

Free Preview



Prologue

“What have you found out?” the man asked as he sat behind his desk.

His lawyer sat in the chair opposite him. He removed a manila folder from his briefcase and handed it to the man, who quickly opened it and poured through the pictures and documents inside.

“There are three of them,” said the lawyer. “The mother, Laura Holden, has pancreatic cancer. I’m afraid it’s terminal.”

The man sighed as he scanned copies of medical forms and pictures of the woman. In her prime. And of her today, where she was little more than a withered shell of her former self.

"She's a fighter," the lawyer continued. "The doctors gave her nine months. So far, she's lasted over a year."

The man sifted through the contents of the folder. "And her children?"

"A daughter, Sophie. She's thirteen. And a son, Peter. He's seven."

"And their father?"

"Not in the picture, I'm afraid."

"How are they managing?"

"The insurance is able to provide for a part-time caregiver. The daughter does the rest." The lawyer smiled. "She appears to have inherited her mother's strength."

The man came across pictures of the girl from a newspaper article online, from a school play she was in. Her smile was dazzling. Her eyes bright.

He compared that to a more recent picture. A school photo. She smiled, but it was obviously forced. The light in her eyes had faded too. They were so tired. Weary.

Yet, at the same time, he could see the strength his lawyer mentioned. A resolve. A determination to push forward through the hardship she was experiencing.

He set the picture down almost lovingly. "You have an address?"

"They live in Arizona."

He leaned back in his chair. "Go to them. At once."

Chapter One

As usual, when I got to my brother's school, I saw his teacher, Ms. Elgin, standing by the front gate. She high fived each student in her class as they left. The last of them walked through the gate. No Peter. Great. I knew what this meant.

"Hi, Sophie. How are you?" Ms. Elgin asked, in that overly sympathetic tone I got from everyone these days.

"I'm fine," I said, making sure to smile.

Next came the *poor-pitiful-Sophie-look*. "And your mom? How's she doing?"

"She's hanging in there. Where's Peter?"

Ms. Elgin smiled nervously. "There was an incident today. I'm afraid I had to send him to the office."

I sighed. Knew it. Come on, get a grip, Sophie. You can handle this. Chin up. One foot in front of the other. I nodded to Ms. Elgin then headed toward the office.

"Sophie!" Ms. Elgin called out, stopping me. "You take care, okay? You'll be in my prayers."

I made sure to smile again. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

I hurried to the office, where I got the same *poor-pitiful-Sophie-look* from the secretary, Mrs. Walker. "Hi, Sophie. How's your mom?" she asked.

"She's hanging in there. Where's my brother?"

"He's with – I'd better let Mr. Copeland tell you."

That was the vice-principal. This wasn't the first time I had to meet with him either. Since Mom wasn't well enough to come down herself anymore, the school was willing to make an exception and let me take her place in these little meetings.

Mrs. Walker got off the phone. "He'll see you now."

I muttered a thank you and headed to his office. On the way, I spotted Mrs. Walker talking to another one of the office staff. I could tell they were talking about me by the looks they sent me. I know they meant well, but did they have to treat me like I was the sick one? Like there was something wrong with me?

Mr. Copeland met me at the door to his office. "Hi, Sophie. How's your mom?"

I made sure to smile. "She's hanging in there. What did Peter do this time?"

Mr. Copeland offered me a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. He then sat down and reached for a yellow legal pad.

"I'm afraid this is rather serious," he started. "Your brother's obsession with vampires has gone a little too far."

"What do you mean? What did he do?"

Mr. Copeland had a real uneasy look on his face. I knew he'd been vice-principal for a few years. He must have seen a lot of different behavior problems. For him to look this squeamish, Peter must have done something really severe.

"According to Ms. Elgin, he poked a girl in the neck with a pencil and said," reading from his notes, "'That's what it's going to feel like when I bite your neck and turn you into a vampire. After I kill your parents.'"

I sighed and sank into the chair. Great.

"I can't let something like this go unpunished."

"I know. I understand."

“Normally, this would result in an out-of-school suspension, but considering your family’s circumstances, we’ll go with an in-school suspension instead.”

I nodded.

“There is something else —” Mr. Copeland was about to add when there was a knock at the door.

A red-haired woman in a pantsuit entered. Her mouth formed a surprised O when she saw me. “You have company,” she said.

“Mrs. Baker, this is Sophie Holden. Peter’s brother,” said Mr. Copeland.

And yep, right on cue, I got the *poor-pitiful-Sophie-look* from this Mrs. Baker as we shook hands. She sat down across from me.

“Mrs. Baker is the school psychologist,” said Mr. Copeland. “Peter’s been with her for last half-hour or so.”

Oh, man. I knew this was going to happen sooner or later.

Mrs. Baker smiled. “I’ve been apprised of you and your brother’s *situation*, Sophie. It’s not uncommon for children Peter’s age to be interested in monsters, especially vampires. They’re so prevalent in pop-culture. But after talking to your brother, and after the incident today, I think your his fixation has deeper roots.”

I was almost afraid to ask. “What do you mean?”

“Well, vampires are essentially immortal,” Mrs. Baker continued. “They defy death. And they can make other people immortal by biting them. I think this is related to your mother’s *condition*. I think Peter is having a hard time dealing with her ...”

She struggled for the right words to say.

“That she’s going to die,” I said, abruptly.

Mrs. Baker and Mr. Copeland each smiled uncomfortably. Mrs. Baker returned her

attention to me.

"I'd like to continue to meet with Peter," she said. "To help him deal with this situation."

I sighed. "Okay."

Like I had a choice. Then again, who knows? Maybe it would be for the best.

Mrs. Baker smiled. "You know, I split my time between here and the middle-school. If you'd like, I could meet with you as well. If you need someone to talk to."

I forced a smile. "Thank you. I appreciate that. But I'm okay."

Mrs. Baker nodded. "In case you change your mind, Mr. Copeland knows how to get in touch with me."

I thanked her again. Mr. Copeland told me Mrs. Walker would draw up the necessary paperwork. I promised I'd have Mom sign them, and I'd bring them back tomorrow before school.

They showed me to the in-school suspension room, where Peter was waiting, sitting at one of the desks, doing his homework.

"Let's go, Peter," I said.

"I told you, call me Vlad," he answered.

"Let's. Go. Peter."

He scowled and started packing his backpack. He took his sweet time doing it too.

"Hurry up." I waited another moment then ended up shoving the rest of his things into his backpack. I grabbed Peter by the hand and led him through the office.

"You take care, Sophie," said Mrs. Walker as we were on our way through the door.

"You'll be in my prayers."

"Thank you. I appreciate that," I said without looking back.

Chapter Two

We walked the three blocks to the city bus stop, flashed our passes, and took a seat up front. We got off fifteen minutes later and walked another couple blocks to the grocery store, where I picked up some hamburger for dinner. From there, it was a five-block-walk to our apartment.

Sarah, mom's caregiver, met us at the door. She smiled but checked her watch at the same time.

"I'm so sorry we're late." I glanced at Peter. "We had a little trouble at school."

"That's all right, sugar. I don't mind," said Sarah. "Now I gave your mom her meds at three, so she won't need them again until nine, okay?"

"Okay. Thank you."

She said this every time, like this was something I didn't already know – or must have forgotten the moment I walked through the door.

"Well, goodnight," said Sarah, giving me the *poor-pitiful-Sophie look*. She waved to Peter. "Goodnight, Peter."

"I told you, call me Vlad."

"Sorry, Vlad," said Sarah, amused. I really wished she wouldn't encourage him.

I set my backpack down and reached for the paperwork Mr. Copeland gave me. I figured I might as well get it over with.

"Come on," I told Peter.

"Nooo," he whined.

I wasn't in the mood for this, so I grabbed Peter's hand and dragged him down the hall to Mom's bedroom. The door was open, and she sat in bed, propped up with pillows, watching TV. She hit the MUTE button the moment she saw us.

"What's going on?" she asked in her now normally weak voice.

I sighed and handed her the papers. "You need to sign these."

Mom looked at me in disbelief.

"Don't look at me," I said. "They're not mine. They're *Vlad's*," I added, giving him the stink-eye.

"Honey, what did you do?" Mom asked him.

By now, Peter was sniffing and shaking. But I had to give him credit. He told her the whole story. He now seemed sincerely sorry for what he'd done, especially when he saw how upset it made Mom.

"Peter, honey, why would you do something like that? That's so awful," she said.

"I'm sorry, Momma." Peter threw his arms around her. "I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. I promise."

Mom hugged him. "I believe you."

She looked really tired now. I pulled Peter away from her.

"Why don't we let Mom rest for a bit," I told him.

"Before I forget." Mom picked up Peter's suspension papers.

I got a pen from the kitchen so she could sign them. When she finished, I turned off the TV, fixed the pillows so she could lie down, and pulled the covers up to her chest.

She smiled. "Thank you. My angel."

I kissed her on the forehead. "I'll let you know when dinner's ready."

I turned the light off as I left the room. When I got to the kitchen, Peter was at the table doing his homework without even being told to do it – which was a first. He shuddered like he was going to start crying. I stood beside him and gave him a hug.

“I really do hope you won’t do anything like that again,” I said.

“I won’t,” he said.

“You saw how upset it made Mom.” I crouched down to his level. “Seriously, Petey. You’ve got to stop all this vampire-nonsense. It’s making people worry, not just me and Mom but people at school too. You don’t want that, do you?”

Peter shook his head. I gave him another hug.

“You want apples and cheese?” I asked.

He nodded. I cut some up for the both of us, poured a glass of milk for him, and got a bottle of water for me. I sat down at the other end of the table and started on my homework, pausing to help Peter with his math. They were doing regrouping in his class. I remember I had trouble with that too.

After we finished our homework, I started dinner while Peter read his reading book for twenty minutes, like he was supposed to, for his reading log.

I made hamburgers and French fries for us with a salad and heated up a can of chicken noodle soup for Mom. Her stomach couldn’t handle anything heavier than that these days. I woke her when dinner was ready. No matter how bad she felt she always insisted on sitting at the table and eating dinner with us. Like we’ve always done.

We finished eating. I cleared the table then helped Mom back to bed. Peter got his pajamas on and watched *Vampire Diaries* while I did the dishes. Argh, I’d just told him less than an hour ago to stop this vampire-nonsense, and here he was watching it on TV. I was too tired to argue with him though.

While he watched TV, I retreated into my room for a little bit. I plugged my earbuds into my phone and laid on my bed listening to some music. I chose "No One is Alone" from *Into the Woods*. I sang along softly, remembering the time I sang it in the school musical last year. I was the only sixth grader to land one of the lead parts. Mom was so proud. That was the last time I was on stage.

She got sick not long after that. She had surgery first to remove the tumor, but that didn't work. Then came the chemo. When that didn't work, the doctors said it was only a matter of time.

I dozed off for a little bit. Next thing I knew, Peter was shaking me awake.

"Sophie, Mom needs you," he said.

I hurried to Mom's room and found her sitting up in bed. She'd thrown up all over herself. It was the new pain meds. The doctor said this might happen. I ran to help her.

"Honey, I'm sorry," she cried. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." I glanced at Peter who still standing in the doorway. "Go. I've got this," I told him.

I helped Mom into the bathroom and ran a bath for her. I cleaned her up, dressed her in a new nightgown, changed her sheets, and got her back into bed. I sat with her until she fell asleep then took the dirty sheets and nightgown to the laundry room down the hall.

As I rinsed and scrubbed them in the sink, my throat started to ache. My vision blurred with tears. I tried to fight it but ended up crying uncontrollably. I leaned against the edge of the sink to keep from falling to the floor.

After a few moments, I was able to sniff back my tears. Come on, get a grip, Sophie. You can handle this. Chin up. One foot in front of the other.

Once I'd managed to calm back down, I shoved Mom's sheets and nightgown into the

washing machine, put in the detergent and quarters, and waited for it to start before I left. I wiped my eyes. They were still red and puffy.

“Are you all right, Miss?” a man asked.

Before I could even answer, he handed me a handkerchief.

“Thank you,” I said then dabbed my eyes.

I hadn't seen this guy around before. If I did I definitely would have remembered him.

Especially that suit. It had to cost more than our rent.

“Perhaps, you can help me,” he said. “I'm trying to find number 412.”

“That's my apartment. Why are you looking for my apartment?”

The man's eyes lit up as he smiled. “Oh, you must be Sophie.”

He offered his hand. I let it hang there for a moment before I took it.

“It's nice to meet you.” The man then handed me a business card. “My name is Sebastian Myers. I'm an attorney.”

Attorney? Why would an attorney be visiting us?

“I apologize for stopping by at such a late hour,” Mr. Myers continued. “I tried calling, but apparently your phone's been disconnected,” he added compassionately.

“Yeah, we're a little behind on our bills. Can I help you with something, Mr. Myers?” I asked.

“Well, to be honest, I'm here to help you. I represent a man by the name of Nikolas Kesler. He's spent a lot of time and quite a lot of money looking for you and your family.”

“Why? I don't understand.”

“My client is a distant relative of yours. He's very eager to meet you.”

I blinked with surprise. I didn't think this sort of thing actually happened in real life.

“Is your mother available?” Mr. Myers asked. “I know it's late.”

"Yeah. The thing is my mom's not well," I started to say.

Mr. Myers smiled sadly. "I'm aware of your mother's condition. I'm so sorry."

He followed this up with the *poor-pitiful-Sophie-look* I love so much.

"She's sleeping now. I don't want to wake her," I said.

"Of course." Mr. Myers took back his business card and began to write on the back.

"Let me give you my cell phone number. Oh, wait. Your phone's been disconnected."

"I have a cell."

"Ah. There you go." He handed me the business card again. "Please have her call me the first chance she gets. We have a lot to discuss."

I slipped the card in my front jeans pocket and said goodnight to Mr. Myers. Once I got inside, I looked him up online using my phone. It turned out he was a legit lawyer with an office in San Francisco. I found a picture of him online too. Yep, that was definitely him.

After that, I looked up Nikolas Kesler. I found a lot of info about him. Apparently, he was some rich business tycoon. He did a lot of charity work. I found a picture of him taken from an article saying how he gave a bunch of money to a children's hospital. He was tall with dark hair, bright eyes and a charming smile. He kind of reminded me of Hugh Jackman.

The next morning, I told Mom all about Mr. Myers' visit and what I found online about him and Nikolas Kesler. She didn't see any harm in sitting down and talking to the man. She said she'd call and set it up.

Mr. Myers didn't waste any time either. When me and Peter came home from school, he was there, sitting at the kitchen table with Mom. I sent Peter to his room to do his homework and sat down with them.

Mr. Myers showed us all sorts of documents – birth certificates, marriage licenses, and immigration records – that linked me, Mom, and Peter to Nikolas Kesler through a

common ancestor named Johan Kesler, who came to America in the early 1800s, following some war in Germany.

As crazy as it seemed, having some rich, long lost relative appear out of nowhere, it all appeared legit. Mom definitely looked convinced. She agreed to meet with Mr. Kesler. A phone call later, and a date was set. He'd be visiting us that Saturday.

Chapter Three

I spent the morning cleaning, getting the apartment ready for Mr. Kesler's visit. I figured we should have some sort of snacks prepared, so I chopped up some veggies with ranch dressing and made some cheese and crackers. It all seemed pretty sorry-looking when I set it out on the coffee table. Someone like Nikolas Kesler was probably used to caviar and champagne.

I made Peter wear one of his nice shirts and his clip-on tie. Mom put one of her old dresses, one of the ones she hasn't worn since before she's gotten sick. It was so baggy on her now, after all the weight she'd lost. She wore a matching scarf over her head. All this time later, and her hair still hadn't grown back yet.

I had just enough time to change into a blouse and skirt when there was a knock at the door. It had to be him. Mr. Kesler. I checked myself in my mirror and ran my fingers through my hair before hurrying to get the door.

Mom and Peter were already in the living room. Peter had already gotten the door and stood there, awestruck. I didn't blame him. Mr. Kesler had quite a commanding presence.

He squatted down to Peter's level to greet him then stood back up to shake hands with Mom. At least Peter didn't ask Mr. Kesler to call him *Vlad*. Instead, he stood there with a goofy grin on his face, unable to take his eyes off of him, in total hero-worship-mode.

Mom looked just as charmed by Mr. Kesler as Peter did. I hadn't seen her smile like

that since before she got sick. Mr. Kesler then turned his attention to me. His smile widened, showing off brilliant white teeth.

“You must be Sophie.” He offered his hand.

I hesitated just a second before I took it. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Kesler.”

“Nikolas. I insist.” He paused. For a moment, he actually seemed nervous. He held up some gift bags. “Here, for you and your brother.”

I took my bag kind of reluctantly, I don’t know why. Peter quickly snatched his. He immediately sat on the floor and pulled out what was inside.

“Cool!” He held up his present. A new iPad.

I got one too. Along with some wireless Beats.

“You don’t have one already, do you? And the headphones?” Nikolas asked. He glanced at Mom. “Kids these days, it’s hard to tell.”

“No, I don’t – we don’t,” I said. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kesler –”

“Nikolas.”

“But I can’t accept these. They’re way too expensive.”

“I’ll take Sophie’s if she doesn’t want ‘em!” said Peter.

Nikolas laughed. He turned his attention back to me. “Well, think of it as me making up for all those birthdays and Christmases I’ve missed. Actually, if you put it that way, I’m getting off easy.”

Mom chuckled. She urged me take the gifts. I thanked Mr. Kesler – I mean, Nikolas and shook his hand again. Peter leapt to his feet and rushed him with a hug that almost knocked him over. We all laughed.

Nikolas then handed the largest gift bag to Mom. Inside was a colorful silk robe.

“Whoa, Mom,” I said.

"It's beautiful," she added.

"It's a kimono," said Nikolas. "Imported directly from Japan. Try it on."

Mom slipped the kimono on over her dress. It fit her perfectly, even with all the weight she'd lost. Nikolas looked relieved that we liked our gifts. We sat down in the living room. I got glasses of lemonade for everyone.

Nikolas ate some of the veggies and cheese and crackers I'd made. He didn't seem the least bit bothered by these sorry snacks like I thought he might. He asked us all sorts of questions. He wanted to know everything about us and told us a lot about himself too, such as how he lived in a town called Harmony, in a place called Napa Valley in California, in a house that had been built by his great-grandfather back in the 1900s.

We sat and chatted for a couple hours. Nikolas then checked the time on his very expensive looking watch.

"Does everyone here like Italian?" he asked. "I booked us a reservation at a restaurant downtown. It was recently featured in *Food and Wine*."

"Oh. I don't think I could handle anything that rich," said Mom. "I'm on a rather restricted diet."

"I'll speak to the chef," said Nikolas. "Have him prepare something special."

"Oh." Mom giggled. "You don't have to go to that much trouble."

"It's no trouble at all."

"This place sounds pretty fancy," I said. "Are you sure we're dressed right?"

Nikolas winked. "That's why I thought we'd go shopping first. I insist. I refuse to take no for an answer."

"Nikolas, please. You're spoiling us," said Mom.

"That's my intention. Now come on, I'll phone my driver. Have him bring the car

around front.”

We walked to the front door of our apartment building. A long black limo waited for us. Whoa. Was this how Nikolas always traveled? We were all impressed. Especially Peter, who bounced up and down, begging to sit up front – that was until he saw the back, with its plush seats, TV, stereo, and mini-fridge.

The driver drove us downtown. Normally, when I heard the word *shopping*, I thought of the mall, not an exclusive boutique where you had to make an appointment just to get in. A woman named, Yvonne, buzzed us inside. She greeted us and immediately showed us racks of beautiful dresses that cost hundreds – some of them thousands – of dollars, and had names on the tags I'd never heard of and couldn't even try to pronounce.

Yvonne helped me and Mom pick out the perfect dress and shoes for each of us. I was a little uncomfortable having Nikolas pay for these. They all cost a fortune, but he simply glanced at the bill and handed Yvonne a credit card like it was nothing.

We stopped at a men's clothing store next to get a suit for Peter. I thought he'd complain at first, but he went along with it and picked out one that looked almost exactly like the one Nikolas was wearing. I swear, he looked like a little clone.

Next, we stopped at a wig store, where Mom picked out a wig that looked almost identical to how her old hair used to look. We then went to a salon to get it styled. I got my hair done too. Me and Mom also got our nails and make-up done. I had to admit I'd never felt so pretty in a long time, and I'd never seen Mom look so beautiful or so happy either.

By then, I didn't feel the least self-conscious when we got to the restaurant, which was gorgeous by the way. We were taken to our table. Nikolas spoke to the waiter in what I assumed was Italian. Our waiter sounded excited that Nikolas knew his language. They spoke for a few moments before the waiter headed off to the kitchen.

I was glad Nikolas knew Italian, because I could barely understand the menu. Mom looked just as lost, and I knew Peter would be too. Nikolas happily answered our questions. I'd never been anywhere that had such fancy food before, but I decided to be adventurous and order a pasta dish with shrimp, clams, and mussels.

Nikolas ordered something called *osso bucco*, and just as he'd promised he asked the chef to make something special for Mom. She had this type of pasta called *gnocchi* that was real light and fluffy and made from potatoes. Peter had some three-cheese ravioli. Normally, he was kind of a picky eater, but that night he cleaned his plate in just a few minutes. And luckily didn't get any food on his suit either.

I'd never heard Mom laugh so much. She was having such a good time. We had something called *tiramisu* for dessert. It was so rich and sweet. Mom insisted on having a bite – then another. I hoped she wouldn't be sick later.

After dessert, we had our waiter take our picture with Nikolas' phone so we could remember the night. By then, it was late. Peter dozed in the car. Mom did too a little.

Nikolas walked with us back to our apartment and waited while I put Mom to bed. I checked on Peter and frowned when I saw his suit lying in a heap on the floor. I folded it nicely and draped it over his desk chair before heading into the living room.

Nikolas was waiting there, looking at the row of pictures on the entertainment center. He held up one of me taken from a community theater performance of *Wizard of Oz*, where I'd played Dorothy. There were others too, from all my performances.

Nikolas picked up another photo. "This is you in *Into the Woods*, right?"

I nodded. Mom had been bragging all evening about the plays I'd performed in, along with all the years of dancing and singing lessons I'd had.

"Any performances in the future I can look forward to seeing?"

“No. Not really. I’m too busy.”

“Right.” Nikolas smiled sadly. “Watching you with your mother and your brother, it’s really touching to see how devoted you are to them.”

“Thank you,” I said, my cheeks feeling a little flushed.

“You’ve had to sacrifice so much for them.”

“Yeah. Poor, pitiful me.”

“No. Don’t ever say that,” said Nikolas firmly. “You’re not pitiful. You’re far from it. You are a remarkable young lady. Don’t ever forget that.”

My eyes watered. I wrapped my arms around myself as I started to shake. Nikolas stepped forward and held me. I rested my head against his chest and started to cry.

We saw a lot more of Nikolas after that. He came down every weekend – in his private jet I should add. Each time he visited, he always spoiled us with fancy lunches and dinners and lots of shopping. One time, he even took us to see a production of *The Lion King* that had come to town.

The next time he visited after that, before we went out, he said that he and Mom had something serious to talk about first. He gave me money to take Peter to the movies and get some lunch. We took the bus downtown to the theater. I didn’t enjoy myself as much as Peter did. All I could think of was what were Mom and Nikolas talking about that was so important they needed me and Peter out of the house.

When we got home, Mom sat the kitchen table sipping a cup of tea and looked deep in thought.

“Where’s Nikolas?” Peter asked.

“He went back to his hotel for a little while, sweetie,” said Mom. “Petey, could you

excuse me and your sister for a few minutes? We have something to discuss.”

Peter nodded okay and disappeared into his room. I sat down next to Mom.

“Sophie, honey,” she started. “As you know, we’ve been having a hard time lately, financially. With all of our normal expenses plus my hospital bills.”

“We’re getting by. So we’re behind on a couple bills. Big deal. We’ll catch up.”

Mom squeezed my hand. “That may have been true, but now – I’m afraid the landlord’s raised our rent.”

“What? Can he do that?”

Mom nodded. “I got a letter saying they were raising everyone in the building’s rent, starting next month.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Nikolas has offered to help us. He’s also offered to let us move into his home in Harmony. And I said, yes.”

“But isn’t that in California?”

“Sophie, it’s either that or we look for a smaller apartment, and I just don’t think I can handle that. Honey, I don’t understand. You and Nikolas seem to have gotten so close.”

“We have, and he’s great. But do we really have to move? We’ve lived in Phoenix our whole lives. Now we have to pick up and move?”

“I know, and I’m sorry. You’ve had to give up so much in the last year. It’s not fair, I know. But I’m afraid there’s another reason behind this move that doesn’t have to do with money.” Mom stared into her tea. “We know that I’m not going to get any better. And the doctors are amazed I’ve lived this long. I’m living on borrowed time, Sophie. Who knows – any day now – I could – leave you and Peter.”

“Mom.”

“We have no other family, and your father is who knows where.” Mom’s voice cracked like she about to cry. “I need to make sure you and your brother will be okay after I’m gone.”

I managed a smile, while trying not to cry. I gave Mom a hug and held her for the longest time. I agreed to go along with the move. Peter did too, when we told him, especially since it meant spending more time with Nikolas.

A few weeks later, we sold our furniture, packed our belongings, and were on our way to Harmony.

Chapter Four

On moving day, Nikolas arranged for our things to be shipped to his home in Harmony. We each took what we needed to tide us over until then.

Nikolas sent his private jet for us. It waited for us at the airport. I'd only been on a plane one other time, in fifth grade, for a school trip to Washington DC. This time, instead of being crammed into a row with two other people and choked with even more people all around me, in all directions, we had an entire plane to ourselves and a flight attendant waiting just on us. I could get used to traveling like that.

We landed at the airport in San Francisco a little over an hour later. Nikolas waited to greet us, standing near a limo. The man standing next to him was huge, like a football player, with a shaved head, goatee, and a gold earring through his left ear.

"Everyone, this is Rolfe, my butler and driver," said Nikolas.

"The Alfred to your Batman," I joked.

Nikolas grinned. "Something like that."

Peter held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Rolfe."

Rolfe's huge hand completely swallowed Peter's as he gently shook it.

"I should let you know now Rolfe doesn't speak," said Nikolas. "He suffered a throat injury years ago."

In that moment, I saw it, just above his shirt collar, a thin white scar running from one

of Rolfe's ears to the other. It made me shudder a little, thinking about what might have happened to him.

Rolfe loaded our suitcases into the trunk. There were plenty of snacks and drinks in the limo, which worked out good, because it took us about three hours, counting bathroom breaks, to get to Harmony. We drove past miles of tree lined highways and green hills, before turning onto the road that led to Harmony.

The town lay up ahead. It was perfectly cradled by the forest. In the distance, I could see the St. Clair winery and vineyard. Nikolas had explained how the St. Clair family founded Harmony back in 1855 and that tourists came to town specifically to visit the winery and vineyard.

"And to spend money at local businesses, like my restaurant and my gallery," he added with a wink.

The town appeared up ahead, further down the road. Instead of heading toward it, we turned down a private road and passed through a wrought iron gate.

The road ended at Nikolas' home – I should say mansion. Wow. We were really going to live here? I couldn't believe it.

The inside was just as impressive as the outside. It had high ceilings and was filled with artwork and antiques. Peter was about to take off running. I snatched him by the collar.

"Don't run," I told him. "And don't touch anything."

"Anybody home!" Nikolas called out. His voice carried.

A moment later, a boy and a girl appeared at the top of the staircase in front of us.

"We saw you guys pull up," said the boy.

He walked down first, followed by the girl. This had to be Patrick. Nikolas told us how he had two wards – again, like Batman. Patrick was my age. He wore trendy clothes and

had perfectly gelled blonde hair. I swear he looked like he belonged in a boy band.

The girl's name was Emma. She was sixteen, tall with long dark hair. She didn't smile as easily as Patrick did. It didn't seem like she was feeling very well. She looked kind of pale and had dark circles under her eyes. Her voice was little more than a muffled whisper when she said hi, and the way she stared at me made me a little uncomfortable.

Patrick seemed especially happy to meet Peter. He crouched down to his level when he shook his hand, like Nikolas did the first time they met.

"Call me Vlad," said Peter.

I groaned a little. Oh, no. Not this.

Patrick glanced at Nikolas. They both held back a laugh. Rolfe just smiled. Even Emma managed a chuckle.

"Vlad it is," said Patrick.

Nikolas motioned toward the stairs. "Why don't we show everyone their rooms. After that, we can give them the tour."

I reached for Mom's suitcase, but Nikolas grabbed it before I could get it. The stairs were pretty steep, but Nikolas already had one of those stair-lift-thingies installed for Mom, so she had a smooth ride all the way to the top.

We stopped by my room first, which had to be twice the size of my old one, then Peter's. We set our suitcases inside before heading to Mom's room. A lady in purple scrubs met us at the door.

"Laura, this is Vanessa," said Nikolas. "She's here full-time to help you. Her room's right next door to yours, and there's an intercom so you can contact her."

"It's nice to meet you, Laura," said Vanessa. "I just finished making your bed. I figured you'd be tired after your trip."

"Yes. I am," said Mom. "Thank you."

She followed Vanessa inside.

"You know where to find me if you need me, Mom," I said.

Vanessa smiled back at me. "It's okay. I got this. You go relax, okay?"

"Okay," I murmured. Relax. That almost sounded like a foreign word to me.

I lingered a bit then walked back down the hall. A strange noise came from Peter's room. When I got there, I found him jumping on his new bed.

"What are you doing? Get down from there!" I ordered.

Peter responded by giving me puppy-dog eyes. He should have known by now I was immune.

"Sorry. My bad."

I turned to see Patrick standing behind me.

"I told him he could," he added.

I softened a little. "I just don't want him to get hurt."

"You're right," said Patrick. "I should have been more careful."

"See. I told you," Peter said to him.

I turned my attention to Peter. "Told him what?"

Patrick chuckled. "Nothing."

I glanced at Peter, who smiled back at me, all innocently.

"Let's get you unpacked," I told him.

"I'm already unpacked," he said. "Patrick helped me."

"Oh." I glanced at Peter's dresser. "You didn't just shove everything in there, did you?"

"No, ma'am," said Patrick. "Everything is neatly folded and ready for inspection."

I turned to Peter, who gave me a salute. He and Patrick giggled. Those two had bonded awfully quick – at my expense by the sound of it.

“What about your suit?” I asked Peter. “The one Nikolas bought you?”

“Neatly hung in the closet, ma’am,” answered Patrick.

I grinned back at him and Peter. “Very good then. As you were, gentlemen.”

Patrick smiled. He looked impressed I could take a joke. “Hey, when you’re done unpacking, me and Vlad are going to hang out in my room, play some Call of Duty if you want to join us.”

“Thanks, but video games aren’t really my thing.”

Patrick shrugged. “If you change your mind, my room’s right across from Vlad’s.”

I stifled a groan. I wished he wouldn’t call Peter that. I headed to my room and unpacked my suitcase and garment bag.

Now that we were somewhat settled in, Nikolas gave us a tour of the house. Mom was still asleep so it was just me and Peter. Patrick tagged along.

We started on the top floor and worked our way down. As we stopped in each room, Nikolas showed off his favorite antiques and pieces of artwork. Some of them were over a hundred years old. Each one had history and a story behind it, and Nikolas was so detailed and so specific when he told these stories, you’d swear he was actually alive back then.

“Are you ready to see something really cool?” Nikolas asked – more to Peter than to me.

Peter bounced up and down. “Yeah!”

We headed toward the far end of the mansion. This was the only locked room in the house we’d encountered so far. Nikolas opened the door and turned on the lights.

The room was filled with old weapons. We’re talking swords and shields, crossbows

and old-timey guns. They were in cases that lined all four walls. And just like all of the artwork and antiques in the house, Nikolas showed us his favorites and told us the history of each one.

“Can I touch one of the swords?” Peter asked.

“No!” I immediately answered.

Nikolas chuckled. “Your sister’s right. These aren’t toys. They’re just for looking at. They’re very old and very expensive. Okay?”

Peter nodded obediently. I stepped closer to one of the cases. Nikolas may have just said the weapons in that room were just for looking at. But those swords looked awfully sharp to me.

Nikolas told us we had a couple of hours until dinner. Patrick and Peter decided to head back upstairs and resume playing Call of Duty. I decided to follow and hang out with them. Eventually, I gave in and let them teach me how to play the game. I sucked at it of course, but it was still fun blowing stuff up.

Rolfe later appeared at the doorway.

“Is it dinner time?” Patrick asked him.

The mute giant simply nodded. We followed him downstairs. Nikolas and Mom were already waiting for us in the dining room. No Emma though.

“I’m afraid she’s not feeling well,” said Nikolas.

I nodded, thinking about how shaky Emma looked earlier.

“I hope she feels better,” I said.

“So do I,” Nikolas muttered.

He had this strange look in his eye that made me think Emma’s illness might be more than a cold or a touch of the flu. I tried to think of a subtle way I could ask and find out what

was going on with her. I was sure Patrick knew.

Rolfe entered from the kitchen, pushing a little trolley with our plates on it. We started with risotto, this type of pasta that looked like rice. After that, we were served something called Beef Wellington. Mom only had the risotto. The Beef Wellington was too rich and heavy for her. But I thought it was delicious. Everything was. It turned out Rolfe was also the cook. I was definitely impressed.

For dessert, we had chocolate mousse. It was the perfect way to end a perfect meal. I pushed myself away from the table, totally stuffed, and went to help Mom. Vanessa beat me to it. I followed the two of them upstairs to Mom's bedroom.

Peter tagged along to say goodnight to Mom as Vanessa put her to bed. I wanted to help, but Vanessa shooed me away playfully.

"I told you. I've got this," she said, winking.

I reluctantly backed off, kissed Mom goodnight, and left with Peter. We met up with Patrick and watched TV in his room. It wasn't long until Peter was snoring softly, sprawled out on Patrick's bed. I heaved him into my arms and carried him to his room, helped him into his pajamas, and put him to bed.

Patrick waited for me in the hallway. "You're really good with him."

I smiled. "Thanks. You aren't so bad yourself."

Patrick smiled back sadly. "I used to have a brother his age. He died in the same car crash that killed my parents."

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

"Thanks."

"I take it you and your little brother were close."

"Honestly, I thought he was a little pest, always wanting to tag along with me and my

friends. Only now – I wished I let him.”

I suddenly got a little choked up. I thought the same thing about Peter at times. But I could only imagine how heartbroken I'd be if I'd lost him.

“I invited my friends over for a pool party tomorrow,” said Patrick. “I thought you'd want to meet them.”

“Thank you. I'd like that.”

“I figured that way you'll have someone to hang out with at school on Monday. You won't have to be alone.”

I thanked him again.

Patrick nodded. “See you in the morning.”

“Yeah. Goodnight.”

I headed down the hall to my room. When I got inside, I immediately flopped onto my new bed. It was so soft and warm, and it had been such a long day, I could already feel my eyelids getting heavy. I leapt to my feet when I saw Emma standing in the doorway staring at me.

“You startled me,” I said.

“Sorry,” Emma murmured. “I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Thank you. I'm fine. Just getting used to my new room.”

Emma managed a tight smile. “If you need anything, I'm right across the hall.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Emma stared at me for a moment rather intensely. She held herself as she began to tremble slightly.

I shifted my feet nervously. “Well, goodnight.”

She nodded then pulled herself away and hurried to her room. I stepped out into the

hallway in time to hear her door slam.

If you want to read the rest of *Bloodline*, you can purchase the eBook or paperback at Amazon.com!

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Thank you,

Dan O'Mahony

