added, “It is, isn’t it? Those Arcans didn’t just stumble onto a random werewolf back in Ireland. They had tracked you specifically. And not because you’re a werewolf. Because of something about you that you share with your human mother.”

Ben still kept silent.

Mariah studied his tense expression and body language. She was right then. And the man was not leaving this cabin until he told her everything.

She folded her arms, saying, “Tell me, wolfman. Or I go to my father right now and tell him all about your secret limb on our Bryant family tree. Then he’ll personally pursue you like a bloodhound after a bunny to force you to accept the Direct Heir position.”

Ben narrowed his green triangle eyes at her. “Blackmail, is it?”

“With a cherry on top.”

A dark growl rumbled in his throat. Mariah sliced a thin smile, knowing she had him cold.

“If I tell you,” he said, “you have to let me finish. No matter how unbelievable it sounds at first.”

“What could be so—?”

“I need your word, Mariah.”

She rolled her eyes, but Ben wasn’t going to budge on this item.

“Fine, alright,” she said, with an annoyed wave. “I promise. Lips sealed, locked, deadbolted.”

Ben closed the laptop lid, then turned to face her directly. It still took him another long minute before he began.

“There’s a good reason why my father faked his death over a century ago,” he said. “Arcan Hunters would have tracked him through the years, just waiting for him to meet my mother. Again.”

Mariah frowned. “Again?”

“Yes.”

“But didn’t he go missing..?”

“In June of 1888,” Ben answered for her. “When they first met. Then connected again a century later.”

Mariah processed what he just said. That extensive length of time wouldn’t be unusual for werewolves who typically lived several centuries, but...

“But your mother is fully human.”

“She is.”

“With a normal human lifespan.”

He gave a nod, fixing his green stare with hers, waiting for her to fit all of the pieces together.

“Wait, are you telling me that your mother can..?”

“Travel through time dimensions,” Ben added for her.
“Yes.”

Mariah gaped, waiting for him to laugh at her for believing such an outrageous joke.

The man never flinched.

“You’re serious,” she said.

“Very,” he answered. “My grandmother time-jumped, too. Mom believes it’s something in their genetic line.”

“Crickey.”

He nodded. “Arcan Hunters back in my father’s time learned of my mother doing this and salivated to use her ability for their own purposes. My dad shut them down then. So when my parents reconnected after she returned to her own time, they had to officially hide from any and all who would capture and use her ability.”

Mariah considered it, looking for cracks in the story. There were none.

“That’s really why those other Dr. Frankensteins wanted her?” Mariah figured out.

“Yes.”

“So if this is true, and I’m not saying that I believe it,” she said, “then your parents would know that you carried this same...ability as well.”

Ben shook his head. “They didn’t know what I inherited from either of them. They were shocked when I was able to shift into wolf for the first time at the age of fifteen. I’m only half werewolf after all, and it shouldn’t be possible. But I can. We only found out last year that I can time-jump like my mother as well.”

“You...*you* traveled through time?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Wow. How, *when* did you go to? And why would you even attempt such a dangerous thing?”

Ben pulled a folded piece of stationery from his pocket. “I knew you would need proof, if I ever told you. This is all I can give you at the moment. You can call your grandfather to verify its authenticity. I’m sure he’ll tell you, if you let me talk to him to give him permission to do so.”

“My grandfather?”

“Robert Bryant. Read the note he sent me.”

Mariah took it from Ben’s hand, her belly jolting at the familiar cream parchment with the Bryant royal crest. But it wasn’t her father, Jake Bryant, who signed his name at the bottom with the title of Bryant Pack High Alpha. It was her grandfather, Rob. Dated April of last year.

Then she read the note itself.

And nearly upchucked.

Mariah raised and fixed her stare with Ben’s. “You’re telling the truth.”

“I am.”

“Then you...you saved Dad’s life last year. But not last year. Before my parents ever married. And had all of us. Before he became High Alpha.”

Ben took the note from her hand and folded it back up. “I had to find out if I could time jump. And I did. I had to help the Bryant wolfpack survive whatever political coup was attempting to destroy it. And I did. Now I plan to do so again. Will you help me, Mariah? You’re the only one I can fully trust.”

* * *

It was a lot for Mariah to accept. More than a leap of logic and faith and basic physics. Ben gave her the long moment necessary to absorb his unbelievable explanation, true though it may be.

“Okay,” she finally said.

“Okay, you believe me, or okay, you’ll help me find your father’s true heir?”

“Both. Neither. I don’t know, Ben. I really don’t. I need to sleep on this whole bizarre thing. I’m only half sure that I’m not dreaming now.”

Fair enough. At least she didn’t dismiss it all outright.

“I’ll leave you to do so then,” he said, standing. “Goodnight.”

“Leave? Wait, where are you going? You can’t go back to town. You’ll be seen and caught for trespassing.”

She gasped, adding, “You’re the illegal trespasser that my uncles are scouring the mountain for, aren’t you? They’re very, very ticked at you, by the way. If they catch you, you’ll be chained in the dungeon for several painful centuries.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m well versed at hiding from hunters. I’ve managed to avoid their capture two weeks now. I’ll be fine.”

“Two weeks? Where have you been staying?”

Ben juttled his chin to the west. “Hiding out in the woods.”

Mariah frowned at him. “No doubt you think you’re an expert at evading predators, but you don’t know how persistent my uncles are. Especially Uncle Adam. He’s a natural and very gifted hunter. It’s only a matter of time and ill-luck that you’ll be found.”

“I’ll be fine,” Ben assured her.

“No, you won’t. And you can’t stay in the woods anymore. Ugh, there’s no choice then. You’ll stay here out of sight. No one will look for you here.” She looked back at the lone bedroom, then arched her brow saying, “Take the couch.”

“That’s kind of you, thanks. I promise not to be a bother.”

“Sure, sure,” she grumbled, rubbing her forehead roughly. “Well, I’m going to bed. It’s been a very long and very strange night. Don’t go anywhere until we finish this weird conversation in the morning.”

“Pleasant dreams, Mariah.”

“Says you.”

She then walked wearily to the bedroom, closing the door behind her without a backwards glance.

Ben looked at the worn couch with a little relief. He didn't mind sleeping in the woods again, of course, but it had been a hard day and harder night with little of it left before dawn broke.

And tomorrow the real hard work began.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 14

Mariah showered and changed into black slacks and her lavender eyelet blouse before meandering into the main room. With his wavy dark hair still wet, she noted that Ben had already made use of the single bathroom facilities earlier. Much earlier, based on the fact that he had cooked breakfast and set two filled plates of berries, sourdough toast, ham steak and diced potatoes onto the bar counter.

“Coffee?” he offered, holding up a steaming mug.

“Please,” she said, accepting it as she slid onto the counter barstool. “Looks like you were industrious this morning.”

“Call it paying for my room and board,” he said, then sat beside her. “And my apology for running out on you in Ireland. My intentions were for your benefit, if misplaced. I hope we can be friends now.”

“Fren-a-mies. Maybe allies, since you’re still helping me with my search. For different reasons, but ones I can get behind. Hmm, this is good. Really good,” she said digging into the meal.

“I aim to please.”

Mariah choked at his words.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asked.

“No,” Mariah chuckled nervously. “It’s just really weird to hear you speaking with an American accent. You were a very convincing Irishman back in Drogheda.”

“The dialect comes easy for me, since my father comes straight from the old country. Several centuries back, of course.”

She almost choked again at this casual statement. Yet, she had seen a very old photograph of Michael Bryant once in a Seattle museum.

Covertly she studied Ben's features, comparing them with Michael Bryant's photo. The similarity was unmistakable. Maybe Ben was telling the truth then. At least partially.

But time travel?

Who knows? she grudgingly admitted. There were things in this universe that human beings could never comprehend, were-kind like herself being one of them. Perhaps were-kind still had a thing or two to learn as well.

"You still don't believe that I can travel through time," Ben remarked, studying her.

"The jury's still out."

"Fair," he said. "If anything, I hope you can trust how motivated I am to discover the truth of your birth. I may have stalled a political coup to destroy the Bryant pack once, but it looks like it rose up and tried again, somehow using you in the process. That means that it's most likely still alive and working to take down the pack."

And might have been successful if the Elder Council hadn't broken from tradition and allowed her, a female, to take up the position of High Alpha. Until it was discovered she didn't carry the Bryant bloodline.

But why her? Why did this shadow coup want her as a Direct Heir to the Bryant crown? She was one of the least politically motivated people around.

"The scary part is that I never would have found out that Jake and Nicole Bryant aren't my biological parents, if my first DNA test hadn't been misplaced and my aunt hadn't taken the second one herself."

Ben set his coffee cup down, frowning. "The first one was lost?"

"Yes, some horrible clerical error by the lab technician the morning of my coronation."

"Are you saying the first test *did* identify you as Jake's daughter?"

Mariah nodded.

“First a mistaken ultrasound, then a mistaken DNA test?” Ben remarked. “A little too coincidental.”

She absently fingered the coffee mug, puzzling out the reasons for anyone to do this. “I know. None of it makes sense. Why would anyone want to—?”

A hard knock on the front door silenced her. Then a hard fist pound.

“Come on, Mar. Open up,” Liam called from the other side. “I know you’re in there, and you’re not alone. I can smell the mongrel’s stench from out here.”

* * *

Mariah jumped up and shot Ben a wide look, but the stubborn man coolly slid off his barstool and jutted his chin to go ahead and answer the door.

Reluctantly, she walked over, plastered on a happy expression, then answered the door.

“Hey, hound. Visiting me again so soon? What do I owe this pleasure?”

“Never mind that,” Liam stated, pushing past her, then glared at Ben casually leaning against the counter. “Yes, I thought you had company out here in your little woodland bungalow. Who’s this?”

Mariah hiked her brows. “And what’s it to you who I invite here?”

“I’m someone looking out for your best interest. What did you say his name is?”

“I didn’t. And really, Liam, it’s none of your business.”

Ben shifted his stare from one to the other, then walked up to Liam with extended right hand.

“Ben Gallagher,” he said, using his broad Irish accent. “You’re Mariah’s good friend, are you not? A great pleasure to finally meet you.”

Liam narrowed his eyes, not accepting the handshake. “That truly remains to be seen, dog. The last I heard, you ran

out on Mariah back in Europe. How odd that you suddenly appear here in Timber Ridge out of the blue.”

“Liam, please,” Mariah cut in.

“No, it’s quite alright, darlin’,” Ben said, slipping his arm around her waist and drawing her against him. “We’ve been found out, so we might as well come clean. He’s your closest friend after all, is he not?”

“Yes, but...”

Liam eyed them both suspiciously. “You’re back together?”

“Yes, all the saints be praised,” Ben said, kissing Mariah’s temple. “It was a wretched misunderstanding, to be sure. I thought she no longer wished for my company, you see, and I cared for her too much to put her in an untenable situation. So I left her in Drogheda to avoid any awkward fare-thee-wells.

“Low and behold a week later, I was too heartsick not to at least hear Mariah’s melodious voice one last time, if nothing more than to say a final goodbye. As true Irish luck would have it, she was generous to accept my phone call, and we hashed things out right and proper. And presto, here I am, and we are together again! A truly happy ending to my sad tale, don’t you think?”

“That remains to be seen.”

Before Mariah could add her own take of the situation, Ben pulled her in for a lusty kiss that made her head reel and legs wobble. Then he released her with a wide, toothy grin.

If that didn’t convince Liam, nothing would.

“Apologies, if I’ve intruded then,” he stated deadly quiet.

“Not a’tall,” Ben said. “We’ve just had a bit of breakfast, but I’m certain there’s enough to scrape up a third plate, if you’ve of a mind to join us.”

“No, thanks,” Liam muttered, turning to Mariah. “I just came by to tell you something. I overheard Dad secretly talking to Uncle Sean on the phone this morning. The Council

is meeting tomorrow to discuss what it would take to eliminate the Bryant monarchy and go to general elections for the H.A. position.”

Mariah gasped, breaking from Ben’s hold. “They can’t do that!”

“They can, and they will, if there is no heir to the crown. Dad and Uncle Sean are against it, of course, but it’s two against three.”

“Does my dad know about this?” she asked.

Liam shook his head. “*I’m* not supposed to know this, so you can’t say anything to him. At least not yet. I’m just warning you to lay low until everything’s decided.”

“Why? What’s really wrong, Liam?”

“If word gets out that there is even the slightest possibility of High Alpha elections, you and your entire family’s lives could be in jeopardy. Political assassins aren’t just in the human world, Mar. Revolutions and power grabs are always bloody.”

“Oh, God. Yes, I understand. Thanks for the warning, Liam.” She saw him slice another deadly look at Ben and added, “And please don’t say anything about...”

“Your visiting boyfriend?”

She winced, noting his snide tone. “It’s best if no one knows he’s here.”

“Why is that, I wonder? Is there something to hide?”

“Discretion would be in order,” Ben cut in, lacing her fingers in his. “At least until Mariah and I have properly sorted out our rekindled relationship. Then I would like to approach her family appropriately. You understand, do you not? You look to be a man of great honor and dignity.”

“I suppose I do. For the time being.”

Mariah breathed with relief. “Thanks, Liam. You’re the best.”

He grunted, knifing another look at Ben. “Don’t take too long sorting things out. You know how I hate to keep secrets.”

“I do,” she answered. “Thanks for this.”

“As for you, Darby O’Gill,” he lethally warned Ben. “You hurt Mariah in any way again, and I’ll hunt you down and chew you up so thoroughly that your own mother won’t be able to recognize you.”

Ben lifted his chin, returning, “Don’t worry about me, boyo. I’ll be staying close to Mariah for as long as she needs me.”

One last glare at him, then Liam stalked out of the cabin, slamming the door behind him.

* * *

“Is it done? What did you say? Did anyone suspect anything?” Mariah rushed out as Ben walked into the cabin.

“Don’t worry, your aunt won’t suspect a thing,” Ben said. “I just walked up to the hospital reception counter and claimed that I found the doctor’s I.D. badge in the parking lot. I let the clerk make the conclusion that she accidentally dropped it there.”

Mariah eased. At least one sticky task was accomplished.

“Your computer geek uncle wouldn’t help out with another master passcode into the hospital’s records, would he?”

She arched her brow. “I was lucky he didn’t turn me in for last night’s illegal stunt. I don’t dare ask him again.”

“That means we’re back with a lot more questions than answers,” Ben said. “Let’s review everything again and see if we can plug any holes.”

They spent the next several hours searching on the laptop, but in the end made little progress. Dr. Richard Collins had all but disappeared from existence the night of her birth. The intern who assisted him, Tia Cassidy, quit that same week and couldn’t be tracked down from there. Darlene Ryan still

couldn't be traced after leaving Timber Ridge the night of Mariah's birth.

"At least we know for sure Mom actually gave birth to a boy, not a girl," Mariah said wearily, referring back to the original ultrasound image.

"In theory," Ben reminded. "It was admitted that the technician made a few errors that week, and this might be one."

"So that might not be my mother's child then."

"That image of a male fetus might belong to another pregnant woman entirely, yes. We just don't have any proof who the boy's mother was."

"Which means my first theory for the birth switch is void, and we're again back to square-one," she said defeatedly.

"Not necessarily. We'll find something, Mariah."

She frowned up at him. "But we're running out of time. You heard what Liam said this morning. If we don't locate the true Bryant heir soon, they're going to consider ousting my father from his H.A. position. You're right, there has to be some kind of political coup to install someone else and take over the pack. But who?"

Once again, they reviewed everything they knew, along with their suspicions, until Mariah wanted to scream and yank her hair out in frustration.

"Let's take a break," Ben suggested, then stood and held his hand out to her. "We'll walk down to the lake and watch the sun set over Bryant's Mountain. I'll even tell you the story on how this mountain got its name."

* * *

It was a great suggestion. Together they sat along the bank of Aurora Lake as the sun eased its way over the peak of the snow-capped mountain, spraying the sky with amber and orange rays.

It was a magnificent view, and Mariah began to relax for the first time that day.

“Your father originally founded Timber Ridge on this mountain then,” she remarked after Ben told the tale of their pack’s origins there in Washington State.

“He did. This was the perfect place for the fledgling Bryant wolfpack to settle.”

“Too bad he didn’t get the chance to enjoy it himself,” she said, gazing out over the glittering lake.

Ben lifted a shoulder, absently skipping a pebble across the water. “He was loner anyhow. Our nomadic life has always suited him well. My mother, too.”

“What about you? Didn’t you ever want to settle down in one place, make friends, a permanent home?”

He quirked a cheerless smile. “At times. It was difficult never knowing when we would spontaneously up and leave again, so I tried not to get too attached to anyone or any place.”

“Because of being hunted by Arcans,” she added for him.

“And others who suspect what we are and want that power for themselves.”

All barriers down between them now, Mariah began to understand and appreciate Ben more. She even understood his true and honorable reasons for trying to cut off all emotional and physical ties between them by callously leaving her in Ireland.

“You disconnected your phone,” she remarked.

He frowned. “You called me then.”

“I wanted to know why you left me. What I must have done or said.”

“You were great, Mariah. Perfect. But it grew too dangerous for you to be around me anymore. I had to cut all ties for your safety.”

“I see that now,” she sighed. “What a lonely life you lead. I’m so sorry.”

Ben frowned. “No, I’m sorry you were caught in the crosshairs of my problems.”

“Don’t be sorry. You saved my life that night the Arcan Hunter shot me. I never did thank you for that.”

“It was my fault that you were shot and almost killed.”

Mariah touched his tightening bicep. “It wasn’t. Arcans and evil men have always hunted our kind. They kill what threatens them.”

Ben fixed his stare with hers for a long moment. He began to lean in to gently kiss her when Mariah quickly faced the lake again.

“Tell me another story,” she said.

“About what?”

She smiled and turned back to him. “Tell me what happened after you traveled back in time to save my dad.”

Ben let go of a long breath, then settled back in his storyteller’s position.

“Let’s see,” he began, gazing at the darkening lake. “I received your grandfather’s note by special messenger. It was after the death of his youngest son, Luke.”

“Uncle Luke died?”

He nodded. “After both of his older brothers, Jake and Adam were killed. It wasn’t openly acknowledged—then—that Neil Duran was Rob Bryant’s natural son and could have taken up the D.H. position, if necessary.

“There were rustlings of a pack split just like this one, because of no surviving Bryant heir. Rob was desperate to keep the pack together somehow. That’s when he remembered the letter my mother gave him in 1988.”

“A letter?”

“From my father,” Ben said, cracking a one-sided smile. “One he wrote a century earlier. He asked my mother to give it to his brother when she returned to her own time.

“She claimed to have discovered it during one of her historical research projects. But Rob Bryant was a brilliant man and figured out how my mother really came to have such a letter. He vowed to protect her secret, of course, knowing Arcans would weaponize her for their own purposes, particularly in helping to eliminate all were-kind.”

“No doubt they would.”

“Growing up, I never knew about my mother’s unique ability,” Ben continued. “I assumed we were always on the run because of Dad and me being werewolves. It wasn’t until I received the letter from your grandfather a year ago that they admitted everything in full. I finally understood why my father kept us all on the run—to protect Mom because her time traveling ability.”

“I had to try the feat myself in order to help our family’s clan,” Ben continued. “I may not have been a pack citizen, but I am a Bryant by blood. It was a matter of honor and duty and family loyalty. So against my father’s furious demands to stay away from it all, I hopped a flight to see my father’s brother in America.”

“That was very brave of you,” Mariah remarked. “For all you knew, that too was a trap set by Arcans.”

Ben shrugged. “It was all good. When I met with Rob, he explained that he figured out how my mother delivered the ‘message’ from his late brother a hundred years ago.”

“The letter?”

“No, actually,” Ben said. “I didn’t even know about the physical letter itself until a few months ago when my mother admitted it. Before then, I thought Rob meant that she delivered a verbal message.

“In any case, he asked for my help to change, well, the past and the future by jumping back in time to save his son Jake. I told him that I didn’t know if I possessed the same ability as my mother, but that I would at least try.

“Mom put me in touch with a trusted friend-in-the-know here in Seattle, Logan Thorne, who knew what she could do.

Together we approached the Snoqualmie tribal chief, Margaret Thunders, who also helped my mother thirty-five years earlier and knew what she could do.

“The time portal itself rests in a mountain on Snoqualmie land. Chief Thunders had the cave entrance collapsed shortly after my mother returned in 1988. At first, she refused to open it for us, but Thorne eventually convinced her, and she reluctantly gave us permission to do so on our own, taking no part in it herself.

“In the end, we made it inside, and I found the correct cave room with the ancient hieroglyphs marking the portal’s... I don’t know what you’d call it. Time barrier? Fracture?”

He shook his head, continuing, “My mother explained how it was done, and suffice it to say that I was successful in jumping back to the correct time—the day of the wolfpack’s 2004 Spring Gala when your father was assassinated.”

“Wow. That is so hard to imagine,” Mariah said. “Dad was actually killed that night. And then two of my uncles. In an alternate reality.”

To think that in *this* current parallel timeline, none of that happened. Her father wasn’t murdered. Her parents did marry, and her sisters were born. Not to mention that her uncles, aunts, cousins...

It made her head dizzy to think about.

“I didn’t know the assassin I would need to stop,” Ben explained. “Rob himself had no information for me to go on, because the person or group that killed him was never discovered. But he could give me when and where his son’s decapitated body was found—inside the locked Great Lodge library after the Gala ended.”

“So it happened during the event,” Mariah said.

“My guess, too,” Ben agreed. “Jake had been seen several times and even publicly introduced by his father during the event. The last anyone saw of him was when one of his enforcers called him away for some unknown reason.”

According to this alternate timeline, Mariah knew the reason well—to ambush Nicole into a romantic interlude and marriage proposal inside the rose decorated library. Her mother had told her and her sisters this beautiful tale many times.

Ironically, it was her Uncle Luke that utilized the library for his first meeting with her Aunt Jade. Her parents' engagement had ended up happening later at her place.

But that was another story.

“In any case,” Ben continued, “I played it safe and covertly hovered around the library hallway before the Gala began. Finally, I spotted a woman enter the library with champagne and glasses. I didn't think much of it until she exited, carefully checking in all directions before she left.”

“How did you know that she wasn't just some caterer?” Mariah asked.

“I didn't,” he said. “In fact, it didn't make any sense to be suspicious of her, since Jake was brutally decapitated to assure his death. But I've hunted and been hunted all of my life. Instinctively I knew she was up to something.”

Mariah considered it, then looked at Ben. “A sedative! I'll bet the champagne was spiked. Then when Dad drank it and was knocked out, the real assassin planned to sneak inside and silently kill him without calling attention to the crowd. In fact, the crowd itself could be used as cover and diversion from the murder.”

Then the true assassin could easily slip through the guests unnoticed, and drive away without anyone the wiser until the pack enforcers eventually discovered her father's body during the nightly sweep of the Lodge.

A brilliant plan.

One in that alternate universe worked, too.

“Anyhow, I knew a plot when I saw one and confronted the woman,” Ben said. “I didn't expect her to pull out the gun with a silencer to silence anyone interfering with her task.”

“Whoa!”

He nodded. “It was a close one. She didn’t count on me being as fast and agile as I am. She did catch me in the shoulder as I twisted away from the silver bullet though. Two centimeters to the right, and I would have died before you were ever born.”

“Another bizarre paradox,” she muttered. “Then what happened?”

“I tackled her and was about to haul her tail into your grandfather’s office to glean who contracted her services. But another shot from a random enforcer passing by hit her square between the eyes. I assumed he was one of Rob’s enforcers, but now I wonder if he was a part of the plot to kill Jake. He was there to silence any possible witness who could divulge the true person orchestrating all of this.”

“Dang it. You were so close to finding out then,” Mariah said.

“I wish I had. But I thought that I had stopped the assassin in her tracks. Problem solved.”

“You did in one sense,” Mariah said. “You stopped my dad from being murdered, which apparently discouraged the shadow group from later killing my uncles, too. You were a real unsung hero, Ben. Then what happened?”

“Nothing,” he said. “My mission to save Rob’s sons was successful, so I returned to the time portal and jumped back to my present time a year ago, relieved to find that Jake Bryant was alive and now High Alpha of the pack.”

“You changed history,” Mariah remarked with amazement. “Our history.”

“And I’ll do it again,” he added, frowning. “Jump, I mean. If there’s no other choice.”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 15

Mariah tossed and turned, then slipped on her red satin robe and quietly padded out to the dark living room. Instantly Ben sat up on the couch, wearing only his jeans. The sight of his firm, tanned abs once again made her entire body thrum.

“What’s wrong, Mariah?”

She shook her head, sitting next to him. “Just couldn’t sleep. Too many things to worry about.”

“We’ll solve this,” he assured her. “We’ll make sure to stop any moves to oust your family from their rightful positions.”

She seriously wondered now, after the warning Liam gave her earlier. Hearing the story Ben had shared of her father’s thwarted assassination attempt, this powerplay had been going on for decades.

How far back did it extend?

How many people were involved?

What was it going to take to stop it all?

Ben slid his arm around her shoulder and drew her against him. She balked slightly, then relaxed into his hold. It felt good to be there, to be held by him.

“Thank you,” she whispered, pressing her cheek against his bare shoulder, secretly breathing in his delicious musky, male scent.

“I should be thanking you,” he said, his nose nuzzling the top of her head.

“Why?”

“You saved my life back in Ireland before I saved yours.”

“What? When I shifted and stupidly attacked an armed Arcan Hunter?” she snorted.

“You sacrificed yourself to save me. It was brave. Selfless. Thank you.”

Mariah closed her eyes, listening to the steady pounding of his heart. It was a peaceful, perfect moment.

Still, there was that toxic weed of dark doubt that sullied it.

“Why did you leave me, Ben?”

“I had to.”

“You didn’t call me.”

His hold tightened. “I couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t, or wouldn’t?”

“Both. My very existence puts you in danger, Mariah. I had to correct that.”

She raised and fixed her eyes with his darkening green stare. “What about now?”

“I shouldn’t be here,” he admitted, his fingers tracing an electrifying line down her cheek. “This is wrong. I swore never to put you at risk again. Yet, here I am.”

“Here you are.”

Mariah licked her lips, wishing they could be pressing Ben’s. She leaned deeper into him, and for once he didn’t pull away. Now she understood why he held himself in restraint before. Why he rejected her advances. Her heart beat faster at this knowledge.

She tilted her head up to nip his jaw. She felt more than heard the low rumble of need boiling deep inside his chest and throat.

“I can’t love you, Mariah,” he said, huffing hard as he tightened his hold.

“I don’t want to love you either,” she said, her lips tracing along his neck.

“No. It’s not that I don’t want to love you,” he said huskily, nuzzling her hair, her ear. “I can’t. It’s not safe for

you to be around me. I'm not good for you. I never will be."

"I'm not good for you either," she said, nipping his bottom lip.

"The hell you're not," he growled, teasing her lips with his. "You're frigging perfect. It's me—"

"Shut up and kiss me, wolfman, before I go up in flames."

* * *

Her cellphone chimed, and Mariah groaned, wanting to ignore it. But because of Liam's warning yesterday, she rolled over in bed and grabbed it off the rustic nightstand to read the text from Natalie Paxton:

Happy birthday, Mariah! Can you come over for brunch this morning to celebrate?

Wow, it *was* her birthday today. With everything going on, she had completely lost track of the days.

With a mild groan, Mariah considered begging out. No doubt her family would want to make a big deal about her birthday this year, too. In truth, being left alone right now would be the best gift today.

Well, maybe not all alone.

Still, if she didn't show up to her line of parties, someone would just track her down here, discovering her fugitive houseguest.

Mariah texted Natalie that she would be there in an hour, then tossed her cellphone back on the end table.

"What's up?"

She rolled over with lazily smile at the luscious sight of Ben lying next to her naked under the sheets. She reached a toe to press against his bare calf, then snuggled into his warm hold.

"Nothing much," she sighed. "Liam's mom wants me to come over to celebrate my birthday today."

“Happy birthday. Here, let me give you my own present.”

Snickering, she pushed his grabbing hands away from areas that would definitely ignite something she didn't have time for right now.

“Stop it, beast. I told Aunt Nat that I'd be there in an hour, so you'll have to entertain yourself for a while here. Alone.”

Ben narrowed his darkening eyes at her. “You're a cruel woman.”

“I am,” she laughed. “Let me get up and great dressed. The sooner I get there, the sooner I can return and you can freely and fully give me your own birthday present.”

* * *

Mariah drove onto the Paxton manor grounds, allowing the family chauffeur to park her car. Natalie Paxton was waiting for her in the foyer of the Tudor mansion, embracing Mariah when she walked inside.

“Thank you for coming,” Natalie said, hooking her elbow through Mariah's to lead her inside the marble tiled foyer. “I know your family and friends will have their own birthday celebrations lined up for you today.”

“No doubt,” Mariah returned. “But this is an excellent place to start. Is Liam and Uncle Walter joining us too?”

“Not this time. Walt has an emergency council meeting, and Liam is off gallivanting with a few of his cronies, causing heaven knows what kind of trouble. He sends his birthday wishes, by the way. It's just us girls. I hope you don't mind.”

“Perfect,” Mariah said, as they walked into the sunny atrium. “How else can we gossip about them if they're here listening?”

For the next two hours they ate and chatted. Mariah opened up several wrapped gifts, most of which consisted of designer clothes.

She was glad to have come now. It had been ages since she spent time alone with her godmother. But now she was anxious to get back to the cabin and the delicious wolfman awaiting her there.

“Well, I’m stuffed to the brim,” Mariah said, standing and pressing a hand to her stomach. “Thanks for the birthday brunch. It was just what the doctor ordered.”

“I’m glad,” Natalie said. “Oh, before you leave, I wanted your opinion on a dress I bought in Seattle last weekend. I think it will be perfect for the upcoming Harvest Festival, but I’m not sure about the color. You’ve always had such a gifted eye for fashion.”

“Sure, happy to help.”

Together they headed out of the atrium and back into the main foyer, taking the winding staircase up one floor and down the east hallway to the master suite at the end.

It was as elegant and grand as anything at the Great Lodge. The Paxton brothers had always been gifted entrepreneurs, even in her great-grandfather’s time when they first started the Bryant wolfpack.

Natalie walked into the large dressing area and pulled off a bag on a hanger, zipping it down to reveal the sparkling amber and brown cocktail dress.

“What do you think?” she said, grimacing at it. “I fell in love with the lace trimming, but now that I look at it again, it may be a bit much. Maybe I should return it.”

The dress itself was interspersed with tiny red rhinestones. Mariah moved it this way and that, making the dress twinkle with amber starlight.

“Absolutely not, Aunt Nat,” she said. “This is gorgeous. I swear if you don’t want it, then I’m snatching it from you.”

“You can have it, if you really want it.”

Mariah chuckled. “No, it’ll be perfect on you. I just wanted you to know how beautiful it is and not to dare return it.”

Natalie relaxed. “Good. I feared the worst.”

“Rest assured, it’s the best. All the other women at the festival will be green with envy.”

“Great.” Her godmother gazed at the dress again, sighing, “To think that this festival has been going on since the beginning of our pack here at Timber Ridge. Did you know that Rufus Bryant mirrored it after the one in the town of Silver Falls near where his son Michael used to live?”

“Michael. That was my grandfather’s older brother who was killed a century ago?” Mariah prodded cautiously. “The one who founded Timber Ridge.”

“That’s right. May he rest in peace, poor dear. He never did get to see the reward for his hard efforts in leading us all here.”

“You must remember Michael Bryant, since you were on of the original immigrants from Ireland.”

Natalie pulled her stare from the dress to Mariah. “Vaguely. I was a very young girl myself in those days. Walt would have known him better, since he was Rufus’s right-hand man. A great tragedy that Michael was killed back then. Arcan Hunters are everywhere though.”

“It is a shame.”

“I should talk to Walt about having the Council commemorate him in some way during the festival. Our young should know about his great sacrifice for those under his care.”

Mariah agreed.

A housemaid walked around the corner, saying, “Mrs. Paxton, Hilly Grant is on the phone for you. Says she’s been trying to get you on your cell all morning, and there’s an emergency with the catering for tonight’s hospital charity dinner.”

Natalie murmured to Mariah, “The chef probably got into it with her on the canapes again. I’ll be right back. If you’re sure about the dress, can you pick out some matching shoes

and accessories? I'll get something if I have to, but I'd rather not."

"Will do. You attend to your critical emergency, and I'll attend to mine here."

"Thanks, dear. I'll be right back."

Mariah rummaged through her godmother's extensive shoe racks, earmarking a few possibilities. Then she opened each jewel drawer filled with broaches, watches, necklaces, rings and bracelets. Then froze when she spotted the teardrop emerald pendant in a yellow gold Celtic interlace setting.

There was no mistake. This was the same pendant Barbara Gregory described. The one given to Darlene Ryan twenty-four years ago. The one her friend threw back into her married lover's face.

Walter Paxton's face!

Oh, God, that meant..!

"Crap," she whispered, swallowing hard.

"What was that, hon?" Natalie asked, rounding the corner.

Mariah whipped the necklace behind her back.

"What's that you're hiding?" Natalie questioned.

Slowly, Mariah produced the emerald pendant. Natalie took it and frowned.

"Really, this gaudy old thing?" she remarked with twisted expression. "The color's all wrong, don't you think? Even as a contrast."

"Oh. Uh, I suppose..." Mariah said. "It just caught my eye. I don't remember this piece being here before."

Natalie grunted. "That's because it's usually in the back of the drawer, so I don't have to look at the ugly thing. I don't dare give it away though, since Walt gave it to me as an anniversary present."

"Uncle Walter gave this to you?"

“Monstrous, isn’t it?” Natalie chuckled. “Well, he never did have much taste in this department.”

“You said this was an anniversary gift?”

“Belatedly, since the date completely slipped his mind,” Natalie confirmed. “Not the first time, of course, but he felt so horrible about it that he went out and bought the biggest gemstone he could find to make it up to me.”

“It is, uh, big.”

“Hmm. Walt was very sweet about it, actually. I walked in on him here in the bedroom and caught him red-handed pulling the thing out of his pocket. He didn’t even have time to wrap it up.”

Natalie took it from Mariah’s hand, souring her expression. “I wore it a few token times to appease him, then locked it away, hoping he would never ask about it again.”

She dropped the pendant back into the jewel drawer, then picked up a garnet and diamond necklace. “How about this one? It complements the red brilliants in the dress.

* * *

Mariah tramped on the gas pedal, racing back to the cabin. She burst inside, ready to tell Ben that her own godfather, Walter Paxton, was Darlene Ryan’s married mystery lover. If it wasn’t for the fact that Natalie obviously had no clue about the sordid affair, she would have waited to confront the cheating bastard face-to-face.

Besides, she needed to calm down first. Process the information. Discuss it with Ben before flying off the handle.

“Ben, I just found out...”

Mariah drew up short.

Liam and Ben both turned towards her with dead serious expressions.

“What’s going on?” she asked warily. “Liam, why are you back here?”

The two men exchanged a look. Ben jutted his chin at Liam.

“Dad told me the Council met an hour ago,” Liam admitted. “They voted three-to-two in favor of dissolving the Bryant monarchy. Immediately. Uncle Sean and him voted against, of course, but the majority carried.”

“Oh, God. No!”

Liam touched her arm. “The details aren’t set in stone yet, so there’s still a sliver of hope that it will come to nothing. The Elder Council is going to figure out the details, then approach your father with the news tomorrow and request that he accept their decision in the matter and immediately transfer all power to them, until such time that general elections can be held.”

“No, no, no! Dad won’t go along with this madness!”

“He has no choice,” Liam explained. “The Council found a small contingency in the bylaws created by Rufus Bryant. If your father refuses to comply with their demands, they will take the next step to break the mystical document and still keep the pack from dissolving.

She shook her head. “Contingency? What? How?”

“The curse can be broken,” Liam explained, “by the spilling of the High Alpha’s blood at the next full moon. All of it.”

* * *

One week. The next full moon was in one week.

Mariah stood there, too stunned by the horrific news to move or respond.

“I have to go now, Mar,” Liam said, bracing her shoulders with both hands. “Don’t leave this cabin for the next few days. You’re not a true Bryant, so you’re safe from any renegade planning to jump protocol and fire up the masses to take out all blood relatives.”

Her eyes shot up to his. “My sisters!”

“They’ll be fine. I’m sure your father and uncles have security contingencies for threats like this.”

She looked at Ben whose own green cat-eyes were darkened with deep concern. He was also a blood relative, not to mention the rightful heir. If his identity was ever discovered.

“I’ll keep you updated as I hear news. Stay here and stay safe,” Liam said.

He looked to Ben who gave him a nod, assuring his protection of Mariah. Then he kissed her temple and stalked out of the door. The next sound Mariah heard was Liam’s car zooming up the gravel road.

“It’ll be okay, love. Your father and uncles won’t stand for this. They’ll think of something to stop this power grab.”

She blinked hard at Ben. “Maybe, but I...I have something else to tell you.”

Recalling her conversation with Natalie Paxton, Mariah shared her discovery of Darlene Ryan’s emerald pendant.

“Barbara Gregory said that she threw the necklace in Darlene’s lover’s face,” she added. “Natalie confirmed the timing, that she caught her husband with it.”

“Walter Paxton was the nurse’s secret lover.”

Mariah nodded. “Do you think Uncle Walter knew about Darlene Ryan’s involvement with my birth switch?”

“If he did, why didn’t he stop it?” Ben questioned. “And why didn’t he tell your parents from the start?”

Confirming that if he did know, then he was involved with it.

But why?

“He couldn’t be part of the coup though,” Mariah added. “He and Uncle Sean were the ones to vote against the power grab.”

She shook her head, adding, “If we only knew what really happened that night. To find out who all was involved with

the switch. More importantly, what happened to the true Bryant newborn.”

Mariah fixed her stare with Ben’s. Both knew there was only way to find out for sure.

Find out, and stop it.

“You have to go back,” she said. “You have to jump back to the night I was born and learn what really happened.”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 16

“Do you think it’s even still open?” Mariah questioned as she drove out of Timber Ridge and down the winding mountain road. “What if Chief Thunders completely collapsed the cave after you used it last year to make sure it was never used again?”

“We’ll find out, won’t we?” Ben answered in a dark tone.

He didn’t think that the Snoqualmie chief did so.

Still, if anyone knew of the danger of him or any other traveler accessing the portal again, she would. From what his mother described about Margaret Thunders, the woman would do anything to protect her tribe, including destroying his last chance to help the Bryant pack.

“Take the next left towards Silver Falls,” he said, seeing the road sign. “Then keep on the main road through town until we reach the bridge at the end.”

Mariah made the indicated turn. Two miles further, and Ben could make out a few buildings looming up in the distance.

“I still can’t believe that Uncle Walter was Darlene Ryan’s mystery lover,” she said with shaking head.

Ben arched a brow. He knew how close Mariah was to her godfather, so he refrained from sharing what his own dad told him about the overly ambitious Paxton brothers.

“Whatever you do, son, don’t trust either of them. More than once I witnessed and heard about them cheating and swindling families in the old Callaghan pack.

“It was even rumored that they themselves instigated the internal war that forced Quinn Callaghan to exile my own da and the lot of us in the first place.

“I have no doubt the Paxton brothers believe themselves to be the rightful leaders of the Bryant pack in America, and resented the fact that the majority of the families sided with

Rufus in the matter. Greed for power such as theirs rarely softens through the years, and Walt and Sean Paxton have had almost two centuries to harden their resolve and desire to rule. At any price.

“Be forewarned, son. And be cautious.”

Ben planned to.

So no, he didn't have a hard time believing Walter Paxton cheated on his own wife. And if the man was unfaithful the woman he was committed to for decades, then he would just as easily be unfaithful to the allegiance he made to the Bryant wolfpack and its rightful High Alpha.

“I couldn't tell Aunt Natalie what I suspected,” Mariah said as she lowered her speed through town. “I just couldn't. I feel so guilty.”

“Don't be,” Ben said. “It would've served no good purpose in telling her.”

“Maybe when you go back in time and talk to him—”

“I can't let myself be seen by anyone, Mariah” Ben interrupted. “I can't interfere with any events in any way, or the entire time-paradox could turn on its head and ruin multiple lives.”

She frowned at him, while trying to keep her eyes on the busy road. “But you have to. You have to stop my birth switch from happening. That's the whole point of this!”

He shook his head. “I have to let things play out as they need to. The only thing I can do is observe and find out what really happened. Then we can find the evidence needed in the present time to arrest whoever instigated your birth switch and stop this political coup to usurp your father's position.”

Mariah faced the city street in front of her. Ben noticed the flush on her cheeks and knew she wasn't happy with his decision.

What he said was true enough in one sense. In another, however, Ben knew that Mariah was right to wish for the past

circumstances to change, if it was possible. And it was in his power to do so. He had done it before.

But that would also mean this beauty would never be raised as a Bryant royal. Never have the loving parents and family that helped make her into the strong, brave, incredible woman she was now.

Hell, she might even end up dead somewhere if he interfered and stopped the switch from...

No, he couldn't go there. Ever.

He was right then to allow things to play out as they did in this current timeline. Which meant that he couldn't stop the political coup in its tracks twenty-four years ago.

A selfish move on his part?

Maybe. But it was still his choice to make. If he had to choose between the wolfpack's wellbeing and Mariah's, she came first. He would just have to find to make things right in the present time.

"You're sure this will work a second time?" Mariah questioned as they reached the bridge across Silver River.

"No, I'm not sure," Ben darkly admitted. "I don't know how or why it worked the last time. Things my mom said that should happen didn't, and things she didn't think about did. It's all a bunch of guesswork. For all I know, I'll end up in Roman times. Or in the future. Or nowhere at all."

She sucked in a breath and gave him a wide look. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry! I didn't think what an enormous risk you're taking by doing this."

Ben raked fingers through his hair. "It's okay, but...well, I'm not looking forward to jumping again. Especially now that I've done it before and know what to expect."

"Not fun, huh?" she remarked.

"A trip to the underworld would be preferable. It's hard to explain. It feels like you're being ripped to pieces from the inside out, then suddenly slammed back together again."

“Sounds awful.”

He grunted in agreement. “My mother assumed we could only jump during the Sun or Fire Feasts, but I jumped during no special seasonal or cosmic event. The key to steering seems to be how intensely you focus onto a particular date, time and place. That much worked for both of us.”

Ben shook his head, adding, “Still, there’s no guarantee that either of us is correct. This time I might jump back only ten years. Or fifty.”

Or a hundred. Or a thousand.

And never be able to return to the present.

“I didn’t even think of that!” she gasped. “This was a bad idea. You shouldn’t go.”

Ben saw the worry on her face, and that helped. A little.

“No, I have to try,” he said. “This is too important. Your father’s very life is at stake. I saved him once. I might as well do it again. A two-for-one special.”

“This isn’t a joke, Ben.”

“I know. The Elder Council wants to oust your family immediately from your rightful positions, and this hasn’t been the first time. Someone is behind this and has been for decades. I need to find out who and stop this once and for all. Take the left turnout up ahead.”

Mariah turned onto the unmarked unpaved road and continued driving up the winding, overgrown forested road up the mountainside.

Every fiber in Ben’s body went rigid the closer they drove towards the hill and cave that would tear him from his present world. He wasn’t a coward and would go through with it, but he did regret not being able to say goodbye to his parents. In case he never made it back.

Then there was Mariah herself.

Even if he couldn’t return to the present, like his own father, he would just wait out the years before reconnecting

with Mariah again. She was worth it.

“Whoa, this time portal cave is really in the middle of the boonies,” she remarked as they bumpily drove over debris and potholes, hanging tree limbs smacking the windshield. “How much further in is this place? This road is making my teeth rattle.”

“Another half-mile or so,” he said, hanging onto the ceiling handhold to brace himself.

The bumps grew rougher and more undrivable with every yard. He wondered if Maggie Thunders purposely made sure of it to discourage explorers. This was tribal land after all, and she was determined to keep its dangerous secrets safe from outsiders.

“This road will eventually dead-end. From there we hike another four miles up the mountain.”

Grimacing, Mariah was about to make a comment, then noticed his own strained expression and refrained.

Ben rechecked the small pack he stuffed back at the fishing cabin—flashlight, water bottles, protein bars, butane lighter, matches, hunting knife, change of clothes. No matter *when* he landed, he could make use of these.

The road finally ended, the turnout itself brushy and grown-over. Ben got out of the car, slinging one strap of the backpack over his shoulder.

“I walk from here,” he said. “Drive back to town and wait until I call you that I’ve returned.”

“No, Ben, I’m coming with you,” she said, stepping out of the driver’s side.

He shook his head. “Too risky. If any Arcan Hunters around had so much as a hint that I was going to time jump again, they might have followed us here. I can’t take the chance of you getting caught and injured in the crosshairs again.”

“I don’t care. I’m going with you to the cave. I need to see it for myself.”

“Mariah, it’s too dangerous. I’ll take it from here. Trust me.”

“I do trust you,” she said. “But I’m still going. No, you can’t stop me, so don’t even try.”

Ben was about to argue further, but saw by the stubborn set of her chin that she would only follow after him once he left on his own. At least if she was by his side during the hike, he could look out for her.

“Fine,” he said. “But you’re staying outside the cave, then immediately driving back to town where it’s safe.”

“Lead the way. It’s getting late,” she said with a jut of her chin.

Ben narrowed his eyes at her, noting that she hadn’t agreed.

There was no use in trying to dissuade her, however, and he was losing time. If a dual timeline was indeed a factor, he needed to use this exact date to jump.

He kept a sharp ear out for sounds not native to the woods. Twice he froze at crunching footfalls, one of them turning out to be a wandering stag that scented them and darted away. The entire way he remained on high alert until they finally reached the hillside that hid the cave entrance.

“How much farther?” Mariah questioned, pulling a branch out of her way.

“There it is,” Ben said as they broke through the trees to the small clearing just before a brushy hill.

Mariah looked up and down the area. “I don’t see anything.”

“It’s just there,” he said, pointing to the narrow hole, hidden behind debris. “Thorne and I dug out the entrance last year. The tunnel itself was extremely narrow though and littered with rocks. Some places might be impassible now.”

He powered off his cellphone, then tucked it beside a nearby rock, adding, “Go back to town. I’ll call you when I return. If you don’t hear from me by six tonight, or if you

suspect anyone following you for any reason, then drive back to Timber Ridge immediately. Call your grandfather and tell him everything.”

“Not my dad?” she asked.

Ben shook his head. “Jake won’t believe your story. Rob will. He’ll convince your father. This whole thing concerns him as well. Where do you think you’re going?”

Mariah pulled the bush branch away and peered inside the dark cave opening. “Doesn’t look too bad.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he said, slinging the pack over one shoulder. “This cave is the deadliest thing on earth. Get away from it.”

She looked up to him with her brown doe eyes, making his gut clench. “I need to see these hieroglyphs for myself.”

“Are you nuts? Absolutely not!”

She arched a brow at him. “I’m going, Ben, no arguments.”

“There’s no argument, because you’re not going.”

She crossed her arms. “You can’t stop me from following.”

“You’ll get lost and die inside the mountain,” he ground out. “There’s a maze of tunnels and rooms that goes on for God knows how long.”

“Then you’d better let me come with you, so I don’t.”

He growled at her, making his eyes glow and canines lengthen for emphasis. “Don’t make me hogtie you here to a tree, Mariah.”

“You could try,” she said, making her own eyes glow at him.

They glared daggers at each other for a full minute, until Ben cursed and turned away.

Stubborn, stubborn she-wolf princess.

“Keep close to me,” he ground out, slapping a flashlight into her hand. “Move when I say move, stop when I say stop, and don’t touch anything. It’ll be a miracle if either of us gets through this tunnel of horrors without the whole mountain coming down on top of us.”

Both stepped cautiously through what remained of the narrow tunnel. More rocks had fallen since then, partially blocking their way in places. Ben only hoped the portal room itself was not completely collapsed now.

“Ow!” Mariah hissed behind him.

Ben whipped his light beam around to see her sprawled forward on the ground. He raced back and helped her up.

“Are you okay, Mariah?”

“Ow. Yeah, I’m fine,” she muttered, sucking through her teeth as she brushed dirt off her scraped palms.

“This was a bad idea. You should go back.”

“No, I’m fine. Let’s just keep going.”

Ben waited a beat, considering a way to force her to go back. There was none.

“Okay, but be careful and watch your step,” he ordered.

Three more turns in the tunnel, and Ben finally found the mark on the wall he had made a year ago.

“This is it,” he said, sweeping the light beam towards the opening on the right. “Let me go in first to make sure it’s stable.”

“Don’t take too long.”

With dread, Ben stepped into the black darkness.

Instantly the icy tunnels they had squeezed through for the past thirty minutes blasted hot, rancid air static with an unearthly vibration he remembered and dreaded.

Ben swept the beam around the cave room littered with rocks and debris. Then he raised it to the south wall, shining it

onto those ancient hieroglyphs that had thrown him back and forth through time.

No turning back now.

“Whoa. You really weren’t making this up.”

Ben whipped around to glare at Mariah standing there. “Dammit, Mariah! I told you to stay out of here until I was sure it’s safe.”

“But you can’t do that, can you?” she countered. “According to you, this entire mountain is unsafe.”

“Yes, but...” He dragged a rough hand down his jaw, adding, “Okay, you’ve seen them. Now go back—”

“Uh, why are those drawings on the wall glowing?”

Ben whipped around to see the glyphs pulsating with green light.

Just like they did last time!

“Crap! Mariah you have to get out of—!”

The rock walls and ground began to vibrate and rumble like thunder.

Dust and pebbles rained down, threatening a cave-in.

This was it! Whatever triggered the time portal before had somehow ignited it again!

Ben pulled out his hunting knife and sliced across his palm, drawing blood.

“Get out now!” he yelled at Mariah as the quaking increased. “Go! Now!”

“Ben!” she screamed.

He pushed her towards the cave opening at the same moment the earth beneath their feet rose and buckled like an ocean wave.

His arm instinctively swung around bracing her against him, just as another ground wave threw them forward towards the blinking glyphs.

Reflexively, Ben reached up to brace his collision, the blood from his palm smearing across the symbols. That's when he noticed that Mariah had done the same, her own blood mixing with his.

Before he could retract her hand, he was yanked away by some unseen force and thrown into a strange suspended space. It grabbed at his body, lengthening and stretching and tearing him into bits.

He was floating, spinning, falling. Again and again and again.

Without warning, Ben was thrown down with a force that should have shattered every bone in his body and splattered him across the rocky ground. He landed with a painful thud onto his back, knocking the wind from his lungs for several agonizing seconds.

God, that was painful.

This time was different though. It felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest.

“B-Ben? W-What happened?”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 17

His eyes snapped open in horror. "Mariah?"

"Yeah, ow. What just happened?"

Ben rolled her off his body and staggered to his feet while helping her up. He gave Mariah a quick assessment. She seemed to be in one piece.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. What happened? Did the tunnel cave in or something?"

Or something, Ben grimly mused.

"No, we're okay. Let's get out of here," he said, huffing hard.

Ben didn't want to voice his true suspicions just yet. He would know soon enough anyhow.

He checked the cave, then gritted his teeth. During the jarring panic, the backpack had slipped from his grip and now wasn't anywhere around.

There went his supplies.

Another mild quake made him tense up. No time to check around. This was still an unstable, dangerous place.

"Let's go," he instructed quickly.

Together they picked their way through the tunnel until they were finally, gratefully out of the cave. The markers he had noted before entering the cave—a pine sapling by the rock was gone. So was his cellphone. If he needed confirmation that he had jumped elsewhere in time, he had it.

The question was—*when* did they land?

Quickly they hiked through the woods, finally stopping at the unpaved road where they had parked.

"Uh, Ben? Where's the car?" Mariah asked, checking around.

He arched a brow. “Somewhere in the future, I suspect.”

Hopefully.

Another problem, he realized. If any Arcan Hunter had followed them, he would eventually find the abandoned car and work his way towards the cave. Then venture inside.

Dammit, he should have expected Mariah to stubbornly follow him through the tunnel. He would have then made arrangements for her car to be retrieved by someone he trusted.

Dumb mistake on his part.

“Future? No, that’s impossible! I’m still here.”

“You are,” he grumbled. “Which means that whatever genetic anomaly I have in my blood that allows me to travel through time, you must have, too.”

“Me? No, I can’t—!”

“Actually, you have no idea whose genes you carry.”

“What do I do now? What do *we* do now?”

Great question.

Squinting, Ben checked around. There would be no way to tell what time period they landed in until they reached town. Still, even with their superhuman speed, it would take all night to hike down the mountain and across the city bridge, and time was definitely of the essence now.

“I have a few friends at the Snoqualmie campgrounds,” he said. “If we’re lucky, I’ll find one who can help us out. I suggest we both shift into our wolves and head there. In that form it should only take a half hour.”

Mariah grimaced at the prospect, but nodded.

A few minutes later, both were fully shifted into their respective wolf forms, then pounded on all four paws through the forest and down the mountainside.

Past the tribal hotel and fairgrounds, they finally reached the newly expanded cultural museum and administrative

buildings.

Keeping out of sight at the edge of the forest, Ben peeked through the lattice of blackberry vines to the rear parking lot. By the direction of the sun, it was mid-afternoon, and there weren't many cars parked. He waited until any person he recognized exited the building, but it was at least twenty minutes until one finally appeared.

It was genuine luck, too. The forty-something blond man would be the ideal person to help fit them out with the things they needed to continue their mission.

Ben stamped his forepaw for Mariah to stay hidden. He then checked around and cautiously padded forward until reached the back bumper of the blue BMW, then peeked around to face Logan Thorne.

“Whoa! Uh, n-nice wolf,” he said, raising his palms.

Ben heaved a tired breath, rolling his eyes. Then to let Thorne know his identity, he made them glow for a beat, making Thorne yelp and jump back.

“Oh! Wait, then you're a...”

Ben nodded his muzzle, then sat on his haunches in an effort to let Thorne know his non-lethal intentions.

It worked. Thorne visibly eased and looked him over.

“You're one of them then,” he said.

Ben nodded again.

“And I know you, too. Ben? Ben Bryant?”

Ben nodded, and Thorne relaxed even more.

“Okay, bud, glad that's it's you and not some wild wolf ready to make a meal of me. What are you doing here? Didn't you travel back to your own time in the future?”

Ben gave an irritated growl, then scraped the ground with his paw.

“Right, you're back then,” Thorne said, guessing. “The reason must be a good one too, I take it.”

Another nod from Ben.

“You know,” Thorne said, checking around to see that no bystanders were listening, “it’ll be a hell of a lot easier to communicate if you shift back to your human self. I, uh, have an extra set of clothes here in the trunk you can use.”

Ben gave a nod of thanks, then turned towards the woods and gave a quiet gruff. Mariah then cautiously peeked her head through the blackberry vines.

“Ah,” Thorne said with hiked brows. “You’re not alone this time. I suppose I could go back inside the center and scrounge up something for him, too.”

Ben gave his muzzle a shake.

“Oh. Her, then. Go back into the woods and stay out of sight. I’ll meet you there.”

Later, Ben headed across the parking lot fully human and clothed in black tee shirt and jeans. Mariah followed, wearing a traditional beaded dress, leggings and moccasins.

“You’re joking, right?” she remarked, holding her arms out in display. “Not too conspicuous.”

Logan winced, saying, “Sorry, that’s all they had in the museum gift shop.” He held out his right hand to her, introducing himself. “So what are you two doing here?”

“First, what date is it?” Ben asked.

“Oh, right. Well, it’s August 13, 2008. Uh, Sunday at four-thirty, to be exact. Hopefully this is the time you were targeting?”

“It is. Good.”

“Ben,” Mariah whispered, touching his arm. “It’s three hours before I’m born. We don’t have much time.”

Thorne’s brows hiked.

“Is there somewhere private we can talk?” Ben asked him.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “Come with me.”

Thorne led them inside the administration building and down a few hallways to a small utilitarian office, closing the door behind them.

“Maggie’s letting me use this until my company completes work on their student rec center next to the high school. You remember Maggie Thunders? She’s on the elder council now. Can you believe it?”

“I can,” Ben assured, refraining from sharing that she would eventually become full chief and CEO of the Snoqualmie tribal nation in fifteen years. It was never wise to give information about future events. Even to a trusted friend.

“It’s safe to talk now,” Thorne said, closing the door after them. “Why are you here, and how can I help?”

Ben briefly filled his friend in on the situation and reasons for his coming back to that specific time. To Thorne’s credit, he didn’t interrupt and took the unbelievable information in stride.

“There’s not much you can do personally,” Ben concluded. “But it would help if you drove us to the edge of Timber Ridge so that we can sneak inside and find out the truth of what happened the night of Mariah’s birth.”

“Which is today,” Mariah reminded. “Three hours from now.”

“I can do you one better,” Logan said. “You can have my car. You’ll need wheels to get you back to the cave when you’re finished with your surveillance. No, it’s okay. I can call one of my people to come get me here at the cultural center.”

“Thanks, man,” Ben said as Thorne passed him the car keys. “I owe you again.”

“Hardly,” Thorne grunted. “It was your mother’s investment advice over a century ago that made my family obscenely rich to begin with. If anything, we owe you. Hey, anything you can share with me now?”

Ben hesitated. Still, Logan didn’t press or guilt him into giving away future events. He was a good man with pure

motives.

“Tesla.”

Logan hiked his brows. “Really?”

“Really.”

Logan shrugged. “Thanks for the tip. Take care, both of you. Hope to see you in the future again sometime.”

Ben shook his hand and thanked him, then grabbed Mariah’s hand and pushed out the door.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 18

Mariah grimaced at the overgrown area where Ben parked the BMW and covered it with added brush. It was a remote area near the security twenty-foot stone wall that surrounded Bryant's Mountain. That still didn't mean they could get over it somehow without detection. She knew her uncle's security measures too well.

"We'll be arrested in minutes," she said grimly.

"It's only been a few years on this timeline since I was here last," Ben assured, assessing the towering pine tree next to the wall. "I doubt the guards have discovered and repaired the breach since then. We can scale this tree, then leap over and drop down on the other side. It wasn't too hard last time."

Mariah wrinkled her nose at the tree in proximity to the wall. "And if they did fix it?"

"Then I hope you have your running moccasins on, princess."

She sliced him a hooded look. "Ha, ha."

"Honestly," Ben said, assessing her wolfishly. "You look good enough to eat in that costume. Maybe you could buy a few more for some fun private time later."

"Much later," she muttered. "Let's do this before I change my mind."

"If you're having second thoughts, Mariah," Ben said, serious now, "you could always stay here and keep an eye on the car. I can find out what we need on my own to open up a formal investigation back in our own time."

A tempting thought.

Cowardly, too.

In less than three hours, she would be officially born and switched inside their community hospital. Like it or not, she needed to be there when her mother gave birth. Both of them.

Mariah shook her head. “No, we need to split our efforts to find out the truth in time. Let’s stick to the original plan.”

While she was surveilling the hospital births, Ben would track Walter Paxton. He suspected her godfather to be involved with this shadow coup to overthrow the Bryant monarchy. Mariah didn’t believe it, not of him or her Uncle Sean, but Ben shared his own father’s warnings and insider information. It couldn’t be ignored either way.

Ben clamored up the pine tree like a squirrel, then rocked back and forth twice before launching himself into the air and over the towering wall. Mariah winced, waiting for the sound of his painful thud on the other side. Or security alarms blaring.

Nothing.

“Ben?” she called quietly. “Did you...Are you alright?”

“I made it,” he called out. “We should be okay. The security camera on this side shows that it’s still not working.”

Mariah wasn’t sure if that was good news or not.

“Your turn,” Ben called again.

She grunted. “Okay, here goes.”

Gritting her teeth, Mariah mimicked Ben’s moves up the tree, then the rocking motion to gain leverage. Counting to three, she leaped in a high arc that cleared the top of the wall with inches to spare, landing agilely on the balls of her feet.

“Impressive,” Ben remarked with hiked brows.

“Thanks. Let’s not do that again, shall we?”

“It’ll take us twenty minutes at were-speed to cross the forest here and make it to town,” Ben said gazing out towards the grassy meadow edging the forest. “That’ll give us both two and half hours to track our targets, then make it back to the hospital before the Prima Alpha is rushed into emergency delivery.”

“Got it. Be safe,” she told him.

“You, too. Don’t forget to stay out of sight. We can’t allow anyone to know what we’re doing and our ability to time travel.”

“Yeah, yeah. See you in two hours.”

Taking off at were-speed over the grassy hill and into the forest, they ran together until they reached the outskirts of town. There they parted company, Mariah heading straight for the hospital.

Step one was to locate Darlene Ryan. Since she had no idea what the woman looked like, Mariah planned to pose as a former patient to seek out the “kind nurse” she wanted to personally thank for taking such good care of her during her maternity stay. Once she was directed to Ryan, she would covertly follow the nurse around to wait for her mother’s dangerous delivery to take place.

Her second task was to find Collins and the intern who assisted him. She had a feeling that would be more of a challenge though.

This is where Mariah planned to stray from Ben’s instructions. After warring with her own self-interests and conscience, she decided to thwart any effort to make the birth switch with the Bryant newborn.

It was a grave personal sacrifice. Mariah understood this meant that she as an infant would remain with her own birthmother and would never become the royal daughter of the High Alpha. She would never be raised by Jake and Nicole Bryant, parents she loved dearly. Never know her sisters—Tawnya, Katrina and Avril. Or her aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents.

All of her relationships and the trajectory of her entire life would be changed in the blink of an eye.

You don’t have to do this. Just let things unfold as they’re going to. Then you will remain the royal princess you are.

That greedy demon once again hissed its malignant taunts inside her brain. It was very tempting to obey. So tempting.

But it was time she kicked that beast to the curb for good.

No, I'm doing this, no matter what happens. It's the right thing to do.

With new resolve, Mariah reached the hospital and walked inside the main entrance. She checked the time—4:50 pm. She needed to work fast.

Ignoring the curious looks at her in traditional Indian maiden costume, she punched the elevator button, then took it to the fourth floor maternity wing. She then headed up to the check-in reception desk, smiling at the woman just hanging up the phone.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

“Yes, thank you,” Mariah said. “I was a former patient here, and I’ve been meaning to come back to thank one of the nurses here who had been so generous and instructive to me during my stay. Plus, I promised to show her photos of my son. Do you know if she’s working today?”

“What’s her name?” the receptionist asked.

“Darlene Ryan.”

The woman checked her computer, along with the printout in front of her.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “Nurse Ryan’s not on the schedule sheet.”

“I’m sure she should be working today. I mean, she told me that she always works the weekends and it’s Sunday.”

The woman checked both schedules again. “Sorry, she’s not here and won’t be until next Tuesday. Did you want to leave her a note? I could give it to the nurse supervisor on the floor.”

Mariah offered a nervous smile. “No, that’s all right. I’ll just try and catch her another time. Thanks for your help.”

“My pleasure. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Actually, there might be. Do you know if Dr. Collins is on duty this evening?”

The receptionist checked the computer, scrolled a bit, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, no. Was there a reason you needed him?”

Mariah gave a little wave, saying, “It’s nothing much. Again, just a thank you call. He had been very helpful during my delivery.”

The woman’s brows drew together. “Delivery? Why would the chief surgeon deliver your child? Are you sure you don’t mean Dr. Adam Rollins? He’s one of our O.B.’s here.”

Mariah blinked hard, then quickly recovered her expression. “Yes, you’re probably right. It’s all such a blur now.”

“Yes, Dr. Rollins is here today,” the woman said, checking her computer schedule. “I can page him, if you’d like.”

“No, that’s fine. I don’t want to disturb his work, and I should be going anyway. Thanks again.”

Quickly Mariah headed back to the elevators, punching the down button.

This was wrong. Collins should be there right now. So should Darlene Ryan. At least according to Barbara Gregory.

None of it made sense. If Ryan wasn’t officially scheduled today, why did she tell her roommate..?

Unless it was all a lie, and Gregory was in on the birth switch, too.

Crap, she didn’t even consider this before!

Only one way to find out though. She had to go to their cottage and find out if both nurses were in on this together.

Mariah checked the wall clock—5:20 pm.

She was running out of time.

Stay or go? She had two hours before her mother would be rushed into emergency delivery. Could she make it back in time?

The elevator doors dinged and parted open. Making her decision, Mariah took it down, then headed quickly out of the lobby and main entrance.

According to Gregory, the cottage they rented was located on the outskirts of the other side of town. The fastest and most direct route would be cutting through the town square park.

Now came the tricky part—strolling fast through town while not attracting too much undo attention. Much harder to do with her Native American attire.

Mariah reached the large tiered fountain in the middle of the park. A half mile in length, she would take it east, then cross the main street...

“Elena!”

Mariah was nearly knocked off her feet when a young boy crashed into her, clinging to her legs with an iron grip.

“I’ve missed you!” he cried, burying his face into her stomach. “You’ve been gone so long. Where were you?”

“Uh...”

A stout, curly haired woman in floral dress jaunted up to them, huffing with exasperation.

“Liam Jeremy Paxton, I’ve told you a hundred times not to run off..! Oh. It’s you.”

Mariah blinked at the woman she instantly recognized as the Paxton’s cook and house manager. “Ursella?”

The woman grunted. “And who else would I be?” She gave her a disapproving up-down, adding, “Gone back to your Snoqualmie heritage, have you? I suspect you’ve been hiding out at the reservation then. I told everyone as much.”

“Yes, I-I thought it would be best. Well, it was nice seeing you again. Say hello to everyone for me.”

“No, Elena, don’t go!” little Liam cried, holding tighter.

Mariah tried to pry him off, but he clung to her like a barnacle.

“Come on, Liam,” Ursella ordered, pulling him off. “Miss Elena needs to get back to her business. Let go now.”

Business?

Perhaps there was more to this chance encounter that might give her some answers.

“What business are you talking about, Ursella?”

The woman gave her the stink eye, making Mariah’s back go up. “You know fine well what business, Elena Martinez. It’s well known what you were up to with the master all that time, no matter how sneaky you thought you were. I’m sure you think he owes you something now. Well, he doesn’t.”

Walter Paxton had another mistress?

With one of his trusted staff employees, no less.

The man sure did get around.

“One more thing, missy,” the cook leaned in, warning quietly. “If you think you can waltz back into the family’s lives and disrupt things again, I’ve something to say about it. Poor little Liam here cried his eyes out for a week after you up and left him four months ago. If you had any conscience whatsoever, you’d go back to the reservation and stay away for good this time.”

* * *

Across from the Great Lodge, Ben peered around the office building, waiting for any sign of Walter Paxton. He had lost the man after he had driven away, overhearing his phone conversation about something that needed attending to at the Lodge.

Finally the entrance doors opened, but it was Sean Paxton who exited.

Not the brother he wanted, but Sean would do. If anything, he would lead Ben back to his older brother.

Ben watched as the younger Paxton said something to his aide, then headed across the street alone and picked up his pace.

“In a hurry?” Ben muttered.

Nodding to Paxton as he passed him on the sideway, Ben waited five beats, then casually followed the man down the street.

At the end of the corner, Sean stopped, checked around, then headed right into a back alley. Ben followed, halting at the corner, then looked around the building into the shadowed alley.

It was more like an outdoor mall, its shops and sidewalk vendors now shut down for the evening. There was a single sandwich shop at the end, closed as well, and a black bearded man stood up from the outdoor bistro table when Paxton approached him.

“Is it done?” Sean questioned tightly.

Black beard nodded. “Cassidy gave the Prima a double dose of Oxytocin an hour ago, telling her that it was a vitamin shot. She already spiked the bodyguard’s drink, and the woman went home sick.”

“Too sick to take Nicole to the hospital when her contractions start,” Sean remarked.

“Exactly. That way Cassidey will be there to take the Prima to the hospital herself. Don’t worry, she knows the right place to roll her into.”

“Are you sure we can trust this girl?”

“Tia? No problem. She’s a broke intern who’s grateful to have her overdue school loans paid off for any reason.”

“Perfect,” Paxton said. “Jake and the others are off investigating Bart Warren’s remains thirty miles away. I made sure the body was in an area out of cell communication, so all of them will be tied up there for hours.”

“That should be plenty of time,” Black Beard said, checking his wristwatch.

Ben straightened, recognizing the name from the last time he was in Timber Ridge. Bart Warren was one of the Elder Council members. Or had been, apparently.

So he was dead then.

And since Sean Paxton sounded like he had something to do with the dump site, he must have orchestrated the elder's homicide himself.

"You're sure that you're prepared to terminate the Bryant kid, Collins?" Sean Paxton questioned doubtfully. "You doctors take that oath to save lives, not take them. There can't be any hesitation in this. We have a very small window of opportunity to terminate the newborn without witnesses."

The doctor shook his head. "I'm good. Don't worry. Stillbirths happen all the time. The family will be too grieved to look too closely into the circumstances."

"What if the Prima conceives again?" Paxton questioned.

"She won't," Collins said. "I'll make sure of it during the emergency caesarian. I'll note that it was a lifesaving measure."

"Good. I have the balance ready to wire into your Jamaican account the hour that it's all done," Paxton said.

"No one will suspect," Richard Collins assured. "But before I do this, I'll expect you to wire the five hundred grand in the next hour."

"Our agreement was *after* that it's done and no one suspects."

"*Before*, Paxton, or I'm backing out altogether, then going to the High Alpha and his Prime Enforcer to tell them everything. Including your part in trying to murder him five years ago at the Spring Gala. Yeah, I know about that, too."

Paxton went rigid. "Blackmail, is it?"

"Not blackmail—insurance."

There was a silent standoff, until Sean Paxton jutted his chin, saying, "Fine. I'll call to make the wire transfer now."

"Good. Then we're still a go." The doctor's pager buzzed. "It's Cassidy. The Prima's being rushed to the hospital as we speak. I'll expect to see the money in my

account when I'm finished, Paxton. Or you and your brother are."

"Just go do your job."

Sean Paxton glared at the doctor's broad back as the man stalked down the shop alley. His own cellphone rang, and Ben sharpened his supercharged wolf hearing in order to hear both sides of the conversation.

"Yeah, what's up?" Sean asked.

"You gotta help me!" his brother Walter rushed out. "It's Elena. She's...God, she's dead."

* * *

Mariah quickly crossed the park to the other side of town, still shaken by the sensation of a weeping six-year-old Liam clinging to her like a lifeline. Even more shaken by what Ursella Conrad implied to his family employee, Elena Martinez.

Who obviously looked strikingly like herself, Mariah mused.

A woman having a sexual affair with Walter Paxton. Who then abruptly left four months prior to this date in history.

It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure out this woman must be her birthmother. Meaning Walter Paxton was probably her birthfather.

God.

Did he know?

He must. He had to.

But if he did, why would he allow the switch of his own child with that of the Bryant's newborn?

The only logical answer was that Walter Paxton purposely meant to have her raised as Jake and Nicole Bryant's child. Perhaps to cover up his own mistake and bastard child?

Or something else even more nefarious.

Mariah gripped her roiling stomach at the heartlessness of this man who she had looked up to and adored all of her life. She felt betrayed. On so many levels.

Still, there was no time to sort through the horrific questions and implications now. She needed to get across town to find Darlene Ryan and the truth of what really happened when she was born.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 19

Passing the last residential street, Mariah raced through the woods until reaching the edge. From that vantage point, she saw a scattering of dilapidated cottages in the valley below.

Mariah scrutinized each, but there was no way to know which was Ryan's, if any.

The sun was setting over Bryant's Mountain in the distance. She was losing time fast before her mother would give birth. She should forget this idea and head back to the hospital.

Still, she was already here. She might as well knock on a few doors...

Tires squealed down the road below, drawing Mariah's attention to a silver Lincoln Continental skidding to a stop behind a blue trimmed white shanty. She was just about to question why anyone who could afford a luxury car like this be living in these broken-down houses, when Walter Paxton himself jumped out of the car and inside.

What was he here?

But grimly Mariah knew.

Skidding down the grassy rise, she sneaked down and around the cottage, then ducked behind Walter's sedan.

A woman wailed loudly, and Walter hissed for her to shut up before one of the neighbors heard.

Mariah crept around the tiny house until reaching an open window. Silently she edged up to peer over the sill.

She spotted Walter first, his face sweaty, his fingers raking dark, damp hair back again and again as he paced the area like a caged tiger.

A woman on her hands and knees wailed and wept as she desperately scrubbed the wood planked floor with red paint

from a bucket.

Not red paint, Mariah then realized. *Blood*.

It was then she noticed the black-haired woman laying unmoving on the corner twin bed.

How could she sleep so soundly with all that commotion?

Not sleeping, Mariah then realized. This woman was sickly pale and staring sightlessly at the ceiling in the blood-soiled bed. This woman who looked strikingly like Mariah herself was stone cold dead.

My mother.

An infant's cry pulled Mariah's attention to the squalling newborn bundled in an empty drawer pulled from the dresser. This baby that was obviously herself.

"What happened, Darlene?" Walter accused. "Sean said you could deliver—!"

"I told him that I could *help* in a delivery," Ryan growled at him in an Irish brogue. "But I'm no midwife or obstetrician. I did my best. She hemorrhaged and bled out, simple as that. I told Sean that your girlfriend should've delivered in the hospital. I told him!"

"She's dead."

"Very observant," Ryan grumbled, swiping tears off her stained and bloody cheek with the back of her hand. "We need to call the authorities—"

"No! We can't tell anyone about this! I-I need to talk to Sean. He'll know what to do. And quit scrubbing the damn floor. I'll have my cleanup crew come here and scour the place. There can be no trace of what happened, or we're all cooked. Wait here."

"Wait? Do you hear that screamin'?" Ryan ground out, viciously tossing and splashing the scrub brush into the bucket of reddened water. "The baby's hungry, and I don't have a bottle or formula or diapers or nothin'. Elena sure as hell can't breastfeed the kid in her state. What am I supposed to do?"

“Figure something out!” he shot back. “I’ll be right back.”

Before Ryan could protest further, Walter shot out of the room. Mariah watched from the corner of the house as he exited the rear door, pulled out his cellphone and frantically paced beside the bumper of his car.

“You gotta help me!” Walter cried out. “It’s Elena. She’s...God, she’s dead.”

Mariah leaned forward, sharpening her wolf hearing in order to hear both sides of the conversation.

“What do you mean, she’s dead?” Sean Paxton returned.

“I mean she’s dead, dammit!” Walter answered through gritted teeth. “Your incompetent girlfriend let her bleed to death. Now I’m stuck with a corpse and a kid that’s going to ruin my marriage, reputation and expel me from the Council.”

“Then get rid of her,” Sean said. “Your ex-lover’s dead. No one knows about her returning to Timber Ridge last week, so no harm done.”

Mariah’s heart stopped at what she just heard.

How could she be so wrong about her godfather and his brother?

Ben was right. Both were heartless, evil men.

“Your girlfriend knows,” Walter reminded darkly, turning back to the cottage. “She’s already furious that you manipulated her into delivering Elena’s baby. She’ll talk. I saw it in her eyes.”

“Don’t worry about her,” Sean said. “I can talk Darlene into anything. Always have. Right now, you have bigger issues, like getting rid of your girlfriend without anyone else knowing.”

“How?”

“Easy, idiot. Just take her body to the southwest end of Aurora Lake and bury her in the woods. It’s remote enough.

Then wait for me there. We may have a second body to bury now.”

“The Bryant boy?”

“No,” Sean answered. “Collins just became another major liability.”

“But we still need him to kill the heir,” Walter reminded.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be after the kid is terminated. I’ll go to the hospital myself and make sure it’s done. Then I’ll knock Collins off and drive his body to the lake. He already geared up his resignation letter, so one will suspect that he’s missing.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. The only loose end is that kid your ex wanted to foist on you. Hmm, we can bury it with its mother, I suppose. Make sure Darleen doesn’t know. I doubt if she would go along with that.”

“Kill my..?” Walter dragged a hand through his dark hair. “Crap, Sean. How many more people do we have to murder before it’s enough? Where will it end?”

“It will end when a Paxton is sitting in the High Alpha seat at the Great Lodge, as it should have been all along. Damn, Rufus Bryant’s dead eyes and blood contract.”

At the infant’s wail, Walter whipped his head back to the cottage, his own eyes widening.

“Wait, I have an idea,” he said. “What if we replace the Bryant newborn with mine? The baby’s only an hour old, and Elena herself is dead. No one else knows about this except your own girlfriend, and you said she’d do anything for you.”

“Pretty risky, brother.”

“No, it’s perfect!” Walt raced out. “Think of it. Darlene could sneak into the hospital and switch the babies out herself. You plan to get rid of Collins anyhow, and you say you can talk that simpleton woman into doing anything you ask.”

“A blood Paxton inserted into the royal Bryant family,” Sean quietly mused. “Unfortunately you had a female.”

“We can tweak or eliminate any hospital records that identifies the baby as a male,” Walter said, gaining steam. “Then you and I can spearhead a campaign to change the monarchy rules that require only males to inherit the crown.”

“Possible. It would take some years for the kid to grow up and take over the pack.”

“And in the meantime, you and I can make sure she grows up in the Paxton way,” Walter added. “I’ll even offer to become her godfather.”

“Hmm. We’ll have to find a way to eliminate the three older Bryant girls, so that the Direct Heir position falls on your daughter.”

“We can do it,” Walter said. “We have time on our side. Lots of it.”

“Then once she’s officially ruling, you can ‘confess’ your paternity to her,” Sean added. “Encourage her to take up her rightful Paxton name. Change the pack’s name to match hers.”

“Exactly. It’s what we’ve always wanted.”

* * *

Narrowing his eyes at Sean Paxton, Ben listened to both sides of this traitorous phone conversation.

His dad had called it then. No only in suspecting the Paxton brothers of various assassination attempts in order to usurp wolfpack power, but that the younger brother was the dominant one in this dark duo.

And now Sean Paxton was heading straight to the hospital to manage the regicide of the Bryant heir and the murder of Richard Collins after it was finished.

Well, not on his watch.

Ducking out of sight, Ben watched Paxton exit the empty outdoor mall, then head back up the street towards the Great

Lodge where his car was parked.

Ben headed the opposite direction to the hospital three blocks away. "See you soon, Sean."

* * *

Mariah's stomach gripped in horror at what she just heard. It was all the more important to reach the hospital now.

Forget about preventing the switch of two infants. She needed to get there before they killed Nicole Bryant's son!

She ran with were-speed back through the woods, residences, across the town square and straight for the hospital itself.

Rushing inside the lobby, Mariah checked the reception wall clock. Fifteen minutes before the boy was officially born.

Was her mother there yet?

Probably. Had to be.

At least in theory.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" the receptionist asked, seeing her distress. "Oh, you're back."

"The Prima Alpha," Mariah rushed out, not caring that the woman recognized her. "I was told she was brought in here just a bit ago."

The woman checked her computer, shaking her head. "No, ma'am, she hasn't been admitted. Did she come through Emergency or straight to...ma'am?"

Mariah raced around the corner to the stairwell and took it up to the fourth floor maternity wing. She rushed up and down the corridors, checking rooms, departments.

Her mother wasn't anywhere. Not in any of the labor and delivery rooms. Not in the recovery or patient rooms. Not even the employees' lounge. Nowhere.

Where did Collins perform the procedure then?

Mariah frantically thought.

The receptionist mentioned that Collins wasn't one of their obstetricians, but the hospital's chief surgeon. Meaning he might utilize the general O.R., a place where he had the proper meds, machines, setup and equipment. No surgeries were usually scheduled at that late hour as well, so no curious staff members would be hanging around.

It would be the perfect place to stage an illegal surgery without notice.

Mariah ran back to the elevator and checked the wall listing, then raced down the stairwell one floor and into the first operating room.

Not there.

She jaunted down the hallway, ignoring the annoyed calls and curious looks from everyone she passed, then checked the next operating room. It was in use, but the patient wasn't her mother.

"Where are you?" she muttered anxiously, checking up and down the corridor.

Mariah started to head to yet another room, but was stopped by nurse in green scrubs, gripping her arm.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but you're not allowed in this area. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Um, my mother is having a...an emergency procedure. Now. I told her I would be there for her."

"There's a waiting area down this hallway for family members."

"No, you don't understand! I need to check—"

"I suggest you go there now, or I'm calling security. Your choice."

Mariah wanted to shove the stubborn nurse aside and bolt for the next O.R., but knew it would only stall her efforts. Quickly, she nodded and turned in the direction indicated.

This was all wrong. Where would Collins take her mother to perform a C-section without notice from the other

staff? Even that nurse had noticed and stopped her.

Mariah went back to the elevator, studying the directional sign—all general, and none that would...

Outpatient!

Mariah remembered the procedure room where she had a broken wrist repaired by a nervous intern two years ago. First floor, east wing at the end of the hallway. She even exited the cramped clinical room to the rear parking lot.

That had to be where the intern Cassidy took her mother.

Racing down the fire stairwell, then through the maze of hallways on the first floor following the directional signs and arrows, Mariah burst through the door of the outpatient surgical room.

There lay her mother, Nicole Bryant, anesthetized and unconscious on a flat table, the doctor in green scrubs holding up a slippery, squalling male infant in one hand, a filled syringe in the other.

* * *

Ben waited around the corner of the hospital's rear parking lot.

On cue, Paxton's black Lexus raced up to the side exit of the building, skidding to a stop. When the man jumped out, Ben sauntered from his hiding place to block the door.

"Sean Milo Paxton," Ben said. "I'd like a word with you, if you can spare the time."

"No! Out of my way."

"Ah, come now. Just a minute or two," Ben said, shifting this way and that to block Paxton's attempt to push past him.

"I said no. Move."

"I don't think so, Paxton. We have some business to attend to first."

"Look, bud, get out of my way now before I pick you up and toss your ass across this parking lot!"

Sean made his narrowed eyes glow gold for emphasis.

“You could try,” he said, widening his smile and folding his arms across his chest.

Paxton lengthened his canine fangs and raised his claws. “Get out of my way, dog. I’m not telling you again.”

“You’re not murdering the Bryant heir, Paxton,” Ben stated, making his own eyes glow green and claws and canines lengthen. “I’m here to stop you. I’m here to stop both you and your brother from this latest attempt to take over the Bryant pack.”

Sean went rigid, his eyes dimming and widening. “How..? I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Shall I refresh your memory then? Heard you connive with that doctor friend of yours a bit ago.”

Paxton narrowed his eyes, then moved to step around Ben, but Ben circled in counterpoint to stop his hospital entry.

“Not going to happen, Sean,” Ben said. “Even if you scum-sucking Paxtons manage to murder all of Jake Bryant’s kids, there will still be an heir to the Bryant crown. Me.”

That stopped Sean in his tracks.

He assessed Ben with a long, wide look, then sucked in a breath. “No. No, you can’t be...”

“Michael Bryant?” Ben added for him. “No, I’m not. I’m his son.”

Another panicked beat of silence.

“You’re lying,” Sean hissed quietly. “Mike never had a son.”

Ben cracked a dark, cocky grin saying, “Not sure, are you? Mom says I do look a bit like him. I’d show you my driver’s license, but then my hands wouldn’t be free to whip your traitorous ass. Go back to the hole you crawled from, Paxton. You and your brother are finished.”

Sean lit his eyes to flaming red, his fangs lengthening even more. “No, we’re just getting started.”

Ben's own eyes beaded fireball red, then he raised his razor sharp claws. "So be it."

* * *

The doctor held the infant in one arm, a filled syringe in his right fingers. The young woman braced against the back wall stock-still watched in horror.

"No!" Mariah screamed, leaping for the infant.

Grabbing the baby stunned both doctors. Then Collins reflexively launched himself at Mariah.

"Give him to me!" he yelled, grasping at him.

"Over my dead body," Mariah spat, holding the boy out of his reach.

Collins grabbed at Mariah. She yelled and front kicked him in the gut with a force that shocked even her.

With an oof, he crashed against the wall and clattering machines and equipment. The female intern screamed, then dashed away.

With the baby in her arms, Mariah ran for the door. Collins grabbed her from behind and hauled her backwards.

There was a sharp jab in her shoulder, and blood gushed from the wound with the protruding scalpel.

In seconds her beaded shirt was soaked red. Mariah felt the blood draining from her fast, making her lightheaded, dizzy, nauseous. Her legs and feet lost feeling and gave out, and she slid to the tiled floor. Still, she clung to the yowling infant with all the strength that remained.

Then something deep and primal shifted within her. A protective maternal instinct that the doctor himself could never understand and had ignorantly ignited.

Fury boiled Mariah from the inside out, illuminating her eyes, flaring her nostrils. The doctor reached down to snatch the boy from her, but her teeth elongated and clamped down onto his arm, ripping flesh.

Collins yowled, his other hand gripping his exposed, bloody wrist.

Infuriated, he reached down to seize Mariah by the throat.

Then suddenly froze, shook, and collapsed.

Mariah gaped at the still seizing body at her feet. Then up at Darlene Ryan holding an empty syringe.

The nurse gasped, then absently dropped the syringe, gaping down at the dead doctor, then at Mariah holding the baby.

“D-Don’t hurt me, Elena, please!”

Elena?

Did she think..?

When faced from massive blood loss, Mariah clutched the infant against her chest, looking every bit like the ghost the superstitious nurse thought she was.

“No, I’m not—”

“See, I helped you,” Darlene pleaded. “I didn’t let him kill the boy. I never wanted this, I swear! It was Sean. He told me that we were only going to switch the babies, that’s all. Your daughter is safe. I put her upstairs in the nursery myself. Please believe me!”

Mariah weakly rocked the infant in her arms, nodding. “I believe you.”

“Oh God, what have I done? Tell me what to do, Elena. Please tell me what to do!”

Mariah looked down at the mewling infant in her arms. He was the true Bryant heir, her parents’ birth-son. He was the person whose royal life she had unknowingly stolen.

And she now had the power to return it.

But was that for the best? Not for her, but for him?

Until Walter and Sean Paxton were proven the pack traitors and murderers they were, her brother’s life would always be in danger from them.

Maybe Fate did play a part in their respective lives, the switch keeping him temporarily safe from their lethal plots. And Mariah herself now had a choice to play her own role in his precious protection.

Shakily she stood and handed the newborn to Ryan. “Here’s what you must do. And remember that I’ll always be watching you to make sure that you follow through...”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 20

Ben scowled down at Sean Paxton's body. He would have enjoyed doing a lot more damage to the dog other than knocking him unconscious. But that would have served no good purpose other than satisfying his own need for private justice.

"My dad sends his regards," he ground out, then gave Paxton a hard kick in the gut, eliciting an airy oof from the man. "And that's for Mariah and her mother. Both of them."

Ready to head into the hospital itself, Ben froze when the exit door burst open and a woman carrying a wrapped bundle ran out and across the parking lot towards a brown sedan.

The building door opened again, and Mariah stepped out with an unearthly pale look on her face, her right hand pressing against her right shoulder, that Ben saw was stained all around with blood.

"God, Mariah!" he yelled, racing up to her.

She lifted her other hand, shaking her head weakly. "I'm alright. It's starting to heal on its own now."

"Who did this?"

"Collins. Darlene Ryan stopped him from finishing his work."

"Ryan? Wait, was that..?"

A brown sedan backed up, then zoomed across the parking lot. Only then did Ben realize that the driver was the nurse, and the bundle she was carrying must have been the Bryant infant.

"Quick, she's getting away!"

"Let her go," Mariah said, touching his arm.

"Let her go?"

She nodded, huffing recovery breaths. "It'll be okay. Trust me." Mariah then jutted her chin down at Sean Paxton.

“Is he dead?”

Ben snarled down at him. “No, unfortunately. But the bastard will be very sore when he wakes. At least I kept him from murdering the doctor and possibly the heir.”

“Collins is already dead. And the heir is safe.”

“Ryan?”

Mariah nodded. “It was well deserved.” Swallowing hard, she added, “We’ve done what we came here to do. Now I have the answers I need to approach my father about what really happened and who’s trying to usurp his position. It’s time to go back.”

* * *

Using Paxton’s Lexus, they drove across Timber Ridge to the breach in the perimeter wall, then made their way back over. After uncovering Logan Thorne’s car from the brush, they raced back to the town of Silver Falls towards the mountain portal that would take them back to their own time.

“So Darlene Ryan thought you were Elena Martinez’s ghost,” Ben remarked with amazement after Mariah shared her side of the events. “Then she made off with the Bryant newborn at your order to save his life.”

“She may have killed the doctor,” she explained. “But it was self-defense. Sort of. Look, I knew the Paxtons would always be seeking a way to kill my brother as he grew up, so I told her to keep him hidden until I spoke to her again when I knew that he would be safe. Well, Elena’s ghost anyhow.”

“But we already tried to track her down back in our own time.”

She shrugged. “I have a better idea how to find her now. She’ll be able to lead us to my brother.”

Mariah was quiet a long moment, trying to piece it all together.

“It’s really a strange paradox,” she remarked.

“I’m sure seeing your infant self would be,” Ben said.

She shook her head. “Not that. Well, that was bizarre, yes. No, I’m talking about how all of these things worked together. But was still impossible.”

“How do you mean?”

“For one thing, Barbara Gregory mentioned that Darlene was superstitious and left in the middle of the night because her ‘Indian spirit guide’ told her to do so.”

“You were that guide, I take it. You do look the part.”

“That’s just it. Barbara told this to me *before* I ever knew about time travel, *before* I ever went back to become the ghost of Elena Martinez. How can that be?”

“Maybe Fate does play some part in all of this,” Ben suggested. “I’ve often wondered about such time fractures myself. In reality, I shouldn’t have even been born, because my parents shouldn’t have ever met. Or my own grandparents for that matter. Don’t think too hard on it. Some things just don’t fit together in our very limited mortal brains.”

Mariah let go of a long breath. “I suppose. Still, it’s going to keep me up a few nights, that’s for sure.”

Ben chuckled nervously. “I can relate.”

More silence.

“What else is wrong?” he asked.

Mariah flushed, her brows drawing together. “Walter was my godfather and Sean my uncle. They both loved me. I was sure of it. And I adored them, all of my life. Loved their families like my own. How could I have been so deceived?”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Ben said. “They did love and want the best for you. In their own sick, twisted way.”

She arched her brow at that.

“Anyhow, we have the truth and evidence needed to open a formal inquiry into the criminal activities the night I was born,” she said. “The Paxton brothers are toast, once my Uncle Neil digs into the investigation. Then their century-long political coup will finally end.”

“Hope so,” Ben agreed.

They exited the town and crossed the main bridge, then made the right turn onto a two-lane highway winding up the mountain. Another thirty minutes, and Ben parked at the end of the unpaved road. He tucked the car keys under the windshield visor as previously agreed, so Logan Thorne could retrieve them later.

“That’s it then,” he said, both getting out of the car. “Let’s go home.”

“I’m so with you there,” Mariah sighed, following him into the thick of the forest.

Ten minutes into the night hike, Ben walked over a fallen log, then froze.

“Wh—?”

Ben clamped a palm over Mariah’s mouth, pressing a finger to his lips.

Mariah sharpened her night vision and checked around, but saw nothing, heard nothing. Still, she trusted Ben’s self-preservation skills enough to know that he did.

What is it? Mariah mouthed at Ben, watching him slowly check in all directions.

He didn’t respond to her question, just continued to cautiously scan the wooded area. Mariah listened hard, but only heard owls, deer, bobcats and a few other nighttime forest residents.

“Move!” Ben suddenly yelled.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her away just as a shot rang out, blasting a tree branch inches above their heads.

Another shot followed, missing them, and they ran at full were-speed through the thick woods.

“Who?” she huffed, running for all she was worth.

“Arcans,” he answered through heavy breaths. “They must...suspect Thorne. Bugged...his car.”

The hillside clearing loomed up. The cave entrance was only seconds away.

They broke through the trees, then skidded to a halt in front of a man facing them with raised rifled trained on them.

Ben illuminated his eyes and lengthened his canines and claws. Leaping on top of the man in a blink, he swiped the rifle away as the shot rang out, then clamped down on the man's throat with his fangs.

The man yelled, gargled, then silenced.

"Get inside and go to the portal," he ordered her, dropping the body at his feet. "I'll keep the other one off you!"

"No!" she said, throwing her arms around his neck. "I'm not leaving you!"

"No choice," he said, prying her arms off him. "Arcans always hunt in pairs, and I have to take out the other one before he has a chance to tell others about this cave."

"Then I'll fight him with you!"

"No, Mariah! You have to go back and tell your father everything about the Paxtons, or all of this will be in vain."

He grabbed and kissed her hard on the mouth, then pushed her towards the entrance. "Now go. I promise I'll follow later."

"How much later?"

Ben cracked a cheerless smile. "As long as I have to, darlin'. Wait for me, will ya? Even if it's a few decades?"

Her eyes welled. "Always. Forever. I love you."

"Go!"

Two more hunters broke through the woods.

This was so not fair!

Ben growled at them, then flash-shifted into his black wolf, shredding the clothes off his body, then launched himself at them.

Conflicted to stay and help him, Mariah grimly knew what she had to do. Quickly she ducked into the cave, picking her way fast through the rocky, narrow tunnel to the portal room.

The symbols instantly glowed, sensing her return. Remembering the process, Mariah grabbed a sharp-edged rock and sliced across her palm, drawing blood, then spread it across the etchings.

The ground rippled and buckled.

She closed her eyes, bracing to be tumbled and tossed around through space like a load of drying laundry, focusing with all her strength on the exact date they left twenty-four years earlier.

Suddenly she was grabbed from nowhere and launched like a slingshot into space and time.



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 21

After waiting several beats for the quaking to subside and the ground to still, Mariah finally opened her eyes into darkness. It took a few more seconds to regain her bearing and equilibrium, but she at last staggered to her wobbly feet and checked around.

No Ben. But she did see his filled backpack in the corner.

Did this mean she returned to the correct time?

Not necessarily, she considered. The pack itself could have been sitting here for weeks, months, even decades.

God. When did she return?

“Ben?” she called out, checking all around.

No answer, of course. Not that she expected any.

Her heart raced at a new thought. What if Ben still didn't escape the remaining Arcan Hunters unscathed?

No, she refused to consider the worst-case scenario. He might have just time-jumped to another period. Which meant they would eventually reconnect at some point, somewhere, somehow. She felt it in her bones.

In the meantime, she had another task to accomplish.

Quickly Mariah picked her way back out of the cave. The woods outside looked similar to when they left, but she couldn't be certain.

Ben's cellphone was sitting beside the rock where he left it. Mariah picked it up and powered it on. The battery still had a small charge, not that it indicated anything significant.

Dawn was breaking and dimly lighting the forest as she trudged through the woods. Reaching the overgrown road, her heart and breath stopped.

No car.

She didn't come back on the right timeline then. Her car would still be waiting...

Mariah panicked, detecting the sound of a vehicle heading her way. Quickly she darted behind a thick cedar tree out of sight.

The vehicle rolled to a gravelly stop and the engine shut down. Silently Mariah inched around the tree to peer at a silver Tesla parked at the trailhead.

The driver's door opened, and an older version of Logan Thorne stepped out.

"Ben? Mariah? Are you guys out there?" he called.

"Logan!"

He exhaled with relief when she darted up to him and embraced him. "Mariah, thank God. Where's Ben?"

"He's...not here," she said pulling back. "He didn't..."

"Oh man, I'm so sorry."

Because Logan would understand what this meant. That either Ben had been killed by the Arcan Hunters that night twenty-four years ago. Or he was launched to a completely different timeline where he couldn't return to her.

"No offense, Logan, but what the hell are you doing here right now? Not that I'm not glad to see you."

"Oh, right. See, Ben caught up to me the night you traveled back to your own time twenty-four years ago," he explained. "He said he had to take care of some Arcans who discovered the cave here. Anyhow, Ben told me to move your car that would be parked yesterday on this date, so that no one else would find out about this place in the future. Or I guess present now."

"Logan, where is Ben?"

"That's another thing," he said, wincing. "I'm not sure. Ben was supposed to check in with me after he took care of the Arcan Hunters, but I never did hear from him again. In any case, I did move your car yesterday like he wanted, but I

figured you would need a ride back to town if you did make it back to this date. And here you are.”

“Here I am,” she said dully.

And Ben was not.

* * *

There was no time to weep for her great loss. Just enough for Mariah to clean up at the cabin, then head to her father’s executive office in the Great Lodge.

He wouldn’t have believed her story at all, would have probably locked her up in a hospital mental ward, had she not shown him the letter written by Robert Bryant himself. It still took her father talking to his to verify its authenticity, thus giving credence to her eyewitness testimony on the day she was born.

An all-out investigation was instituted by her uncles. After locating Tia Cassidy, now a doctor who had changed her name to Samantha Willis and relocated to California, the woman confessed her part in the plot to kill the Bryant newborn boy orchestrated by Walter and Sean Paxton and negotiated a plea deal.

Four days later, Mariah stood behind the crime scene tape around the uncovered burial site near Aurora Lake as the pack’s forensic investigators collected evidence and snapped photos. Hugging herself, she watched as they brushed away the soil covering the rolled Aubusson carpet.

When they lifted down a flap, all suspicions were confirmed. The female body was too decomposed to make an immediate identification. But Mariah had no doubt that it was her mother, Elena Martinez, a half-wolf hybrid who had left the Snoqualmie reservation to become part of the Timber Ridge community.

Maggie Thunders knew the woman’s aunt and planned to let her know in order to bury her at the reservation and the tribe pay the proper traditional respects for the deceased.

“There’s a second body over here!” another investigator called out a hundred yards away. “Male. Wearing green

surgical scrubs. Looks like they're covered in blood splatter, too.”

* * *

DNA particulars were found on this body, identifying both Paxton brothers. With the confession of the former intern, other co-conspirators from various coup attempts surfaced like popcorn and were all too willing to divulge their secrets for plea deals. The Paxton influence had been far and wide and very old in their attempt to take control of the Bryant wolfpack.

Walter and Sean Paxton were charged, arrested and convicted of more than fifty counts of murder, forgery, larceny, money laundering and acts of treason and subterfuge.

Their four consecutive lifetime prison sentences would stop them from ever attempting such a plot again.

* * *

Jake and Nicole Bryant lovingly assured Mariah that she was and always will be their daughter, by heart and adoption, if not by blood.

But Mariah finally understood that she had outgrown living in the Great Lodge with her parents, royal or not. It was time to finally strike out on her own. Find out who she was and what kind of life she wished to live.

Until she answered those questions, she continued living in the quiet fishing cabin by Aurora Lake. It suited her needs for solitude in order to concentrate on her new project—locating Darlene Ryan.

It helped to have better insight into the situation and the reasons behind Ryan's sudden disappearance.

Mariah scoured the internet for any breadcrumb she could find on the woman. Three full weeks passed, and still no trace of the woman.

Then it happened.

One morning Mariah startled awake by a new idea, then rushed to the living area and powered her laptop computer.

She had spent her time trying to locate Darlene Ryan. But it finally occurred to Mariah that if she was trying to hide from criminals who wanted to locate and kill her, the best way would be to hide in plain sight—*after* she had changed her identity.

So obvious and so simple that Mariah wanted to kick herself for not thinking of this before.

After several background checks, using variations of Darlene Ryan's name, she still came up with nothing.

Then she had one more idea.

Mariah typed in the background check on *Elena Martinez*, narrowing it down to five persons living in Washington State, narrowing it down further to the Snoqualmie tribal nation.

Immediately she got a hit, along with a photo I.D.

Mariah smiled sadly to see her birthmother's picture, once so youthful, beautiful, dark and lovely and so alive. She lightly pressed her fingertips to the photo, her heart clamping painfully for the young woman whose life was cut so short.

She wished she could have known this brave woman who gave her life.

Perhaps in the next life to come.

Scrolling through the various licenses, school and employment records, residential addresses, Mariah found nothing beyond the night of Elena's death unfortunately. That shot down her theory that Darlene Ryan had assumed her identity. It would have been easy for Ryan to drive back to the cottage where Elena had her wallet and credentials. No one would guess, since no one at that time knew Elena was even dead.

Of course, it would be equally as easy to...

Mariah typed in different variations of the name, receiving nothing significant.

Until she typed in the name "Ellen Martin".

Immediately, license renewals, employment records and addresses flowed down a list from the current date back to the week of Mariah's birth.

Brilliant. All Ryan needed to do was tweak a few letters in each name, and bingo—new and untraceable and undeniable identity. The Paxton brothers would never have guessed. And obviously didn't for several years.

Having this information, Mariah did a deep-dive search and found what she most dreaded—a two-year-old obituary for the memorial service of Ellen Martin.

But that too had its reward. Because that's when Mariah discovered the true answer she was searching for.

* * *

Mariah wanted to be there to witness the scene, but didn't want to push in during this very sensitive and intimate moment. Silently she stood by the wall paneled windows of her father's executive office as Jake and Nicole Bryant anxiously held hands, watching the double doors open.

Her Uncles Neil and Adam escorted the nervous blond corporeal into the office and closed the doors behind them. Her mother's fingers shot up to her lips, her exotic eyes widening. Her father flushed, his welling blue eyes blinking hard at the stunning similarity between them.

The young man snapped a salute. "Corporeal Lance Martin, sir."

Jake Bryant offered a shaky smile, his hand pressing the young man's shoulder. "No need to salute me. Son."

Mariah almost burst with tearful delight, grateful that Darlene Ryan had made good on her promise to guard over her brother. Well, her mother's alleged ghost anyhow. Not only did Ryan claim the identity of Elena Martinez, but she shifted the details to include a son that she raised well and left behind at her death.

Or so her obituary stated.

“Yeah, uh...the Prime Enforcer told me...” Lance Martin went pale, swallowed hard. “It’s hard to believe.”

“Believe it,” Jake said. “You’re our birth-son. It’s been verified. You were told what happened the night you were born?”

The young man frowned, nodded. “They said I was stolen from you, but my mother...I mean Ellen Martin...well, I did love her. She was a good woman. She raised me to always be honorable and truthful and loyal to our pack. It was even her dying wish that I enlist in the military to serve it. It’s hard to believe she would...”

“She was a good woman,” Jake assured him. “She saved your life, and for that we will always be grateful to her. But now it’s time for you to learn the truth of who you are, who your true family is. Along with your rightful place here.”

Nicole rushed up to the young man and threw her arms around him, weeping, “Welcome home, my sweet baby boy. We’ve missed you so very much. So much.”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Chapter 22

Mariah sat across from Lance Martin Bryant at the long formal dining table in the Great Lodge, watching him tug uncomfortably at his suit collar or send a cheerless smile or polite remark at her sisters or brothers-in-law or aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents eagerly vying for his attention.

Poor guy.

It was easy for him to be overwhelmed by all of this grandeur and formalities. Royal life wasn't an easy one, as Mariah well knew. Add to that the bombardment of an enormous family that he didn't even know existed, as well as being in line to run the entire Bryant wolfpack territory when required.

No, *overwhelmed* didn't even cover what Lance was probably feeling about now.

"What do you think of our new brother?" Avil asked, sitting beside her.

Mariah sighed. "I think he's a simple man whose life has just been turned on its head forever, and wishes he could find an escape hatch."

"Been there, done that," Avril said, sipping her wine.

Mariah nodded. Both had been thrust into the Direct Heir position at a moment's notice. Fortunately, neither had to worry about it anymore.

"Do you miss it?" Avril asked. "The Direct Heir position."

"Not even a little bit," Mariah grunted. "Now I'm finally free to live my life as I choose."

"Ditto. Don't tell Mom and Dad." She leaned closer to Mariah whispering, "Has he called you yet?"

Mariah smiled sadly and shook her head. "He can't."

"Or won't?"

“No. He can’t,” Mariah confirmed. “He would, if he could, but he can’t.”

“So what now?” Avril asked.

Mariah shook her head. “Now, I move forward. Now, I can.”

“Here’s to new adventures then,” Avril said, holding up her goblet in a toast.

Their father stood then and raised his own wine glass saying, “Everyone, I would like to make a toast to our lost Bryant family member, now found. Lance, my son, welcome home.”

After a few more toasts and mild conversations, Mariah decided to call it a night. She thanked her parents for the wonderful dinner, made plans with her sisters to get together before they left for their own respective lives, hugged her new baby brother (covertly whispering her sympathies and condolences and availability to be his guide through the chaos and quagmire that was royal life). Then she gratefully escaped back to her quiet, simpler life at the lake cabin.

The sun had long ago set, and the full moon and a galaxy of stars brightened the black night sky. Still, it was too early to close herself inside her bedroom and go to sleep. Or try to. Tonight marked a full month back in her own time, and her own ghosts depressingly haunted her dreams.

One ghost in particular.

Mariah headed down to the lake to quiet her mind and perform the ritual she began a month ago to calm her thoughts and quiet her aching heart.

Gazing out over the black, glittering lake, she swiped away a renegade tear, then pulled the smartphone from her pocket.

She powered it on and typed in the passcode that her Uncle Ian had hacked into. Immediately it pulled up the screen with apps and contacts. Then she hit the message recording button and braced herself.

“You’ve reached Ben Bryant. You know what to do at the beep.”

Her chest gripped with exquisite pain at the sound of his voice. Like an addict who craved their fix, Mariah played it again. Then again.

She squeezed her glistening eyes shut as she listened to his voice for that final time that night. If she just knew what happened to him, his loss wouldn’t be so agonizing.

Had he been killed by Arcan Hunters?

Captured and tortured and dissected for his ability...

The phone vibrated, startling her.

She snapped her eyes open and sucked in a breath at the caller I.D.: *MARIAH*

What the..?

On the third buzz, she cautiously answered it. “Hello?”

“Did I ever tell you the story of the were-dragons of Colorado?”

Gasping, Mariah whipped around to see Ben slowly emerge from the forest with cellphone held to his ear. *Her* cellphone. The one she left at the cave site twenty-four years ago.

Dropping the phone in her hand, Mariah ran up the rise and launched herself into his waiting arms. His lips crashed down onto hers, and she couldn’t stop kissing him, wondering if this was all some cruel, exquisite dream she would horribly wake from.

“Miss me?” Ben chuckled, gripping her waist with both hands.

“You’re late,” Mariah ground out. “What happened? I thought you were dead. Or sent to another timeline. Or...or something.”

“Hmm.” He drew her against him, suggesting, “Shall we go inside and get reacquainted properly before explanations?”

She pushed away, warning, “Explanation first, or no getting reacquainted now or in the future. Spill it, wolfman.”

Ben laughed tiredly, taking and kissing her palms. “Well, it took a while to catch up to those Arcan Hunters that got away that day. There were others, too, I later found out, and had to track each down before any divulged the secret of the time portal. Or you.”

“Me?”

He shrugged, adding, “They knew about me and my mother’s ability to time-jump. You were the wild card they didn’t count on. I needed to make sure they didn’t hunt you down through the years.”

“But you...did?”

Obviously, since none had ever gotten to her.

He nodded. “All of us are safe and sound. At least for now.”

“Then you jumped back to this time,” Mariah said.

Ben grimaced. “Thank goodness for that, yes. I wasn’t sure at first. When I landed in the cave portal, my backpack was gone. So was my cellphone and the car we drove.

“Needless to say, my first order of business was to get to town and find out just *when* I was. Now I see that the portal took me back here at the correct year, but only to the date that corresponded to my leaving back then. I’ll have to tell my mother about that. It’s new information into our ability.”

“Welcome back then.”

“Fill me in,” he said, sliding his arms around her waist again. “What happened after you came back?”

Mariah briefed him on the major events, which included the Paxton brothers’ conviction and the upcoming coronation of her lost long brother, Lance Martin Bryant.

Ben frowned at that last highlight. “Are you disappointed that he’s taking your position?”

Mariah shook her head. “It was never what I wanted. I see that now.”

“What *do* you want, Mariah Byrant?”

She smiled up at him saying, “This entire thing has shown me that I truly crave a nomadic life of travel and adventure and mystery.”

“And time travel?”

Mariah arched a brow at that. “No thanks. I’m happily keeping my feet in the present time period from now on.”

Ben cupped her cheek, frowning. “Mariah, I lied to you when I said I didn’t love you. I do love you, with all of my being. I love you and need you and never want to be parted from you ever again, even for a short period of time. I know that now. If I could go back—”

Mariah pressed her fingers to his lips. “I know. I always did. I love you, too, wolfman.”

“So if time travel is off the table for good,” Ben said, “think you could settle for sharing your life with a free, but reckless rogue?”

Mariah pulled him down for another luscious kiss, saying, “As long as it’s with you, Benjamin Gallagher, I’ve got all the time in the world.”



ROYAL'S BLOOD

Series Epilogue

Rob Bryant stood towards the end of the semicircle of Bryant pack leadership on both sides of the newly coronated Direct Heir, Lance Martin Bryant. His own beautiful wife, Katherine, blew him a kiss from the crowd gathered in the decorated lobby of the Great Lodge, the wolf den and home they had built together a century ago.

It had been a good life for the most part. Filled with ups and downs, but one he was grateful to have been blessed with. Now the pack itself was secured, and he and Katherine could live the remainder of their long lives in peace.

Somewhere else.

A uniformed enforcer walked up to hand him a note, giving a salute before turning and marching away.

Robert joined in the applause after his son Jake's speech on the bright future of their pack, then quickly read the note:

Meet me in the library—M

M?

That could be any number of people.

The note had been given by a military enforcer though, so either way it was important.

Another handshake from a well-wishing VIP, and Rob deftly scooted out of line and melted into the crowd, nudging his way through the Lodge, around the corner, then down the rear deserted hallway.

Opening library door, he drew up short to see the back of the man facing the filled bookshelf.

"You came," Rob said, closing and locking the door. "I was wondering if you would."

Michael Bryant turned around, breaking into a half-smile.

"You look well, little brother," he said in a thick Irish brogue.

Michael himself didn't. He looked much older and careworn, his once long black hair now threaded heavily with silver. Then again, the man looked much better than any other six-hundred and thirty-year-old corpse moldering in the ground.

"You do, too. For a dead man."

His brother snorted, picking up Rob's dark tone. "Apologies, but I had to die, Robbie. The Arcans would have found and killed my mate, Callista, otherwise. As a Bryant you know all too well that she is always my first priority. Even above the pack."

Rob eased his rigid stance. He did understand. He would sacrifice everything for his own true mate. And had.

"If it's any consolation," Michael added, "I didn't want to drop the heavy burden of the new pack into your lap back then. You were just a kid. I thought when our father eventually died..."

"I was only thirty when the Arcans killed him," Rob accused. "Thirty. And all alone, because you didn't have the decency to tell me that you were alive and could help..."

"I know. I'm sorry, truly," he said with raised palm. "But I did watch over you, little brother. I tried to help you where I could, behind the scenes. How do you think you made that first fortune with the plastics company before the second world war?"

Rob's silver eyes widened. "That was *you*? I never knew how the investment was..."

It made sense now, so many of the ingenious "inside financial tips" that his advisors made over the years, always one step ahead of the time's advancements and technology that made them the successful dynasty they were today.

Almost as if his people knew exactly what was going to happen.

"They said you 'knew things' in your time," Rob said. "It was Callista, though, wasn't it?"

Because too late after her visit to Timber Ridge in 1988 to give him his brother's last letter, Rob figured out that Callista McEwan was a time traveler. She had somehow jumped back to the Old West and found Michael Bryant, just when the Bryant pack was forming.

"I got your letter," Rob said. "And yes, it did help me when the mantle of High Alpha was unwillingly thrust upon my shoulders. I wish you could have told me in person though."

"Ah, but if I could have done that, brother, then I wouldn't have needed to give you the H.A. position in the first place. No, I'm afraid it was a journey you had to venture on your own. And you did well. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, brother." Rob sighed and frowned back at the door adding, "I only hope our own children and grandchildren will do a better job of it. If I could have one wish during my own reign though, I would have destroyed every last Arcan in their perverse organization."

Michael shook his head. "A naïve wish, Robbie. Until the last day when God Himself finally has had enough of mankind's evil and destroys it with one powerful stroke, it will be here on this ruined earth. All we can do is our own part in His perfect plan to keep it at bay until then, and teach our young to carry on for us after our own limited time here is finished."

"Wise words," Rob said.

"Ah well, then I would have a bit after living several hundred years," Michael said. "Oh, and I ran into a one Addie Carmichael who wanted me to give you a message the next I saw you. She said to thank you for the great adventures, you and all who shared in them with you both."

Rob bit down a smile. "Yes, she and I had quite a run back in the day. If you see her again, tell her thanks for me, as well. And no, I'm not going to explain that."

"Always the gentleman."

"I try."

Rob studied his brother's tanned, lined features, committing it to memory, realizing this would be the last time he would ever see his brother again.

At least in this lifetime.

"I'll keep an eye on our children, Mike. Just as you've kept your eye on me all these years. I promise you that. Rest in peace, brother. I won't let you down."

Michael gave a nod, then stepped up to give Rob a tight embrace. "Kiss the kids for me. Tell them Uncle Mike loves them. All of them."

He released Rob, then gave him a gold signet ring with a square cut emerald. It was the original given to Michael by their father, Rufus Bryant.

"Keep this for me, will you, brother? Since your own grandson now has yours."

"I'll be honored to," Rob said, curling his fingers around the ring. "Where are you off to now?"

"Ah well, I suppose the wife has us off on another of her wild adventures." Michael gave Rob a wink adding, "Don't worry. I'm looking forward to it. If I've learned nothing else in this life, there's always another one right around the corner. If you're only brave enough to look."

THE END

PREQUEL TO ROYAL'S BLOOD:



She's a time traveler from the present. He's a werewolf in the wild west.

Both are hunted by a common enemy.

Is it Fate that brings them together?

Or is it cruelly taunting them once again?

Historian **Callista McEwan** is contracted by the Snoqualmie tribe in Washington State to authenticate recently discovered ancient hieroglyphs. But a mysterious cave throws her a century into the past to the old west. There in 1888 Callista meets a mountain man that has secrets of his own, one whom she is more than just physically drawn to, but is destined to help him fight a great evil that threatens to destroy those he cares for.

Frontiersman and werewolf, **Michael Bryant** plans to move his new wolf pack into the wild Pacific Northwest mountains, the perfect place for his new community to grow and flourish. But the ancient enemy of all were-kind shifters has discovered Mike Bryant's presence and his plans, and threatens to stop him at any cost.

Caught in the middle of a war she never counted on, Callista battles her own dilemma of needing to return to her own 20th century world, or staying in the old west to live with the man she has grown to love. But choose she must, before the choice itself it taken from her.

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