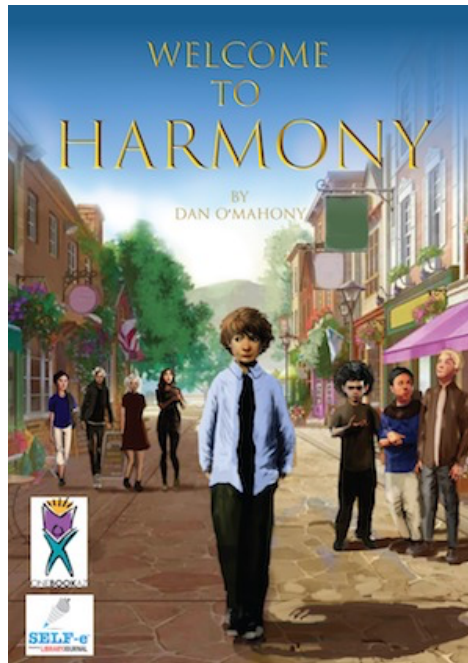


Free Preview



Chapter 1

The Change had started. My senses were jacked. I smelled and heard things no normal twelve-year-old kid could, like my parents' breathing as they slept, even though their room was at the other end of the house. The pressure built inside my stomach. I groaned and leaned against a wall. I had to get out now before it was too late.

I crept down the stairs and through the living room. Thanks to my new super senses, I made my way through the dark without bumping into anything or making a sound.

Outside, the forest called to me. Its scents were so strong they made me dizzy. The hairs on my arms stood up. My skin tingled under my t-shirt and shorts.

I dashed across the backyard, leapt over the brick wall, then sprinted across the field. All sorts of brambles stuck to the soles of my feet, but I barely even noticed.

The forest welcomed me with open arms. Every nerve in my body lit up. There were so many smells and sounds. But I couldn't stop. I needed to stay focused. There'd be time to explore later. Right then, I needed to get farther away from the house.

The brush around me rustled. I stopped short. All around me, golden eyes shone in the dark. Coyotes. I could tell by their scent. A pack of them surrounded me and were closing in, expecting an easy meal.

Sorry, fellas. Not tonight.

I lurched forward and let out a growl that shouldn't have come from a twelve-year-old kid's throat. It was monstrous and inhuman. The coyotes whimpered and ran away. The stink of their fear trailed behind them.

I charged deeper into the forest. Suddenly, every muscle in my body spasmed, forcing me to collapse. Dang, I had really wanted to make sure I was farther away when this happened, but it was too late.

I opened my mouth to scream. Instead, out came a canine whine. The Change was always excruciating. I wished I could pass out and be spared it, but I had no such luck.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as my bones cracked and lengthened. My muscles swelled and thickened. My skin darkened and sprouted a coat of sleek, brown fur.

I watched my feet grow into large hind paws and my fingernails turn into claws. My ears became pointed and shifted towards the top of my head, and my nose and mouth stretched into a canine muzzle filled with sharp fangs.

The Change was finally complete. I rose from the ground, no longer a boy but a creature of legend. A monster. A werewolf.

I flexed my clawed hands, sniffed the air, then dropped to all fours and ran. The power of this body – the speed and quicksilver grace – always amazed me.

Adrenaline rushed through me as I wove around the trees and leapt over boulders and logs. There were moments when it seemed like I was more than running. It was like I was gliding on invisible currents.

My senses became even stronger. I not only heard sounds but felt their vibrations. Smells were so strong I could taste them. Nature whispered her every secret to me. I could tell there was going to be an earthquake a few miles to the south, and from the shift of moisture in the air I knew it would rain the next morning.

I steered towards a rocky outcrop and raced to its peak. Back in L.A., whenever I Changed, I'd run through my neighborhood to the reservoir. That was pretty cool at the time, but it didn't compare to this, to running in a real forest.

This forest was amazing. There was so much life all around me, not just the animals but the trees, plants, flowers – everything! The forest itself was alive. It was an ancient being that nurtured every living thing within its reach. And I'd become a part of that.

A feeling of pure joy surged through me. I had no choice except to throw back my head and howl into the night.

I spent the next few hours exploring. In this form, I had an internal clock that told me when the sun would rise. The part of me that was still human worried about getting home before Mom and Dad discovered I was gone.

As the sky turned pre-dawn gray, that familiar pressure built up inside me again. The Change back had begun. It hurt even more than Changing into a werewolf, probably because my human self was weaker.

Bones cracked and shifted. Muscles shrank. Fur retreated beneath my skin. My muzzle shortened, returning to a human nose and mouth. Fangs withdrew into my gums, claws into my fingertips.

When it was over, every inch of me was sore. Even my hair. I laid in the grass for a while, unable to move. Finally, I forced myself up and raced home as fast as my aching body could carry me. I opened the French doors just enough to slip through and shut them quietly.

So far, so good. The house was quiet. I was going to make it. I started up the stairs, but before I reached the top Mom and Dad stepped into view. Dad frowned, his arms crossed. Mom looked like she was trying not to cry.

I stood there for a moment then sighed and sort of slumped. What else could I do? Just looking at me, they could tell I'd been out. My t-shirt and shorts were filthy, and I was covered with sweat and dirt.

“Dillon, how could you?” said Mom. “After what happened in L.A.?”

I bowed my head. Only Mom could make me feel this guilty.

“Are you checking up on me now while I sleep?” I asked.

“Apparently, it was a good thing we did,” said Dad. “You promised us, Dillon. You said the next time you felt the Change coming, you would tell us.”

"I know." I stared at the floor. "I'm sorry. I just couldn't stand the idea of being locked up in the basement all night."

"You think we want to do that?" asked Dad. He and Mom hurried down the stairs. "It's for your own good. You could get hurt or you could hurt someone. Like in L.A."

"Why do you always have to bring that up? I didn't actually hurt anyone!"

"But you came close," said Mom. "And all those people saw you, Dillon."

"I still think they'd never have found out it was me."

"We can't run that risk," said Dad almost yelling. "That's why we moved out here in the first place. And you promised you would cooperate."

"I'm sorry. I wanted to come get you and Mom – it's just – the smells of the forest, they were so strong – I couldn't help it."

"Well, you're just going to have to try harder then," said Dad.

I fumed. My right hand clenched into a fist. I kept it at my side. *Try harder*. That was easy for him to say. Dad stepped beside me. He'd calmed down a bit.

"Look, son, I know this is difficult –" he started.

"You have no idea what *this* is like," I said, raising my voice, cutting him off.

Dad backed away startled. He glanced at Mom.

"You're right, Dillon," she said. "We have no clue what you're going through." Her voice cracked. "But we're trying, son. We're doing the best we can to help you deal with this." She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes.

Jeez, I hated it when she cried. It was so unfair.

Dad rested a hand on my shoulder. He looked really tired. He and Mom had probably been up all night since they discovered I was gone.

“Why don’t you go clean up?” he said. “We’ll talk about this later.”

I slipped past Mom and Dad without saying a word. I had to admit I felt sorry for them. I still remembered the day they told me I was adopted, how they tried to have their own child for years but couldn't. I was supposed to be their “little miracle.”

Too bad I was a burden from the start. Always acting up in class, being too aggressive with the other kids. I got diagnosed with ADHD and Oppositional Defiance Disorder and was put on a ton of meds. Mom and Dad thought all their problems were solved.

Then I started to Change.

I knew Mom and Dad were trying to deal with this the best they could. I mean, it wasn't like there were books they could read or a support group to join. The three of us were learning about “my condition,” as they liked to call it, as we went along.

For starters, we found out movies and TV had it all wrong. I had no problem with silver, and my Changes happened whenever, not just during the full moon. Then there was the big one. I wasn't bitten or scratched by another werewolf.

As far as we could tell, I was born one.

Chapter 2

It rained Saturday morning, just like I had predicted, but it cleared up by the afternoon. Not that it mattered for me. I'd been banished to my room. No TV, Xbox, laptop, or iPod. Mom even brought my meals up on a tray. Punishment for the previous night's run.

On Sunday, when Mom brought up my breakfast, she told me our closest neighbor, Mrs. Coen, had come by yesterday and invited us over for lunch that afternoon.

"They have a son your age. Miles. Isn't that great?"

I sat at my desk, picking through my cereal. "I'm a little too old for a play date, don't you think?"

Mom frowned. "It's not a play date. We're new in town, and Mrs. Coen was nice enough to invite us over. Since she has a son your age, I thought it would be perfect. I think Mrs. Coen liked the idea too. I got the impression Miles doesn't have many friends."

"Wow, Mom. He sounds really cool. I can't wait to meet him."

"Stop it. You will be nice or you're not getting your stuff back for a month."

"What?" I groaned. "Fine."

Mom left, and I finished my breakfast. She returned later to tell me it was time to get ready. I put on a polo shirt, slacks, and my good shoes, knowing Mom and Dad would send me back upstairs to change my clothes if I didn't look nice enough.

Our new house in Harmony was pretty isolated. The Coens' place was almost a mile away. As we drove there, I kept hoping we'd run out of gas or have engine failure. I so did not want to be forced to hang out with this kid, Miles. He had to be a real dweeb if he needed his mom to find friends for him. Then again, who was I to judge? I wasn't exactly Mr. Popularity back at my old school.

Dad pulled into the Coens' driveway. Mom had picked up some flowers and an apple pie at the store. I followed her and Dad onto the front porch and waited while Dad rang the doorbell. A few seconds later, a stocky guy with a beer gut flung open the door.

"Whatever you're selling we ain't buying!" he yelled and slammed the door, only to open it a moment later laughing. "Just kidding. Dave Coen. How's it going?"

Mrs. Coen and Miles appeared beside him. Mrs. Coen was kind of quiet and plain looking. Miles was a little taller than me but pale and skinnier. He looked skittish, like he was about to jump out of his own skin. We said hi and shook hands. I glanced at Mom, wanting her to see how nice I was being.

Mom presented the flowers and signaled for me to offer the pie. "We come bearing gifts."

"Oh, thank you. They're lovely." Mrs. Coen took the flowers. She stared at the pie. "Is the crust gluten free? Miles has food allergies."

"I'm sorry," said Mom. "I had no idea. I know you said you were vegetarians like us."

"It's my fault," Mrs. Coen replied. "I should have mentioned it."

Mr. Coen snatched the pie from my hands. "That's all right. Means more for me."

Mom, Dad, and Mrs. Coen chuckled politely. Miles looked embarrassed.

“It smells wonderful in here,” said Dad.

“Oh, thank you,” said Mrs. Coen. “We’ve got meat lasagna for Dave and a veggie lasagna for the rest of us.”

“Dave, you’re not a vegetarian?” Mom asked.

Mr. Coen laughed. “Are you kidding? Never going to happen.” He hiked his thumb at Miles. “This one may not be able to eat meat or dairy or gluten – whatever that is – but I’m sure not going to let that stop me.”

Mr. Coen laughed again, even louder. Miles looked like he wanted to crawl into the nearest hole. His mom put her hand on his shoulder and smiled sympathetically.

“I became a vegan after Miles was first diagnosed,” she said. “I haven’t regretted it since.”

“We did it because it seemed like a healthy choice to make,” said Mom.

I bit the inside of my mouth, trying not to laugh or grin or do anything that would get me in trouble. The truth was Mom and Dad decided to go vegetarian after they found out I was a werewolf. They thought if I stopped eating meat, it might help weaken the “animal inside me.” They gave up eating meat too so I wouldn’t feel bad, I guess.

Mrs. Coen held up the flowers. “I’m going to put these in a vase and check on lunch.”

Mom followed her into the kitchen. “I’ll give you hand.”

Mr. Coen handed the pie to Miles. “Make yourself useful and put that in the kitchen.”

Miles didn't say anything. He just slunk away while Mr. Coen led me and Dad to the living room.

“Get you a brew?” he asked.

“That'd be great. Thanks,” I said.

Dad whipped his head toward me in surprise. Mr. Coen laughed and slapped my back.

“Good one. I like this kid.”

Dad forced a smile. “Yeah, he's a laugh a minute. I'll have a beer. Soda for Dillon.”

“*No problema,*” said Mr. Coen on his way out. “Go ahead and make yourselves at home. *Mi casa es su casa.*”

Me and Dad sat on the big sectional couch in the living room. Miles came back with his dad. He carried two Cokes while Mr. Coen carried a couple bottles of beer.

Mr. Coen asked Dad what he did. I knew Dad did something with stocks and investments. In L.A., he was in the office five, sometimes six days a week. He was lucky now. He could work at home most of the time and only had to drive to his new office in San Francisco a couple days a week.

“I teach P.E. over at the high school,” said Mr. Coen. “The missus teaches English. I coach varsity football too. We got a good squad this year. We're going all the way.”

“Sounds great,” said Dad.

“I played ball in high school. I was the only sophomore on the varsity squad. Helped take my team to state my senior year. Got a full ride to Berkeley.”

“Wow. That's impressive,” said Dad, even though I knew he wasn't the biggest sports fan in the world.

“Yeah, but Berkeley wanted me to sit on the bench my first year. Can you believe it? I wasn't going to put up with that. I dropped out and played ball for my local JC instead.”

Mr. Coen smiled proudly. I actually thought that sounded pretty stupid. I knew Dad – aka Mr. Practical – probably thought the same thing but was too polite to say anything.

“So now I share my wisdom with the boys on my team.” Mr. Coen pointed at Miles. “This one here can’t play any sports. If his food allergies weren’t bad enough, he’s also got asthma.” He laughed. “He gets winded just running to the mailbox and back.”

Miles frowned again. To be honest, I couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed, sad, angry, or all three. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. I knew what it was like to be a disappointment to your parents.

Mr. Coen grabbed the remote. “You mind if I turn on the game?”

“Of course not. Who’s playing?” asked Dad trying to sound interested.

Me and Miles sat there quietly. He gave me this sort of *help-me* look. Mrs. Coen and Mom came in to tell us lunch was ready. Me and Miles set the table. We didn’t talk much, except about where to put forks and napkins, stuff like that.

Mom and Mrs. Coen brought out the lasagnas, bread, and salad. We all took our seats. Mr. Coen enjoyed his meat lasagna rather noisily, slurping and chomping, while the rest of us dug in to our mushroom lasagna with gluten-free noodles and nondairy cheese.

Ugh. At least Mom and Dad let me eat real cheese. This fake stuff was like chewing melted rubber. Mom and Dad seemed to like it – or at least they pretended to.

They were always polite like that. Appearances really mattered to them. We always had to present ourselves as a happy family. They never talked about my problems with anyone, even when they were just limited to ADHD and ODD.

Since they discovered I was a werewolf, it seemed like they were putting in even more effort to pretend they were my “proud parents.” Not just in public, but when we were alone too.

They never would've admitted it, but I knew that when they looked at me all they saw was the monster I turned into.

Chapter 3

After we finished eating, me and Miles helped our moms clear the table while Dad and Mr. Coen grabbed a couple more beers and returned to the living room to watch the rest of the game. I noticed the fridge was well stocked with beer, and the recycling bin in the corner was filled with empty bottles.

Mrs. Coen suggested Miles show me his room. Honestly, I would have rather stayed and helped with the dishes or anything else for that matter, but I followed Miles upstairs and tried to look excited about it.

His room was pretty much geek heaven. It was decorated with all sorts of movie posters and rows of action figures displayed on shelves – superheroes, monsters, stuff like that.

One of the sliding closet doors was open, and I could see half of it was filled with those long, skinny comic book boxes. He had a sweet laptop, not to mention a flat screen TV and an Xbox.

“So what do you think of Harmony?” Miles asked.

“It’s okay.”

“Hang in there. It gets worse.”

I laughed. That was actually pretty funny. I sifted through some of the comic books spread out on Miles' desk. Avengers. X-Men. Spider-Man.

“Nice.”

“Those are back issues,” said Miles. “My mom drives me to a shop in San Francisco sometimes. But I get all my new issues from this web site.” He sat at his computer. With a couple clicks, he opened up a webpage. “This is where you buy them from. You download them, and you can read them online or on your phone or tablet.”

“Sweet.”

“You read comics?” Miles asked.

“Not for a while, but I wouldn't mind getting back into them.”

“What about Dark World? Do you play?”

Dark World was this new supernatural MMORPG. It was really popular, even more than World of Warcraft. Everyone back at my old school played it.

“My parents don't like me playing those kind of games.” Oh man, why did I have to say it like that? I sounded like a total tool.

“Oh, are you guys Christians or something?” Miles asked.

“Or something,” I muttered. The truth was Mom and Dad kept me away from anything that had to do with monsters – movies, TV shows, comics, video games. They were afraid it would be a bad influence.

“Well, if you want to play – I won't tell if you won't.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

Miles fired up his computer. I pulled up a chair and sat beside him. He gave me the 411 on how to play Dark World. He started by showing me the different character templates. There were vampires, werewolves, sorcerers, and monster hunters.

“What kind of character do you want to be?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Werewolf, I guess.”

“Are you sure? I mean, vampires are so much cooler. They have better powers too. Werewolves are just big, dumb animals.”

I grinned, trying not to take what Miles said personally. He went on to show me the stats for his character, Damon Diabolique, a tenth level rogue vampire. He explained the different powers his character had and filled me in on the latest campaign he was a part of.

Miles then showed me the profiles of the other people he usually played with. None of them lived in Harmony. It looked like they were spread out through the Bay Area. No one from Miles’ group was logged in right now, but Miles said they planned on meeting later that night and picking up where they left off on their campaign.

I watched Miles’ character explore downtown New York, fighting other vampires, werewolves, sorcerers, and monster hunters. Miles was really good. You could tell he spent a lot of time playing this game.

“What do you think?” he asked.

I didn’t say anything. I just sort of nodded and grinned. Dark World blew me away. The graphics. The action. The atmosphere. I had to think of a way I could get a hold of a copy without my parents finding out, so I could play online too.

Miles and I were so into the game that when someone knocked on the door we both jumped.

Miles minimized the screen. “Come in.”

Sure enough, it was our moms. They were both smiling, obviously happy we were getting along.

“So what have you two been up to?” Mrs. Coen asked.

“Nothing. Just surfing the Net,” Miles answered. We both grinned like conspirators.

“Are we heading home?” I asked Mom.

Mrs. Coen turned to her. “Actually, I was thinking I could drop the boys off downtown. Miles could show Dillon around. What do you think?”

“Sounds great,” said Mom. “Dillon?”

“Sure,” I said, glancing at Miles, who was obviously hoping I’d say yes.

“We’ll be down in a minute,” Miles told our moms.

After they left, Miles logged off of Dark World. We both snickered at our little deception then headed downstairs.

Miles’ mom drove us into town. Harmony was small. Less than three thousand people lived there. It was home to the St. Clair winery and vineyard, which according to Mom and Dad was pretty famous. People stopped to visit when they toured Napa Valley, so a lot of businesses in town made money off the tourists. Hotels, fancy restaurants, expensive shops, art galleries.

There was a little outdoor mall downtown that was a bit more kid friendly. Mrs. Coen dropped us off there at about a quarter to three and said she’d pick us up at six.

Miles showed me around. There were a couple stores that sold kids’ and teens’ clothes. Another one sold DVDs, video games, and electronics. We spent about an hour there before

heading to the bookstore, where we looked at comics and magazines, and then went to a candy store that gave out free samples.

I saw a lot of kids hanging out. Miles didn't say hi to any of them. They didn't say anything to him either.

Around five thirty, we decided to stop at this 50's style diner near the mall. As we headed toward the front door, we passed a group of preppy boys sitting in a booth next to the window. Most of them looked our age. One of them looked a couple years older and was obviously the leader. He just had that sort of presence about him. He made eye contact with Miles and grinned rather evilly. Miles got all tense.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing. Maybe we should go somewhere else."

"Why?" I asked, but Miles didn't answer. "We're here. Let's just go in."

I had to coax him the rest of the way. By the time we reached the front door, the preppy boys were there, blocking it.

"Hey, Julian," said Miles softly.

For some reason, this kid, Julian, looked at me like he knew me, so did the boy next to him. But I'd never seen either of them before in my life.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"His name's Dillon," said Miles.

"Aw, do you finally have a friend?" Julian teased. "Good for you. Now you don't have to have your mommy take you everywhere."

Julian laughed. So did the others. Miles looked like he was about to cry. Me? My face felt hot. I took a breath to calm myself. Pressure built in my stomach, like I was about to Change.

I forced a smile, but my voice was firm. “Excuse me. We’d like to go inside.”

Julian shook his head. “Nope. Sorry. Can’t do that. There’s a loser tax here now. You want to come in, you got to pay up.”

“Come on, Julian,” Miles begged.

“*Come on, Julian,*” Julian repeated. “Sorry guys, it’s not my fault. It’s management. You want to come in, you got to pay first.” He pointed to me. “And you’re going to have to pay double. Anyone who’d actually choose to hang out with someone like Miles has to be an even bigger loser than he is.”

Julian and his crew laughed again. A tremor ran through my arm. I made a fist to stop it.

“If there’s a loser tax,” I said. “Who did you have to pay to get in?”

Julian's eyes went wide. His friends looked just as surprised. Miles too.

“What was that?” asked Julian. “What did you just say?”

“Are you deaf *and* stupid?”

Miles tugged on my arm. “Dillon, don’t do this.”

He was probably right. Last time I got in a fight, I came close to Changing in front of lots of people. Somehow, I got it under control. But Julian and the kid standing next to him – I don’t know what it was, but something about those two got me seriously riled up. I wanted to tear them apart. I’d never felt this kind of rage before. It scared me.

Julian got in my face. I didn’t back down. He glanced at the kid next to him. “I don’t know about you, Patrick, but I think someone here has *dog breath.*”

Patrick chuckled. Dog breath? Why would Julian choose that insult? And the way he stressed it. Like he was trying to make a point.

“You should talk,” I told him. “Your breath smells like you've been eating out of a toilet.”

Julian shoved me. I staggered a couple steps then rushed forward and shoved him back, almost knocking him into his friends. He was stunned for a moment but recovered quickly. He snarled and curled his fists. We had the attention of everyone in the diner now. Julian was ready for a fight. And so was I.

“What’s going on here?” a deep voice behind us rumbled.

I turned around, so did Miles. A large man in a long coat stepped up. This guy was huge. We’re talking John Cena or Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson huge. Underneath his long coat, he had on a brown and khaki uniform with a gold star on his chest. Julian and his friends stood up straight and tossed nervous glances back and forth.

“Well? Who’s going to tell me what’s going on?” this big man asked again. “How about we start with you and Patrick, Julian?”

Julian grinned, trying to turn on some charm. “We’re just messing around, Sheriff Ron.”

“It didn’t look like Miles and his friend were having that much fun.” Sheriff Ron’s gaze zeroed in on Miles. “Miles?”

Miles swallowed. “Everything’s okay, sir.”

Sheriff Ron didn’t look like he believed him. He turned to Julian. “Why don’t you and your friends head back inside. Now.”

Julian begrudgingly led his friends back into the diner, leaving me and Miles alone with Sheriff Ron.

“Sure everything’s okay, Miles?” he asked. “This wouldn’t be the first time Julian and his friends have caused trouble.”

“We’re okay, Sheriff Ron. Honest,” said Miles.

A small grin crept across Sheriff Ron’s face. He glanced at me. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Dillon Howell, sir,” said Miles. “He just moved to town.”

“Is that right?” Sheriff Ron’s grin broadened. He extended his hand. “Ron Sullivan. As you can tell by now, everyone calls me Sheriff Ron. Welcome to Harmony.”

“Thanks.”

Sheriff Ron’s hand practically swallowed mine when he shook it. He looked at me the same way Julian and Patrick did. Like he knew me. This was getting weird.

“You boys need a ride home?” he asked. “I got my cruiser parked around the corner.”

“No, thanks,” I said. “Miles’ mom is picking us up soon. Besides, my folks would get the wrong idea if I pulled up to the house in the back of a police car.”

Sheriff Ron chuckled. “Fair enough. It was nice meeting you, Dillon. I’ll see you around. Miles, tell your mom and dad I said hi.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do that,” said Miles.

As Sheriff Ron walked away, Miles let out a huge sigh. “Oh, man. I mean, dude – seriously.”

“You okay?” I asked. “You need your inhaler?”

“No. It’s just – that was intense. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone stand up to Julian like that.”

“It’s no big deal.” I started towards the door.

Miles glanced past me, at Julian and his friends, who were making their way back to their booth. He was obviously still worried about them. I wasn't.

Miles followed me inside. We drew stares and whispers from a lot of people in the diner, especially the kids our age. Julian and his friends mad-dogged us from their seats.

"I hate those guys," said Miles. "They're always hassling me at school. They'll probably start in on you too, because you're hanging out with me."

I glared back at Julian and Patrick. "They can try."

Miles didn't relax until Julian and his friends had finally gone. He sat there quietly, sipping his Coke. I asked him more about Dark World, just to get him talking again. It worked. Boy, did it ever. He was obsessed with that game.

Before we knew it, it was six o'clock. I downed the last of my chocolate shake, and we met up with Miles' mom where she dropped us off.

"Shotgun!" I called and raced to the passenger seat.

Miles' mom asked about our mall trip. We told her everything – except about our run-in with Julian and his friends of course.

When we got to my house, there was a minivan parked in the driveway.

"That looks like Michelle Sullivan's car," said Mrs. Coen as she pulled up behind it.

"Sheriff Ron's wife," Miles added.

Really? First we ran into Sheriff Ron downtown. Now his wife was at my house. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

I said goodbye to Miles and his mom. Mrs. Coen said she'd pick me up for school in the morning. She'd already cleared it with my mom. That was fine with me. Anything was better than riding the bus.

I headed inside and found Mom and Dad in the kitchen drinking tea and talking with a lady I assumed was Mrs. Sullivan. The three of them were laughing. Mom and Dad had their backs to me, but Mrs. Sullivan sat at the other side of the table, facing me. She had sandy hair and clear blue eyes. Even though she was sitting down, I could tell she was tall. She was also tan and totally gorgeous. I mean, like movie star gorgeous. She smiled when she saw me.

“Well, speak of the devil,” she said with a Southern accent.

Both Mom and Dad turned toward me with forced smiles.

“Hi, sweetie,” said Mom. “We were just talking about you.”

“Dillon, this is Mrs. Sullivan,” said Dad. “She stopped by to give us this gift basket.”

“It’s not much,” said Mrs. Sullivan. “Just a little something to welcome you to Harmony.”

The basket was on the table. It was filled with fruit, bread, cheese, and a bottle of wine from the St. Clair winery. Mrs. Sullivan stood up and leaned across the table to shake my hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Dillon.”

“You too,” I answered.

Mrs. Sullivan looked at me the same way her husband and Julian and Patrick did. Like she knew me. But with her and Sheriff Ron, I didn’t mind so much. I don’t know why, but I instantly liked them.

“Michelle’s husband is the sheriff,” said Dad. “Not a bad person to know if you ask me.”

“Yeah. Me and Miles met him downtown,” I informed them.

“Oh, really,” said Mom with a pretend scowl – or at least what I hoped was a pretend scowl.

I held up my hands. “It was just a friendly visit. I didn’t do nothin’. Honest.”

“Except use bad grammar,” Dad pointed out.

“That’s okay.” Mrs. Sullivan winked. “I can think of worse offenses.”

“Michelle has twins your age,” said Mom.

Mrs. Sullivan smiled and reached into her purse for her wallet. She showed me a picture of a boy and a girl, dressed nice but still casual, standing beneath a big oak tree. They both had their mom’s features but their dad’s dark hair and eyes.

“These are my babies. Brody and Brenna,” she said. “They’re in sixth grade too. You’ll probably run into them at school tomorrow.”

“Michelle, can I pour you another cup of tea?” Mom asked.

“Oh, no, thank you. I’ve got to get going.” Mrs. Sullivan slid her wallet back into her purse. “It was nice meeting all of you. I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon.”

Mom walked Mrs. Sullivan to the door and thanked her again for the gift basket.

“Such nice people here,” Mom said when she returned to the kitchen. “I’ve got such a great feeling about this town.”

“I know. So do I,” said Dad. “We should probably make it an early night. Big day tomorrow. First day at the new office for me. First day at a new school for you,” he said to me. “This is a new start, Dillon. For all of us. A new home. A new town full of opportunities.”

“So don’t screw it up?” I said.

Dad frowned. Mom too.

“Dillon, you’re not being fair,” she said.

“It’s what you were thinking, wasn’t it? I was just filling in the blanks.”

“Dillon, the choices you make, especially when it concerns your – ‘condition’ – they affect us too,” said Dad. “We had to pick up and leave everything behind in order to keep you safe.”

“Sorry,” I said softly.

“Can we count on there being no more repeats of Friday night?” Dad asked.

I nodded. “Next time I start to Change, I’ll tell you. I promise. No matter what.”

“Good,” said Dad. “We’re not the bad guys here. Your mother and I are trying to keep you safe and make sure no one finds out about you.”

“I know.”

Mom picked up Mrs. Sullivan’s gift basket. “It’s going to be okay, Dillon.” She walked past me. “We’re going to help you get through this. That’s what families do.”

“That’s right,” Dad added.

I thanked them again, but to be honest what they said would have been a lot more convincing if they’d been able to look me in the eye when they said it.

Chapter 4

I had never liked school. For me, it was a job you didn't get paid for. I especially didn't like my old school back in L.A., Roosevelt Middle. Just thinking about it made me cringe. It looked like a prison and had all the warmth and charm of one too. And don't get me started on the people. Not just the students but also the teachers. So naturally, I wasn't too fired up about my first day at Harmony Middle.

Miles and his mom picked me up around seven thirty Monday morning. She drove us across town. The elementary, middle, and high schools were practically within walking distance of each another.

As we drove past, I had to admit I was impressed. The schools, well, they looked amazing. The buildings were bright and cheerful. There were lots of trees and neatly trimmed lawns and shrubs.

Mrs. Coen pulled up in front of the office. We said goodbye to her and headed inside. I needed to pick up my schedule and locker assignment then stop by the nurse's office about my meds. Mom and Dad still insisted I took them. They didn't work anymore, not since my first Change, but I acted like they did. There was less hassle that way.

Miles insisted on going with me, even though it meant a lot of standing around and waiting. He didn't seem to mind. To be honest, the idea of being on his own seemed to scare the you-know-what out of him.

After the office, Miles helped me find my locker. Harmony Middle may have looked different than my old school, but I soon found out it was the same in other ways. Walking through the quad, it was easy to spot all the different cliques, their members bonded by some common interest, like the clothes they wore or the music they listened to.

I felt all sorts of eyes on me, sizing me up, checking me out. It's funny how kids could instantly tell who fit in and who didn't. From the looks I was getting, I could tell they knew there was something different about me. They may not have known exactly what it was, but they knew I wasn't like them.

Kids watched Miles too – but for a completely different reason. He was weak. An easy target. He knew it too. It was in the way he walked and the way he carried himself.

He stuck close to me as we searched for my locker. We finally found it. I stowed my lunch right as the bell rang. Miles walked with me to my homeroom then hurried off, his eyes down, trying to become invisible to everyone around him. Poor kid.

I took a deep breath and walked inside. Most of the desks were already taken. There were a few empty ones, but no one looked eager to have me sit next to them.

“There's a seat over here,” someone said.

It was Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan's son, Brody. I recognized him from the picture his mom showed me. Mrs. Sullivan did say I'd probably run into him and his sister, Brenna, at school. But that was just something people said. I didn't think I'd actually meet either one of them.

Our homeroom teacher, Mr. Higley, gave me the stink-eye so I hurried up and took a seat next to Brody, who introduced himself. When I told him my name, I got the impression he already knew it.

Mr. Higley took attendance and then read the morning announcements. After that, we had a few minutes to hang out before the second bell rang.

“How you liking Harmony?” Brody asked.

“It’s all right.”

“It’s got to be a big change from L.A.”

“How’d you know where I was from?” I asked, more than a little surprised.

“My mom said she stopped by your house yesterday, talked to your parents.”

“And she told you all about me?”

Brody nodded. “My mom and dad said if I ran into you, I should try to help make you feel welcome.”

“Thanks,” I said, trying not to sound sarcastic.

So Brody’s parents were making him be nice to me. Talk about embarrassing. He asked to see my schedule. It turned out we had two other classes together, Language Arts and P.E.

I had to suffer through Math first, not my strongest subject so I was in the most basic class they offered. Since Dad worked in finance, he was real good with numbers. He tried to help with my math homework in the past, but – well, let’s just say he wasn’t exactly the greatest teacher. He got frustrated way too easily and eventually gave up trying to help me altogether.

I got to Language Arts and found Brody already there. He had a seat saved for me. We partnered up on the grammar lessons and then the discussion questions for the novel we were reading.

By that time, I'd given up on the idea that his parents were making him be nice to me. He came off way too real, not even the slightest bit phony. He really did want to be friends. I thought about what Mom and Dad had said about Harmony being a place where I could start over, have a normal life. Maybe they were right.

After class, Brody and I walked out together. He started to snicker.

"What?" I asked.

"You have Bio' next, right?"

I nodded.

Brody's grin grew wider. "My sister Brenna's in that class. Tell her I said hi."

He headed off to his next class. I had just enough time to stop by my locker and drop off my Language Arts books before I got to Biology.

When I got there, I noticed Brenna immediately. She was pretty, like her mom, tall and long-legged too. She was talking to the girl next to her but turned my way and gave me a quick smile.

I wasn't sure if I should've taken that as an invitation to talk to her or what. Brody did say to tell her hi, although I doubt he actually meant it. Besides, talking to girls wasn't something I was very good at.

After Biology, came PE. As far as favorite subjects went, that ranked right up there with Math. We were playing flag football. Brody picked me for his team. I wasn't much of an athlete. I played soccer one year when I was six, but my favorite parts of the game were when I got to sit out.

It was obvious Brody had been playing sports his whole life. He was fast, strong, and coordinated. He played QB and managed to put the ball in our receiver's hands every time he threw it. Me, I played center. I'd snap the ball then make sure none of the rushers got him.

When our team didn't have the ball, both Brody and I rushed. We made a good team. We always got past our blockers and kept the other team's QB on the run. He was barely able to pass the ball. We won the game of course. Heck, we killed them.

On our way from P.E., Brody insisted I sit with him at lunch. We stopped by his locker first, since it was closer, then mine. I spotted Miles heading our way. He was walking fast with his eyes down. I called out and waved him over.

Miles perked up a bit. But then a boy twice his size shoved him into a locker. Miles crumpled to the ground. The boy and his friends laughed, so did the people who were standing around. I bet a lot of them were just happy it wasn't them.

I glared at the boy who'd shoved Miles, wanting to tear into him. Brody grabbed my arm and shook his head. He glanced at Miles, who was slowly getting back to his feet. We hurried over to help him up.

"You all right?" Brody asked.

Miles nodded.

The wolf growled in my ears. "Who was that?"

"Nobody. Just forget about it, okay?" said Miles.

But I didn't want to. I watched the kid walk away. He looked older and a bit bigger than me, but I was sure I could take him. Brody stepped in front of me.

“Dillon.” From the look in his eyes, I could tell he sensed what I wanted to do. “Miles said forget it. You go after that guy, you’re just going to get in trouble. That won’t help anyone.”

Miles nodded. He didn’t want me to go after the kid either but looked touched that I would have. I took a couple breaths to calm down then grabbed my lunch from my locker. Brody and Miles got theirs, and we headed to the cafeteria.

We sat at one of the tables outside. I soon noticed Brody’s sister, Brenna, coming our way, along with the girl she’d been sitting with in Biology.

Brenna glared at her brother, a snarl on her lips. She walked up to Brody without saying a word and slugged him between the shoulder blades. Hard.

“Ow! What’s your problem?”

“You’re a butthead! That’s my problem!” said Brenna. She tried to hit Brody again, but he bolted from his seat. “You don’t mess with my phone!”

“Hey, I was getting back at you for messing with *my* phone.”

“OMG! That was a month ago. Get over it.”

“You know what they say, revenge is a dish best served cold.”

“What’d she do?” I asked.

“She changed my ringtone to Justin Beiber then called me during homeroom,” Brody explained.

Brenna grinned, showing her teeth. “Yeah, that was pretty funny.”

“So I changed *her* ringtone and called her during homeroom this morning.”

“What did you change it to?” I asked.

“Barney!” Brenna spat out.

Brody started singing. *“I love you. You love me.”*

Everyone around us started laughing. That only made Brenna more furious. She tried to hit her brother again, but Brody was too fast. He laughed the entire time.

The girl with Brenna sat next to me. She had wavy brown hair and was wearing a fuzzy sweater, denim skirt, and boots. She smiled, showing off her dimples.

“I bet you didn’t expect to be entertained while you ate,” she said.

“No. I didn’t.” I watched Brody and Brenna, who were still at it. “Are they always like this?”

“Oh, yeah. Never a dull moment with those two.” She offered her hand. “I’m Gabby.”

“Dillon Howell,” I said, shaking her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Brenna finally stopped chasing her brother and approached me.

“Yeah, you’re in Bio’ with us. I’m Brenna.” She glared at Brody, who was sitting back down. “You’ve already met my evil twin.”

“You’re the evil twin. Not me,” said Brody.

Brenna shook hands with me before sitting down by Gabby. “It’s nice meeting you, Dillon. Next time in Bio’, me and Gabby will save you a seat.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Now that everyone had settled down, we started eating. We all had packed lunches. Gabby had this chicken salad with apples and walnuts. Miles had a salad too, with big chunks of tomato and tofu.

Brody and Brenna, on the other hand, had these awesome looking barbeque beef sandwiches, nice and thick and dripping with sauce. They smelled amazing. Brody and Brenna were definitely enjoying them, sucking sauce from their fingers between bites.

As for me, I stared at my lame Tofurkey sandwich. Before taking my first bite, I tried to trick my brain into thinking I was eating real meat. The results were mixed at best.

Brody, Brenna, and Gabby had a lot of questions. They wanted to know everything about me. I'd never been the center of attention before. It was pretty nice.

The whole time, I kept checking on Miles. He sat there all quiet, not saying a word, but still looked like he was enjoying himself. He looked happy just being part of a group.

Brody and Brenna finished eating and got up to throw away their trash. They took their time coming back, talking about something.

When they did get back, Brody asked, "You guys doing anything after school?"

"No. Not really," I said, checking with Miles.

"Gabs usually comes to our house and does homework," said Brenna. "You and Miles want to come too?"

Miles' face lit up. He turned toward me, waiting for my response.

"Sounds good," I said.

"Let me call my mom," said Miles, reaching for his phone.

Brody pulled out his phone to call his mom. I called home too. A couple minutes later, we were all set. Mrs. Sullivan would pick the five of us up after school.

Chapter 5

Brenna and Gabby had seventh period Computer Lab with me. That was our last class of the day, so when the bell rang we headed to the main gate together. Miles was already waiting for us. Brody showed up a couple minutes later.

There was a long row of cars parked in front of the school. I spotted Mrs. Sullivan's minivan. She waved to us from the driver's seat.

"Shotgun!" me and Brody both called at the same time.

We looked at each other and laughed.

"Go ahead," said Brody.

"You sure?" I asked.

Brody nodded and gave me a little shove. The five of us climbed inside the minivan. Mrs. Sullivan flashed everyone a welcoming smile.

"Hi, guys. It's good to see you again, Dillon. You too, Miles. Uh, Brody, Brenna? Forgetting something?"

The twins grumbled half-heartedly. They stepped forward, and each of them gave their mother a kiss on the cheek.

"Much better."

Mrs. Sullivan started the engine. She waited until everyone had their seat belts on before pulling away from the curb. Mrs. Sullivan asked us how our day went and seemed especially interested in my first day at Harmony Middle.

The Sullivans' house was on the other side of town. It was two stories and near the forest, like our house. Mrs. Sullivan pulled into the garage. We followed her to the kitchen and set our backpacks down next to the table.

Brenna and Gabby fished some bottles of Vitamin Water out of the fridge while Brody grabbed a family-sized bag of Munchies from the pantry.

We sat at the kitchen table and pulled out our homework. Mrs. Sullivan started cooking. Whatever she was making smelled great. I kept wondering what it was. Minutes later, the mystery was solved when she brought over a plate of homemade Buffalo wings with chopped celery and ranch and bleu cheese for dipping.

Brody, Brenna, and Gabby tore into the wings.

“Whoa. Hold on. At least let me get some napkins first.” Mrs. Sullivan shook her head then smiled at me and Miles. “Better hurry up, you two, before they’re all gone.”

“These look great, Mrs. Sullivan,” said Miles hesitantly. “But Dillon and I don’t eat meat.”

All eyes turned to me as I was about to sink my teeth into a large, juicy wing. Rats.

I grinned sheepishly. “Well, my mom and dad do have me on vegetarian diet. It’s not that I *can’t* eat meat, and these wings look great, and you worked so hard ...”

Mrs. Sullivan winked. “I won’t tell if you won’t. What about you, Miles?”

“I have food allergies,” he said.

“Bummer,” said Brody.

“The celery’s fine,” Miles told Mrs. Sullivan.

“What about fruit? I can cut some up for you.”

“Oh, no. That’s okay. You don’t have to go to the trouble.”

Mrs. Sullivan smiled. “It’s no trouble at all.”

Gabby nodded to me and Miles. “Yep, Mrs. S. is da bomb. Fo’ sho’.”

I had to agree. Finally, I bit into my Buffalo wing. Oh, wow, was it good. We’re talking Homer Simpson-with-his-tongue-hanging-out-of-his-mouth-drooling-good.

“So do the wings pass muster?” Mrs. Sullivan asked as she brought over a plate of sliced oranges, strawberries, and banana for Miles.

“They still aren’t hot enough,” Brody complained.

“I know,” said Brenna.

“I think they’re perfect,” I said. “If they were any hotter, you wouldn’t be able to taste anything else.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Sullivan. “I’m glad someone appreciates my cooking.”

“Brownoser,” said Brody, like he was coughing into his hand.

Brenna did the same. “Suck up.”

“Brody and Brenna Sullivan, you behave!” said Mrs. Sullivan in that *mom voice* that made everyone sit up straight.

“Sorry,” said Brenna.

“We’re just messing around,” added Brody.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Sullivan,” I said. “I know they aren’t serious.”

“Well, okay.”

The five of us continued with our homework, eating, drinking, and having a good time. Brody even helped me with my math and didn't give me too much grief for being in such a basic class.

We finished around four thirty and brought our leftover food and drinks into the living room. Brody turned on the TV and fired up the Xbox. We took turns playing the new Halo. Brenna and Gabby were first.

"Either of you play Dark World?" Brody asked me and Miles.

"Are you serious?" said Miles. "That's my game. I play it every day."

"Oh, yeah? What's your character's name?" asked Gabby.

"Damon Diabolique."

"Shut. Up. You were online the other night. You're a vampire, right?"

"Yeah."

"My character's Jade Foxglove. She's a twelfth level sorceress."

"Oh, yeah. I've seen you too."

"My character's a werewolf," said Brody. "He's called Stormclaw."

"So's mine," added Brenna. "Her name's Silverfang."

Okay. It was official. I definitely had to find a way to get my hands on that game. Gabby soon got knocked out of Halo. Brody was up next. I was after him then Miles.

"Hello. Anybody home?" Sheriff Ron called out.

He strode into the family room, still in his uniform. He stood there, his gaze fixed on Brody and Brenna. The two of them were engrossed in their game. They didn't budge or even glance at their father.

“No, no, don’t get up,” Sheriff Ron teased. “Don’t rush to greet me. I don’t want you getting all emotional or anything.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t,” said Brody.

Brenna chuckled. “Yeah. We won’t.”

Sheriff Ron grinned. He approached Brody and Brenna from behind the couch and covered their eyes with his massive hands.

“Hey, stop it!” Brenna yelled.

“Let go! That’s not cool!” Brody shouted.

Me, Gabby, and Miles busted out laughing. Brody and Brenna continued to protest as their dad put them each in a headlock, kissed the tops of their heads, and messed up their hair.

Mrs. Sullivan stood in the doorway, shaking her head.

“Okay, kids,” she said, including her husband. “Watch the rough-housing.”

“Aw, Mom.” Sheriff Ron approached his wife. “You’re no fun.”

“Really? You think so, huh?” Mrs. Sullivan wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist and gave him a kiss. “How was your day?”

“Good. The town of Harmony continues to remain safe from the forces of evil.”

“Mm. My hero.” Mrs. Sullivan kissed him again.

“You guys have to do that here?” said Brenna.

“Seriously, there are impressionable children present,” Brody added.

Both Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan laughed and shook their heads.

“How did those two get to be such smart asses?” Sheriff Ron asked.

“I blame their father,” said Mrs. Sullivan on her way back into the kitchen.

Sheriff Ron rejoined us. “Who’s winning?”

“I am. Of course,” said Brenna.

Sheriff Ron turned to Gabby, who was fiddling with her iPhone. “Gabs, good to see you again. Seems like only yesterday since you were here. Oh, wait. It was yesterday.”

“Ha. Good one, Mr. S,” said Gabby.

“What’s the deal?” Sheriff Ron asked. “You moving in or what?”

“Yeah, I’m bringing my stuff over this weekend,” she said, playing along. “Didn’t anyone tell you?”

Sheriff Ron laughed. “You kids are getting too clever for me. Miles, Dillon, good to see you again.”

“Good to see you too, sir,” said Miles rather formally.

“You don’t need to call me *sir*, Miles. You’re not being charged with anything.”

Sheriff Ron hung out with us for a little while before heading upstairs. He came back down later in jeans and a t-shirt. Mrs. Sullivan had a plate of wings and a beer ready for him, and he disappeared into his den.

Me and Miles each got a turn to play Halo. By the time we were finished, it was after six and time for us to go home.

“Gabby, do you need a ride?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

“No. My dad texted, said he’s sending our driver over.” Gabby put away her phone and got off the couch. She headed down the hall toward the bathroom.

Mrs. Sullivan and Brenna caught me mouthing the word *driver* and must have noticed the confused look on my face.

“Gabby’s last name is St. Clair,” Mrs. Sullivan explained. “As in the winery and vineyard. Her family founded Harmony.”

“Wow,” I said. “How come she didn’t say anything?”

“Gabby wants people to like her for who she is,” Brenna added. “Not for her family’s money.”

I nodded. I could respect that. Mrs. Sullivan said she’d drive me and Miles home. I called *shotgun* and sat up front. She headed to Miles’ house first. She let me pick the radio station. I didn’t know what was what so I just kept pressing the Seek button until I found a song I liked by Green Day called “Holiday.”

Mrs. Sullivan smiled. “Brody’s into these guys too. We took him to see them in concert for his birthday last year.”

“Don’t you mean Brody *and* Brenna’s birthday?” I asked, seeing as how they were twins.

“We give Brenna a party the day before. That way each of them has their own special day instead of having to share.”

Wow. Okay, it was official. Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan had to be the coolest parents ever. They were almost too good to be true.

“How are you liking Harmony so far?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

“It’s nice,” I said. “It’s starting to grow on me.”

“It’s got to be a big change from L.A.”

“Yeah.” I stared out the window at the passing scenery.

“You miss it at all? Living in L.A. must have been exciting.”

“It’s not what people think it is. There aren’t movie premieres every night or celebrities on every corner.”

“You must miss your friends though. At your old school.”

I smiled uncomfortably. “I didn’t really have any friends.”

Mrs. Sullivan looked surprised. “Really? I’d never have known. Brody, Brenna, and Gabby have really taken to you.” She glanced in the rearview mirror. “Miles too.”

My smile turned to a happy one. For a moment.

“Look out!” I pointed ahead.

We were coming up to Miles’ house. Mrs. Sullivan was forced to stomp on the brake as Mr. Coen sped out of the driveway in his pickup truck, tires screeching. He had a serious scowl on his face and didn’t even look at us as he sped by.

Mrs. Sullivan glared at him through the rear window. The look she gave him was downright scary. Her face then softened as she returned her attention to me and Miles.

“Are you boys okay?” she asked.

I nodded. We looked to Miles.

“My mom and dad must be fighting again,” he said.

Mrs. Sullivan sighed. The two of us had the same worried expression on our faces. Mrs. Sullivan pulled into the driveway and stopped by the front door.

“Do you want me to go inside with you?” she offered.

“No, that’s okay,” said Miles. “I had a great time today. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome to come over anytime, honey.”

Miles grabbed his backpack and got out of the car. Mrs. Coen met him at the door. She looked like she’d been crying. She forced a smile and waved to Mrs. Sullivan, who waved back.

Mrs. Sullivan sat there behind the wheel, watching Miles and his mom disappear into the house.

“I’ll call Miles later,” I said. “See how he’s doing.”

“Would you?”

I nodded. Of course I would. I was concerned about him too.

“Thanks. You’re a good kid, Dillon,” said Mrs. Sullivan.

I smiled back but then had to turn away. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone called me a good kid. And meant it.

I called Miles as soon as I got home. He sounded like he really appreciated it.

“Is your dad back yet?” I asked.

“No. I hope he never comes back. I hate him, Dillon. You don’t know how mean he can be. To me. My mom.”

“Yeah, he was kind of a jerk that one time we were over.”

Miles laughed. “That’s him on a good day. He gets worse when he drinks.”

“He doesn’t, you know, hit you, does he? ‘Cause if he does, you should tell.”

“No. He doesn’t hit us.” Miles sounded like he was trying not to cry. “He just yells and calls us names. He’ll tell me how weak and pathetic I am. How he’s ashamed to call me his son.”

“I’m sorry,” was all I could think to say.

“Thanks.” Miles sniffed. “Brody, Brenna, and Gabby are pretty cool, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. So are their parents.”

Miles chuckled. “I won’t tell your mom and dad about the chicken wings.”

“Thanks.”

It was good to hear Miles start to cheer up. We talked on the phone for a while longer, mostly about Brody, Brenna, and Gabby and Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan.

We wondered if Mrs. Sullivan really meant it when she said we were welcome at their house whenever we felt like it. I had a feeling she did. I looked forward to our next visit. I was sure Miles did too.

Chapter 6

I saw a lot of Brody, Brenna, and Gabby after that. I couldn't believe I'd made such cool friends. I mean, I knew why Miles hung out with me. He didn't have anyone else. But Gabby, Brody, and Brenna? I was still trying to figure them out.

They had everything it took to be popular. They were good-looking and smart, Gabby's parents were rich, and Brody and Brenna were great at sports. They were friendly with other people but only hung out with each other. And now me and Miles.

The five of us had become inseparable. We were together all the time, at school, after school, and on the weekends. The Sullivans' house had become our second home, and I don't think Sheriff Ron or Mrs. Sullivan minded one bit.

Mrs. Sullivan would be picking us up from school that day, as usual. In Computer Lab, our teacher, Mr. Gilbert, had each of us putting together a Power Point presentation for class on Friday.

We got to choose our own topic, and I picked the history of comic books. What could I say? Miles had gotten me hooked. Mr. Gilbert loved the idea. It turned out he was a big comic book fan too. He gave me a lot of cool sites to visit.

We were supposed to be finishing up that day. I only had a few slides left, but my eyes were starting to glaze over. I needed a break and asked Mr. Gilbert for the bathroom pass. I

didn't really have to go. I just wanted to stretch my legs and maybe splash some cold water on my face.

My timing couldn't have been more perfect. I spotted Miles heading into the boys' bathroom up ahead. A moment later, Julian and Patrick came down another hallway and followed him inside.

I ran the rest of the way and charged into the bathroom. Julian had Miles by the arms. Patrick had him by the legs. They hoisted him into the air.

"No! Stop it!" Miles shouted. "Leave me alone!"

"Come on. You're long overdue for a swirly," said Julian.

"Put him down!" I shouted.

My voice came out like an animal growl that startled everyone, including me. Patrick winced in surprise while Julian glared and snarled.

"This has nothing to do with you," he said.

"That's my friend you're messing with. It has everything to do with me."

Patrick dropped Miles' legs.

"What are you doing?" Julian demanded.

In that moment, Miles wiggled free. He tried to run, but Julian caught him and shoved him into the wall.

"Just let him go, Julian," Patrick told him. "We shouldn't be doing this. Sheriff Ron said we're not supposed to mess with him."

Patrick looked at me, not Miles, when he said that. What was he talking about? Why weren't they supposed to mess with me?

"I don't care!" yelled Julian. "I'm sick of all their rules."

Whose rules? What was going on?

My hand shook. I clenched it into a fist to keep it still.

“Miles, it’s okay.” I tried to stay calm. “Come over here. They’re not going to do anything.”

Miles tried to rush to my side, but Julian shoved him into the wall again, harder this time. Miles let out a whimper when he hit. A growling filled my ears. Pressure built up in my stomach.

The Change had begun.

I struggled to speak. “Julian, you and Patrick are going to want to get out of here now. I’m warning you.”

“Or what?” Julian stalked towards me. “What are you going to do?”

A wolf growl leapt from my lips. My features contorted. My teeth were already fangs, my fingernails claws. My skin darkened and began to sprout fur.

Miles stared at me, wide-eyed. His mouth fell open, and he struggled for breath. To my surprise, Patrick appeared only slightly uneasy while Julian stood there unfazed.

“Oo. I’m so scared.”

Julian’s eyes then turned to crimson orbs, his fingernails became black talons, and his mouth stretched hideously wide showing off his newly grown fangs.

Julian glanced at Patrick and scoffed. “Dude. Come on.”

“Sorry.”

Patrick transformed, just like Julian did. I let out another growl, louder this time, and lurched forward. My bones cracked and lengthened. My muscles swelled and thickened, straining against the fabric of my t-shirt and jeans.

Julian and Patrick hissed, serpent-like, and snapped at me with their fangs. I got a glimpse of Miles in the mirror. He was huddling in the corner terrified.

“That’s enough!” a familiar voice called out.

Brody stood in the doorway. He rushed between us and faced off with Julian and Patrick, completely unafraid. “Change back and get out of here now,” he told them.

“Or what?” Julian hissed. “Are you going to tell your daddy?”

“Yeah, I will,” said Brody. “Then he’ll tell Mr. St. Clair, and he’ll tell Mr. Kesler. You guys are already in trouble. The question is *how much* trouble do you want to be in?”

Julian hissed again. Brody didn’t even flinch.

Patrick Changed back first. “I told you we shouldn’t have done this.”

Brody faced Julian. “Your turn.”

Julian Changed back. He glared at me and Brody before storming away. Patrick hurried after him.

“You should do something about your boy,” Julian called back to Brody.

Brody turned toward me. I trembled, trying to hold back the Change. Brody placed his hands on my face and locked his eyes on mine.

“Dillon, listen to me. You’ve got to reverse it.”

“I can’t. I don’t know how.”

“You can do it. Just calm down. Deep breaths. Think about what it feels like, Changing back into human form, every sensation.”

I took a couple deep breaths and started to concentrate. Brody talked me through it. It worked. Fur slipped back beneath my skin. My bones reformed. My muscles returned to normal size. When it was over, my knees buckled. Brody caught me before I fell.

He smiled. “Knew you could do it.”

I stood up, a little dizzy but otherwise okay.

“How – How did you –?”

“Let’s check on Miles first,” said Brody.

We rushed to help him. Miles lay on his back, wheezing and struggling for breath.

“Hang in there.” I pulled his inhaler from his front pocket. A couple quick puffs, and Miles’ breathing became steady again. He stared at us in disbelief.

“What – what?”

“Are you okay?” Brody asked him.

Miles’ eyes went wide. “Are you seriously asking me that?”

His voice was high-pitched and panicky. He sounded like a cartoon character. I held my hand over my mouth trying not to laugh. I couldn’t help it.

“What’s happening? What did I just see?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Brody. “Julian and Patrick are vampires. Dillon’s a werewolf.” He glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “And so am I.”

He raised his hand. It Changed instantly. The skin darkened and sprouted fur. His fingernails turned into claws. Brody’s hand then Changed back just as quickly.

Miles groaned. The back of his head thudded against the floor as he fainted.

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

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Thank you,

Dan O'Mahony