

BLOODLINE

A TALE FROM THE TOWN OF HARMONY



DAN O'MAHONY

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Bloodline
A Tale from the Town of Harmony

Growing Up
Supernatural



Book Three

Dan O'Mahony

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To Grandma (July 8, 1926 - May 14, 2017)

RIP

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 pored 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?"

"Her 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 the 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 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 studying 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 online. 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 to 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 shelves. 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 at the kitchen table, sipping a cup of tea, looking 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 was 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 myself. 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.

Chapter Five

The rest of our stuff arrived from Phoenix that morning, but it would have to wait until after the pool party. Rolfe spent the morning preparing the food, and the guests started arriving around ten.

Three of Patrick's friends – Brody, Brenna, and Dillon – arrived first. Brody and Brenna were twins, brother and sister. You could see it in their faces. They both had dark hair and dark eyes, were good-looking and athletes by the looks of them. Dillon too, and from the smiles and glances he and Brenna traded, it was obvious those two were going out.

Patrick greeted the three of them with fist-bumps and bro' hugs before introducing them to me and Peter. Brody and Brenna's parents brought the three of them over. I met them next. Their dad was the sheriff. He was tall and built like a bodybuilder. His wife, Mrs. Sullivan, was tall and gorgeous, his perfect match.

Gabby and Gwen arrived next. Gwen was kind of intense looking and had blonde hair with a cool black streak in it. Gabby was shorter than me and had this awesome long, curly brown hair. She was bubbly and had a big smile glued to her face and greeted everyone with a hug.

The two of them arrived with Gabby's parents, Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair. Mr. St. Clair was tall and distinguished. His hair was graying at the sides, and he had a thin mustache. It was a pool-party, but he still wore a suit. Something told me he always did. Gabby looked just like her mom. Same hair. Same smile. The only difference was her mom wore glasses.

Mom was feeling well enough to come down for the party, which was nice. The adults camped out on the patio while us kids took over the chairs and tables by the pool.

It was too bad Nikolas didn't know anyone who had kids Peter's age. He tagged along with us, looking pretty proud to hang with the big kids. He splashed around in the shallow end and played with the water-basketball game that was in the pool. He did all sorts of tricks to try to show off for Patrick.

"So Sophie, you always talk this much?" Brenna asked sarcastically.

Up until that point, I'd had a hard time getting in a word. I'd just been listening to the six of them talk about school and whatever. I didn't know what to say to Brenna's little joke. I just sort of giggled like a dope.

Gabby nudged my shoulder. "Seriously, tell us your story."

I shrugged. "There's not much to tell. I'm from Phoenix. I'm just a normal girl."

Peter leaned against the edge of the pool near us. "She likes to sing and dance."

Everyone perked up when they heard that. I grimaced, embarrassed.

"Really?" Gwen asked. "We talking on stage or alone in your room?"

"I've had singing and dancing lessons since I was little," I said.

"What kind of dancing?" asked Brenna. "Hip-hop? Ballet?"

"Both. And some jazz and tap."

"Sweet," said Dillon. "You going to bust some moves for us?"

I shook my head, embarrassed.

"At least sing for us," said Gabby, nudging me.

I shook my head again, feeling my face turn a shade redder.

"My sister used to be in plays," said Peter.

I rolled my eyes. Why couldn't he just shut up?

"Is that right?" asked Brody.

I shifted my shoulders. "Yeah, community-theater, school plays. Nothing big."

"You kidding? That's great," said Gwen.

"I haven't been on stage in over a year though," I said.

"Why not?" asked Brody.

"My mom started getting sick. I had to stop to help take care of her and Peter."

"Oh. Sorry," said Gabby.

"Thanks." I got up. "Excuse me."

I headed over to the patio, where the adults were sitting. Everyone was talking and laughing and having a good time. Mom looked happy, but at the same time I could tell she was looking a little tired. I walked over and gave her a side-hug.

"Hi, sweetie. Having fun?" she asked.

I nodded. "I just wanted to check on you. See how you were doing."

"I'm fine, Sophie. Go. Have fun."

I glanced at Patrick and friends then back at Mom, who made a worried face.

"Help me up, honey," she said.

We walked into the house, stopping on the other side of the patio doors.

"Sweetheart, I know this last year's been difficult," Mom started. "You've had to give up a lot to take care of me and your brother, and I don't know what I'd have done without you. But we have Nikolas now. And Vanessa does a wonderful job taking care of me. She's such a dear. Go. You are officially discharged from your responsibilities," she joked.

I cracked a tiny smile.

"Sophie. Have fun. Be a kid again."

"I think I've forgotten how," I said, meaning it as a joke.

Mom smiled. "I think Patrick and his friends will be more than happy to show you."

I smiled back and helped Mom outside to her chair. When I rejoined Patrick and his friends, they'd turned on the boombox. Someone's phone was plugged into it, either Brenna or Gwen's I guessed, because the two of them were singing along to Taylor Swift's "Shake it Off." Gwen wasn't singing. I took it that it wasn't her kind of music, because she and the boys looked like they were being tortured.

I had that album on my phone too and knew the song, so I started singing along. It didn't take long for me to really let it rip. Soon, Brenna and Gabby stopped singing, and everyone was looking at me with big eyes and even bigger smiles. I stopped, feeling a little self-conscious.

"Don't stop," Brenna told me.

"For real," said Gabby. "You can sing, girl."

"Thanks," I said, smiling now myself.

The three of us continued singing. Gwen and the boys didn't look so tortured now. Instead, they listened to us happily. Along with my dancing and singing lessons, I'd also done gymnastics since I was in first grade. The others begged me to show them some moves. I was so nervous.

I hadn't done any gymnastics in a year. I prayed I didn't fall on my face. Luckily, I didn't. I was able to pull off some cartwheels and back-flips. Everyone applauded. I laughed and took some bows.

Brenna joined me. She was pretty acrobatic herself. We tried to get Gabby and Gwen to join us, but they both shook their heads insistently.

Peter tried some cartwheels too but could barely get his feet off the ground. He didn't seem to care one bit though and laughed every time.

After that, we had a dance-off. Well, everyone except Gwen. She just watched from one of the pool chairs. Peter danced around like a little spaz. We didn't really count him in the competition.

One after another, the others dropped out. First Brody, then Gabby, Patrick, and Brenna. It was down to just me and Dillon. He had some good moves, I'd give him that. But in the end, he couldn't stand up to my fresh style and had to give up just like the rest.

By then, I noticed the adults had been watching us. They applauded from the patio. I looked to Mom, who gave me a thumbs-up.

Chapter Six

I was still so used to waking up at five every morning, making breakfast, helping Peter get ready for school, and waiting for Mom's caregiver to show up before taking the city bus to school.

As I laid there in my new, comfy bed in my new ginormous room, I reminded myself I could still sleep in for a couple hours, that Mom's new nurse, Vanessa, would have her up and dressed and downstairs for breakfast -- which Rolfe would be cooking for everyone.

Around six, I couldn't take it anymore. I got out of bed, got dressed, and headed down the hall. The door to Peter's room was closed. I assumed he was still sleeping. I checked the time on my phone. I'd give him a few more minutes.

Mom's door was closed too. I resisted the urge to knock, reminding myself she had Vanessa now. She was so good with Mom. I liked her. So did she.

I sighed and headed back to Peter's room. It was six thirty. His new school started at eight. He needed to get up now. I knocked on his door.

"Peter. It's time to wake up. Rise and shine."

He didn't answer, so I gently pushed open the door. He was still in his pajamas, sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at the floor.

I sat next to him. "Nervous?"

He nodded, and I pulled him close.

"Yeah. Me too," I assured him.

"At least you know Patrick and his friends," he told me. "I'm not going to know anybody."

I gave him a squeeze. "You'll make friends. Just lay off the vampire-stuff. At least for a while?"

Peter grumbled some sort of reply. I turned him to face me.

"How about thinking of Peter Holden as your secret identity? Wait until you make some friends then you can tell them all about Vlad."

He managed a smile. "That'd be kind of cool."

I smiled back at him -- but gave a silent sigh, kicking myself for not thinking of that sooner, when all this Vlad-stuff first started. It definitely would have saved me a few trips to the vice principal's office at Peter's school.

I kissed him on the top of his head. "Go on. Get dressed and ready for school. I'll meet you downstairs."

Peter nodded and headed to his dresser. I shut the door behind me and walked toward the stairs.

"Sophie."

I turned around. Emma stepped out of her room. I waited as she headed over to meet me. She looked totally different now, compared to the last time I saw her. She had some color in her cheeks, and there was a bit of a bounce in her step. Talk about a miraculous recovery.

"First day of school, huh?" she asked. "Nervous?"

I nodded.

"Just stick with Patrick and his friends. You'll do fine."

"Thanks. What about you? I thought you'd be at school already." I mean, I assumed Emma was in high school. And high schools usually started even earlier than elementary.

Emma sifted the carpet with her bare toes. "Yeah, I'm not quite ready for that yet."

"Oh. Okay," I said, wondering what she meant by that.

Nikolas had told me Emma was a runaway, which meant her home life had to have been pretty cruddy. She'd been living on the streets too for a long time, which I imagine couldn't have been a whole lot of fun either. It had probably been a long time since she'd done something normal like go to school. I imagined that would probably take some building up to.

"Hey, listen. I really want to apologize for how weird I've been since you got here," said Emma.

"It's okay. I heard you weren't well."

"Yeah. I've been pretty sick," Emma replied, turning away from me. She then returned her attention to me and smiled. "Anyway, have a good one. I'll see you when you get back. I want to hear all about your first day."

"You bet."

"It's going to be cool to have another girl around the house," said Emma as I started to walk away.

"Thanks."

As I headed down the stairs, I spotted Nikolas, Patrick, and Rolfe coming from the same direction as the room in the house with all those antique weapons. They were dressed in workout gear. The three of them stopped short when they saw me.

"You're up," said Nikolas, sounding surprised.

"School doesn't start for us until nine," said Patrick. "It's not even, what, seven?"

"It's Peter's first day," I reminded them. "I want to go with him, make sure he gets settled."

"Right. Super sis'," said Patrick.

Nikolas gave him a playful shove. "He's kidding. Peter's lucky to have you as a sister."

"Thanks. I'm going to get our breakfast ready."

"Rolfe will take care of that for you," said Nikolas.

The mute giant nodded.

"No. He doesn't have to," I said.

"Trust me, he'd be happy to." Nikolas leaned in and half-whispered. "To be honest, he's a bit territorial about his kitchen."

I chuckled. "Okay."

Patrick followed Nikolas upstairs, while I followed Rolfe into the kitchen. He washed up and opened the refrigerator.

"Anything I can do to help?" I wasn't quite sure how Rolfe would answer that, but it felt right to at least ask.

Rolfe shook his head. He urged me to sit at the table. I took a seat and listened to some of the *Wicked* soundtrack, which I had on my phone, and sang along softly.

Peter came down a couple minutes later and sat at the table across from me. Rolfe then brought over our breakfast, bacon and cheese omelets with a side of fresh fruit and a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice and milk for each of us.

We thanked Rolfe, who nodded and smiled, looking pleased that we were happy with our meal. I took that first bite of my omelet, smiled, and made my yummy-face. It was so good, light and fluffy with nice big pieces of crispy, crunchy bacon. Judging by the look on Peter's face -- and the speed at which he ate -- he enjoyed his too.

Vanessa brought Mom down as we were getting ready to leave. She walked with us to the door and gave me and Peter big, embarrassing hugs

and kisses before we left.

Rolfe drove us into town in a big, sleek black car. He stopped at the elementary school first. As we walked toward the front gate, Peter reached for my hand all on his own, something he hadn't done in years. I smiled at him and gave it a little squeeze.

We stopped at the office first. The secretary welcomed us and walked us to Peter's new classroom. His new teacher, Mrs. Wilcox, was inside getting ready for the day. She smiled as she crouched down to Peter's level to introduce herself and shake his hand. She seemed really nice. It looked like Peter liked her too.

The bell rang, and Peter and Mrs. Wilcox left to pick up the rest of the class on the playground. I watched them walk away. As they did, Peter glanced at me, over his shoulder, and gave me a thumbs-up. I took that as a signal he would be okay.

I returned the gesture then headed to the middle school, which was a few blocks from the elementary school. I stopped at the office, where I got my schedule and locker assignment. As I walked through the quad, I immediately spotted Patrick and the others at a corner lunch table, which according to him was their usual hang-out spot.

They passed my class schedule back and forth, commenting on each teacher I had, who was cool, who wasn't, and who gave the most homework.

"You're taking computers for an elective?" Gabby was the first to notice.

I nodded.

"I thought you'd take drama or choir or dance," she continued.

I sat there stunned for a moment, facing a wall of disappointed faces. I grinned nervously. "Maybe next semester," I mumbled.

Patrick and the others each nodded. Apparently, that was an acceptable answer. The bell rang. Me, Gabby, and Brenna had the same Homeroom so we walked together.

They asked me about Peter. When I told them his teacher was Mrs. Wilcox, both their faces lit up. It turned out they had her for second grade too. They couldn't say enough good things about her.

"Watch out, wide load coming through," a girl called out from behind us.

Gabby's chin dropped while Brenna glared over her shoulder. I looked too. It was a couple of *those* girls. Perfect hair, flawless skin, skinny almost to the point of starvation, and always dressed in the latest fashion. They were the type that thought they owned the school -- and sadly no one bothered to tell them different.

"I bet she beeps when she backs up," said the other girl.

They both laughed and high-fived. Gabby bit her lip. I could tell she was trying not to cry. I don't know why those two girls were making fat jokes. Gabby wasn't really overweight, just healthy looking.

Brenna fumed. She stalked toward them. Gabby tried to grab her wrist, but Brenna was too quick. "Isn't this getting old, Natalie?" she asked the taller, blonder girl.

"Down, Fido," said a smirking Natalie. "What's wrong? Someone not get her Kibbles 'n' Bits this morning?"

The other girl laughed then made barking sounds. Brenna's face turned red. Her fists balled up at her sides. Before she could take a step forward, Gabby dashed in front of her and hustled her down the hall.

"Come on, Brenna. They're not worth it," she said.

Brenna gnashed her teeth as she turned around and started walking away. Me and Gabby walked on either side of her.

"Aw, are you taking your little doggie for a walk, Flabs?" Natalie called out to us.

"Isn't there a leash law in this town?" asked the second girl.

Their laughter trailed us down the hall. Brenna snarled, but at the same time she looked like she was about to cry. I couldn't understand the dog-jokes they were making. I mean, Brenna was fit and beautiful. It didn't make sense.

"Who are those girls?" I asked.

"Natalie and Lori," said Gabby, her voice cracking a little. "They hang with Sarah Dupre. She's sort of the queen bee of this school."

Brenna sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Natalie's usually not so obnoxious. But the school musical's coming around, so she's extra full of herself."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

"Natalie always lands the lead," said Gabby. "And all the attention that brings."

At that same time, we passed a flier for auditions for the school musical. To my surprise, it was *Wicked*. A show I knew line for line, song by song.

Chapter Seven

Throughout the day, when I wasn't caught up in classwork, all I could think about was Natalie and how mean she'd been to Gabby and Brenna that morning. Every time I walked down the halls, I saw fliers for the auditions for *Wicked*. Whenever I did, a different song would pop into my head. As the day went on, I thought about how sweet it would be to audition and beat out that little snob for the lead.

Unfortunately, as I did think about how satisfying that would be, at the same time, my stomach did flip-flops. It had been over a year since I'd been on a stage. And this girl, Natalie, had been performing on a regular basis. There'd be no rust on her.

I told myself there was no shame in not being ready yet. There was always the next play. I could practice until then. Make sure I was good to go.

I kept saying to myself that was the practical thing to do. But a little voice in my head kept nagging me to go for it. I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore it. But that only made the annoying little voice a much bigger, louder annoying voice.

At the end of the day, I met up with Patrick and the others at the front gate. Normally, they all got picked up by Brody and Brenna's mom and usually went over to their house to do homework and hang-out.

"Actually, you guys," I started to say. "I think I want to hang out for a bit. Check out the auditions for *Wicked*."

Gabby blinked with surprise. She and Brenna both had big smiles on their faces. The others looked just as happy and surprised at the same time.

"So you're going to audition?" Gwen asked.

I shook my head. "I didn't say that. I just want to, you know, check it out. Scope out the talent."

Everyone glanced back and forth at each other. Gabby and Brenna smirked. I got the impression they didn't believe me.

"All right, let me tell my mom we're all staying," said Brenna.

"You don't have to," I said.

"Oh, trust me. We all want to see this," said Gabby.

"I mean it. I'm not going to audition," I insisted.

Now it was Patrick's turn to smirk. "We heard you. We heard you."

I shook my head and let out a sigh as I started toward the theatre. I'd checked it out earlier, so I knew where to go. The others followed me.

All of the people auditioning sat in the front rows. Natalie was flanked by some friends, who looked just as snobby and full of themselves as her. They caught a glimpse of me and the others and started snickering. I gritted my teeth. My face suddenly felt hot.

The drama teacher/director, Ms. Phelps, clapped her hands and announced that she was ready to begin auditions. Me and the others sat in the back. Everyone else settled into their seats. Me? I sat on the edge of mine, my arms folded on the back of the seat in front of me.

I watched audition after audition, studying and evaluating each performance, watching Ms. Phelps scribble notes on her pad, wishing I had super vision and could see what she thought about each person.

Finally, it was Natalie's turn. She walked onto the stage with all the poise and confidence in the world -- like she knew she already had the part. And from the expression on Ms. Phelps' face, maybe she did. I definitely got the impression Natalie was her star.

She auditioned for the role of Elphaba, the lead, of course. Even though she would have probably made a better Glinda, seeing as how she was so shallow. She picked "I'm Not That Girl" to sing -- which also happened to be my favorite song from that show.

She sang it well. I had to give her that. She'd definitely been taking lessons and performing her whole life. She was used to the spotlight too by the looks of it. When she finished, Ms. Phelps stood up smiling.

"That was wonderful, Natalie. As always," she said.

Natalie looked like she was trying to act humble, even though she obviously wasn't.

Ms. Phelps addressed the other students who'd auditioned. "I want to thank everyone for coming out -- "

"Wait!" I stood up in my seat. "I want to audition."

Natalie sneered. "Uh, sorry. But auditions are for drama club only."

"Really? Because it didn't say that on the flyer," I told her.

Natalie opened her mouth to say something, but no words came up. She turned to Ms. Phelps, who simply shrugged and said, "I suppose we've

got time for one more."

Natalie's mouth opened even further like she was ready to argue but then decided against it. Instead, she crossed her arms and stood there silently. I ignored her and took some deep breaths as I walked onto the stage. My mouth tasted like I'd been sucking on a penny. Ms. Phelps asked me a question, but I couldn't hear her clearly over the sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

"I'm sorry. What?" I asked her.

"What song are you going to sing?"

I glanced at Natalie out of the corner of my eye and grinned. "I'm not that girl."

Her jaw dropped. She actually looked offended. I figured what the heck. If I could outperform her singing the same song she did, that would be so sweet.

The student playing the piano began the song. For a moment, I thought I was going to hurl. But I closed my eyes and took one last deep breath. When the time came, I dug down deep and summoned as much soul and passion as I could and started to sing.

Almost instantly, I was in the zone. Time seemed to stop around me, and all my fear and anxiety vanished. The song poured out of me. A feeling of pure exhilaration carried me through each word, each verse.

When I finished, I let out a weary sigh. I felt drained. Applause and hoots and hollers filled my ears. I glanced up and saw Patrick and the others on their feet cheering for me.

The other drama students in the theatre who had been auditioning clapped as well but looked dazed at the same time, like they couldn't believe what they'd just heard. All except for Natalie, who sat with her back turned in her chair, glaring at me from over her shoulder, pouting like a little brat.

Ms. Phelps met me as I stepped off the stage. She was wide-eyed and had a huge smile on her face. She couldn't take her eyes off me and asked me all sorts of questions, wanting to know everything there was to know about me.

I was giddy from all the applause and attention. After a few minutes, Ms. Phelps addressed the auditioning students and informed them she'd have the cast list ready by tomorrow. She then gave me a wink that seemed to suggest I had the lead.

At that point, Natalie had gathered her stuff as was stomping out of the theatre. Gabby and Brenna looked especially satisfied by that.

I caught up with Patrick and the others, and we walked out together.

Gabby shrieked and threw her arms around me. "You nailed it!"

"We'll find out tomorrow," I said, deciding I probably shouldn't read too much into the wink Ms. Phelps gave me.

Brody had his phone in his hand. "My mom just texted. She just pulled up front."

"You guys go ahead," said Patrick. "Rolfe's going to pick me and Gwen up. We got that big Social Studies project to work on."

Gabby showed off a sly grin. "Ah, you two want a little 'alone time,' huh?"

Brenna snickered. Gwen glared at Gabby. I swore for a moment she was going to punch her. Patrick, on the other hand, squinted, looking confused.

I rolled my eyes and chuckled. It was so obvious to everyone. Me too, even, and I'd only known these guys a couple days. Gwen had a crush on Patrick – and he was completely clueless about it. As were the other boys.

"What about you, Sophie? You coming with us?" Dillon asked.

"Not this time, sorry. I want to go home, check on my brother, see how his first day of school went."

"Super Sis' to the rescue," said Patrick.

I shot him a look, but he didn't care. We walked together through the front gate and said goodbye as Brody, Brenna, Gabby, and Dillon headed toward Mrs. Sullivan's minivan, while me, Patrick, and Gwen met Rolfe as he pulled the car up behind her.

When we got home, I found Peter up in Patrick's room playing Xbox instead of working on his homework like he should have been.

Before I could lay into him, he said, "I've finished my homework already."

I blinked with surprise. "Oh. Well, where is it? I want to check it."

"Rolfe already did."

I blinked with surprise again, wondering how Rolfe would be able to help Peter with his homework seeing as how he couldn't talk. Then again, the two had been spending a lot of time with each other and seemed to have

developed a sort of telepathy. I had to admit, they were awfully cute together, my little brother and the mute giant.

I still insisted on seeing Peter's homework. With a lot of drama, he paused his game and dug it out of his backpack. He had it all finished, even his reading log, and it was all correct too.

"Okay then," I grinned and left him to his game.

I then headed down the hall to Mom's bedroom. She was up, sitting in her chair by the window, watching some old sit-com on TV Land. She looked good. There was some nice color in her cheeks.

I hugged and kissed her and sat on the arm of her chair as I told her about my day. She was thrilled to hear I'd auditioned for the school musical, and like Patrick and the others she was sure I got the part.

We sat and talked for a little while longer. After that, I headed downstairs to get started on my homework. Patrick and Gwen were already camped out at the kitchen table, their books and notes spread out in front of them.

They cleared a space for me, and Gwen slid the tray of snacks Rolfe had prepared toward me—sliced fruit and veggies, fancy cheese and crackers. I looked around for Rolfe but, according to Patrick, he had to leave with Nikolas, who had some business in town to take care of.

Emma came down a few minutes later. She disappeared into the pantry for a few seconds and came out with a bag of popcorn, which she stuck into the microwave. She kept glancing our way, specifically at Patrick and Gwen, and would grin and give a little chuckle.

I knew exactly what she was thinking. Poor, Gwen. She was working so hard to get Patrick to notice her, you know, "that way." She kept smiling and complimenting him every time she could and looking for any excuse to touch his hand or his arm.

Gwen was in the same Math and Language Arts classes as me. I knew exactly how smart she was. But she kept playing dumb, for Patrick's sake. Not that it did any good. Patrick was just utterly clueless.

When I finished my homework, Patrick and Gwen were still working. I headed upstairs, where I caught up with Emma. She saw me grinning and asked what was up.

I shook my head. "Nothing. Just – poor, Gwen."

Emma giggled. "Oh, I know. She's got it so bad for Patrick."

"And he's totally clueless."

"Trust me. Boys usually are. I can't blame her though. Patrick is a cutie."

"Yeah."

Emma shot me a sly look. "Don't tell me you're interested in him too?"

My eyes widened. "What? No. He's definitely not my type."

"Ah. You prefer the bad boys, huh?"

"No. I – " I sighed. "To be honest, I really don't know what my type is. I've never really had a boyfriend. Or dated anyone."

OMG, I sounded so lame. Emma didn't appear to think so. She gave me a comforting smile.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Don't be in a rush either. You've got plenty of time." The corners of her smile drooped a little. "And don't be one of those girls who defines herself by the guy she dates. Find out who you are first. Then be that person. And stay that person. Don't change who you are. Especially for some guy. Believe me, the wrong guy can really mess with your head, make you do a lot of things you'll regret."

With that last part, Emma sounded especially serious. I smiled and thanked her for her big-sisterly advice. We hung out for a little bit in her room after that, listening to music, before we headed back downstairs to check on the "lovebirds."

When we reached the stairs, we heard shouting coming from the front door. I hurried the rest of the way, followed by Emma.

Patrick and Gwen stood in the doorway blocking some scary-looking guys who wanted to get in. The one in front had black spiked hair and wore a long leather coat. He was at least a foot taller than Patrick, who, to his credit, wasn't backing down. Neither was Gwen.

"I told you, Emma's not going anywhere with you," said Patrick.

I glanced at Emma. The look on her face told me she knew this guy -- and knew him very well.

The guy leaned forward and got in Patrick's face. "And I told *you*, get out of my way, or me and my boys are going to roll over you and your little girlfriend here."

"Don't you know whose house this is?" Patrick asked.

"I don't care!"

Gwen stepped up. "We've called 911. The sheriff's on his way. You know who he is, don't you? You really want to deal with him?"

The guy sneered. "Get out of our way."

He pushed past Patrick and Gwen.

Emma cried out, "Tommy, no!"

So she did know this guy.

Patrick grabbed his arm. When he did, somehow he -- he changed. His eyes turned dark red. He hissed, and he had fangs. Actual fangs.

Tommy hissed back at him. He then turned to Emma. His eyes had gone blood red too. He also had fangs. So did the rest of his crew. I saw it clearly as they forced their way inside.

Chapter Eight

My heart leapt into my throat. What was going on?

"Emma, get Sophie upstairs. Now!" said Patrick.

Emma wasn't moving. She stood frozen. So did I.

Tommy turned and swung at Patrick, who ducked then swept Tommy's legs out from beneath him.

Two of Tommy's crew rushed toward Gwen, who stood her ground. She spun her left hand in a circle. As she did, it started to glow this sort of neon-green color.

Energy spiraled from her fingertips. She extended her hand, and a blast of energy swallowed one of Tommy's crew. When it faded, he was gone. Vanished.

The other member of Tommy's crew that had been stalking toward her stopped short. He glanced at Gwen then the spot where his buddy had been standing then back at Gwen again. She smirked and began spinning her left hand again, daring him to come at her.

Tommy and the other members of his crew kept trying to take down Patrick, who it turned out had mad skills. He ducked and dodged them when he could then hit them with well-placed kicks and punches.

But there were too many of them. They threatened to overpower him.

"A little help, Shawn," Patrick called out.

What? Who was he talking to? Who was Shawn?

I didn't see anyone else around at all.

Suddenly, the furniture around us started to shake. The pictures hanging on the walls rattled and threatened to crash to the floor.

One of Tommy's crew then screamed as he was flung through the air by some invisible force. Another went flying. Then another. All three crashed into the walls and crumpled to the floor. Tommy went flying too. He landed near the stairs.

Near me and Emma.

I shoved Emma up the stairs and ordered her to run. I was right behind her when Tommy grabbed my ankle. I landed hard on the stairs. He

hissed, showing off his fangs. And those eyes. They were dull and lifeless like a shark's.

I screamed and kicked his face with my other foot over and over. My last kick hit his nose. There was a sickening crunch. He cried out and released his grip.

Emma yanked me to my feet. Before we could make it any further, Tommy sprang to his feet. Blood flowed from his nose, which was almost on the other side of his face now. But he didn't care. His gaze tore a hole through me.

"Run," he said, his upper lip curling. "Please."

I tried to move but was frozen. I glanced below. Tommy's crew had recovered from whatever had tossed them around. Gwen got set to blast another one with -- whatever it was she'd done. But one of them grabbed her from behind and pinned her arms to her side.

Patrick ran to help her -- but got jumped by two more of them and was forced to the ground. Tommy chuckled approvingly, especially when the last two of his guys hurried to back him up.

He returned his attention to me. "I wished you would've run. It's so much more fun when they run."

My legs threatened to give out. I was ready to collapse into a quivering, sobbing ball. All I could think of were Mom and Peter. Oh God, please keep them safe.

The walls started to shake again. Whatever -- or whoever -- had thrown Tommy and his crew around was ready to do it again.

"No!" Tommy shouted, eyeing the room. "Do it and they're dead. I swear."

The rumbling slowed to a stop.

Tommy gazed past me. "I just want Emma. Then I'm out of here. No one else needs to get hurt."

I glanced at Emma. Her bottom lip trembled. Tears gathered in her eyes. She started down the stairs, toward me. No, not to me. To Tommy.

A vicious snarl. A loud growl. Three figures burst through the doorway. Tommy's crew panicked, letting go of Patrick and Gwen. They tried to run but were taken down in an instant. Whatever had shown up now -- they had large wolf heads but human, *humanlike* bodies. They were covered in fur but wore t-shirts and long shorts.

Each took one of Tommy's crew down and wrestled with them.

The last two members stared at Tommy terrified, practically begging him to do something. The two of them then went flying down the stairs, courtesy of – *Shawn*, I guess.

Tommy looked back at Emma. His features had returned to human. There was tenderness in his eyes. A pained expression on his face. As he was forced to decide between her and his own safety.

"Go. Please." I watched Emma mouth those words to him.

Tommy gnashed his teeth then threw himself over the railing. He landed on his feet and ran. Patrick, Gwen, and -- whatever those three creatures were finished off Tommy's crew. Gwen blasted another one into nothing. When the others fell, the ones Patrick and those three creatures killed, their bodies shriveled into brittle-looking husks.

In the absence of the battle, an eerie silence took over. Patrick rose to his feet slowly. He and Gwen and those -- those three *things* turned their attention to me.

My heart hammered. My breath escaped in short bursts.

"Sophie?"

I looked up and saw Peter standing at the top of the stairs, peering around a corner. "Sophie, what's happening?" he asked.

The next thing I knew I was on my feet running to him. I swept him up in my arms and didn't stop until we reached his bedroom.

"What's happening Sophie?" he asked me again.

"Did you -- did you see-?" I tried to ask him.

"See what?"

I thought for a moment. No, there was no way he could have seen anything from the top of the stairs, not from that angle.

Peter still stared at me waiting for a response.

"Stay in here," I finally said. "Keep the door locked." Like that could keep those *things* out. But it was all I could think of to say.

"But Sophie – "

"Just do as I tell you."

I yanked the door shut then hurried down the hallway to Mom's room. Vanessa was in there with her, standing at the side of Mom's bed. Both talked casually. This far from the foyer, were they unable to hear any of the fighting downstairs? It definitely looked that way. I decided to just walk away before they noticed me.

Mom and Peter were safe. I could breathe again. The only thing I could do, I guessed, was hide in my own room. On the way, Emma ran past me, crying.

I called out her name, but she didn't answer. She just ran into her room and slammed the door behind her.

When I got to my room, I just stood there. My mind scrambled for some sort of answer. Something logical. Something sane.

What just happened? What was going on with my friends? Call it temporary insanity. But the next thing I knew, I was heading down the stairs.

I crept down and stopped about halfway. Tommy was gone. So were his friends. So were those three -- *hairy* things. The only ones left were Patrick and Gwen.

Patrick sat against a wall. His eyes were back to normal. No fangs, as far as I could see. His face was covered with bruises and cuts.

Gwen crouched beside him. "Hold still, will you? Jeez, for a vampire, you're such a wuss."

Vampire? Did she just say Patrick was a vampire? I wanted to laugh, but then I thought about his fangs and his eyes. It fit. God help me, it fit. That would have made Tommy and his crew vampires too. If that was true, what was Gwen?

I watched Gwen place her hands on Patrick's face for a few seconds. When she lifted them, his bruises and cuts had vanished. Like magic.

"There, you're as pretty as ever," she said. "Except your hair's a mess. I know how important that is to you."

"You got jokes, huh?" Patrick then coughed and grabbed his side.

"Where else does it hurt?" Gwen asked.

Patrick was about to answer when those *hairy* things appeared, loping on all fours. I was set to run. Before I could, their bodies started to blur and change.

They turned into --

– Brody, Brenna, and Dillon.

What was going on?

"Me and Brenna caught up with the last of Tommy's crew," said Brody. "They won't be making any more surprise visits."

"What about Tommy?" Patrick asked.

"I tracked him as far as I could," said Dillon. "He must have had a car waiting somewhere. Lost him after that. Sorry."

Patrick was about to say something but must've caught a glimpse of me out of the corner of his eye, because he suddenly turned my way. The others did too.

I prepared to bolt up the stairs.

"Wait. Sophie," said Patrick. "Don't go. Please."

"It's safe now," Gwen added. "We chased off Tommy and his friends."

I pointed to Gwen. "You – you called him -- " Then to Patrick. " -- a -- a -- "

"Vampire," said Patrick.

My knees buckled a bit. I grabbed the handrail to keep from falling.

"And you," I said, returning my attention to Gwen. "You did something to two of those guys. You made them disappear. And Patrick's face -- he was beaten up, then you touched him, and now he's fine."

Gwen shrugged. "I'm a witch."

I groaned. My knees buckled again. I gripped the handrail even tighter.

"And you?" I faced Brody, Brenna, and Dillon. "You changed into -- you're -- " Only one word came to mind. I felt stupid even saying it. "Werewolves."

Brenna crossed her arms. "We prefer to be called *lupoi*."

I wanted to laugh like a crazy person. "And Shawn? As soon as you said that name, everything started to shake. Those guys started flying around the room."

Patrick and Gwen didn't say anything at first. They looked at each other, like they were worried about upsetting me even more than I obviously already was.

Patrick sighed. "Shawn's a ghost."

I let out another groan and sat on the steps, my head in my hands. When I glanced up, Patrick and the others were heading toward me, looking concerned.

I shot to my feet. "No. Just – just don't. Please."

I raced up the stairs and didn't stop until I reached Peter's room. I pounded on the door until he opened it.

"What? Hey!" he called out as I grabbed his hand and whisked him down the hall to Mom's room.

Vanessa was still there. She and Mom stared at me. I didn't blame them. I probably looked horrible. Like I was scared to death.

"Sweetheart, are you all right?" Mom asked. "Is something wrong?"

I forced a smile. "No. I just -- "

We heard a short siren whoop from outside. Vanessa checked out the window.

"There's a police car pulling up," she said.

Everyone turned to me now for an explanation, including Peter.

I swallowed. "There was -- someone tried to get into the house."

Vanessa covered her mouth with her hand. Peter's eyes widened. I was still holding his hand. His grip tightened.

"Oh my God, is everyone okay?" Mom asked.

I nodded. "We're fine. They're gone. No one got hurt."

"You should go downstairs," said Mom. "The sheriff will want to talk to you."

"No. Uh, Patrick and Gwen are down there. They can give him all the details. I didn't really see that much."

Mom held out her arms. "Oh, my poor baby. You must have been terrified."

I nodded again, trying not to cry. I ran into Mom's arms. I didn't want her to let go. I climbed into bed and nestled in next to her. Peter climbed in too, on the other side, and did the same.

Vanessa excused herself and shut the door behind her. Oh my God, did she know about Patrick and Gwen and this Shawn? What about Nikolas? What did he know?

I pulled Mom closer to me then reached over for Peter. I laid there, in some weird state of shock, only to get startled later when there was a knock at the door.

Nikolas entered. Mom pushed herself to a seated position. Peter raced to meet him. I tried to catch him, but he was too quick. He reached Nikolas and immediately threw his arms around his waist.

Nikolas patted Peter's back. "I heard about what happened. Is everyone okay?"

"Peter and I are fine," said Mom. "But poor Sophie was downstairs when it all happened."

Nikolas fixed his gaze on me. "I'm so sorry you were put through that. Trust me when I say that measures are being taken to make sure nothing like that ever happens again."

Mom and Peter looked relieved. But there was something in Nikolas' tone when he said that. I couldn't help but hear some deeper, shadowy meaning in his words.

"Sophie, do you mind if we talk in the hallway?" he asked.

I glanced at Mom and Peter then returned my attention to Nikolas. He seemed insistent. I almost felt like I didn't have a choice.

I stepped from Mom's bed. Nikolas held the door. I joined him in the hallway. He then closed the door and let out a sad sigh.

"I was foolish to think I could shelter you and your family from all this," he said.

"So you know about what happened today? About Patrick? Gwen? Brody, Brenna, Dillon?"

Nikolas nodded. "I'm just like Patrick. Rolfe and Emma are too."

"Vampires." I could barely get the word out.

Nikolas stepped toward me, as if to comfort me, but I instinctively backed away. He stared at me. He looked hurt.

"What do you want from me?" I asked. "My family?"

"To take care of you. Like I said from the start."

"Why?"

Nikolas grinned. "I told you I was a long-lost relative. Well, that was sort of a half-truth. Forgive me, but secrecy is an unfortunate necessity in the life my kind lead. The truth --is, in its entirety I was born in Germany, in the early 16th century. And you, your mother, and brother are the last of my human bloodline -- before I was turned. I spent a number of years trying to find you, and now that I have -- I care about the three of you. Greatly."

Staring into Nikolas' eyes, I couldn't help but see the sincerity they held. I heard it in his voice too.

"Do you -- have you-?" I tried to ask.

"Kill humans?" he said, like he was reading my mind. "In the past -- too many to count. But now, let's just say vampire society has progressed a bit since those days."

I sighed. "Thank you -- for being honest."

He smiled, somewhat sadly. "You're welcome."

"I don't know," I started to say. "I don't know if I can do this. Stay here. My mom. My brother."

Nikolas moved to comfort me again. This time, I didn't back away.

"I understand. If you don't want to stay in Harmony, I won't force you. I'll help you move back to Phoenix, set you up in a new apartment, and take care of all your needs, just like I promised I would," he said, sounding almost heartbroken at the prospect of us leaving. "But if you do decide to stay, I swear to you, your mother, and your brother will be protected. You have my word."

The corners of my mouth rose into a slight smile. There was a strength, a conviction, in his promise that -- so help me -- made me feel safe.

"Take all the time you need to think about it," said Nikolas as he started to walk away.

"No need," I said.

He stopped and turned back toward me with a hopeful look on his face.

"Two things though," I said. "First, my mom and my brother -- we're going to keep all this *weirdness* from them."

"Agreed," said Nikolas.

"As for me." I swallowed. "No more half-truths, no more secrets. If I'm going to stay here, from this point on, I want to know everything. And I do mean *everything*."

Nikolas smiled. "Agreed."

Chapter Nine

When I got back to Mom's room, I expected her to ask me what Nikolas wanted to talk to me about, but she didn't. She just smiled and scooted over in her bed for me. I climbed in and snuggled next to her.

She had on TV Land. It was her favorite channel, because it played all the old shows she watched as a kid. She loved sharing them with me and Peter, and I had to admit they were pretty funny, especially *Gilligan's Island*, which was on right now.

They both slowly drifted off to sleep. As I watched them, I thought about what happened earlier and everything Nikolas had told me. He promised to keep us safe. I kept focusing on that.

But I guess I was starting to have second thoughts. Was I really making the right choice staying here in Harmony now that I knew what I did?

There was a light knock at the door. I eased myself out the bed, so not to disturb Mom and Peter, and hurried to answer it.

It was Patrick. He greeted me with a nervous smile. "Hey."

"Hey," I said back with a nervous smile of my own, flashing back to earlier when he was all red eyes and fangs.

"Nikolas said you two talked. You're planning on staying?"

"Yeah. We'll see."

"When Nikolas said he'd keep you safe, he meant it," said Patrick. "So will I. So will all of us."

"Us? You mean -- all of you guys?"

Patrick nodded.

"I suppose Gabby's a part of this too."

"Yeah." Patrick hiked a thumb down the hall. "They're all in the kitchen, so's Nikolas. He ordered some pizza and wings and stuff." He swallowed. "We're ready to tell you -- anything you want to know."

I glanced back at Mom and Peter. Peter murmured a little and snuggled closer to Mom. I couldn't help but smile.

"You coming?" Patrick asked. "It's cool if you don't. If you're not ready. Everyone will understand."

"No." I stepped out of Mom's room, closing the door behind me. "Let's go."

I followed Patrick down the hall. As we were walking, there was something I was dying to know. I couldn't wait.

"Patrick?"

He stopped short and turned around, eyebrows arched.

"This is probably going to sound like a stupid question," I said.

"No. Hit me."

"How come you and Nikolas, Rolfe and Emma – if you guys are really vampires, how can you go out in sunlight without, you know-?"

"Bursting into flames? You'll find out TV and movies got a lot of stuff wrong." Patrick chuckled. "And you've seen by now, we don't sparkle either."

A laugh erupted from me.

"Not a fan, huh?" I then asked.

Patrick made a face and shook his head. "No vampire is. Trust me."

"I'll make a note of that," I said. "So how long have you been-?"

Patrick frowned. "I got turned last year."

"I'm sorry." I noticed now how uncomfortable he looked. "If you don't -- "

"No. I want you to know all this."

"Did Nikolas-?" I was about to ask, even though I wasn't too sure I wanted to know the answer.

"Turn me? No. He rescued me from the vampires that did though. I kind of know what you're going through. All – this really blew me away. Dillon and Gwen are pretty new to this too."

"What about Gabby, Brody, and Brenna?"

"They were born into it." Patrick cocked his head toward the stairs. "Come on, we better hurry or else there'll be no food left for us."

Patrick started walking away. I called out to him.

"Your family?"

He stopped.

"They're not really dead, are they?"

Patrick let out a sad sigh. He shook his head then continued toward the stairs. I followed him down. When we reached the kitchen, he seemed

to have gotten himself back together again -- either that or he was doing a darn good job of pretending.

Everyone was sitting at the table. Three large pizza boxes sat in the middle along with some other take-out containers and some two-liter bottles of soda.

"It's about time," said Brenna. "We're starving."

Gabby got out of her chair and headed toward me. "Don't listen to her."

Before I could react, she gave me a big hug.

"How you doing?" she asked. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Looking at her, I couldn't help but stare. At her. At everyone. Looking at Brody, Brenna, and Dillon, I immediately saw them all hairy and wolfy. The image of Gwen blasting those two vampires and making them disappear rushed to my mind.

I noticed everyone shifting in their seats. I was obviously making them feel uncomfortable by staring like I'd done. I bowed my head, feeling kind of guilty.

"Come on. We saved you a seat," said Gabby.

Brody pulled out a chair. I sat between him and Gabby. Everyone appeared pretty self-conscious for a moment. Brenna finally broke the silence.

"Heck with it, I'm going in."

She opened one of the boxes and pulled out a slice covered in pepperoni and sausage and still joined to the rest of the pizza by long strands of cheese.

Everyone else started to dig in too.

"I got a meat, a veggie, and a cheese," Nikolas said to me. "I wasn't sure what you liked."

"Thanks."

I wasn't hungry at first, but then I smelled that pizza and the wings as they were being passed around. Before I knew it, I was filling my plate along with everyone else.

Dillon sat across from me, next to Brenna. He swallowed the bite in his mouth.

"Best pizza ever," he said, urging me to try it.

I went ahead and took that first bite. Oh, wow. He definitely wasn't kidding. A smile touched my face as I continued to eat. I dropped the crust on my plate and reached for another slice.

"So – " I glanced at Nikolas then Patrick. "Vampires can eat regular food, huh?"

Nikolas nodded. Patrick dropped a neatly cleaned chicken bone onto his plate and reached for another wing.

"Which is good, because I'd die for sure without pizza and wings from Castiglione's'." He bit into his new chicken wing. "It's blood that nourishes us though. We only have to drink it once a week-"

"Dude, we're eating," said Dillon.

Patrick grinned. "Oh. Right. Sorry."

I chuckled and thanked Dillon. I looked around the table at each person. I tried to think of a smooth, cool way to ask what I wanted to know next, but couldn't. So instead, I just decided to go for it.

"So, um, Gabby, are you – I mean, what's your -- what can you – ?"

My face suddenly became flushed. OMG. Someone just shoot me right now, please. I looked around, expecting everyone to be offended or something.

Instead, they just laughed.

"I'm a sorceress," said Gabby.

"Oh." I glanced quickly at Gwen. "How's that different from being a witch?"

"It isn't," Gabby answered. "I just think *witch* has such negative connotations to it, don't you?"

I nodded, not quite sure how to answer that.

"You know what we are," said Brody.

"Right. Werewolves." I shook my head. "No. Uh. What was that other name you said you called yourselves?"

"Lupoi," said Dillon.

"*Werewolf* has such negative connotations to it, don't you think?" said Brenna, doing her best Gabby impersonation.

Gabby gasped then smiled and chucked a piece of breadstick at her. Brenna laughed and stuck her tongue out.

"So you all were -- bit, is that how it goes?" I asked.

Dillon shook his head as he wiped his mouth with his napkin. "You're born one."

I nodded. "So your parents-?"

"I'm adopted," said Dillon. "My folks are normal."

"We're not," said Brody, pointing to himself and Brenna. "We can trace our lineage, on both sides of our family, back to the Old Country."

"Nice," I said. "But aren't you only supposed to go -- *wolffy* during the full moon?"

"We can control it," said Brenna. "We can Change whenever we want."

I grinned and glanced at Patrick out of the corner of my eye. "Ole 'Sparkles' over there did say TV and movies got a lot of it wrong."

Everyone busted out laughing -- except for Patrick and Nikolas, of course.

Gwen pointed at Patrick. "'Sparkles.' That's your new nickname now."

Patrick groaned. He glanced off to the side for a second.

"Thanks, Shawn," he said.

"Shawn?" I asked. "He's here?"

Patrick pointed to the space next to him. "He's right here."

At that moment, a figure began to materialize -- a skinny, hippy kid with long blonde hair. He smiled and flashed a peace sign.

"Whoa," I breathed.

"He can only be seen by normal people for a few minutes," said Patrick.

"But I can do a spell that can make you see him all the time, like us," said Gabby.

Next thing I knew, her hand hovered over my eyes.

I leaned back. "No, thank you. I mean, not now. Maybe."

Gabby smiled. "I understand."

From the looks on everyone else's faces, they did too.

"It's a lot to take in," said Dillon.

Gwen nodded in agreement. "I only found out about all this -- and what I am a few months ago."

I turned to Nikolas, who had been silent all this time, letting the kids do the talking. "I know I said I wanted to know everything," I said. "And I do. It's just -- "

Nikolas smiled. "It can be overwhelming. I'm not so old that I can't forget my life before I was turned. How jarring all of this can be."

"A little at a time," said Gwen.

"Baby steps," said Gabby.

I agreed.

"I got to say," said Brenna. "You're handling this a lot better than Miles did."

Everyone at the table shot her a look.

"What?" said Brenna.

"Who's Miles?" I asked.

Everyone shifted about, looking kind of uncomfortable.

Dillon broke the silence. "He was a human friend of ours. He got pulled into our world by mistake."

From the mood in the room, I could sense that something bad happened to him.

"Is he -- still in Harmony?" I asked.

"He moved," said Brody. "But we still meet up with him online every Sunday to play Dark World."

Dark World. I'd heard about that. It was this MMORPG that took place in a world full of supernatural characters.

I wrinkled my eyebrows. "You guys actually play Dark World?"

"What's wrong with that?" asked Dillon.

"I don't know. Don't you -- live it?" I asked.

"Yeah, but that's still no reason not to play it? It's fun," said Patrick.

"It's also kind of funny thinking about all the normal people online who have no clue they're playing alongside actual vampires, sorceresses, and lupoi," said Brenna.

From the looks on some of the others' faces, I could tell she wasn't the only one who found that amusing.

"I suppose you all love horror movies too," I said.

Brenna grinned. "Oh, yeah. They're a hoot."

They started talking about their favorites, laughing at all their favorite "funny parts." They mentioned some movies I'd seen that had scared the you-know-what out of me. But to them, they might as well have been comedies.

It was getting late. Brody and Brenna's mom texted them, saying she was on her way to pick everyone up. She'd also be taking Dillon, Gabby, and Gwen home.

We all helped clean up and throw away all the empty boxes and cartons. I made sure to save some food for Emma. I put together a plate and brought it up to her room.

I knocked and waited. After a few moments, she finally opened the door. She looked like she'd been crying -- for quite a while.

I held up the plate. "I thought you might be hungry."

Emma took it from me. "Thanks. That was sweet of you." She stared at me for a moment. "You know now, don't you?"

I nodded. "Nikolas, Patrick, Gwen, the others -- they all told me."

"Good. You need to know. Especially if you're going to live here. In this house. In this town." Emma's eyes watered. "Sophie, I'm so sorry about what happened today."

"It's okay. It wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was. Tommy came here looking for me. I had no idea how he found out I was here."

"He's gone now. We don't have to worry."

Emma sniffed and wiped her eyes. "He'll be back. You don't know him like I do. That's why he turned me into a vampire like him, so we'd been together forever."

"Tommy turned you?"

Emma nodded. "I'd run away from home. I'd been living on the streets, in Seattle, for weeks when Tommy found me. He took care of me. He was so sweet. When he showed me he was a vampire, I actually thought it was cool. When he asked if he could turn me, I couldn't say yes quick enough. I thought it was so -- romantic. God, I was so stupid! He forced me to feed. He made me kill -- all those people. It was the only way. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I ran. I'm so lucky Nikolas found me." Her lips twitched in an attempted smile. "He's helping me control the craving for blood. So I can learn how to fit in. Live a normal life -- or as normal a life as possible for one of us."

I smiled back at Emma and thought back to the way she acted when we first arrived. She did seem sick. Was that her fighting the craving for blood?

Then there was that moment when she was standing outside my bedroom door. The way she stared at me. The look on her face. I couldn't figure out what was going on with her at the time, but now I had an idea.

She was hungry.

Chapter Ten

"You okay?" Patrick asked.

I ran into him on the way back to my room -- and really must have looked shook-up from my conversation with Emma for him to ask that.

"I'm fine," I muttered.

"You don't look it. Come on, talk to me."

I stared at him, thinking, realizing I should share with someone my suspicions about Emma. Heck, deep down in my gut I knew I needed to.

"Emma told me a little about her past," I started.

"Yeah, she was a runaway. Had a pretty crummy home life? She lived on the streets." Patrick made a face. "Met that jerk Tommy."

"She's also told me she's killed -- and fed on people."

Patrick nodded sadly. "I've been told that feeding on humans is an addiction. A lot of vampires get hooked on it, the whole 'thrill-of-the-hunt' and, well, there's no other way to put it, they get drunk on the blood."

I fought back the queasy feeling that rose in my stomach. "Have you ...?"

Patrick shook his head. "Nikolas rescued me before that could happen. I've only drunk donor blood."

"Donor blood?" I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that.

"A lot of vampires have arrangements set up with human donors. They give blood, like they would for the Red Cross or something like that. They're taken care of financially, trust me."

"So Emma's trying to 'kick' the blood-habit? How's that working out for her?"

"She's doing good. She turned a big corner recently. If you're worried she's dangerous, don't. She's getting things under control. Believe me, Nikolas wouldn't have brought you and your family here if he didn't think it was safe."

"What if she starts to 'slip?'"

"You're worried about that?" Patrick asked.

I nodded.

"Then we'll go to Nikolas together and tell him."

I smiled, relieved. "Thank you."

Patrick glanced off to the side. He smiled and chuckled.

"Okay, Shawn. I'll tell her."

"Shawn's here?" I asked.

Patrick nodded. "Ghosts don't sleep. He hangs out here a lot, but he's got to go back to his house every so often. He's sort of linked to it. Anyway, he wants me to let you know he's got your back too."

I giggled and looked toward Patrick's side. "Thank you, Shawn."

Patrick pointed to the other side. "Actually, he's over here now."

I laughed. "Oh."

"He says 'you're welcome.' Feeling a little better now?"

"Uh, still trying to accept the existence of the supernatural. But yeah, I'm getting there. Thank you."

"Anytime. We're all here for you, you know that."

"I do. Thanks – again."

I offered Patrick my hand. He shook it. We said goodnight to each other. I said goodnight to Shawn too. After all, I didn't want to be rude.

When I got into my room, I dropped onto my bed and stared at the ceiling. I didn't think I'd sleep, but before I knew it my eyelids started getting heavy, and I slowly began melting into the mattress. I guess the events of the day had finally caught up with me. Exhaustion took over. I didn't even bother to put up a fight.

My alarm blared, yanking me out of a deep sleep. I let out a silent growl. I hated when that happened. My thoughts quickly turned to Mom and Peter. Next thing I knew, I was out the door and on my way to see them.

My first stop was Peter's room.

It was empty.

Panic rose. I raced to Mom's room. Vanessa was already in there, getting Mom out of bed. And there was Peter standing by them, sleepy-eyed and yawning. I'd forgotten he was asleep in Mom's room when I left him. I'd also forgotten to take him back to his room.

Mom smiled at me. "Good morning, sweetheart." That smile dimmed slightly. "Are you all right?"

I nodded back then turned to Peter. He looked me up and down with a scrunched-up face. "Aren't those the same clothes you had on yesterday?"

I chuckled to myself. Yeah, he was fine. And so was Mom.

I walked Peter to his room with orders to get ready for school. On the way, the relief I'd experienced slowly gave way to guilt. After everything Nikolas, Patrick, and everyone else did to convince me we'd be safe, the moment I didn't see Peter in his room, I immediately thought the worst.

That and I had to lie to Mom when she asked if something was wrong. I reminded myself it was to protect her. I doubted if Mom could handle all this supernatural stuff in her condition.

And Peter? If he found out everyone living in this house were real vampires, well, let's face it, he'd probably want them to turn him into one. Not a chance. Not on my watch.

My thoughts returned to Nikolas and everyone else, how he'd told me that secrecy was a necessity for him. For all of them. I imagined how difficult that had to be, keeping such a massive secret from everyone they dealt with everyday who weren't supernatural.

According to Nikolas, he'd had five centuries to get used to it.

I wondered how Patrick and the others dealt with it.

By the time I'd showered and changed my clothes, Peter was already downstairs in the kitchen in front of a bowl of cereal and a glass of OJ and a glass of milk.

Rolfe was with him, an apron protecting his shirt and tie. He brought over a plate with some toast on it. Peter thanked him. The two stared at each for a moment. Peter then giggled while the mute giant grinned. More of the "telepathy" these two had developed.

Rolfe nodded to me and directed my attention toward the stove. His way of telling me he was preparing my breakfast too. One of his delicious frittatas from the smell of it. I guess me and him had developed a telepathy of our own.

I joined Peter at the kitchen table. Rolfe brought over my frittata when it was ready. He then brought me a glass of milk and a glass of juice and a plate of toast followed by a plate of fruit for me and Peter to share. I smiled and thanked him. Every time he cooked for us, he never seemed satisfied until he was certain we had plenty to eat.

When breakfast was finished, I gathered our plates, out of habit, to clean. Rolfe shook his head and took them from me. I guess I'd have to get used to being waited on. I hoped it didn't spoil me.

I checked the time on my phone.

"Ready for school?" I asked Peter.

"You don't have to take me anymore," he answered.

They weren't so much words of assurance as they were an assertion of independence. He turned to Rolfe, obviously preferring his company over that of his big sister. I chuckled. Sure. Why not? I'd trusted Peter with him so far. Why not continue?

With nothing to do for the next hour or so, I made myself a cup of tea, sat back down at the table, and reviewed last night's homework.

"You've got to start sleeping-in during the week," Patrick said as he entered. "Rolfe can take care of Peter, get him off to school."

I smiled. "Old habits are hard to break, I guess."

"Super Sis' to the rescue."

I shot Patrick a look. He laughed it off as he retrieved a box of cereal from the pantry.

"You mind my asking what you and Nikolas do downstairs each morning?" I asked him. "I assume you're working out."

"Something like that. We spar. He's been training me how to fight."

"Really?"

"Didn't you notice my sick moves when I was fighting Tommy and his friends?"

"You did go all Jackie Chan on them." I paused to think then asked, "You think I could start training with you guys?"

"Why? We told you, we got your back."

"I know, but maybe I should learn to defend myself. Just in case you guys aren't around."

"Look, Nikolas said he was going to keep you guys safe. He meant it."

"I know. It's just -- " I tried to keep my voice from quaking. "Yesterday, I never felt so scared before in my life. I know I could probably never take a vampire in an actual fight, but -- it'd just make me feel better, okay?"

Patrick gave me an understanding smile. "I'll talk to him. You definitely got potential."

"You think?"

"Oh, yeah. You nailed Tommy good. Broke his nose from what I saw."

I smiled. That was pretty sweet.

"Ask Nikolas when you see him," said Patrick. "I'm sure he'll have no problem with it."

He sat down at the table with me. We talked while he ate his breakfast. Not about anything supernatural. Just normal stuff. Which was good. I needed things to be normal. At least for a little while.

Mrs. Sullivan drove us to school that morning. Apparently, she did this every morning. She also had everyone over at her house after school. Brody, Brenna, Dillon, Gabby, Gwen. The moment I sat down I noticed it got colder in the minivan, and from what I could tell, the air conditioning wasn't even on.

"That's Shawn," said Dillon. "The temperature always drops when he's around. But us lupoi like the cold so we don't even notice."

"Lucky you," said Gwen, who pulled her denim jacket a little tighter around her.

"So how are you holding up, Sophie?" Mrs. Sullivan asked as she pulled away from Nikolas' house. "You've got to still be pretty overwhelmed after what happened yesterday."

"I'm okay," I said.

She squinted at me in the rearview mirror. "You sure about that?"

I blinked with surprise. The way she looked at me, the tone in her voice, I could tell she knew I wasn't being honest. Was this some sort of "super-mom sense," or was there more to it?

Brenna leaned in next to me. "Lupoi have super senses. We can hear a person's heartbeat skip and feel their temperature rise when they aren't telling the truth."

"In other words, we're human lie-detectors," said Dillon.

"And our mom is the best at it," said Brody. "Trust me."

I grinned sheepishly at Mrs. Sullivan. "Sorry."

She flashed me a forgiving smile. "Don't worry about it, darling."

I sank a little in my seat. "Yeah, this is going to take a while to get used to."

"It's cool," said Gabby. "We understand."

As we continued on our way to school, the conversation shifted to normal school stuff. Homework, gossip, that kind of thing. I didn't know if that was usual for them or if they were just trying to put me at ease -- or a bit of both. Either way, I appreciated it.

When we got there, I walked with Brody and Dillon to their lockers. It turned out they were near mine. We then joined everyone at the lunch table we hung out at.

"So when are you going to know that you got the part?" Gabby asked excitedly.

"What?" I asked.

Gabby gave me a playful shove. "In the school musical."

"Oh. Right." I'd completely forgotten about it, after what happened yesterday. "I think the question is *if* I got the part."

"Seriously?" said Brenna. "You know you nailed it. Everyone there knew it. Especially Natalie."

"Speaking of which."

Gwen directed our attention to a group of girls heading our way. One of them was Natalie. She whispered to the taller blonde next to her. Next thing I knew, the whole group was glaring at me as they passed us.

Gwen and Gabby closed ranks around me.

"Here's the thing," said Gabby. "Natalie is a witch."

I gasped.

"So are the rest of her clique," Gwen added.

Oh, great.

"Yeah, their families are part of the coven -- the group of witches -- my parents lead," said Gabby.

I groaned.

"Hey, don't worry," said Gabby. "There's a rule that says we can't use our magic against anyone in Harmony."

"And everyone follows that rule?" I asked.

Me, Gabby, and Gwen glanced back at Natalie and her friends. At the same time, Natalie shot me an evil look from over her shoulder.

We quickly turned away.

"Me and Gwen know some protection spells we can cast over you," said Gabby.

"Yeah. Better safe than sorry," added Gwen.

Okay. That made me feel a little better.

The first bell rang, and we all said goodbye as we headed to our Homerooms. As the day went on, I focused especially hard on the lessons and assignments in each of my classes. Again. Normal.

I met Patrick and the others at lunch. We ate and talked about our morning and what we'd do this weekend. We. I'd only known them less than a week, and I was already part of their group.

I could tell they were trying to keep the conversation away from the supernatural again, like they did on the ride to school, in order to put me at ease. That was sweet of them. They were definitely going to be great friends.

And they were definitely excited for me when I learned I beat out Natalie for the part of Elphaba. Yes! She got cast as Glinda instead. Talk about art imitating life.

They wanted to celebrate after school at the Sullivans' house. As much as I wanted to, rehearsals started that day. Patrick and the others looked disappointed. However, I couldn't help but notice a sly gleam in Gabby's eyes, making me wonder if something was up.

My suspicions were confirmed when I got home later. Tired and hungry but happy about my first day at rehearsal. I was surprised at how easily it all came back to me. I headed up to my room to drop off my backpack and then back downstairs to the kitchen. Dinner wouldn't be for another hour, but I still needed to grab some crackers or a piece of fruit to tide me over until then.

I reached the bottom of the stairs, turned the corner, and --
"SURPRISE!"

Everyone as they sprang to their feet and tossed confetti at me. And I mean everyone. Patrick and the whole gang, Nikolas and Rolfe, Mom and Vanessa. Even Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan were there.

Peter jumped up-and-down, blowing a noise-maker. I laughed and wiped tears from my eyes as I brushed confetti out of my hair.

Everyone came up to hug me and congratulate me. When it was Gabby's turn, I gave her a look. She shrugged and grinned, an admission that it was all her idea. I made sure to give her an especially long hug.

There was cake, ice cream, drinks, and snacks in the kitchen. We hung out and pigged out for a couple hours before everyone started making their way home.

The celebration was picked back up again on Saturday when Patrick and everybody took me to the movies then out to lunch at this 50s style diner called Archie's that was near the mall. They said Archie's had the best burgers in town, and boy they weren't kidding.

It wasn't long after that when I started seeing past the whole supernatural-thing.

These were my friends. And that was it.

It was a shame the world would never get to know them the way I did. No doubt, people would be terrified if they knew vampires, witches, and werewolves -- excuse me, lupoi -- were real and walking amongst them. They'd call them monsters and put them in cages. Or worse.

But who would be the real monsters? Nikolas? Rolfe? My friends? Or the people who'd try to hurt them without even bothering to try to understand them?

And what does it mean to be human anyway? To laugh and cry? Be good to everyone around you, even if you don't know them? To love and care for your friends and family and make sure they don't come to any harm?

If that was true, then Nikolas, Rolfe, Patrick and everyone else definitely qualified as being human. Heck, if that was really true, then they were more human than anyone I'd ever met.

Chapter Eleven

I was happy to hear it when Nikolas said he'd let me train with him, Patrick, and Rolfe. Not so happy when I found out that meant getting up at four in the morning though. But in the end, I was willing to make that sacrifice.

The thought of it gave me some peace of mind. I knew Nikolas and Patrick and the others agreed to keep me safe. But seriously, I couldn't stand the idea of being some damsel-in-distress. And if something did happen, well, I knew I'd never be able to actually take a vampire in a fight. But at least I'd be able to do something.

As I left my room, I spotted Nikolas coming my way, dressed in workout clothes with a towel around his neck and a water bottle in his hands. He also had a Bluetooth in his ear and spoke to whoever was on the other end in some foreign language.

I had no clue what they were talking about, but judging from the look on Nikolas' face it was definitely good news.

"Business call," he said as he pulled the Bluetooth from his ear.

I wrinkled my eyebrows. "It's four AM."

"Not in Budapest. I got a lead on a painting I owned back in the 1700s. Lost it along with my fortune at the time."

"Looks like you got it back," I said, indicating the mansion.

"I've actually lost it and regained it a few times over the centuries."

We walked together down the hall.

"So all these antiques," I started. "You, like, bought them when they were, what, new?"

Nikolas chuckled. "More or less."

"So are you one of the oldest? Vampires?" I asked.

"I'm one of the oldest that's left. There used to be others, like the one that made me. The first was a sorcerer in Sumeria, an ancient civilization in the Middle East, six thousand years ago. He made a deal with a demon for eternal life. He got it. But at a price."

"What happened to them? The old ones?"

"They're dead. Many were killed. Others got tired of living and took their lives."

When Nikolas said that, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd feel the same way someday. I shuddered and zipped up my hoodie.

"How did it happen?" I asked when we reached the stairs. "How did you get turned?"

In that moment, Nikolas suddenly seemed so far away.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's none of my business."

"No. It's all right."

We started down the stairs.

"I was a peasant farmer in Germany," he began. "The noble that ruled the land was cruel. He taxed us heavily. And would have his men beat us for even the slightest offense. One day, I took my family to a fair. I got a little too drunk and started mouthing off about our noble lord and what I would do to him if I had a chance. Later, I went off to -- 'relieve myself' and was approached by a strange man who said he'd heard what I had to say and asked if I really meant it. I was still drunk and, of course, swore that I meant every word. He said he could give me the power to actually do it. Drunken fool I was, I agreed."

"He was a vampire. He turned you."

Nikolas nodded sadly. "I woke up the next morning, bloodied, not knowing what happened to me. I staggered home. When I arrived, our noble lord was there along with two of his men. He was yelling at my wife and son, demanding to know where I was and why we had such a poor crop that season. She pleaded with him for mercy. I still remember him sliding from his horse, his men following him.

"My wife ordered our son to run inside. Our noble lord and his men stalked toward her. I knew they'd beat her. Maybe even worse. I flew into a rage. Everything in my vision turned red. I ran. I pounced on our noble lord and drove him to the ground." Nikolas ran his hand along his mouth. "I tore out his throat. With my fangs. The taste of the blood made my head spin. Fire ran through my veins. The lord's men were terrified. They fumbled for their weapons. They never stood a chance. When the last one fell, that was the first time I ever feasted. I gluttoned myself on blood. When I'd finally had my fill, I saw my wife. Our son, Markus, must have come outside when he heard the fight. She clutched him in her arms, terrified. I stepped toward

them, and she pulled Markus even tighter and shrieked. It was horrible. I still hear it sometimes."

"I'm so sorry."

"I ran away after that. The one who'd made me, Ulric, found me and offered to help me adjust to my new life. My new world. I became his traveling companion. Over the years that followed, I slowly surrendered what was left of my humanity. I did -- horrible things."

I wiped my eyes. "Your family, did you ever see them again?"

"Years later, Ulric was killed by a rival. I was alone. My thoughts slowly drifted back to my old life. Everything I'd lost. I found my way back to my old village. My old home." A smile touched his lips. "My son, Markus, lived there now. He was a grown man by then. Handsome. Strong." His smile faded. "I should never have approached him. But I couldn't help it. He didn't recognize me -- not at first. He told me things. About the new lord, the son of the old one. He sounded even worse than his father, if you could imagine that. And Markus' feelings toward him were so much like the ones I had all those years ago. I -- I revealed who I was to him. And I ..."

Nikolas couldn't say it. He didn't need to.

"You turned him," I said.

Nikolas nodded.

"What happened to Markus? Is he still around?" I asked.

Nikolas shook his head. "He's gone. That's all you need to know."

We walked the rest of the way in silence. For a moment, I thought maybe Nikolas was upset with me for wanting to know so much. But a smile from him said otherwise.

Down the stairs, in the weapons' room, Patrick and Rolfe were already there warming up. Me and Nikolas did the same.

By the time we were ready to start, Patrick and Rolfe had already begun sparring. They didn't wear any sort of padding, and the punches and kicks they threw at each other looked -- and sounded -- like they hurt. Seriously hurt.

Patrick tried to use his speed to evade the mute giant and strike whenever an opening appeared. But Rolfe was deceptively quick for a man his size. He was far more experienced too. That much was obvious as he bided his time, waiting for the precise moment to clamp a chokehold on Patrick, forcing him to tap out.

The two continued to spar while Nikolas worked with me. He started by showing me proper ways to fall, and not hurt myself too much when I did, and how to roll forward and backwards when thrown or to evade a hit.

I had the luxury of thick blue mats to land on instead of the cold, hard concrete that was beneath Rolfe and Patrick's feet. After the first few rolls and falls, I felt like I was getting the hang out of it and began to add a little flair.

When I landed on my back, I'd kip back up to my feet. The next time Nikolas threw me, I used the momentum to do a hands-free cartwheel. The time after that, I hit a front-flip. Nikolas definitely looked impressed, so did Patrick and Rolfe, who'd stopped sparring to watch and applaud.

"Very nice," said Nikolas. "I think we're ready to speed up your training a bit."

We immediately moved on to fighting stances then proper techniques for punching and kicking. The days that followed, Nikolas started showing how to put together different combinations that included striking, blocking, and evading.

That became my new routine, training in the early morning, then school, and finally rehearsals for *Wicked*. Since me and Natalie were the two main leads, we had to work together a lot. I had to give her props. She was good. She also worked hard, and if she still had any animosity toward me for beating her out for the role of Elphaba, it definitely didn't show. Everyday, she seemed determined and focused on making sure we rocked our parts and that the show would be the best it could be.

"So, I hear you know -- about all of us, about Harmony," she said, surprising me one day during a break.

I wasn't sure what to say so I just nodded.

"And you're not freaked out?" she asked, glancing around, making sure no one was in listening distance.

"I guess I'm starting to get used to it," I said. "That sounds so odd, saying that out loud."

Natalie chuckled. "I've got to say you're handling it pretty good. Not like that Miles kid I heard about."

"Yeah, Patrick and the rest of them mention him every now and then. They still play Dark World with him online on Sundays too."

Natalie's mouth made an O. "They haven't told you yet?"

"Told me what?"

Natalie slipped her water bottle back into her bag. "Never mind. I don't know a whole lot about what happened anyway. You should wait until Patrick and all them are ready to tell you."

I sighed, frustrated. Great, when would that be?

Ms. Phelps clapped her hands and gave us a five-minute warning before it was time to get back to rehearsal. A moment later, my phone buzzed telling me I had a text. I opened the attachment and was laughing in seconds.

"What is it?" Natalie asked.

"Oh. Gabby always sends me these silly animal videos. This one's of a squirrel drinking a milkshake."

Natalie smiled, rather fondly. "Yeah, she's been doing that for years. She used to send them to everyone."

I frowned, thinking back to a previous conversation I'd had with Gabby and Brenna. "Gabby said you and Sarah and the rest of them used to be really close growing up."

Natalie didn't respond. She just started walking away. According to Brenna, the summer she and Brody Changed for the first time and were able to go all *wolffy*, Natalie and Sarah and all the other coven kids stopped hanging out with them. They thought it was "too weird" now that Brody and Brenna could change shape and become half-human, half-wolf creatures.

From what I was told, it was Sarah who mostly thought that. Apparently, she was the queen bee, even back then. She made the others choose, either be friends with her or with Brody and Brenna. They couldn't do both. Gabby obviously chose Brody and Brenna. And from what I've seen and heard, they've tried to make her life a living hell since then.

I gnashed my teeth, thinking about how messed up that was. I'd been thinking about **it** for a long time and had wanted to say something to Natalie. I've had plenty of chances. What was stopping me?

I dashed in front of Natalie, cutting her off. She blinked with surprise.

"You know I heard from Gabby and Brenna all about what happened the summer before middle school."

Natalie got a little flushed, hopefully from embarrassment.

"I think it was messed up the way Sarah made everyone choose between her and Brody and Brenna," I said.

Natalie tried to interject, but I cut her off.

"And I think it was even more messed up the way you and Lori and the rest of them just went along with her. And you've been giving Gabby and Brenna so much grief since then, that's just really lame."

Natalie sighed. "You don't understand. Just thinking about Brody and Brenna Changing like that -- it was just too weird."

"Hey, I've actually seen them Change. And yeah, it was weird -- heck, *weird* is an understatement. But you know what? I got over it. And I'm glad I did, 'cause they're awesome."

"I know," Natalie muttered.

"And I've seen the way Sarah treats you. She talks to you like you're property or something. Is leeching off her popularity really that worth it?"

"I'm not leech -- " Natalie sighed. "Look, it's complicated, all right?"

"So, Un-complicate it."

Natalie opened her mouth like she wanted to say something. But it soon shut. As she turned away, her lip trembled like she was going to cry.

Suddenly, I felt kind of bad. "It's just something to think about."

Natalie nodded, her arms around herself, and walked away without looking at me. She came back moments before Ms. Phelps called us back for rehearsal. Her eyes looked a little red and puffy. Still, she put everything she had into the rest of rehearsal.

Afterwards, she caught up with me before I left, wanting to trade phone numbers.

"You know, in case either of us gets any ideas for the show we can text each other," she said.

I smiled back. "Sure. Sounds good."

Rolfe waited for me in the car outside the front gate. On the way home, I decided to forward the squirrel video to Natalie. She might've liked it. I mean, it was pretty cute.

Chapter Twelve

When I got home, it was still a couple hours before dinner. There was plenty of time to start my homework. First I needed a little snack.

Emma sat at the kitchen table studying. She'd been seeing a tutor lately, trying to get ready for her first day at Harmony High. She'd been out of school for a while, and Nikolas thought this might help her catch up.

Me and Emma were cool -- but I still thought about those "hungry looks" she gave me when I first got here. I tried to tell myself I'd read too much into it, that I was still weirded out about the whole vampire-thing. But part of me remained on guard.

Not just for my sake but Mom and Peter's too.

I smiled and said, hey. Emma murmured a reply then slammed her pencil down in frustration.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Stupid math," she said, rubbing her temples. "I was never any good at it."

"Want me to take a look at it?" I asked, approaching her.

"No. That's okay."

I slid her textbook toward me a little. "This looks kind of like what we're working on in my class. Where are you stuck?"

Emma pushed herself away from the table. "Great. I'm doing the same math as a seventh grader."

"It's okay. You've been out of school for a while. You just need a little time to catch up. I'm sure you're just rusty."

"This is hopeless. I don't know why I'm even bothering."

I didn't know quite what to say. So instead, I just sat down and listened as Emma continued to talk.

"I never liked school to begin with," she continued. "And it's not like I'm not going to know anybody. That's going to make it even worse."

"What about those kids Nikolas had over the other day?" They were some of the older kids of the coven members. Then I remembered that two of them were Sarah and Natalie's older sisters. Enough said.

Emma smirked. "I would really call them 'my crowd' if you know what I mean. I couldn't stand kids like that at my old school. So superior. Always looking down on everyone else. I mean, they came off all nice -- in a phony sort of way. But I soon got the impression I was going to be their 'pet vampire' if you know what I mean."

"That sucks. Sorry. Well, heck with them, then. I'm sure you'll meet other people like you."

Emma folded her arms on the table. "You mean, vampires?"

"No -- I mean -- that were like the kids you used to hang out with before you -- "

"Got *turned*?"

"Actually, I was going to say before you ran away."

Emma cracked a tiny smile. Her mouth then twisted up. I couldn't tell if she was going to cry or scream. "I can't do this. Who am I kidding? And what's the point anyway? What if I do make it through high school, then what? College? That's a laugh. Get a job? Find a boyfriend? Get married? Can I even have kids? I'm going to be stuck like this. Forever!"

"At least you're not stuck like *this*."

Me and Emma turned to see Patrick standing in the doorway.

"At least your life will go somewhere," he continued. "You think I'll be able to finish high school looking this -- forever? Forget about going to college or getting a job or having anything that even resembles a real life. Consider yourself lucky, Emma."

We both watched Patrick wander off. Emma suddenly looked so embarrassed. I doubt she even bothered to think about Patrick's situation. I knew I didn't.

I went after Patrick and found him sitting on the stairs.

"Hey." I approached him. "What you said in there -- "

Patrick wiped his eyes. "Sorry about that."

"No. Don't be."

He cracked a sad smile. "It's my birthday today."

"What? Why didn't you tell anyone?" The answer suddenly rushed to me. "Oh."

"It's cool," said Patrick. "It's making me miss my family. Birthday parties in the backyard. My dad barbecuing burgers and hot dogs. Mom's homemade cakes. My little brother, Davy, following me everywhere I go. Kind of corny, I know."

"It sounds sweet."

Patrick folded his arms on his knees. "I keep wondering how many birthdays I've got left in Harmony before I have to leave."

"Why would you --?" Once again, the answer came to me without Patrick having to say anything?

"I figure that's going to be my life from now on. Moving from place to place every two years, never forming any lasting relationships with anyone. Never doing anything real with my life."

"You've -- you've got us, Patrick. We'll always be there for you."

Patrick smiled, slightly brighter. "That's sweet. But you guys are going to grow up, have families, real lives. You'll forget about me, eventually."

I wanted to argue with him, that that wouldn't happen. But he seemed so convinced. It didn't seem like I wouldn't be able to get through to him.

"What can I do for you?" I asked. "I want to help you, please."

Patrick's sad smile returned. "Thanks. But I just need to be alone right now."

I watched him disappear up the stairs. The whole time I wondered if any of our friends knew what he was going through.

I waited downstairs for Nikolas to come home, to talk to him about Patrick. By the look on his face, I could tell he knew -- or at least suspected -- what Patrick was going through.

"Unfortunately, that's part of our lives," he started to explain. "I've lost track of how times I've had to abandon one life for another out of fear people would begin asking questions about why I didn't age. Of course, it's easier nowadays. You've got plastic surgery, holistic medicine, and all of that. I can tell people I'm in my fifties and get away with appearing much younger."

"How old were you when you were turned?" I asked.

"I was in my twenties."

I made a face. He didn't look like he was in his twenties. Late thirties, yeah. Maybe even early forties. But definitely not twenties.

Nikolas laughed, no doubt reading my expression.

"Life was harder back then," he said.

I giggled. Okay.

"I arrived here in Harmony over a hundred years ago," he continued. "I've played my own ancestors a few times over. Being friends with the St. Clair family for as long as I have, I could use glamour spells to pretend to age then spread news of my death, only to change my appearance somewhat and return later as a long-lost heir."

"I guess you'll be doing that again in what, twenty, thirty years?"

"The next time will be different. I won't be returning to Harmony. It'll be time for me to move on."

"Where will you go? Who'll inherit all of this?" I asked, meaning the mansion and everything in it. Not to mention all of his business interests.

Nikolas smiled. "You will. And your brother."

What? Was he serious?

"Thank you," I said, a little breathless.

"You're more than welcome."

I sighed. "What about Patrick? Will you still take care of him?"

"Always," said Nikolas. "That's one reason why it's forbidden, among our kind, to turn children. It's been that way for centuries. Even some monsters recognize the cruelty in damning a child to such a fate."

I sniffed and wiped my eyes, thinking about what kind of life Patrick had to look forward to. If you could even call it that.

By that time, Emma was finally ready to ask for my help with her math homework. We sat at the kitchen table. Emma seriously struggled, but I had to give her credit. She didn't quit on me. And kept working until she finished the last problem.

I tried my best to praise her, make her feel good for her accomplishment. I couldn't tell if it worked or not. She simply nodded and headed upstairs.

I still had my own homework to do. It was going to be a late night. I'd definitely need some help from my good friend, coffee, on this one. I brewed a pot, filled a carafe, and headed upstairs with it along with my favorite mug.

When I reached my room, I spotted Emma down the hall -- outside of Peter's room. The carafe and my mug hit the floor. I raced toward her.

The closer I got, I could see that the door was open a crack. Emma was peeking inside. The expression on her face. It was the same hungry look I remembered her giving me when I first arrived.

I wrenched her away from Peter's door.

"Stay away from him," I hissed.

Emma blinked and shook her head, like she'd snapped out of a trance. The realization of where she was and what she'd been doing seemed to strike her instantly.

"What – no, Sophie. I wasn't going to hurt him. I swear," she pleaded.

I positioned myself in front of Peter's door.

"Get out of here. Now," I told her.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Are you going to tell Nikolas?"

I didn't say anything.

"Sophie, please, I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Get out of here."

Emma grabbed my hand like it was a life preserver, and she was drowning. "I'm sorry. Please. He'll kick me out of here. I can't go back to living on the streets."

"Let go. You're hurting me."

"Sophie, please!"

Emma's eyes went red. Her teeth grew into fangs.

Panic. My breath caught in my throat.

Next thing I knew, Emma flew across the hall. She crashed into the wall and crumpled to the ground. I glanced around. There was no one. Or at least no one I could see. I smiled. Thank you, Shawn.

Emma jumped to her feet and ran down the hall.

"What's going on?"

Peter stood behind me with a bewildered look on his face. I pulled him close.

"It's okay," I said. "It's nothing."

I started walking him back into his room, ready to stand guard over him, when something cold touched my shoulder. It was Shawn. I just knew it.

A voice -- it had to be his -- whispered in my ear. "I got this."

I sighed a thank you and headed down the hall, to the other end of the house, to Nikolas' room. I banged on the door until he opened it. He responded to the obvious panic on my face.

As I told him the details, the adrenaline that had been running through me disappeared. I started shaking, realizing -- moments ago -- I'd actually confronted a vampire. I felt like I was going to pass out.

Nikolas rested a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"It's all right. I'll take care of this. Go back to your brother."

I nodded and started back down the hall. I returned to Peter's room. He sat on bed still looking very confused. He shivered. I knew that was Shawn. He'd stayed with Peter like he'd promised. I smiled and mouthed a thank you.

I waited with Peter until he finally went back to sleep. It felt okay to leave him then, knowing Shawn would be with him.

Downstairs, I waited for Nikolas by the stairs. I didn't have to wait long.

"I told you to stay with your brother," he said.

"Did you find her?" I asked.

Nikolas nodded. "I caught up with her at the edge of town. I tried to get her to come back. But told her she'd be leaving in the morning. That I'd send her to live with an associate in San Francisco. She didn't believe me. Or didn't care. She was determined to find Tommy."

"Tommy? She can't go back to that psycho," I said.

"It was her choice."

I don't know why, but I suddenly felt bad for Emma.

"I gave her an address, told her I'd wire her some money, enough to get her through for a while," Nikolas continued. "It was all I could do."

I nodded okay.

"You did the right thing."

I managed a weak smile. "Thanks. You think she'll be okay?"

Nikolas appeared uncertain. "She survived this long."

"If she changes her mind, would you take her back?"

Nikolas grinned. "Of course." Then got serious again. "But not here. Not into my home. I have you and your family to think of."

I kept thinking about Emma for days after that. Nikolas was right. There was nothing we could do. Emma had to make her own decisions -- and live with the consequences. Hopefully, she'd make the right choice, reach out to Nikolas, and let him help her.

Chapter Thirteen

That weekend, I got to visit Gabby's house. It was my first time there. Man, that place was huge. I thought Nikolas' mansion was impressive when I first saw it. And according to Gabby, the whole estate and vineyard covered over a mile of surrounding land. This was actually Patrick's first visit too. We were always over at the Sullivans' house. There was no reason to ever go to Gabby's.

Well, except maybe to see the gargoyles.

At first, they looked like statues perched on the roof of the mansion. Then all Gabby did was wiggle her fingers, and they stood up and started to move. Not just move but flap their wings and fly. They landed in front of us, where we stood on the lawn.

They spoke too, in these awesome French accents.

Gabby said how they'd been here since the mansion was first built and how they'd been carved out of special stones brought over from France and brought to life with a spell. They weren't just walking, talking statues though. They were living beings. I put my hand against the big one – Silvain's chest, and I felt a heartbeat, not to mention him breathing. Awesome. So awesome.

Dillon told me about when he met the gargoyles for the first time, not long after he arrived in Harmony. Gwen then told me about her first meeting with the gargoyles during a sleepover at Gabby's house. She actually got to fly on one of their backs.

Luh-kee!

I didn't think anything would top that. Boy, was I mistaken.

We went on a walk through the mansion grounds, starting with the gardens. I assumed this was just a normal tour of the estate. Looking back, I should've guessed, by the looks on everyone's faces, I'd be in for a surprise.

Sure enough, I could see it in the distance. Seven tall stones standing in a circle. I'd read about places like these. There was a real famous one in England. What was it called again? Stonehenge?

Gabby smiled and took me by the hand. I couldn't take my eyes off the stones. I walked like I was in a trance. When we reached the stones, I

stood in the middle, near a smaller one Gabby said served as an altar.

"This is where our coven comes to celebrate the sabbats," she explained.

They'd told me what those were already. Those were the nights that marked the changes in the seasons and other turning points in the year.

"We come out here on those nights too," said Brody. "Observe their ceremony. We're not the only ones either."

My gaze drifted toward the forest. "You mean, the Faeries?"

I caught some of the others nodding. I'd gotten a bit of an education on Faeries already. It turned out they didn't all look like Tinkerbell. Faerie was a generic term for all sorts of nature spirits. Technically, they didn't exactly live in the forest either but in a different dimension that was sort of intertwined with ours, and beings from both sides could cross over during different parts of the days. The *in-between* times.

I turned to Patrick.

"So what do vampires do on the sabbats?" I asked him.

He just sort of shrugged. "Nikolas throws a party. That's about it."

This was his first time visiting the stones. It showed too, by the way he marveled at them. It was Shawn's first visit too. I could see him now. After him coming to my rescue with Emma that one night, I finally felt comfortable letting Gabby do that spell on me that'd allow me to see Shawn, which was great too, because he was a lot of fun.

He looked about twelve and had a big afro' and was dressed like a hippy. He was more in awe of the stones than any of us, staring at them without blinking, standing right up close, studying them.

"Whoa. Trippy," he said. "Totally far out, man. I feel like I should be gathering flowers and dancing, listening to some Doors or some Hendrix."

I made a face. Doors? Hendrix? What was he talking about?

Patrick must've read my look. "Those're bands from when Shawn was still alive."

"Hendrix wasn't a band, man," said Shawn. "He was a *dude*. And not just a mere dude either. He was a guitar *god*. All hail. Accept no false idols."

I covered my mouth as I chuckled. So did the others.

"You guys just don't know good music, man," said Shawn.

"Hey, that's not true," said Dillon. "I've been downloading those Led Zeppelin albums off iTunes."

"First of all, don't get me started on this whole digital-music-thing," said Shawn. "And you don't call them *Led Zeppelin*, man, not if you're really into them. You call them Led Zep. Or Mighty Zep."

"Sorry," Dillon giggled. "I'll try to remember that."

Patrick leaned close to me. "At least he's not trying to talk gangsta anymore. That was embarrassing."

"I heard that, man," said Shawn. "I'm not proud of that either."

I laughed a little louder this time. I wasn't the only one either. Gabby actually started turning red. We hung out there for a while longer at the stoves before returning to the mansion.

Gabby gave us a tour. Her house was impressive, with all of its beautiful furniture and artwork. But it felt cold and barren. Not like a real home.

That could have been because her parents were so busy. They not only had the vineyard and winery to run but the coven as well. If that wasn't enough, apparently they had a side-job where they traveled all over the world retrieving magical talismans and artifacts, keeping them out of the wrong hands.

It was no wonder why Gabby spent so much time at the Sullivans' house. The whole place could've fit in the bottom floor of her family's house. But the Sullivans' house was a real home. Filled with all the things this place was missing.

The tour ended in Gabby's room -- which was so *her*. Very girly. Very pink and frilly. A servant brought up some snacks and drinks, and we hung out and watched TV until it was time to go home.

Rolfe picked up me and Patrick. As we pulled into the driveway, there were several cars parked in front of the house. Nikolas told me this might happen sometimes. He'd explained how, like a lot of the older vampires, he ruled over a region. His included the West Coast and the Pacific Northwest.

Each region was divided into what Nikolas called fiefdoms, and each elder had lieutenants that supervised them. The elders would meet with their lieutenants on a regular basis to discuss what was going on in their fiefdoms. That must have been what this was about.

One car stood out from the rest though. It was Sheriff Ron's police cruiser. I might have been new to all of this, but I highly doubted he took part in these vampire meetings.

Me and Patrick walked through the front door and saw Nikolas and Sheriff Ron waiting for us. Both had serious looks on their faces.

"Patrick, we need to see you," said Nikolas.

"What about?" Patrick asked.

"Just – come with us, please."

Nikolas waved for Patrick to follow him and Sheriff Ron. Patrick looked at me, all puzzled, but I didn't know what was going on either.

"Sophie, I believe your mother and Peter are on the patio if you'd like to join them," said Nikolas as he and Patrick and Sheriff Ron walked down the hall.

I headed straight to the patio. Mom sat out in one of the deck chairs enjoying what was an unusually warm day for fall. Vanessa sat next to her holding a fruit smoothie for her to sip from. Peter sat on the edge of Mom's chair, his back to me.

"Hey guys," I said.

Both Mom and Vanessa turned to me and smiled. Peter, on the other hand, whipped his head around, hissed and growled.

His face was painted all white with black hollow looking eyes and a dark red, Joker-like smile. Red paint speckled his chin. I assumed that was supposed to be blood. There were also spots of red running down from his eyes. Bloody tears, I guess. And he had plastic vampire fangs! What was going on? As if the face paint wasn't enough, who actually bought him fangs?

"Where on Earth did you get that done?" I asked through almost gritted teeth.

Peter pulled the plastic fangs from the mouth. "At the Fall Festival at my school, where else?"

That was right. I remembered now. Nikolas and Rolfe had taken him there this afternoon.

"And the fangs?" I asked.

"They had them at the store. You know, for Halloween."

Peter then popped the fangs back into his mouth. I glanced to Mom for support.

She laughed. "Honey, relax. It's not that big of a deal."

Relax, she said. If only she knew half of what I knew now, she probably wouldn't think her son fantasizing about being a vampire was even slightly funny.

I let out a sigh. I suppose it wasn't that bad after all. I mean, Peter had actually been settling in at school, making friends, getting good grades -- and no vampire-related incidents, like sticking people in the neck with pencils. I figured if that kind of thing was going to start up here, it would have by now.

Peter fainted toward me, fangs bared, hands up like claws.

I laughed and gave him a tiny shove. "You're such a little dork."

I sat with them until Mom started getting tired. Me and Vanessa helped her up. We headed for the stairs.

"Patrick, check out my make-up!" Peter called out.

I spotted Patrick up ahead. He didn't even glance our way. Instead, he raced up the stairs. Peter turned to me, looking slightly disappointed and even more confused.

He wasn't the only one either. Whatever this was, it must have had to do with whatever Sheriff Ron and Nikolas wanted to talk to him about.

I excused myself and ran up the stairs after Patrick. When I caught up with him, he was standing outside of his room, leaning against the door. His whole body heaved with heavy, ragged breaths.

I touched him, and he jumped with a start.

"Hey, what is it?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

Patrick's whole body quaked. He struggled to get his breath under control.

"My parents," he started to say. "They're here -- in Harmony!"

Chapter Fourteen

Nikolas came down the hall. As he did, Patrick slipped into his room, shutting the door behind him. I wanted to go in, but Nikolas said we should give him his space.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Patrick said his parents are here in Harmony. Is that true?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Nikolas.

"What's going on? This can't be some sort of coincidence."

"It's not." Nikolas hesitated, like he was debating whether or not to tell me. "The FBI arrived in town this afternoon. They stopped to see Sheriff Ron first and filled him in. Someone sent Patrick's parents photos of him in Harmony, at school and in town."

"Who would do that?"

"We don't know. Whoever left the photos dropped them off in their mailbox by hand."

"So what are we going to do?"

"It's being taken care of," said Nikolas. "The FBI have already gone to the school to look at the records. Ron sent one of his deputies with them. While they were gone, he placed a call to the St. Clairs. Thankfully, it took the deputy and the FBI some time to find someone to let them into the school. By the time they arrived, the St. Clairs had used their magic to erase any trace of Patrick from the school records."

"That's great they were willing to help."

"Well, if one of us is discovered, the others are put at risk too."

I grinned, uneasily, thinking about how people would react to the discovery that supernatural beings were living among them.

"So we're in the clear?"

Nikolas grinned, probably at my use of the word *we*. Hey, why not? I was a part of this now. "I'm afraid 'we' are not in the clear just yet. According to Ron, the FBI agents have begun searching the town, visiting some of the places where he was photographed."

Oh, no.

"But the St. Clairs have told me that they, and the coven, have cast what's called a *confusion spell* over the town. Anyone working at the places where you kids hang out won't be able to identify Patrick."

"What about the school? They'll probably want to question the staff and all the kids too on Monday."

"It's been taken care of. The St. Clairs and the coven plan on using the same confusion spell. Patrick's been told to stay home until this matter is settled."

"How long will that be?"

Nikolas looked like he didn't have an answer. I peered past him, toward Patrick's room, like I was hoping I could see through the walls and get some idea of how he was doing. I couldn't even begin to imagine.

"So where are Patrick's parents?" I asked. If Nikolas knew as much as he did, he had to know that too.

"According to Ron, they arrived in town an hour ago and checked into a B&B. There's no doubt they wish to do some searching of their own."

"And Patrick can't leave the house."

Nikolas nodded, sadly. Gosh. Patrick. I knew he missed his parents and his brother really bad. And to have them here in Harmony and not be able to see them, it had to be torture.

"Why would someone do this to him?" I asked. "To his parents? To all of you?"

A dark look settled over Nikolas' face. "I don't know. As far as *who* did this, believe me, I plan on finding out."

A chill ran through me. For a moment, I actually felt sorry for whoever this was when Nikolas got a hold of them -- and I knew he would. But then I reminded myself of all the pain and heartache this person was causing to so many people close to me.

Yeah. Whoever this was definitely had it coming.

We all gave Patrick his space and didn't bother him. The gang called me later that day, one at a time, to see how he was doing. Each of them said they'd tried calling and texting him themselves, but he wasn't answering. I told them I knew as much as they did right now. And we were all in agreement that it sucked that everyone had to work so hard to keep his parents from finding him. But what else could we do?

Finally, after dinner, around eight o'clock, I put a plate together for Patrick and took it up to his room on a tray along with a can of Coke. Rolfe

had made his favorite that night, macaroni and cheese, with four different cheeses, and sweet and spicy sausage. I really hoped this would at least get me through the door.

I knocked and waited. Then knocked again. And again. Patrick was starting to scare me now. I called out to him and begged him to open the door.

After a couple moments, he did. He was so disheveled, like he'd been sleeping all this time in his clothes. And his hair, which he always fussed over, looked like a bird's nest. I set the tray down on his desk.

"Thanks for the grub," he said and began to pick through the mac'n'cheese.

He set the fork down and glanced at me, like he expected me to leave. Too bad for him I sat on the edge of his bed instead.

"This may sound like a stupid question, but how are you holding up?" I asked.

Patrick smirked. "Just great."

"Everyone's worried about you. The whole gang's been calling. Then there's me and Nikolas and Rolfe."

"What'd you tell Peter?"

"That you're not feeling well."

Patrick nodded. He then gripped his fork. "I just want to see them. Just once. For a little bit."

"I know you do," I breathed. "Patrick, I'm sorry you have to go through this. But you're not alone. We're all with you."

"Yeah. I hear everyone's working real hard to make sure my parents and the FBI don't find me."

I winced, trying to imagine how painful that must have been.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really am. You should probably call or at least text Brody and everyone. Let them know how you're doing."

Patrick managed a tiny smile. "Thanks. I will."

"Nikolas too. You should see him. He's dead-set on finding whoever sent those photos. I wouldn't want to be that person for anything."

"I wouldn't mind getting a piece of whoever did this too."

I waited a moment then stood up. "I'll leave you alone now. You know where to find me if you need anything. And please, eat something."

Patrick managed a slightly wider smile this time. "I will. Thanks, Sophie."

I smiled back. "Got your back, dude."

He chuckled and turned his chair toward the dinner I brought him.

Chapter Fifteen

“No. Not quite,” said my rescuer. Patrick showed more signs of life over the next couple days. He joined us downstairs for meals every day. He also really threw himself into his training and even made sure to keep up with homework as much as he could too, since all the teachers at our school posted their assignments online. I was sure he was doing all of that to keep his mind occupied so he wouldn't have to think about his parents being in town.

We got updates from the gang on the whole situation, who came to hang out after school, instead of the Sullivans' house, since Patrick couldn't go.

So far, the coven's confusion spell was working. The FBI questioned the teachers and staff, one-on-one, and showed Patrick's picture to every student. They'd already been all over town, to the places where Patrick was photographed in front of, the movie theater, Archie's, all that. No one knew who he was.

Finally, the FBI had to call it quits. Patrick's parents, on the other hand, weren't about to give up that easy. According to Sheriff Ron, they were still in town, walking every inch of street, talking to everyone they met, passing out fliers.

Patrick looked like he was trying to be as strong as possible, but we could tell he was hurting really bad inside. We all did our best to support him. Especially Gwen.

At school, she and Shawn finally let us in on a plan they'd come up with. I thought it was crazy. So did everyone else. But if it would help Patrick, we were willing to go along with it.

Patrick was in the kitchen when we got home after school, reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the novel we were assigned to read in Language Arts class. He was so absorbed in it, he didn't even realize we were there -- until Gwen snatched the book from his hand.

"What are you-?" he started to ask.

"How'd you like to see your parents?" Gwen asked.

Patrick checked her face then each of ours like he thought it was a bad joke or something. When he realized it wasn't, he sat up in his chair, ready to listen.

Gwen handed him a piece of paper. "I used a divination spell to find the B&B where they're staying. That's the address and directions."

"Nikolas is out of town right now, taking care of some business," I reminded him. "Today would be the perfect time to go."

"Yeah, but he left Rolfe in charge of us," said Patrick.

"I doubt he's going to watch us 24/7," I said. "After dinner, we go upstairs. After I've made sure Peter's gone to bed, that should give us plenty of time to make sure Rolfe's in his room and out of the way, so we can sneak out."

"We?"

"We're all going with you." I'd just assumed. But as I checked the others, I suddenly got the idea I'd assumed wrong.

"I won't be able to sneak out," said Gwen.

"Me neither," said Gabby.

"Count us out," said Brenna.

"I probably could," said Dillon.

"Me too," said Shawn.

Patrick set down the paper Gwen gave him. "No, you guys. I appreciate it, but I really need to do this on my own."

I was ready to argue and glanced at the others, thinking they'd back me up. Once again, I'd assumed wrong.

Dillon smiled. "It's cool."

"Yeah, we understand," said Shawn.

I didn't. Instead of saying anything though, I just crossed my arms and shut my mouth as Gwen continued to explain the plan. Gabby told me how that one time, when they went back to Patrick's hometown for one final visit, she cast something called a glamour spell on him. It changed his appearance so no one would recognize him. Even his parents. But since neither Gwen nor Gabby could go with him to cast the spell as they needed, they came up with an alternative.

"Think of it as kind of a portable glamour spell," said Gwen as she held up a tiny cloth bag that hung from some string like a necklace. "Slip it on when you need it. Take it off when you're done."

She handed it to Patrick.

"Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy," Gabby added with her usual bright grin.

"I've been following your parents around town," said Shawn. "They're usually out pretty late, going around, handing out fliers and talking to people."

"What if I get there too late, and they're already inside for the night?" Patrick asked.

"Got you covered there too." Gabby reached into her bag and pulled out a second necklace. "This one'll make you invisible. But only for a short time. So you can check inside the B&B, see if they're there. In and out real quick."

Patrick held up this second necklace. He then beamed at Gwen, whose eyes brightened. Something told me she'd been waiting a long time for this moment.

"Thank you," he told her.

"You're welcome," she answered, a little breathless.

Me, Gabby, and Brenna exchanged a look, feeling the charge between them. Brody, Dillon, and Shawn, on the other hand, appeared clueless. That's boys for you.

Everyone went home around six. Me, Patrick, and Peter ate dinner together. By eight o'clock on the dot, Peter was in his pajamas, teeth brushed, and in bed. I checked on Mom. She was sound asleep. Vanessa's door was closed. I could hear the TV. When I got to Patrick's room, he had just closed the door and was heading for the stairs.

"Wait up," I said, trying not to be too loud.

Patrick stopped to shoot me an angry look from over his shoulder. "You're not coming with me."

"Yes, I am," I said, jogging to catch up with him.

"I told everyone I needed to do this on my own. That meant you too."

"You need someone to go with you."

"Why?"

I stopped to think. "Emotional support."

Patrick groaned and continued walking.

I hustled behind him. "This is going to be hard, don't you think? Seeing them, after all this time? You should have someone with you."

It wasn't working.

"What if you're tempted to go to them and say something?" I asked.
"You'll need someone to talk you out of it."

Patrick stopped at the top of the stairs. He bowed his head slightly.

"Fine," he said without looking at me as he started down the stairs.

The house was so big, and Rolfe's room was way on the other side, we didn't have to worry about sneaking out any windows or anything. We simply went out the front door, locking it behind us.

About a half hour of walking later, we reached the edge of town. I grabbed Patrick's arm.

"What?" he asked, shaking himself free.

"Your glamour-thingy, remember?"

"Oh. Right. Thanks."

Patrick reached into his jacket pocket, pulled it out, and slipped it on. His form went hazy for a moment. When it cleared up and came into focus, my eyes popped with surprise. He looked completely different.

He was taller now, really skinny, with ears that stuck out, and a big hooked nose. Poor Patrick. He should have tried out that glamour right after Gwen gave it to him. She made him look like a total dork.

I bit my bottom lip to keep from laughing.

"What?" Patrick asked. "What is it?"

I shook my head, trying to fight back a smile. "Nothing. We should go. Hurry."

Patrick sighed and kept walking. The streets were pretty much empty this time of night. Only a handful of people were walking on the sidewalks. A lot of stores had closed up for the night. A few more were just turning over the signs and shutting off the lights.

The B&B where Patrick's parents were staying was in a little residential area a few blocks from downtown. We stood on the corner, across the street, just staring at it.

I grinned at Patrick. "So what do we do now?"

"I guess I go in."

Patrick reached into his jacket pocket again for the invisibility charm. The moment he pulled it out, a car drove up. Patrick stared into the window as it drove past, the invisibility charm dangled from his fingers.

"That's them," he said.

"Your parents?" I asked.

Patrick nodded and stepped off the curb. I followed him. His parents parked their car down the block and walked up to the B&B.

They looked exhausted. Patrick's mom still had a stack of fliers in her hand. From what I could see, they had a picture of Patrick on the front. She dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex. Patrick's dad pulled her close and smiled. His mom leaned against him and smiled back. I took that as a sign they still had hope of finding him.

I checked Patrick. His entire body shook. I reached for him.

"Don't stare. You'll freak them out," I told him.

Patrick nodded and forced himself to turn away. Tears glistened on his cheeks. I rubbed his arm, hoping to comfort him. He sighed and wiped his eyes.

"Thank you for coming with me," he said.

I smiled. "Told you so."

He chuckled and shook his head.

"You going in?" I asked.

Patrick nodded and raised the invisibility charm to put it on.

"I don't think I can go in there without drawing attention," I said.

"I'll be okay," said Patrick. "Really. I promise I won't do anything stupid."

I thought about it for a moment. "Fine. You've got ten minutes then I'm going in and making a scene."

Patrick grinned. "Got it."

He slipped on the invisibility charm. He went all hazy again, just like with the glamour. Only this time, the picture didn't clear up. He faded away. Disappeared.

I stood there, listening to his footsteps as he ran across the street. I could tell he'd reached the B&B when the front door opened on its own, just enough for him to slip through, then close.

"Good luck," I whispered.

I checked the time on my phone then crossed my arms and glanced up and down the street. I tapped my foot and hummed "Defying Gravity," one of the songs from *Wicked*, to myself. Somehow, for some reason, it had gotten into my head.

After what felt like a few minutes, I tried to check the time on my phone again. Before I could even pull it out of my pocket, a gray van screeched to the curb in front of me. The side door slid open even before it

came to a full stop. A man lunged from inside the van and grabbed my arms.

Lucky for me my training kicked in. I stepped back and threw up my arms, reached around, grabbed the man's arms and pulled him from the van. He tried to get up. I landed a front kick to his face that staggered him.

The man howled in pain. I stepped back into a fighting stance.

When the man faced me again, his eyes had turned to blood red orbs. He hissed, showing off a mouth full of fangs. Vampire. Great.

My fists were sweaty, but I still clenched them even tighter. I was so focused on the vampire in front of me, I didn't notice the other one jump from the van and tackle me. He was tall and strong. Too strong. He pinned my arms to my sides. His free hand clamped around my mouth.

I thrashed and kicked and tried to scream. He dragged me into the van. His partner slid in after him, shutting the door, as a third vampire behind the wheel drove away.

The big vampire who'd grabbed me tossed me into the wall. A tremor of pain ran through me. "You going to behave?" he asked me.

The first vampire touched his cheek. "I'm going to have a shiner for sure."

"Good," I said.

The big vampire got in my face. "You didn't answer my question. Are you going to behave?"

I spat at him.

And got a slap across the face for it.

I hit the floor. Face on fire. Ears ringing. Vision blurry. I stayed down. They left me there. Didn't touch me.

They kept driving. We had to have been out of town by now. But where were we going? Why did they take me? This had to have been planned. But how did they know me and Patrick were going to be there?

I tried to listen as they talked, hoping to get some clue as to what was going on. They talked about a *boss*. For some reason, I thought about Tommy. No, these vampires looked a lot older than the ones he ran with. Who was behind this then? Why did they want me?

Thump! Something landed on the roof of the van -- hard enough to make a huge dent. Big-Boy and the other vampire scurried to the sides. I did too.

The van swerved as the one behind the wheel glanced back at us.

"Watch the road!" said Big-Boy.

The moment the driver turned around something struck the windshield, turning it into a spider web of cracked glass.

The driver screamed and lost control of the van again.

The window next to him shattered. An arm reached in.

There was a ripping sound. Followed by a wet gurgle from the driver. His body seized and shriveled into a husk.

The van veered off the road, bouncing over the uneven ground before smashing into a tree. Me and the other two vampires were thrown forward. My head smacked the dashboard. A kaleidoscope of colors danced in front of my eyes.

Big-Boy landed next to me. An arm reached through the shattered passenger side window, grabbed him by the hair, and yanked him out like he weighed nothing.

Big-Boy screamed. Then there was that same ripping sound from earlier.

Then nothing.

The remaining vampire, the one I'd given a black eye, cried out and charged the back doors, busting them open. He scrambled outside.

From the sound of it, he didn't get very far.

I tried to stand but ended up falling forward. I whimpered and crawled toward the back doors. Head throbbing. World spinning.

I made it outside and crumpled to the ground. A pair of strong arms picked me up gently. My head rested against this person's chest.

"Patrick?" I murmured, sinking into unconsciousness.

"No. Not quite," said my rescuer.

Chapter Sixteen

I came to and tried to push myself to my feet. But the pain in my head stopped me short. Strong hands reached out for me.

"Easy." It was the voice of my rescuer. "You got a nasty bump on your head."

He helped me out of the bed I was laying on -- my bed, now that I realized it. Whoever had saved me brought me home. And to my room.

My rescuer stood directly beneath the overhead light, giving me a clear look at him. He was tall and lean. Young. He looked only a couple years older than me -- but somehow seemed much older.

He kind of reminded me of Patrick a bit with his flashy clothes and perfectly gelled hair, although his was brown. And he had the clearest, most beautiful green eyes I'd ever seen. They drew me right in. For a moment, they were all I could see.

He handed me a bottle of water that had been on my nightstand. My mouth was barren. I happily took it. That first sip turned into a huge gulp then another and another.

My rescuer laughed as he pried the bottle from my hand.

"Careful. Don't want to overdo it," he said.

I coughed and wiped my mouth. Now that I'd had some water, my voice worked again. Except now, in front of my rescuer, it came out all shaky and sort of breathless.

"You saved me," I said. "From those guys -- vampires."

He nodded and flashed a humble smile. He looked so normal, like a kid I'd see at school, probably hanging out with one of the popular cliques. But he'd taken out all three of those vampires, even Big-Boy, so quickly, so violently. There was definitely more going on with this guy beneath the surface.

He offered his hand. "My name's Julian."

"Sophie. Hi."

Julian nodded, like he already knew my name.

"Thank you -- for saving me," I said, trying not to cry as I flashed-back to the whole incident.

As he chuckled, his cheeks brightened a little. "Just doing my job."

"What do you mean?"

"I think Nikolas would prefer to tell you."

Julian motioned toward the door. He walked with me. I was still a little uneasy on my feet, leaning against the rail as we made our way down the stairs. Julian remained at my side. And looked ready to reach out if I stumbled.

We headed to Nikolas' office. The door was open. A large, muscular man with close-cropped red hair stood by the door. I'd never seen him, but he and Julian exchanged a nod, so obviously they knew each other.

Rolfe was inside, standing by Nikolas' large, antique desk. Patrick sat in a leather chair, sunk into his seat, his head bowed. Nikolas stood over him. I immediately got the impression that he'd already been ripping into Patrick for quite a while.

Patrick looked up. The moment he caught a glimpse of Julian, his eyes flashed with anger. He shot from his seat.

"What's he doing here?"

"He's the one who rescued Sophie," said Nikolas. "I also asked him to keep an eye on her. Until she woke up."

"You trusted her with him?"

The moment Patrick said that, I could tell he instantly regretted it. I would have too, if Nikolas had glared at me the same way he did at him.

Patrick sat back down. I glanced from him to Nikolas then to Julian, trying to figure out what was going on. Nikolas sighed and leaned against his desk.

"Look, I understand why you did what you did," he said to Patrick. "I get it. But to take Sophie along with you -- "

"I made him, Nikolas," I said.

Nikolas gave me a disappointed look. "I thought you had more sense than that."

I shrank away a bit and murmured an apology.

"So why were the Red League watching my parents?" Patrick glanced at Julian and the red-haired man when he asked that.

Red League. Nikolas told me about them. They were the vampire police.

"Matthias and Julian were there to protect your parents," said Nikolas.

"From what?" Patrick asked.

Nikolas hesitated for a moment then began. "I suppose I can't keep you in the dark any longer." He glanced at me. "You neither. As you know, I've been away a bit. That's because there have been rogue vampires attacking throughout the region. I originally thought the attacks were random. But a pattern has been emerging. Whoever is behind them is trying to keep me off-balance. They've also been taking out some of the higher-ups in the Red League along with those that are close to me."

"Why would someone want to do that?" I asked.

"To take-over."

"Can't you get help? What about that vampire council you told me about?"

"To go to them would be a sign of weakness. I can't afford that."

"Wait. What does this have to do with my parents?" Patrick asked.

"I suspect now that whoever sent those pictures of you to your parents are the same ones behind these attacks," answered Nikolas. "It was meant to draw you out into the open. As a way to use you against me." He then turned his attention to me. "And whoever is plotting against me also knows about you. And I'm assuming your brother and mother too. Or else they wouldn't have seen fit to abduct you."

I swallowed a baseball-sized lump that had risen in my throat. Nikolas moved to my side immediately. "I made a promise to keep you and your brother and your mother safe, and I mean it," he reminded me. "You're my family too, remember?"

A small smile touched my lips. I felt a little better.

Nikolas turned to the red-haired man, Matthias. "I want more agents from the Red League in Harmony at once. Handpick them. Only the best and most trustworthy."

Matthias nodded. "You cleared this with the St. Clairs and the sheriff?"

"They've been notified. They've also promised to lend their assistance. I want agents outside of the mansion and outside of both Sophie and Peter's schools." To Julian. "I want you at the middle school."

"What?" Patrick shot from his seat.

Nikolas ignored him and kept talking. "An extra set of eyes on Patrick and Sophie can't hurt. I also want you and Matthias to move into the mansion."

Matthias nodded. Then Julian.

Patrick jumped to his feet and stalked out of the room. Julian stepped quickly out of his way. If he hadn't, it looked like Patrick would have plowed right through him.

Nikolas watched Patrick storm away, shaking his head.

"Anything else?" Matthias asked.

"No. Thank you, old friend," said Nikolas. "Rolfe will show you and Julian to your rooms."

"Any chance of getting my old room back?" Julian asked.

I blinked with surprise. He used to live here?

"That close to Patrick? The way he's acting? I'd rather not risk it," said Nikolas.

Julian nodded. He flashed a tiny smile at me on his way out. I smiled back. My heart fluttered. Matthias left next, followed by Rolfe. I stayed behind.

"So Julian used to live here, huh?" I asked.

"He was my first ward. I attempted to help him assimilate and control his thirst for blood." A sad shadow fell over him. "Let's just say it didn't work out very well."

"And there's obviously some history between Julian and Patrick."

Nikolas nodded. "Julian did something very bad. Because of it, I kicked him out of Harmony. I'm sure Patrick will tell you all about it. Dillon too. Both were directly involved. They know more about it than I do."

I glanced down the empty hallway. "Do you trust him? Julian?"

"I'm allowing him to stay in the mansion, aren't I?" said Nikolas.

Unfortunately, that wasn't a good enough answer for me. After all, I had Mom and Peter to think about too.

Nikolas must have noticed this, because he continued. "Since leaving Harmony, Julian was placed in the custody of the Red League. Months back, Matthias told me he volunteered to help out on a mission. I granted him permission. It was successful. He's worked closely with Matthias ever since. According to him, Julian is determined to make a change this time. For good."

"He saved my life," I said, trying to force back the quake in my voice.

Nikolas smiled. "Believe me. That hasn't gone unnoticed."

I started toward the door then turned back. "I trust him. Just so you know."

I meant it too. I felt safe with Julian, the same way I did with Nikolas, Patrick, or the rest of the gang.

Chapter Seventeen

When I woke up the next day, my jaw dropped when I checked the time on my phone. It was almost three in the afternoon. No one had woken me to get up for school. Either that or they tried and failed miserably.

The extra sleep did me good though. My head no longer hurt. My neck was a little stiff and sore, but it was nothing some stretches and some aspirin couldn't fix.

Mom's room was my first stop. Luckily, she was still awake when I caught her. She asked how I was feeling. I assumed that meant Nikolas told her and Peter I was sick or something.

I said I was feeling better, which was sort of the truth. I mean, I did feel better. Only I wasn't sick. I was recovering from a head injury -- not like I could tell her that. Once again, I reminded myself that keeping the truth from her and Peter was for their own good. That I was protecting them from all this crazy supernatural stuff.

I stayed and chatted a bit, excusing myself when I saw she was getting tired. From there, I headed to the kitchen, figuring Rolfe would be bringing Peter home from school by now.

Sure enough, there they were. Peter sat at the table starting his homework while Rolfe got his snack ready for him. The usual. Cheese and crackers with chopped fruit and veggies and a glass of milk. Peter asked if I was feeling better too. I told him yes and ran my fingers through his hair.

"Dooon't," he complained. He'd been gelling his hair like Patrick lately. And just like Patrick, he got upset when anyone messed it up.

Rolfe held out a plate of cheese and crackers and fruits and veggies for me. I shook my head and said no, thank you. It would be a while until Patrick and the others got here. I thought I'd use that time to get in a workout.

I tied my hair in a braid as I headed downstairs. When I got there, I stopped short in the doorway. Julian was there, dressed in some track pants and a tank top in the middle of his own workout. He attacked a heavy bag that had been set up in the corner.

I winced each time he punched and kicked the bag. He wasn't wearing any gloves or kick pads. I remembered trying that one time, and it hurt like heck.

The bag he used wasn't the normal one Nikolas had bought for me either. It was the specially reinforced one he and Patrick and Rolfe normally used, because vampires were stronger than normal humans. I remembered hitting that one, even with gloves on, and I swear I almost broke my hand. But just like when Nikolas, Patrick, and Rolfe hit it, the bag shook violently with each of Julian's strikes.

I entered quietly, not wanting to disturb him, and settled in a corner of the mat where I did some yoga to warm up. As I was finishing up, Julian landed one more kick-punch combination and then turned away from the bag.

He smiled when he saw me and didn't look the least bit surprised, like he knew I was there the whole time. He strolled across the mat toward me, wiping his forehead with a gym towel. My heart fluttered a little.

"How you feeling?" he asked.

I nodded. For some reason, I couldn't talk right away. After a second, I managed to say, "Good."

"You sure you should be working out? You might want to take it easy."

"I will. Later. I just – I need something. I got so scared last night when those guys grabbed me. I tried to fight back. But I wasn't good enough."

"There were three of them," said Julian. "They were stronger than you, and you just started training. Give yourself a break."

"I know. I – " My breath was shaky. "So I better train harder. Get better."

Julian flashed a crooked grin. "Anything I can do to help?"

"I was thinking weapons." My eyes drifted to one of the cases. It held knives of various sizes. "Something small I could hide on me."

Julian glanced at the knives as well. "I was thinking weapons too. So was Nikolas." He walked toward a closed cabinet at the other end of the room. "We've got wooden knives you can train with. I was also thinking about something else."

He pulled something from the cabinet, came back, and handed it to me. It was a small metal rod, slightly bigger than his fist.

I made a face, wondering how that was going to protect me. Julian then flicked his wrist. With a loud snap, the rod extended into a baton.

Julian handed it to me. "Try it out."

I swung it around. The baton whistled and cut through the air with each strike. It was lightweight but sturdy, and very well balanced.

Julian shook his head. "No. You're using too much wrist."

Next thing I knew, he was standing right behind me, his hand gently grasping my wrist. My whole body shuddered a little. It was hard to make out what he said next.

"A weapon, any weapon, is an extension of your body." He guided my arm, showing me how to effectively swing the baton. "Move your hand, your arm, your body, and the weapon will follow."

I nodded my head and forced myself to concentrate. And block out these new feelings, sensations, having Julian's body so close to mine.

"You'll be smaller than your opponents," he continued. "So you'll need to be smarter and faster. Hit them in weak spots, like the knees and elbows. I can show you some pressure points and nerve clusters you can aim for. And just like when you punch or kick, you want to use all your body weight."

The moment he said that, his hands rested on my hips to show me what he meant. I just about lost it. My muscles turned to jelly as I let out a ragged breath.

Julian backed away. When I faced him, he stared back at me, nervously -- an emotion I wouldn't have associated with him. My face felt hotter. I was about to turn away when a relaxed smile from Julian put me at ease.

"I think we're good for today," he said.

I nodded, and he waved for me to follow him upstairs. Julian had a water bottle with him. I was parched so we headed to the kitchen. Peter was still there, hanging out with Patrick and the others as they ate and worked on their homework.

They were having a good time. But all went quiet when me and Julian entered.

All eyes went to him immediately. Julian backed away, staring at the floor.

"I'll see you later," he mumbled as he walked away.

Everyone glared at Julian until he'd finally disappeared down the hall. I shot them a confused and slightly irritated look as I got a bottle of water from the fridge.

"I can't believe he's just walking around here like nothing happened," said Brenna.

I shut the fridge door. Patrick stood in front of me.

"What were you doing with him?" he asked.

"We were training," I answered. I wanted to add that it wasn't any of his business either.

I walked around him, headed toward the table where everyone was sitting, books and papers out, in the middle of their homework.

"You need to stay away from him, all right?" said Patrick.

"Why? What has he done?" I asked. "Other than save my life."

I scanned each person's face, demanding an answer.

Gwen shrugged. "Don't look at me. It was before my time here."

Brody turned his chair toward me. "You know our friend, Miles, that we talk about?"

I nodded.

"Julian turned him into a vampire," said Patrick.

"What?" I glanced around the room, hoping this was a joke. From the looks on everyone's faces, it wasn't. "Did – did Miles *want* him to do it?"

"What difference does that make?" asked Patrick.

"Yeah. He did," said Dillon. "Miles got bullied a lot at school. His home life wasn't that great either. His dad was -- a jerk. He used to yell at Miles and his mom all the time, say really horrible things to them. And his mom just sort of let it happen. Then, learning about all the supernatural stuff here in Harmony, he tried to deal with it, but it ended up just being something else for him to be scared of. I don't know exactly what happened. My guess is Julian offered him a chance to be able to fight back against all the things that scared and hurt him."

"Did he? Do that?" I asked, unsure if I really wanted to know the answer.

Dillon nodded, his jaw clenched. "He and Julian ended up terrorizing his parents." He drew a breath. "Mine too."

I didn't want to believe this. But when I glanced around the room again, from the looks on everyone's faces, I could tell this was all too true.

"I fought both of them," Dillon continued. "I took down Miles first. Julian – the whole time, he kept telling me what he was going to do to me and then to everyone I cared about."

His voice cracked a little, like he might cry. Brenna reached over and squeezed his hand. My head spun. I didn't understand. None of this made sense. The image they painted clashed with what I'd seen from Julian so far.

"Stay away from him, okay?" said Patrick.

I swallowed. "Nikolas trusts him."

"Don't ask me why," Patrick muttered.

"She's got a point," said Gwen. "Maybe Julian's trying to change. He is one of those vampire cops now. The Red League. And he did save Sophie's life."

"He's a killer," said Patrick. "He's been a vampire for over ten years. He killed dozens of people before he came to Harmony. He told Nikolas he wanted to change at that time, assimilate, live as normal a life as he could. He couldn't do it then, and he can't do it now. He just doesn't have it in him."

Brody, Brenna, Gabby, and Shawn looked like they agreed with him. Gwen wasn't sure. Dillon, on the other hand --

"There's more to the story," he said. "Something happened that day I never told you."

Everyone turned his way. I especially wanted to hear this.

"When me and Julian fought, all of those threats he made, I think he wanted me to get mad. He wanted me to kill him," Dillon continued. "The way he looked at me. He cried. He begged me to do it."

A heavy silence followed. The impact of what Dillon had to say appeared to have struck everyone. They definitely weren't expecting it.

I was the first to speak, breaking the silence. I asked about Miles. I'd gotten the impression he was a normal human, not a vampire. Dillon said Gabby's parents were able to save him. It was early enough. The venom that turned people into vampires hadn't completely metabolized. He was a normal kid again, leading a normal life.

A heavy silence settled over the room again. I decided to leave and head upstairs. I had to pass by the guest room, where Julian was staying, on the way to my own. I slowed down a bit as I approached it. Next thing I knew, I was knocking on the door.

Julian opened the door. He'd showered and changed his clothes following his workout. He smiled, kind of shyly, when he saw me.

"Do you want to come in?" he asked.

He stepped aside as I entered. He left the door open, walked past me, and plopped onto the bed. He had the TV on.

"What are you watching?" I asked.

"*East of Eden*. It's an old movie."

"How is it?"

"I've seen it a bunch of times. It's a lot different than the book."

I sat on the edge of the bed. Julian pointed at the screen.

"See that guy there? His name's James Dean. He's a total legend."

"Oh, yeah? Is he still around?"

Julian shook his head sadly. "He died back in 1955. He was only twenty-four."

"Oh, wow. How many movies was he in?"

"Three." Julian must have noticed the puzzled look on my face. He went on to add, "That's part of what makes him a legend. Can you imagine how special you had to be to affect so many people all over the world with only three movies? His last two, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant*, weren't even released until after he died. Watch his movies, see him in action, you'll know exactly what I'm talking about."

I smiled. "You're on."

I settled in, leaning back against some pillows, and tried to watch the movie. Unfortunately, everything me and the others talked about downstairs dogged me. I sat up. "I know what happened with that boy, Miles. His parents. Dillon's parents. Everyone told me."

Julian shut the TV off with the remote. "Yeah. I had a feeling they would." He grimaced. "Not exactly my proudest moment." He turned to face me fully. "That's not me anymore. I swear."

I stared back at him. The raw emotion in his voice and in his eyes. I wanted to believe him. I really did.

"Dillon said you wanted him to kill you. You begged him too."

Julian nodded and drew his knees to his chest.

"Why?" I asked.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Make me understand."

Julian stared at me for what seemed like the longest time before he finally spoke.

"Patrick and the others tell you how long I'd been a vampire before I came to Harmony? That I'd killed? A lot of people?"

I swallowed then nodded.

"What do you know about vampire society?" Julian asked.

I tried to keep my voice steady. "I know killings have to be sanctioned. And that vampires can't just feed on anyone they want."

"I knew that too. Only I didn't care. My parents, they tried to help me when the Red League came after me. We ran, but the Red League was everywhere," said Julian. "My mom and dad died trying to save me." He sat there for a while, trying to fight back what I imagined was a flood of emotions. "I was on my own for who knows how long before Nikolas found me, offered to help rehabilitate me. I said, yes. I really wanted to, at first. But it just seemed ridiculous. How could I have anything resembling a normal life? I'm stuck this age forever. I can't go to college. I can't even go to high school. I'll never have a job, a house of my own. What was the point?"

I thought back to Patrick, how he shared the same problems with me.

"But to want to die?" I said. "To want Dillon to kill you?"

"Guess I was too chicken to do it myself."

"That's not funny."

"Wasn't meant to be." Julian sighed and stared up at the ceiling. "At the time, I thought I'd never be normal. I'd be a kid forever. My only other option was to become a monster again. A killer. And I couldn't. I couldn't do that. Not anymore."

"So what happened?" I asked. "What changed?"

"Matthias helped, getting me into the Red League. It gave me a purpose. A direction. That and ..." He grabbed something from the nightstand and handed it to me. A leather-bound notebook. "Go ahead. Open it."

I turned to a page labeled "Places I want to visit." It had the names of different cities and countries all over the world. I flipped through it. Other pages included "Books I want to read," "Movies I want to see," "Languages I want to learn," "Instruments I want to learn to play," and more.

"Figure if I'm going to be around all this time, I better make the best of it. Try to be the best me I can be." Julian grinned and blushed a little. "Whoa. Did I actually just say that? So cheesy."

I smiled. "I don't think so. I think that's great. You know Patrick's going through the same thing right now. Wondering what his life is going to be like after the next couple years. After he leaves Harmony."

Julian didn't look the least bit surprised.

"Maybe you can talk to him," I said. "Show him your book."

"You think he'd listen?"

I let out a long sigh. I guess we both knew the answer to that one.

Chapter Eighteen

The next morning, at school, as I stopped by my locker before joining the others at our hangout spot, I noticed a crowd gathering in the area where Sarah Dupre and her clique hung out. Julian was in the middle of it, getting fist-bumps from the boys and hugs from all the girls.

Nikolas told us he'd be around, watching our backs. He'd explained how after Julian had been kicked out of Harmony, they'd told everyone who wasn't in-the-know was that he'd been sent to a boarding school up north.

So now, he was home on a break and here at school visiting everyone. He'd stay out in the open before school, during our break, and at lunch. But would stay out of sight during class time, while keeping an eye out for anyone suspicious.

As I walked past, I noticed Sarah Dupre's arm wrapped around Julian's waist. She even rested her head on his shoulder at one point, showing off a satisfied smile. Watching this, I felt the sudden urge to rip her hair out -- but I held it together. Besides, from the sideways glances Julian gave her, I could tell he was tolerating her attention at best.

At least that's what I hoped.

Patrick and the others were very vocal about how unhappy they were about his presence -- except for Gwen, who hadn't been around for the whole Miles-incident.

Then there was Dillon. He was obviously conflicted about Julian being there. Sure, Julian may have wanted to die that day, and apparently he'd chosen Dillon to do it. But he'd terrorized his parents and turned one of his best friends into a monster in order to force him into it. Those were deeds I couldn't imagine being easily forgiven.

The bell rang, and we all headed off to Homeroom. I passed Julian again, along with Sarah and her clique. I could feel his eyes on me, trying to catch my attention.

I waited a moment then turned and smiled. Julian smiled back. A flush of heat hit my cheeks, and I turned away. Patrick had been walking beside me. He must have caught our little exchange, because he sighed and gave me a look. Whatever. I just rolled my eyes and walked ahead of him.

After Homeroom, I went to Algebra. In the middle of the period, I grabbed the pass and headed to the bathroom. On the way back, Julian stepped from around a corner and gave me a tiny wave. I smiled and waved back, although I couldn't help but think back to earlier when Sarah was all over him.

I caught up with Julian, who walked with me.

"So what class do you have right now?" he asked.

"Algebra."

"Who with?"

"Mr. D."

Julian winced. "Sorry to hear that."

I chuckled. "He's not too bad. He's kind of a dork."

"He still wear that retainer?"

I giggled. "Yes."

We walked a couple more steps in silence.

"So, are you enjoying being back? Here?" I asked.

Julian shrugged.

"It must be nice seeing your old friends again," I said, while fighting back that image from earlier of him with Sarah.

Julian scoffed. "That's a bit of a stretch. Calling them friends."

I made a puzzled face. "You looked pretty chummy with them."

"*Looked* being the key word."

"I don't get it. Why do you hang out with them?"

"Habit I guess. Those were the type of people I've always hung out with."

"But you have a choice," I reminded him.

"I don't know, being part of that crowd, having all those people look up to you and want to be your friend, it's hard to let it go. The kids themselves though, I don't know what it is. All that attention goes to your head, you start thinking you're better than everyone else. Soon, you start thinking you're better than the people you hang out with and start putting them down and talking behind their backs."

"That sucks. But like I told you, you have a choice now."

"Do I? Believe me, I'd love to hang out with you guys. You're real friends. You're tight. You've fought for each other -- literally. You don't know how rare and special that is."

I had to smile. He was right.

"Anyway, Sarah said she's having a party at her house tonight and insisted I come," said Julian.

"Insisted?" I asked.

Julian grumbled. "Let's just say it wouldn't look cool if I turned her down."

"Can't have that now, can you?"

"I was kind of hoping you'd go with me."

"Are you serious?"

"Please, don't make me go to this thing alone."

"That's not exactly my kind of crowd."

"You know Natalie."

"I wouldn't exactly call us friends though." I shook my head. "I don't think I'd be very welcome there."

"Of course you will. You'll be with me."

I felt myself being tempted.

"Come on, you're killing me." Julian made the sweetest little sad face. "Pleeeaaase."

I covered my mouth with my hand as I laughed. I stared at Julian for a moment before saying, "Sure. Why not?"

Julian appeared both relieved and excited. "Great."

At lunch, when I told the others about the party, they flipped out -- which was exactly what I thought they'd do. But I didn't want to keep it a secret from them either.

They settled down pretty quickly though. Except for Patrick.

"Just be careful around Julian," he said.

I scoffed. "He's supposed to be protecting me, remember?"

"I didn't mean that. He's a player. Big time."

"Thanks, Patrick. But I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

Rolfe drove me and Julian to the Dupre home that night. They lived in a mansion. No surprise there, seeing as how Sarah's dad was the mayor and all. They were also one of the oldest families in Harmony. According to Gabby, one of Sarah's ancestors founded Harmony along with one of hers.

Natalie was the one who opened the door for us. She blinked with surprise at the sight of me and Julian. Her lips twitched a little, like she caught herself about to smile but held back at the last second.

"Hey, Julian," she said. "I didn't know you were bringing anyone."

"She has a name, you know," said Julian.

Natalie's mouth opened a little. She then smiled apologetically.

"You're right. My bad." She offered me her hand. "It's good to see you, Sophie."

I shook it. "You too."

Natalie stepped aside. I stood in the doorway for a moment, an uneasy look on my face. Julian then took my hand and led me inside.

"It'll be fine," he said.

Music filled the house. "All About That Bass" played on a stereo coming from -- somewhere, with plenty of bass of course. Natalie showed us to the coatroom. Julian took my jacket and set it on the pile, on top of his.

I smoothed my dress a little. Natalie stared at me. I braced myself, waiting for her judgment. But instead of some scathing remark -- or at least an eye-roll, she smiled and said, "You look nice." And sounded like she meant it too.

"Thank you," I said. That was officially the first compliment she'd given me outside of a rehearsal.

Natalie led us further through the house. With each step we took, the music got louder and louder. People passed us, carrying drinks and plates of food.

Julian passed through a gauntlet of smiles, greetings, and extended hands. He acknowledged each person with a high-five or a fist bump. I recognized almost every face in the crowd, but outside of Natalie's friends who were in the play with us, I had hardly ever spoken to any of them.

I grimaced, just a bit, and took Julian's hand.

"Don't you dare leave me," I said into his ear, so he could hear me over the music.

He chuckled, leaned in toward my ear, and said, "I was going to ask you the same thing."

We finally got the epicenter of the party. It spilled over into two rooms and out on the patio. One of the rooms had been turned into a dance floor. The other had a long table filled with food and drinks.

People ate, drank, and hung out either in the same room or on the patio, where their conversations weren't overpowered by the music.

There was loads of junk food, but there were some healthy choices too. Me and Julian went for those. We each filled a plate with hummus and pita chips along with some veggies.

As Julian went to grab us a couple bottles of water, Sarah slipped up close behind him and ran her hand along his back. She leaned in close to him and smiled.

"I'm glad you could make it," she said.

I clenched my teeth and fought the urge to remove Sarah's hand from Julian – and by remove it, I meant at the wrist. It turned out that wasn't necessary as Julian smiled and stepped away from her.

"You kidding? I would never miss one of your parties." He cocked his head in my direction. "You know Sophie, right?"

Sarah gave me a quick how-dare-you-be-here-at-my-party look then flashed a big, phony smile and held out her hand.

"Of course. I'm so glad you could make it. I've heard so many good things about you from Natalie and the others girls in the play. It's going to be such a good show."

Boy, lucky for us, she wasn't in the play. She was a horrible actress.

I thanked her and said she had a lovely home. Sarah thanked me back and did a terrible job of trying to be humble about it.

She flashed another phony smile and said, "You have fun you two. I'll catch up with you later." She started to walk away, not without touching Julian's shoulder first. "I've got to mingle. A hostess' work is never done."

Me and Julian smiled as she walked off. Once she'd faded into the crowd, we both sighed at the same time.

"I thought she'd never leave," said Julian.

I chuckled in agreement. Once we'd finished our snacks, "Blank Space" started to play. Julian must have been able to tell that was my new jam. The big smile on my face no doubt gave it away. Next thing I knew, we were heading to the dance floor. We found a spot and started to move.

Julian wasn't a bad dancer. I still schooled him though. He didn't seem to mind one bit. I got a few looks from the people around us. They nodded, looking like they appreciated my skills.

We danced to a couple more songs, stopped to get some more food and drinks, and then headed out to the patio. We found a couple empty chairs and sat. A crowd slowly gathered around us. Well, around Julian to be specific. Some people begrudgingly acknowledged my presence. They asked me about the play or complimented me on my dance moves.

As Julian held court, my attention drifted. I scanned the patio from one end to the other, and spotted Sarah dragging Natalie by the hand off

into a far off corner. She immediately started tearing into Natalie, who just stood there taking it.

I crept closer through the crowd and got as close as I could without hopefully being noticed.

"Seriously, you've been so moody lately," said Sarah. "Why do you have to be like that? Especially at one of my parties?"

"I'm sorry," Natalie murmured.

"Either get it together or leave. Understand?" Sarah took another step toward Natalie, getting right up in her face. "Understand?"

Natalie nodded, biting her lip, obviously trying not to cry. Sarah snorted in disgust and walked away. Once she was gone, Natalie turned around and sobbed into her hands.

I stood back, wanting to go to her side but doubting if Natalie would accept sympathy from me. She had been acting differently lately, ever since that day at rehearsal when I blasted her for turning on Gabby, Brenna, and Brody – after all those years of friendship. I wondered if she'd been regretting her decision to side with Sarah and be a part of her clique. Maybe she was ready to trade popularity and all of its perks for some true friends.

Julian laid a hand on my shoulder, startling me.

"Sorry," he said.

I smiled. "It's okay."

"Why'd you have to leave me with those people?" he asked half-joking. "Seriously, you said you wouldn't leave my side."

I shrugged. "Looked like you were doing okay."

"Maybe on the surface. But I was suffering inside, believe me."

I chuckled. He stepped closer. I had to catch my breath.

"You want to go for a walk?" he asked.

I nodded. Next thing I knew, his hand wound around mine, and we were heading down a cobblestone path that led to a flower garden. I smiled and breathed in the different fragrant scents.

Julian picked a sprig of jasmine and gently placed it in my hair, just above my ear. He stood so close to me. I was dying for him to kiss me. Instead, we walked further down the path, to the edge of a wooded area, out of sight of the house.

My breath shuddered. Maybe this was it.

Maybe he was waiting to take me to this exact spot.

The bushes around us rustled.

Tommy stepped out. Along with Emma. And two more goons.

Emma shook her head. "You shouldn't have told on me like you did."

I whirled toward Julian. He grabbed my arm and forced a rag over my nose and mouth. It was soaked with some sort of chemical. I choked and gagged. My head felt heavy. My legs, weak.

I tried to fight back, but Julian tightened his grip around my arm. I stared into his eyes, desperate and fearful. He stared back at me, blankly, like this was no big deal.

He caught me as I started to fall and continued to press the chemical-soaked rag into my face. My body went limp. My eyes fell shut.

Chapter Nineteen

Images of Tommy and Emma's faces flashed before me. Then Julian's.

I still couldn't believe it. Why? Why did he do that?

My eyelids flew open. I cried out and scrambled to my feet, gazing around frantically, trying to figure out where I was. It was dark. Once I calmed down a little, my eyes adjusted. I could tell I was in a bedroom in a big, fancy house from the looks of it.

I spotted a door and raced toward it. It was unlocked. I flung it open.

A huge vampire blocked my path. One of Tommy's friends by the looks of his punked out appearance.

I swallowed and took a step back.

He grinned at me. "You're awake. I'll let the boss know."

"Who? Tommy?" My throat ached. "Julian?"

The huge vampire scoffed. "Those two? Yeah, right. Now why don't you do yourself a favor and go back and sit down and be quiet like a good little girl."

I stepped back into the makings of a fighting stance, trying not to tremble too much and scanned the huge vampire for vulnerable points on his body I could go for.

"And if I don't?" I asked.

The huge vampire looked at me like I'd told a joke he didn't understand.

"You serious?" His tone turned as dark and menacing. "Get your skinny little butt back in there. I'm not going to tell you twice."

"Manners."

Someone behind him spoke in a smooth, charming voice. He stepped into view and looked just like he sounded, wearing a stylish suit and carrying a case that, by the way he walked, was obviously just for show.

"After all, Miss Holden here is our guest," he said.

The huge vampire immediately got out of his way. This new arrival, another vampire I guessed, flashed a charming smile. The huge vampire

stepped off to the side, back to his guard post.

"Let there be light," said the charming vampire as he reached for the wall switch.

He walked toward me. My body tensed. Staring into his eyes, I found myself unable to summon the courage to try to fight back. I found myself unable to do anything. Except stand there.

"How are you?" he asked, almost sounding concerned. "Are you suffering any after-effects from the ether?"

He waited. The look on his face, it was like he demanded an answer.

I forced myself to shake my head.

He smiled. "Good. I'm Markus by the way."

He held out his hand. I stared at it.

"Don't be rude," he said, giving me a sideways look.

I tried to keep my hand still as I placed it in his. He gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Markus Kesler, to be precise."

I pulled my hand away and stepped back at the same time. No way. He couldn't be. But as I thought that, I started to notice the resemblance. The same dark hair and blue eyes, the same cheekbones and chin. Same grin even.

"I take it my father's mentioned me," said Markus.

"You're supposed to be dead. He thinks he killed you."

Markus chuckled. "And he'll continue to think that -- until the moment I look him in the eyes and drive a blade through his heart."

"Why? Why are you doing this?"

"Just claiming my birthright. My father's territory. His place on the council." He smiled. "Let me get a good look at you."

He reached for my chin. I flinched.

"Look at me."

I fought back tears as I turned his way. Markus held my chin with one hand and brushed my hair to the side.

"Here you are, one of the last of my father's precious human bloodline. I think I even see a bit of a resemblance, little cousin. I guess that's what I should call you, right? I'm sure the precise, technical term would be much too complicated."

I slipped from his grasp. "What do you want from me?"

Markus shrugged. "I have no other way to put it except -- you're bait. I originally wanted Patrick. I couldn't wait to finally meet him. My 'little brother.'" He made a disgusted face. "I understand he's never fed properly on a living human being. I'm sure my father is so proud." He smiled. "Now Julian, on the other hand, there's a little brother to be proud of. Such ferocity, coupled with the style and charm of a true Kesler. Did you know he survived for years on his own, evading the Red League?"

I stood there, dumb.

"I asked you a question. Don't be rude."

I nodded.

Markus smiled, pleased. "Thankfully, he's given up on the ridiculous quest for redemption. I have Patrick and his friends to thank for that, for being so unwilling to take him back. Of course, I have Matthias to thank too, for being the one to persuade him to join the winning side."

I blinked with surprise. "He's working for you too?"

"Matthias is pivotal. He's spent almost a century gaining my father's trust," said Markus. "He's the one who'll lead him to the killing floor I'll have prepared for him."

"Please. Don't do this."

"Sorry, dear. This plan's been in the works for too long now. Your part is easy. Just sit still and wait. I'll let you know when it's all over."

"And if I don't?"

Markus stared at me then let out a hearty laugh that sent chills racing through me.

"I've heard how special you are, Sophie Holden. Meeting you in person, I'm definitely impressed. I'd heard you might try to cause some trouble so I thought it wouldn't hurt to have a little insurance."

He glanced toward the open doorway and nodded as if he was signaling someone.

Tommy stepped into view.

He had Peter by the hand.

I dashed toward him.

Markus blocked my path. "I'm sorry. Can't have that. At least not yet." He smiled then headed toward Peter. He got up real close to him and crouched down to his level. "Hello there, Peter. It's so nice to finally meet you." He picked up Peter's hand and shook it. "I've heard a lot about you.

That you like vampires." He glanced at me from the corner of his eye. "How would you like to become one?"

Markus' eyes turned blood red. He gave Peter a good look at his fangs.

Peter whimpered and turned away. Only to see that Tommy had *vamped out* as well.

"Leave him alone!" I shouted.

Markus stood and faced me. "What about you, Sophie? Of course, I'd wait until you were in your early twenties, at least. Peter too. That way, you both could fully enjoy the experience." He slowly rose to his feet and headed back to me. "What about your mother? Lying in her bed, in the east wing of my father's mansion. So close to death. Beyond the help of modern medicine. Only one thing could save her now."

I held myself as I started to shake.

So help me, I was tempted.

Tears trickled down my cheeks. Markus produced a handkerchief and dabbed at them. "There, there now," he said. "You think about it, okay? I'll have someone bring up some food and water for you. And like I said, we'll come get you when this is all over. Hopefully, by then, you'll have made up your mind."

I looked to Peter, who was trying to be so brave. "Please, at least let Peter stay here with me."

Markus appeared to think about it for a moment. "Sorry. Can't have that."

"Please."

Markus turned around and headed toward the door.

"Please!"

Markus grinned and winked as he closed the door behind him.

I let out a scream from somewhere deep inside me. I let out another and another as I toppled every piece of furniture in the room and sent it all crashing to the floor. Finally, I collapsed, sobbing for I don't know how long. When I was finished, I just laid there, numb.

I didn't hear the door open. A hand rested on my shoulder. I glanced over my shoulder. It was Julian.

I growled and sprang to my feet. My fist clenched, I threw it at Julian's face with all of my body weight behind it. It connected with his nose. With a satisfying pop.

Julian grunted and recoiled. I swept his leg out from under him, pinned his shoulders down with my legs, and began pummeling him.

Julian covered his face with his arms. "Sophie. Stop it."

He then flipped me over and pinned me to the floor.

"I'm here to help you escape," he said.

"And I'm supposed to trust you?"

"You want to see what's left of your guard out in the hallway?"

I paused, not expecting that.

"I've been playing them, Sophie," Julian explained. "Trying to find out who's behind all this, what their plan is."

"It's Markus. Nikolas' son."

Julian nodded. "I'm sorry I had to knock you out like that. I had to make it believable."

"And Peter?"

A pained expression took over Julian's face. "I had no idea Matthias was going to take him. I swear to you. I've been keeping an eye on him, making sure no one's hurt him." He then stood up and stepped away from me. "We got to hurry."

I pushed myself to my feet. But stood there, defiant, not ready to trust him yet.

Julian sighed. "You want to stay, fine. I'll at least get Peter out of here, I promise."

He immediately headed for the door. By the time he reached the hallway, I'd hurried and caught up with him. Sure enough, the shriveled remains of the huge vampire that had been guarding me lay in a pile near the door.

I looked to Julian with a bit more confidence now.

"I thought you might want this," he said, handing me my telescopic baton.

I smiled a begrudging thank you and slipped it into my back pocket. We stepped quietly down the halls, Julian taking the lead, signaling me to duck out of sight whenever one of Markus' goons appeared.

We were close to the room where they were keeping Peter. Julian made me wait. I peeked around the corner, watching him approach the guard. He smiled and must have said something funny, because the guard chuckled back to him.

Julian then snatched the guard by the head and neck and twisted. I could hear the crack from where I was standing. I winced and turned away.

"Sophie," Julian whispered to me.

I headed toward him, reminding myself that Peter needed me. The guard was nothing but a shriveled husk now. I ran past Julian and threw open the door. Peter sat on the edge of a bed, staring at the floor. At first, it looked like he was expecting one of the vampires. When he saw me -- "

"Sophie!"

He ran to me. I crouched down and grabbed him tight. He buried his face in my shoulder and started to sob.

"It's all right," I said. "We're getting out of here."

I managed to pry Peter loose. He settled for gripping my hand instead.

"I've already called Nikolas," said Julian. "I gave him as much detail as I could about where we are. He said he'd figure out the rest and bring help."

"How's he going to do that?" I asked.

Julian started down the hallway. "Let's worry about getting you and Peter out of here first."

I grabbed his arm. "Wait. What about you?"

"I have to stay. Don't want to run the risk of Markus getting suspicious."

"Hey! What are they doing out?" someone shouted.

I glanced behind me and saw three of Markus' goons rushing toward us. Before I could react, Julian had one arm around my throat and another around Peter's.

"Julian?" I whimpered.

He nodded and whispered, "Wait for it."

"Good question," he told the three goons. "Who's supposed to be guarding them?"

They glanced at each other like they were trying to figure that out.

"Go," Julian ordered, giving me a shove forward.

I used the momentum to launch myself into a cartwheel. Then sprang to my feet and threw a reverse-roundhouse kick that caught one of the goons on the jaw, staggering him. I continued to spin and hit him with a front kick that doubled him over then drove my knee into his face.

The second one came at me. I sidestepped him, extending the baton. Then used it to take his leg out from under him. He dropped to one knee, and I cracked him across the jaw with the baton. He dropped into a heap.

I glanced to Peter, who stared at me wide-eyed. "Whoa, Sophie. I didn't know you could do that," he said.

I allowed myself a quick smile. Julian just stood there, over the remains of the third vampire. It looked like he'd just been standing there, watching.

"You could have given me a hand with that second guy," I told him.

He grinned. "Looked to me like you didn't need it."

I had a snappy remark ready, but we heard voices coming down the hall. Urgent voices that had obviously heard the fight and were on their way to investigate.

Julian grabbed my hand, I grabbed Peter's. We ran down one hallway, turned, then ran down another.

"Over here!"

A trio of vampires raced toward us. I gripped my baton, ready to fight. Julian gripped me and Peter by the shoulder.

"Down that way, you'll find some stairs," he said. "They lead to the kitchen. Go through the back door, through the woods, to the town. There's an all-night diner. Wait there."

"Julian?"

"Go!"

He pushed us down the hallway then rushed the oncoming vampires. I grabbed Peter's hand. We ran. The fight sounded horrible. I forced myself not to look back.

We reached the stairs-

- – And almost collided with Emma.

She sneered. "So, out of your cage, huh, little bird?"

I maneuvered Peter behind me, slipped the baton from my back pocket, and extended it, keeping it hidden.

"I don't suppose you're alone," I said, trying to sound brave and tough.

"You shouldn't have told on me, Sophie," said Emma

"You said that already," I reminded her.

She continued to advance. "I wasn't going to hurt Peter. I swear."

"I couldn't take that chance," I said, stepping back into a fighting stance.

Emma gnashed her teeth. "I really tried, Sophie. I really wanted to change."

"You still can. It's not too late."

I don't know why I said that. It just sort of came out. Emma stopped short with a pained look on her face.

"Please, Emma. Let us go," I said, still keeping a solid grip on my baton just in case. "Tell them we weren't here. I'll let Nikolas know you helped us. He might be willing to take you back."

Emma stared at the floor. Her fists balled up at her sides. I pushed Peter back, out of the way, ready for her to attack.

Instead, she looked up at me, eyes wet with tears.

"Go. Now."

I stared back at her, stunned.

"Go," she said a little louder.

"Come with us," I said.

Emma shook her head. "I can't." She ran away. "I can't."

I stood there for a moment, dumbfounded, then turned, grabbed Peter's hand and dashed down the stairs. We made it through the kitchen and out the back door.

Up ahead were the woods. I imagined a path all the way to the town and the diner Julian told me about.

I tightened my grip on Peter's hand. We ran.

The sound of shattered glass startled me. I glanced behind me.

Markus had leapt through a window on the second floor. He somersaulted through the air and landed in a crouch, his cane in his hand. He was all red eyes, fangs and talons.

He hissed and sprinted toward us.

"Run!" I screamed to Peter.

I poured on the speed, making sure not to lose hold of Peter. I looked back. Markus ran like a cheetah and was closing in on us already.

I tried to run faster. But worried Peter wouldn't be able to catch up. My only option was to make him keep running while I tried to hold Markus back.

When I turned around again, someone else appeared, chasing after Markus. Whoever it was then leapt through the air and tackled him to the

ground.

I could see him clearly now. It was Julian.

Peter cried out and fell to the ground, grabbing his ankle. I stopped to check on him. Nothing felt broken or swollen. That was a relief.

I turned my attention to Julian and Markus. Julian had Markus down. But not for long. He was soon back on his feet. Both were vamped-out, slashing at each other with their talons.

Markus caught Julian on the shoulder. Julian raked Markus' stomach then followed with a thrust kick that sent Markus flying.

Julian pounced. I prayed this was it. The end of Markus.

Markus leapt for his cane. He gripped the handle and pulled. A sword blade flashed in the moonlight. My mouth opened, ready to scream a warning to Julian.

But it was too late.

Markus lunged at Julian – who twisted and tried to change direction in mid-air -- and ran him through with his sword.

I screamed. Julian crumpled to the ground. Markus stood over him, chuckling. Julian cried out when he twisted the blade and jerked it free from his body.

Markus turned his attention to me and Peter.

With a cruel grin, he started toward us.

"Sophie! Peter!"

It was Nikolas. His voice came from the house. I could see him now in the distance. So could Markus, who smoothed his hair then straightened his jacket with his free hand.

I maneuvered myself in front of Peter as Markus glanced back at me again. He smiled and blew me a kiss before running off.

Peter managed to get to his feet. He nodded to me, indicating he was okay. He then glanced at Julian, who hadn't moved the entire time. I rushed to his side.

Blood flowed from his wound. I applied pressure with both hands. Julian cried out. His eyes flickered open. He struggled to breathe.

"It's okay. You're going to be all right," I told him.

Julian chuckled then coughed up blood. He smiled at me.

"At least I get to go out a hero," I said.

"Stop it. You're not dying. You hear me? Julian?"

He'd slipped back into unconsciousness.

Nikolas rushed to our side, along with Rolfe, Patrick, and two other vampires I didn't recognize, probably from the Red League. Brody, Brenna, and Dillon stood behind them, in lupoi form. Shawn appeared too. The whole group looked like they'd been in one heck of a fight.

Nikolas' gaze went from me to Peter and landed on Julian.

"Who did this?" he asked.

"It was Markus," I said. "Your son."

Nikolas stared at me in disbelief. He quickly shook it off. "Where did he go?"

I pointed in the direction Markus ran off toward. I kept pressure on Julian's wound with my other hand, which was slick with blood.

Nikolas led the vampires and lupoi after Markus. That was when I noticed Gabby and Gwen had been with them. Natalie too.

"We got this, Sophie," said Gabby.

I got out of their way. The three of them knelt over Julian and laid their hands on his wound. They shut their eyes, concentrating. I couldn't see anything happening. But I could definitely feel a charge in the air, gathering around us.

Peter clung to my hip. He stared up at me, desperate to know what was happening. I wished I could tell him.

"It's not working," said Natalie.

"Healing spells work differently on vampires," added Gabby.

"It's working," said Gwen. "I can feel it. Don't give up."

I continued to watch them, hoping, praying the healing spell they talked about worked. Finally, the three of them each sighed, wearily, then rose to their feet. Julian still lay there, unconscious.

"He'll be okay," said Natalie. "He'll be out of it for a while."

I examined Julian. And did see his chest rise and fall ever so slightly.

"Thank you," I told them.

Nikolas and the others returned. He sighed with relief when we told him Julian would be all right. The others looked just as happy.

"And Markus?" I asked.

"Whoever it was, there was no sign of him," said Nikolas. "Brody, Brenna, and Dillon couldn't find a scent either."

"Nikolas, he said his name was Markus Kesler. He looked just like you."

Nikolas turned away. I caught a glimpse of the pained expression on his face. He obviously didn't want to believe Markus was behind this. That the son he thought was dead. That he'd killed. Had now returned. And wanted revenge.

Chapter Twenty

Nikolas led us through the house. *Battlefield* would have been more accurate. I mean, the place was trashed. Holes pounded in the walls. Claw marks everywhere. Blood staining every surface. And so many shriveled vampire corpses, it was hard to walk past them without stepping on part of at least one of them.

I tried to shield Peter from the carnage. No need. He buried his face in my hip, as we walked along, not wanting to see any of it.

Rolfe brought up the rear, carrying a semi-conscious Julian in his arms. Nikolas told me how Julian called him earlier and told him what he was doing. He'd acted on his own. Nikolas knew nothing.

Julian had told Nikolas not to trust Matthias – that he was working for Markus. He said Matthias would come to him with news about ransoming me and Peter, and that it would be a trap. Apparently, not long after that, Matthias did find Nikolas and told him about the ransom and where the drop would be. Nikolas didn't go into details about how he got Matthias to admit he was guilty. Something told me, I didn't want to know either.

Gabby, Gwen, and Natalie used a scrying spell to get our exact location. The rest? Well, I was able to figure it out from there.

Natalie. I still couldn't believe she was here. I wondered if this meant she was she ready to risk being a social pariah by leaving Sarah's clique? Judging by the way she, Gabby, and Gwen joked were joking around, it seemed possible.

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As we drove back to Harmony, Julian started coming to. He obviously felt weak but wasn't about to show it. I could tell his wound was killing by the way he winced with even the slightest movement. But he wasn't about to admit that either.

When we got home, he was finally willing to accept my help. He leaned against me as we walked up the long, spiral staircase and down the hall to his room.

I helped him off with his shirt. The bandage we'd placed over his wound seeped a little. Before I could run and get a first aid kit, Rolfe and Nikolas arrived with one, eager to check on Julian. Patrick stood behind them, looking just as concerned. It was easy to assume Julian had redeemed himself in his eyes.

Julian remained in bed for the next couple days, waiting to fully recover from his wound. I'd bring him water and snacks, and we'd hang out watching old movies. Julian was filled with all sorts of fun facts about the different actors. He'd seen these movies so many times he could recite the dialogue but never seemed bored at all.

When Julian was finally able to get out of bed, he moved a little slowly, stiffly, and winced occasionally. It wasn't long after that he was back on his feet, training in the basement with Patrick, Nikolas, and Rolfe. There was even talk about him staying in Harmony.

Me and Julian were training on our own one day when Nikolas interrupted us.

"Sophie," he said with his jaw set. "It's your mother. It's time."

My bottom lip quivered. I knew exactly what he meant. I wrapped my arms around myself. This was it. I knew this day was coming. I told myself I'd be ready for it.

But now that was actually here?

Julian draped his arm around me. He walked with me, Nikolas on my other side. Rolfe met us in the living room, along with Patrick, who sat on the couch with Peter, comforting him. Peter looked up at me. He was trying to be so brave. I was so proud of him. I knew in that moment, I had to be strong.

We made the long walk upstairs to Mom's room. Vanessa stood by her bed. When she saw us, she excused herself, letting us be alone with her. We immediately surrounded the bed. Me, Peter, and Nikolas on one side. Rolfe, Julian, and Patrick on the other. And Shawn. He popped in out-of-nowhere. I was so glad he was there.

The tears came. I tried my hardest to fight them but couldn't. Nikolas pulled me close. Peter clutched both of our waists.

I glanced to Nikolas. "Please, do something."

He stared at me in disbelief.

"Turn her. Please. I can't lose her," I said, my voice disintegrating into sobs.

Nikolas held my face in his hands. "Sophie, she's so weak. She might not survive the transformation. And if she does, you've seen what we are. What we have to do to survive? Do you really want that for her?"

Suddenly, I felt so guilty. Like the most selfish girl in the world.

"Sophie," Mom called out to me, her voice so brittle.

Her arm trembled. It seemed like it took what strength she had left to reach for me. I took her fragile hand in mine. Peter raced around to the other side of her bed. Mom reached for his hand.

Patrick took Peter's other hand. Nikolas took mine. Julian, Rolfe, and Shawn stood near the foot of the bed, their heads bowed.

I glanced at Shawn. For a moment, I hoped maybe Mom would stay behind, as a ghost, like him. But that seemed just as selfish as me wanting Nikolas to turn her.

"Shawn?" I started to ask. "Will I be able to see her when she goes?"

He shook his head. "There some things mortals just aren't meant to witness."

I sighed and held Mom's hand a little tighter. I brought it to the side of my face and pressed her palm against my cheek. I kept it there for as long as I could.

Slowly, her hand, her entire arm, went limp.

"Sophie," said Peter, sniffing back a tear. "I don't think Mom's breathing anymore."

I clenched my eyes shut and let out a whine. Nikolas pulled me close again, and I cried into his chest. Peter ran and threw his arms around both of us. His tiny body shook with sobs. Patrick, Julian, Shawn, and Rolfe closed around us, each offering their condolences.

Epilogue

Nikolas let me make the funeral arrangements. I picked out the casket, the flowers, the music, and the dress Mom was buried in. We laid her to rest in the town cemetery and returned to the house for the wake.

A couple days later, I insisted on returning to school. Ms. Phelps was happy, but shocked, to see me back so soon. She'd let my understudy take over, for the sake of tech rehearsals, but once I assured her I could handle it I took back over my role.

Natalie helped me catch up on what I'd missed. Finally, opening night came. I was so focused, more than I could ever remember being for any other show I'd performed in. The curtains rose. I hit all my cues. Recited every line. And sang every song with more energy and passion than I ever had before in my life.

And all of it was for you, Mom.

Final curtain. Applause roared from the crowd. The cast took the stage for their final bows. The applause continued. Finally, it was my turn. I didn't think the crowd could get any louder. But they did.

I smiled and cried, happy tears, as I took my bow. Through all the flashing camera lights, I could see Nikolas and everyone on their feet, clapping and cheering with big bright smiles on their faces.

My attention then drifted up the aisle, toward one of the doors.

I saw her. Mom.

She looked so beautiful. So healthy. Like she did before the cancer.

She smiled and applauded.

I wasn't sure if I was really seeing her or not. If it was my imagination. Wishful thinking. Or whatever you wanted to call it.

Then again, this was Harmony.

And I knew now that so many things were possible.

Mom mouthed the words "I love you" to me. I mouthed them back.

Then watched her fade away.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

It is widely believed that the man known as Dan O'Mahony was raised in a library by a pack of wild fantasy novels who brought him up as one of their own.

Follow him at:

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