Venture

Book two
(The Crystal Series)

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For Cynthia who has worked diligently on my book covers.

Chapter 1

Liam

The mournful hoot of an owl sounded from somewhere in the distance. Inside the darkened bedroom, all was still. Silence permeated the air. The ivory laced curtains, every now and then, fluttered, as a calm breeze wafted in from the half-open window. The curtain's slight movement lengthened and then contracted the crescent moon's attempt to illuminate the room. In the somber bedchamber, the dusty-rose painted walls, light oak furniture and frilly accessories were a stark contrast to the occupant of the room.

Liam would cringe if he found himself surrounded by such unmanly decor. The room was awash in pinks, lavenders and fuchsias. From the nightstand, the soft light given off by the Tiffany lamp barely reached him, as he lay unmoving on the bed. His six-foot frame, with its slack yet sinewy muscles concealed much of the frilliness under him on the double bed, but not all.

The fuchsia pillowcase under his head changed the color of his shoulder-length sandy blond hair making it appear pink under the dim light. Strands of his hair fanned out like a halo around his head. The effect gave his peaceful, relaxed face a somewhat pasty complexion. Pale, with weeks' worth of stubble on his square jaw, his full lips were slightly parted, as he breathed steadily. The serenity of his features belied what was going on inside of him.

For his entire life, spanning centuries, Liam had lived under his brother's shadow. Aidan was to be the savior of their people. His older brother had been raised and trained for that one purpose alone. Liam's needs, his want of love and attention, were an afterthought to their mother, the queen of Eruva.

Belonging to a race known as the Sidhe, their characteristics set them apart from other faerie races. Their height, almost all were at least six-feet tall, along with their vivid emerald eyes and incredible strength were but a few distinguishing features. His whole life he

had tried to impress both of his parents. Whereas his father did at times express pride in Liam, he had never received any praise from his mother. Her sole focus was on the prophesy that would have Aidan, along with Alexa, return the long-lost Kaemorra, his people's protective crystal, back to her.

Alexa herself had lived a difficult childhood. Her protective mother allowed her no friends or companionship. Moving often to keep her safe from their enemy, Thalia never explained to her daughter the need for caution. Alexa discovered her origins, the prophesy and the unwanted bonding with Aidan, all at the same time. Liam had to give her credit for how she had handled everything. Never once had she given in to the urge to flee. She might be a petite five-foot-three young woman, but she was stronger than any gave her credit for.

Alexa had readily accepted her role in the prophesy. However, that it involved Aidan as well and that he was supposed to be her soulmate, she had fought at every turn. Her stubbornness had driven Aidan to distraction. Aidan was at a loss to understand why she could not accept they were meant to be together. On her nineteenth birthday, as foretold by the prophesy, Alexa had come into her powers.

As an offspring of a witch and a Sidhe father, it was natural that she would inherit some of her mother's abilities, along with those of her father. The whole range of her powers was still being discovered though. Liam knew there was so much more they still had not seen.

It was incredible how easily she had adapted to her changes. Her outward appearance, as well as her inner strength, was magnified by the source of her newly-formed powers. Her eyes had gone from gray to a steely silver color. A long white streak of hair had appeared, running down the right side of her heart-shaped face. The changes to her body were also profound. Her muscles had become more defined, while her figure grew curvy and fuller.

Alexa had also developed the ability to see visions of the future. She foresaw the attack coming on the night Liam was injured. It was an inopportune time to find out how unpredictable her visions could be. The method of their enemy's assault differed from what she had foretold. They were prepared for warlocks and Sidhe to strike them. The arrival of the shadow people had come as a surprise. With their non-corporeal bodies, Liam and his

brother had no weapons to defeat them with. Slithering along the ground, moving silently to box them in, the shadows had given them no chance of victory. Liam's comatose condition was a direct result of that night.

His unconscious state came about when a shadow crossed over his foot. That brief contact was enough to render him senseless. He remembered clearly the night of the attack. The charge by the shadowy beings came swiftly, giving little chance for them to respond. In the garden with Aidan, the slithering forms, as they surrounded them, made it impossible to defend against the threat. With no physical bodies, the shadows were soon upon them. Alexa had arrived too late to save him. He fell, losing consciousness instantly. Since that night, all he had known was darkness.

While his body refused to move, his other senses had been heightened. He was imprisoned in his mind, where he could do nothing but listen to the world around him. Snippets of conversations, the alarmed voices filtered through the gloom he found himself within. He had remained alone for some time now. In the deafening silence, his mind replayed his last contact with Alexa.

She came to him, hoping for any sign he would wake. Her soft voice stirred him, his heart accelerating at having her near. In his mind, he visualized her clearly. It was impossible to forget her heart-shaped, perfectly proportioned, lightly freckled face. Her soft, enticing lips, he was sure were trembling in sorrow.

When she rested her head on his shoulder, her long auburn hair cascaded over him. Her fingers gripped his forearm, begging him to wake. The torment of having her near, but not being able to reach out and gather her to him was pure torture. He endured the scalding tears that fell from her eyes unheeded. They landed on his bare skin, running down onto the bed linens, which were gathered around him.

"Liam, please come back to me. I can't do this without you." Her plea went unanswered. In his dreamlike state, he lay unable to offer her any comfort. His attempts to wake were met with failure. His body refused to answer his commands.

"No. Aidan, you don't understand!" Alexa's next words made him retreat, seeking refuge from the unbearable agony that engulfed him.

The raw pleading in her voice, calling his brother's name was like a stab in his heart. All he had lost, given up, for Aidan, rushed back to him. Liam had gone to great lengths to make sure Alexa turned to Aidan. Her attraction to him was creating tumultuous emotions in his brother. Aidan's well-being had been paramount to Liam. Putting himself out of her reach had nearly destroyed him. Hearing the alarm in her voice was too much for him.

He knew the moment his brother had entered the room. Whatever Aidan saw, whatever he assumed, Liam recognized the heart-stopping anguish his brother had experienced. Aidan was struck, as if by a physical blow. Taller than Liam, more muscular, with cropped ebony black hair, the contrast between the two brothers did not change the fact they were both in love with Alexa.

In his mind, he pictured Aidan's shocked, chiseled face, his narrowed emerald eyes changing from heartsick to loathing. Aidan was actually bonded to Alexa, they somehow had forged the elusive joining their race sometimes experienced when two people belonged together, but Liam had fallen in love with her simply because of her. Alexa had held him enthralled from their first meeting.

Aidan, for his part, was strongly affected by the bond with Alexa. Having her deny him, fight their joining, had him acting out of character. He was volatile, quick to anger and easily mistook her actions or words. His ability to read her thoughts did not make things easier.

Aidan knew all her intimate thoughts about his brother. Finding her with Liam had wounded him deeply. Frozen like a statue by the door, Aidan was in much the same torment Liam was. The silence that followed his arrival became ominous. Liam could sense his brother's despair, and that he would not recover that time.

Alexa left Liam's side, trying to reach Aidan, trying to stop him from what he was about to do. Liam lay powerless to do anything, to reverse Aidan's course of action. Aidan was gone before Alexa could reach his side. He had simply vanished. Any trace of his signature was lost. Liam could not find him anywhere.

How could my brother leave her unprotected? Did he not understand what he was doing to her? Alexa needs Aidan, needs to be safeguarded. Her trembling voice, as she cried out Aidan's name, cried out for him to come back, wounded Liam.

He could do nothing but lie in his bed, listening, as she fell to the floor. Her desolation at Aidan's departure brought renewed tears, her lips repeating his name over and over. Liam cut the memory off. *How many times am I going to subject myself to reliving her desolation? How long ago did these events transpire?* Time was something he could not measure. It held no meaning where he was.

The buzzing silence in his ears was briefly pierced by the repeated hoot of the owl. It seemed to echo his sorrow. Liam was stretched out, on his back, atop a bed covered by a violet-colored duvet. The material was draped across his lean hips, leaving his bare chest and taut abdomen exposed to the room's crisp air. The darkness that held him prisoner would not yield. Getting to Alexa was impossible. That she was still somewhere nearby, he knew with certainty.

What he felt from her errant emotions was filling him with unease. From the start, lost in the depths of the abyss, he was aware of everything going on around him. After Aidan left, Alexa was discovered by her father, distraught on the floor of his room. Carrying her from the room, Rider had firmly closed the door, leaving Liam cut off from the outside world. He felt abandoned, left alone in his endless purgatory.

Even Rina was absent. He recalled the many hours she had spent with him when he was first brought to that room. Either wiping his brow with a cool cloth, or reading to him softly, he at least had some contact. At times, she would climb onto the bed, lie beside him and fill him in on the day's events.

Since Aidan's departure, he had been left alone. *How long has it been since anyone has come to check on me?* He wanted, needed news. Alexa's incessant crying seemed to go on for hours, days. There was no way to know how much time had passed. It was driving him mad. Tortured by not being able to go to her, he could only listen as sobs escaped her. His ears heard every moan, even as she tried to muffle the sounds.

The time dragged on endlessly. *How could Aidan leave her?* He knew his brother had not returned to the estate. Liam was consumed with rage at his brother. Abandoning Alexa in that state was contemptible, leaving her in so much pain inexcusable. He fought with all his might to break free from the hell he found himself in. His need to find out what was going on was compelling him to fight harder. If only someone would come speak to him. He felt as forsaken as Alexa. She was his only reason for not giving up. Even after all that time, after putting himself out of her reach, he still hungered for her.

Keeping away from her did not lessen his yearning for her. Liam was even more in love with Alexa than before. His pretense of being involved with Rina was all for the benefit of Aidan. Rina was a tree nymph living on their estate outside of Verona. Since he had caught sight of her, while she was speaking with Alexa in the estate's garden, she had remained in her full-sized form.

As a tree nymph, anytime a man laid eyes on her, she grew into a beautiful, auburn-haired temptress. Her body, curvy and generously endowed, was made for seduction. Any other time, she shrank to her original size of slightly over four-inches tall, returning to the tree she called home.

Rina understood, knew that there could never be anything between them. They had developed a deep friendship, but it could not compare to what he felt for Alexa. She was everything to him. He let Alexa go, knowing she was bound to his brother. Giving her up was the hardest thing he had ever done. All he wanted was to get to her. He wanted to hold her, dry her eyes, love her like she deserved. Aidan did not deserve her. All bets were off now that he had abandoned her. Liam would do everything in his power to make sure Alexa never shed a tear again.

Her crying stopped as suddenly as it had started. What replaced it was even more distressing to Liam. He could feel her retreating from the world. Dread filled him, sensing what she intended to do. There was no way for him to stop her, as she encased her heart in a block of ice. A steely, icy coldness surrounded her. Behind the walls she had erected, all emotions were driven out. She was unfeeling, so unlike the woman who had captured his

heart. He panicked at what she was doing. Her numbness was worse than the crying. Then, he felt nothing. She was gone.

He struggled with all his might to escape the nightmare holding him in its grasp. *Where did she go? Was she safe?* Behind his eyes, a glimmer of light seemed to tease him to grab onto it. Willing it to show him the way, frustration grew at his inability to follow its path to wakefulness. Ready to give up, to rest before renewing his battle, the light flickered, growing in intensity.

Focusing with all his might, he tried to track the path. Sounds of someone in the room had him wrestling even harder to wake. Rina was back. Her soft humming was something else to grasp onto. Even as he fought his way back, the darkness rose to claim him yet again.

Exhausted, Liam gave in to the blackness. Floating in his semi-aware state, he kept the image of Alexa fixed in his mind. His sole purpose was centered on her. *How long has she been gone?* With no understanding of how much time had elapsed since she had left the estate, he felt a deep urgency in escaping his prison. Giving up was not an option.

With renewed strength and purpose, he re-focused his energy on capturing the stream of light he had previously glimpsed. Consumed with the need to find her, to make sure she was safe, he put all his energy into that one task. Just as he feared he might fall back into the chasm again, his eyes opened. The dimness of the room still managed to blind him, as his eyes adjusted to the sights around him.

"You're awake!" Rina came into focus, sitting next to his bed.

"How long?" His throat burned from the effort of uttering his first words.

"Three weeks, two days." Rina rose, pouring water from a pitcher into a glass. She offered it to him, helping him to sit up.

He greedily drank from the glass she placed in his hand, relishing the water that soothed his parched throat. His hand trembled from the effort of keeping the glass to his lips. Seeing his struggle, the way his hand shook, Rina took the glass from him once he had emptied the contents. Falling back on his pillow, Liam half-closed his eyes before snapping them open again.

Fearing falling back into the abyss, he struggled to rise from the bed. On one elbow, Liam looked out the window, seeing the starlit night outside. From what he could tell, it was well past midnight. His only thought was of Alexa. With no idea where she might be, he needed information on where to start looking. His brother was out of the equation. Any loyalty he owed to him was superseded by Liam wanting to claim Alexa for himself. Liam would keep her safe.

"Where did she go?" He asked Rina.

Rina's face clouded at his question. She knew of who he spoke. Her stricken expression was proof that she understood he was asking about Alexa. Her eyes could not hide how his words pained her. Seeing her trying to hide the effect his words had on her, he flinched from his insensitivity. He knew he had hurt her, but there was little time to waste. Somewhere out there, Alexa was alone. *Who knows what danger she is in?*

Pushing the covers out of his way, he carefully stood on his shaky legs. Naked, except for his briefs, his muscles straining from the effort, he managed to make his way to the bathroom. Each step was an effort after lying unmoving for so long. From the bedroom he heard Rina get up and come to stand in the doorway. His eyes met hers in the vanity mirror in front of him. The pain in her eyes was replaced by acceptance. She knew he would be going after Alexa.

"I'll let you get ready. Meet me downstairs when you are done." She said, leaving him to prepare.

Liam stared at his reflection. He braced his hands on the bathroom counter, seeing how gaunt he looked. He could see he had lost a considerable amount of weight. Hollowed cheeks intensified his haggard appearance. His hair was matted and hung limply on his shoulders. He desperately needed a haircut.

Searching for the scissors, he found them in the medicine cabinet. He placed them on the counter, and then found the electric shaver. By the time he had finished cutting and shearing his hair, his strength had greatly diminished. He ran his hand over his face, feeling the stubble of the weeks' old beard. Drawing on what little energy he possessed, he shaved,

exposing pale, waxen skin to his eyes. When he had finished, he leaned against the marble countertop, shaky and spent from those simple tasks.

He would be no use to Alexa in that condition, he needed to regain his strength. Pushing away from the counter, he stepped into the shower. Turning the hot water on, he let it wash away what remained of his lethargy. Revived from the scalding spray, he dried himself, dressed and made his way downstairs.

"I'm out here!" Rina called to him from the garden.

Liam stepped outside to an inky darkness. Gazing up, he saw countless stars speckling the endless cloudless sky. The crescent moon struggled to penetrate the blackness surrounding it. The air was cool with a slight breeze blowing from across the lake. He breathed in the scents from the rose bushes and cedars that adorned the enclosed terrace. The way to the center of the enclosure was lit by torches that lined the cobblestone path.

With each step he took, his strength gradually returned. He found it easier to support his weight. Pleased that his Sidhe physiology was already working to heal him, it would not be long before he regained all his stamina. He would need to be fully restored before going after Alexa.

In the shadowed recesses of the garden, Rina was sitting on the bench nearest to the fountain. Empty, with no water running, the fountain had once housed his father, along with five mermaids who were imprisoned within it as statues. He hesitantly made his way to Rina, stopping, not sure of where to sit. Noticing his predicament, she patted the bench for him to join her.

"I have no idea where she went." Rina told him once he sat down.

Thankful that she was not wasting time, knowing he needed to find Alexa, Liam was grateful she spoke of what was foremost on his mind. His guilt was pushing him though to offer some excuse for his behavior. Rina saw his intent and held up her hand to stop him from speaking. Anything he would say could not lessen the sting. Still he needed to say something.

"Rina, I am sorry. I hope you know that I never meant to hurt you." Liam spoke softly. Only then did he realize the full extent of her feelings for him.

"Liam, I knew how you felt. There really is nothing to be sorry about. We cannot help who we love. I just want you to be careful. She is still bound to your brother." Rina offered him a gentle smile, letting him know there were no hard feelings on her part

"Still he left her. I heard her, Rina. I heard her crying, heard her heart break. Why? Why did he do that?" Liam was beyond angry with his brother. His handsome face showed his fury. Emerald eyes flashed with hatred over Aidan's actions.

Rina shook her head. She understood his anger, but also knew that Aidan and Alexa were separated by a misunderstanding. Liam's heart would be broken over this. Even though she had no choice but to let him go, let him go through whatever he needed to do, she still saw nothing but heartache for him.

"Aidan saw her crying over you, Liam. It broke him. He misunderstood what she was feeling." Rina tried to explain, to make him understand.

Liam could not fathom why his brother could not read what Alexa had been feeling. She had started to care for his brother. *Why could Aidan read her thoughts, but not her emotions?* It made no sense to him. Being joined should have let Aidan know what was in Alexa's heart. Instead he left her alone, to face things on her own. He placed her in unfathomable danger.

"Rina, I need to do this. I have to find her. Where could she have gone?" Liam had no idea where to start looking for her.

Rina nodded her understanding, her somber eyes half hidden behind her lashes. She stood, holding out her hand to him. Liam took it gratefully, standing, as she pulled him to his feet. Guiding him back to the house, she stopped outside the library door.

Liam wasted no time in entering the room, going directly to the reading table. Rina's soft footsteps followed him to where he stood, scanning the reading material and volumes of books that lay strewn across the desk. On the table, among the weathered yellowed papers, a book lay open. One of its pages had been torn out, leaving no clue as to what it may have held. Picking up the book, he leafed through it, trying to see if he could find a clue.

"Crete." Rina spoke, breaking into his search.

Liam closed the book, letting it drop back on the table. So, she went to the cave where Rhea supposedly hid Zeus. Liam should have guessed she would continue the search.

The cave was where they thought the Kaemorra, his race's famed crystal, was hidden. She was alone, in a place where Myrick and Elsam could get to her.

Long ago, the crystal had vanished from their world. Their hidden island, their homeworld named Eruva, lost its invisibility. The Sidhe were forced into hiding their existence from humans. His people spread out across the globe, keeping themselves isolated.

Alexa was pivotal to them reclaiming the Kaemorra and restoring their island's protection. There was a prophesy that together with one of royal blood, this being Aidan, Alexa would put things right. The latest clue to the prophesy led them to believe the Kaemorra was somewhere in Crete, specifically the mythological place where Rhea hid Zeus from his father, Cronus.

"You have a starting point. I will let you know if I hear or find anything else. Keep safe, Liam." Rina interrupted his musing, patting his arm, as she left him.

He would leave at first light. Only when he was with her, would he be able to rest easy. Her safety was the most important thing to him. Liam left the library, taking the stairs back up to his room. On the landing, he leaned on the banister to catch his breath. The climb had weakened him. He took a moment to gather his remaining strength. As a Sidhe, he should be fully restored come morning. Once his breathing was even, he continued on to his room, only stopping as he passed the first open door to his right.

The door to Alexa's room stood open. He entered it with a heavy heart, feeling her presence as if she were there. Missing her was eating away at him. Her scent still lingered in the air, bringing to mind the soft coconut, citrus smell of orchids. On the bureau next to her bed, a small jeweled box drew his attention. It was the only thing left of her. He wondered how she could have left it behind.

The box had been gifted to her by her parents on her nineteenth birthday. The magical properties of the box, once opened and peered into, allowed one to see the location of anyone they wished to find. Taking the few steps to it, he picked it up, slowly opening the top. Peering inside, picturing Alexa in his mind, he saw a billowy cloud form. Her image came into focus, showing him exactly where to find her.