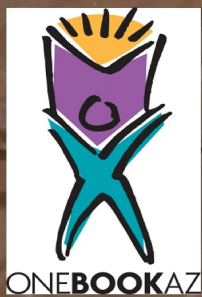
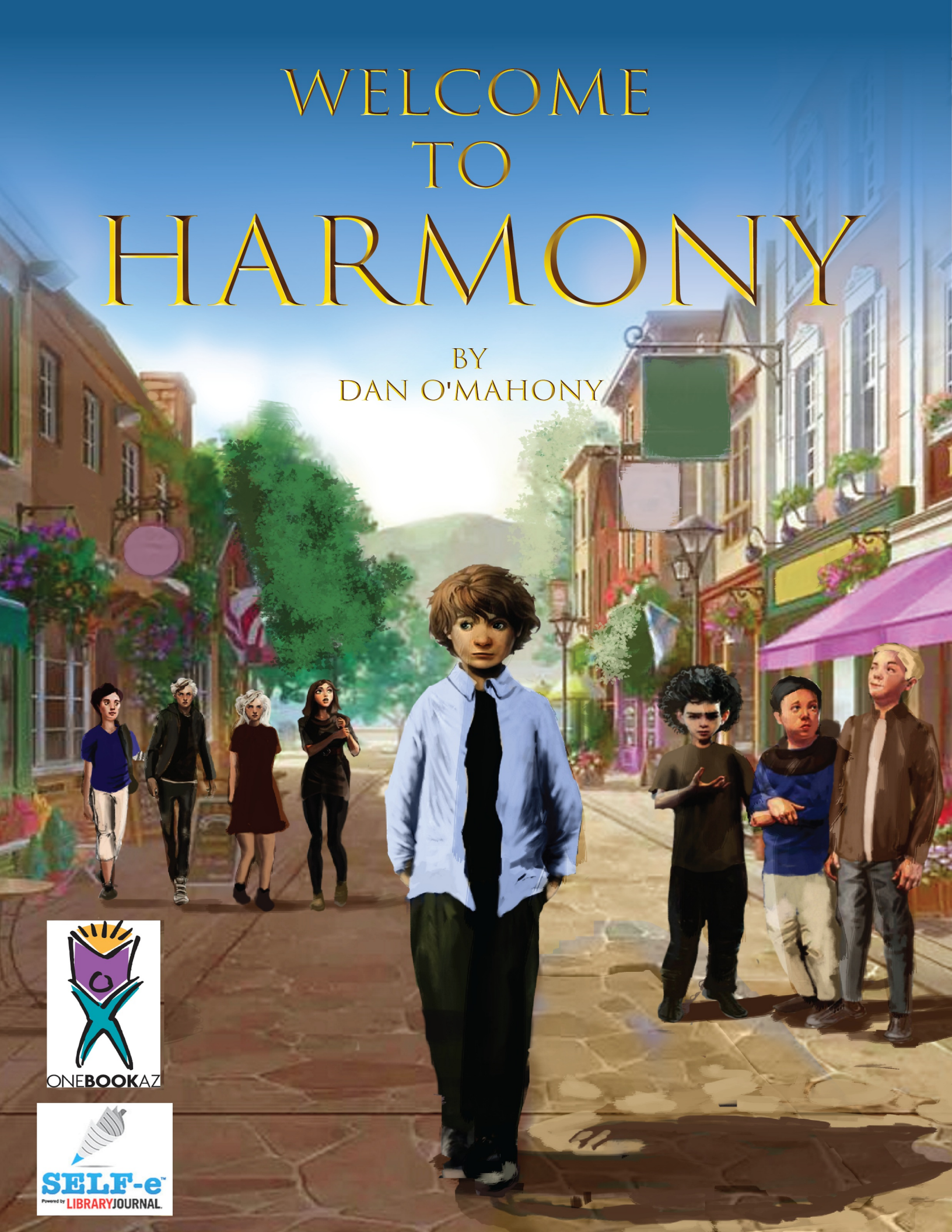


WELCOME TO HARMONY

BY
DAN O'MAHONY



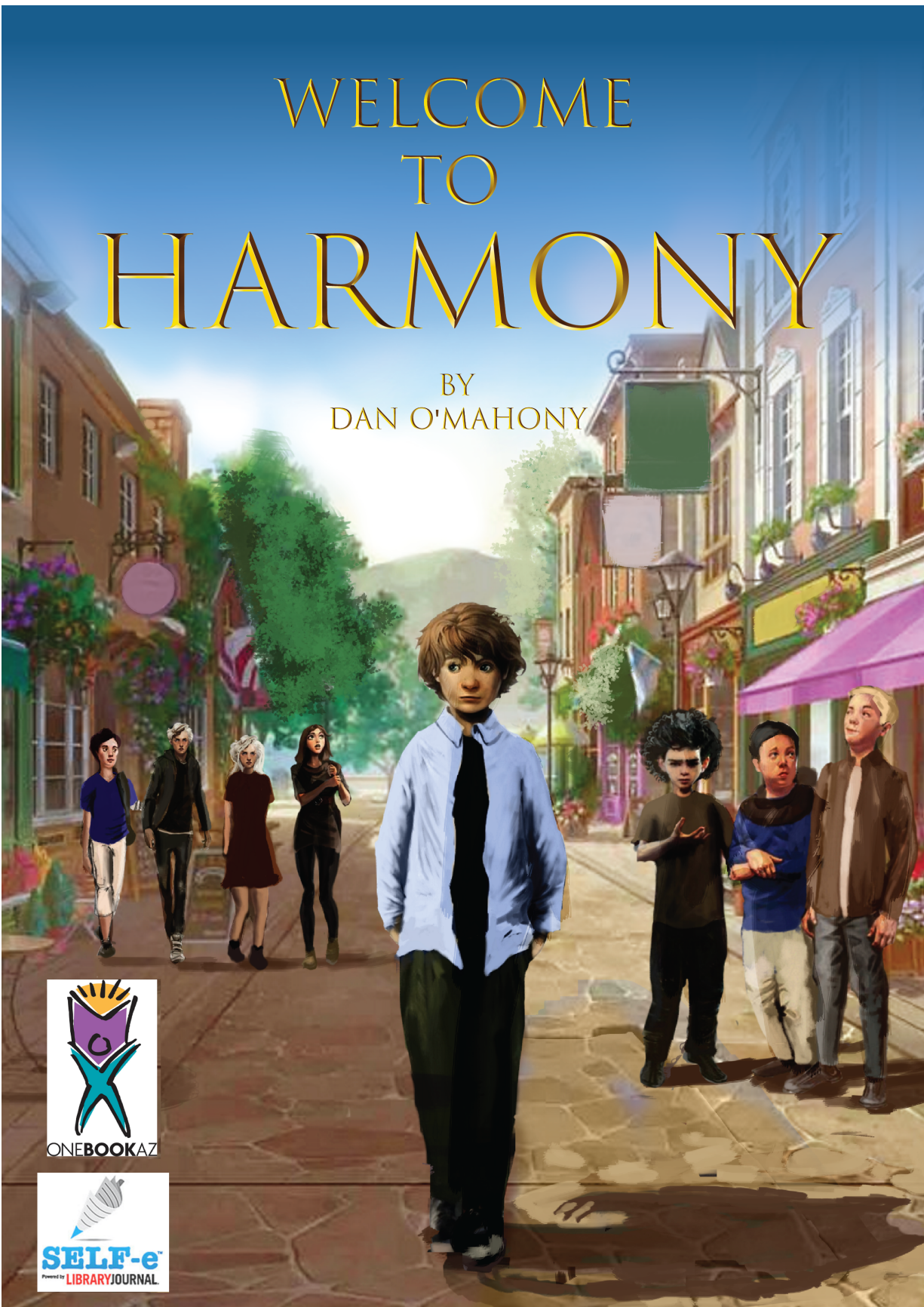
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Welcome to Harmony

Growing Up Supernatural



Book One

Dan O'Mahony

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ISBN-13: 979-8628426722

To everyone who has ever felt uncomfortable in their own skin.

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 from 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 barbecue 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 roughhousing.”

“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.

Chapter 7

“Miles? Miles!” I slapped his face. It was all I could think of. I mean, that’s what people did in the movies or on TV when someone fainted.

“Out of the way,” said Brody.

His hands were cupped and filled with water, which he splashed on Miles’ face. That did the trick. Miles groaned and started to stir. His eyes fluttered open, and he pushed himself to a seated position.

When he saw me and Brody, he let out a startled cry and scurried away from us. I was hurt. Brody looked like he was too.

Miles sighed. “That wasn’t cool, was it? Especially after you guys saved me.”

“No worries,” I said.

“Is that why you didn’t tell me you were a — you know? Because you thought I’d freak out?”

“Pretty much.”

Miles hung his head. “At least I didn’t disappoint you.”

I turned to Brody. “What about you? How long have you known about me?”

“Since you first arrived in Harmony,” he said. “When you and your parents drove through town, you passed my dad in his cruiser. He caught your scent.”

“Your dad’s a werewolf too?”

“So are my mom and Brenna.”

“All four of you?”

“There are rules among our kind. You don’t enter another’s territory without an invitation. So when you first showed up, my mom and dad got curious, not to mention a little nervous, so they checked you and your parents out.”

“Checked us out?”

“You know how a dog can sniff someone and decide within moments whether they’re a threat or not? We have a similar ability. Once my mom

and dad said you were okay,” Brody smiled. “I couldn’t wait to meet you. Neither could Brenna.”

My head spun. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

“We were going to tell you, Dillon, I swear. My dad had it all planned out. Only we didn’t count on Julian and Patrick doing something stupid like this.”

I smiled at Brody, putting him at ease. Part of me understood why he and his family kept their true identities a secret. After all, I'd been doing the same. But what was most important was the Sullivans were like me. Werewolves. I wasn't alone anymore.

“I always wondered,” I started. “Since werewolves were real, what else might be out there. I guess I can check vampires off that list. What’s next?”

Brody pulled out his phone. “Let me talk to my dad, see what he wants to do. But yeah, we have a lot to fill you in on.”

He stepped aside to call his dad. I sat on the floor with Miles, who hugged his legs to his chest.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

Miles scoffed. “Me? I’m doing great. Just dandy. Julian and Patrick are vampires. You’re a werewolf and so’s Brody and his whole family.” He shook his head. “Oh, man. I was scared to death of Brody’s dad when I thought he was just the sheriff.”

I chuckled. “At least you’ve still got your sense of humor.”

Miles managed a slight smile. “That’s a good sign, right?”

“Absolutely.”

I glanced at Brody, who rejoined us. I helped Miles to his feet.

“My mom’s picking us up like planned,” he explained. “My dad’s going to call Mr. St. Clair. They’re going to meet us at our house.”

“Why does Mr. St. Clair have to be there?” I asked. “What’s he got to do with this?”

“He and my dad will explain later. To the both of you.”

“What? Me too?” Miles shook his head. “No. That’s okay. I really don’t want to be a part of this.”

The look in Brody’s eyes said Miles didn’t have a choice. “I’m sorry, Miles, but it’s too late.” He then rested his hand on Miles’ shoulder. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

Miles looked to me for reassurance. I reminded him I'd be there with him. That seemed to help.

The three of us headed back to our classes. Miles' Geometry class was close to the Computer Lab so I walked with him.

"You sure you're going to be all right? I know the whole werewolf-thing is a lot to handle, but I'm still me. I'm still your friend. So's Brody."

I felt confident saying that. It probably had to do with what Brody said, about how our kind could read someone in moments and tell if they were a threat or not. I still felt comfortable around Brody. And I knew I'd feel the same way around Brenna and their parents too.

"It's not you or Brody I'm worried about," Miles said.

"You worried about Julian and Patrick?"

"Always. But now — werewolves and vampires. We're playing Dark World for real now. Like you said, who knows what else is out there?"

I grinned. "I have a feeling we're going to find out."

"You almost sound excited."

"Yeah, I guess I am. Just try and hang in there. I'll see you after school. Okay?"

Miles hesitated but then nodded. For a moment, I doubted if he would show up, but something inside me, instinct or whatever, said he would. I went back to Computer Lab.

I got an earful from Mr. Gilbert for being gone so long. I apologized and told him discreetly I was having some stomach trouble. He seemed semi-understanding and told me to go back to my computer.

When I got there, I noticed Brenna and Gabby huddled over Brenna's phone, reading a text. Something told me it was from Brody, that he'd filled them in on what had happened with Julian and Patrick.

Both girls stared at me. Brenna then grinned, showing her teeth, like she normally did. I now noticed how wolf-like her grin was.

"What's up, dog?" she asked.

Gabby stifled a laugh. "OMG, I can't believe you actually said that."

I stared at them, wondering what they were talking about. I guess I was a little slow at the moment. It took me a second to get the whole "dog" reference. When I did, I smiled. I guess that's what passed as werewolf humor.

"Go on, take a seat." Brenna was still grinning. "I don't bite."

Gabby stifled another laugh and shook her head. "You are so cheesy."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. It felt good though. Definitely broke the tension. I sat down and went back to work on my presentation.

Twenty minutes later, the bell rang. I still wasn't done. Luckily, Mr. Gilbert said anyone who needed extra time to finish could come in before school and during lunch the next day.

I walked with Brenna and Gabby out of class. The three of us were quiet as we headed through the quad. I doubted any of us knew what to say at that moment. Well, actually, it looked like Brenna had something she wanted to say but couldn't, probably because we were surrounded by so many people.

And what about Gabby? Obviously, she knew what was going on. Was she a werewolf too? No, I didn't get the same feeling from her I did from the Sullivans. But she was obviously in on all this. I wondered what her secret was.

Brody met us at the front gate. The only one missing now was Miles. We started to worry he might not show, but then Gabby spotted him coming our way. He looked shaky and paler than normal. I didn't know if that was left over from our confrontation with Julian and Patrick or from learning his best friends were werewolves. Possibly both.

Brenna and Gabby greeted him warmly. We all did our best to put him at ease. We poured into Mrs. Sullivan's minivan. Normally, she asked everyone how their day went. That day, all we got was a nervous smile.

We rode in silence for a couple minutes. Then, whatever had been bugging Brenna, what she'd wanted to say since we left Computer Lab, she finally got off her chest.

"Seriously, Dillon," she started. "You had no clue about us? For real?"

"Brenna," Mrs. Sullivan called back to her.

"We know how you Changed that first night," Brenna continued. "We've been all over the forest. Our scent is everywhere. How could you not have noticed it?"

"Brenna, enough," said Mrs. Sullivan.

"I'm just saying."

"Jeez, Brenna," said Brody. "I swear there's got to be a faulty connection between your mouth and your brain."

"What?" Brenna's voice got shriller and louder than I'd ever heard before. "Mom, did you hear what he just said about me?"

"Yes, dear. I did."

“And?”

“I think your brother might be on to something.”

Brenna let out this half-shriek, half-gasp. She was suddenly incapable of forming whole words. All she could manage was a stream of random syllables. She turned to Gabby for support, but Gabby just held up her hands and shook her head, obviously not wanting to get involved.

Brenna let out a *harrumph* and sat with her arms crossed, pouting. I tried not to laugh, but at the same time what she said did get me wondering.

“That time I Changed,” I started to say. “When I was out in the forest, there was a moment when I did smell something. I don’t know why, but I couldn’t identify it.”

“Don’t sweat it,” said Gabby. “My dad’s got a theory about that.”

“Your dad?” I asked. “How is he involved?”

“Gabby’s a sorceress,” Brody told me and Miles. “So’s her mom. And her dad’s a sorcerer.”

“Uh, excuse me, but I’m perfectly capable of telling them myself,” said Gabby. She returned her attention to me and Miles. “So yeah, I’m a sorceress. Not a witch. *Witch* has such negative connotations.”

I nodded. “Fair enough.”

I checked on Miles, who still looked very overwhelmed. As we pulled up to the Sullivans’ house, I noticed a sleek, black Bentley parked at the curb. That had to be Mr. St. Clair’s car. The garage door was open. Sheriff Ron’s Mustang was parked inside.

Mrs. Sullivan stopped in the driveway. “Okay, Dillon and Miles, this is where you get out.”

“You’re not going in with us?” I asked, glancing at her then at the twins and Gabby.

“Ron and Leo asked to meet with you two alone.” I was sitting right behind Mrs. Sullivan. She reached for my hand. “Everything is going to be all right. I promise.”

“I know. I believe you.”

Mrs. Sullivan smiled. I grabbed my backpack and motioned for Miles to follow me.

“We’ll see you later,” said Brody.

I nodded back to him and slid the van door shut. I looked to Miles and cocked my head towards the Sullivans’ house.

“Let’s not keep ‘em waiting.”

Chapter 8

Sheriff Ron was waiting for me and Miles when we entered the house. “Hey, boys,” he said without his usual enthusiasm. “How are you two doing?”

Me and Miles glanced at each other, unsure of what to say.

“Not bad, I guess,” I finally said. “Considering we just faced down two vampires, learned you guys are werewolves, and the St. Clairs are sorcerers.”

Sheriff Ron frowned. “Trust me, that's not how we wanted to reveal all this to you. And I just want you guys to know I'm really sorry about what happened today with Julian and Patrick. I promise nothing like that will ever happen again.”

“Thanks.”

“No need to thank me,” said Sheriff Ron. “It's my job to keep everyone in town safe.”

“I see our guests have arrived.”

I turned to see a tall, slim man dressed in a suit. He had a thin mustache and black hair that was graying on the sides. He had to be Mr. St. Clair.

“Ron, I hope you don't mind, but your single malt was beckoning to me,” he said, raising a glass.

“As long as you left me some.”

“There might be a swallow or two. Chin Chin.” Mr. St Clair took a sip. He then shook hands with me and Miles. “Dillon. Miles. It's nice to meet you boys. I wish it could have been under better circumstances.”

“Yeah. Same here,” I said.

“Miles, are you okay?” Sheriff Ron asked.

I noticed a bead of sweat run down Miles' cheek.

“Yeah, I'm — ” He swallowed. His voice was barely audible. “It's just — It's been a lot to process — ”

“That's quite all right,” said Mr. St. Clair. “If you'd like, I can help take away some of the anxiety you're experiencing.”

“Through magic?” Miles asked.

Mr. St. Clair raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Gabby told us about you,” I said.

“I see. Well, then, how about it, Miles? Are you up for a little *hocus pocus*?”

Miles glanced at me. I nodded, hoping to reassure him.

“It’s not going to hurt, is it?” he asked.

“Of course not.” Mr. St. Clair laid his right hand on Miles’ shoulder.

I noticed the ring on his hand. It had a gold band and a black stone. Gabby had a matching necklace. The stone started to glow this sort of neon-green. A light, the same color, filled Miles’ body. It vanished, and the stone in Mr. St. Clair’s ring returned to normal.

“There. How’s that?” Mr. St. Clair asked.

“I didn’t feel anything. Except now, I mean.” Miles smiled looking relaxed. “I feel great.”

“Your ring,” I said to Mr. St. Clair. “It lit up. So did Miles.”

“Leo’s ring glows whenever he’s using his magic,” said Sheriff Ron.

“It was nothing really,” said Mr. St. Clair. “I simply passed a little healing energy into Miles. That’s all. Why don’t we adjourn to your den, Ron. Make ourselves comfortable. We have a lot to talk about.”

We followed Sheriff Ron. I’d seen his den from the hallway during previous visits. I’d just passed by but had never been inside.

Sheriff Ron caught me laughing to myself. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I just realized I’m entering a werewolf’s den. Get it?”

Sheriff Ron chuckled. “That’s good. That’s almost as funny as a werewolf with the last name Howell. Get it?”

He howled. I grimaced, a little embarrassed. Mr. St. Clair laughed so did Miles, which meant he was definitely feeling more relaxed.

Sheriff Ron’s den was part-office, part-man-cave. There was a desk and computer against the far wall along with a filing cabinet. The rest of the room was taken up by a leather couch, coffee table, and recliner, not to mention a decent-sized flat screen TV, a mini-fridge, and bar. He also had a sweet stereo with an actual record player and a whole bookshelf filled with albums in plastic sleeves.

Sheriff Ron poured a drink for himself and pulled a couple Cokes from the mini-fridge for me and Miles. We sat on the couch while he sat on

the edge of his recliner. Mr. St. Clair pulled over the desk chair. It all seemed so normal. The four of us sitting down for a nice little chat.

“One of the first things you need to know, Dillon, is that we don’t call ourselves werewolves,” said Sheriff Ron.

“What?” I glanced at Miles, who looked as confused as me.

“*Werewolf* was a term created by humans to describe a monster, a mindless beast that preys on the weak and innocent. And that’s not what we are.”

“Okay. So what do we call ourselves then?”

Sheriff Ron smiled proudly. “We are the lupoi. That’s the name given to us by the Great Hunter, our creator. He came to this world in the form of a wolf and mated with a she-wolf and fathered the first of our kind.”

Lupoi, huh? I said the name to myself a couple times, getting used to it.

“It’s a shame you weren’t brought up in a pack,” said Mr. St. Clair. “It definitely would have made your life a lot easier.”

“A pack?” I asked Sheriff Ron. “Like you and your family?”

“Well, yes. But Mrs. Sullivan and I are each from different, larger packs. Our families arranged our marriage. We had a choice of either living with my pack, hers, or dispersing — going out on our own.”

“We think your birth parents might have been dispersers, Dillon,” said Mr. St. Clair.

“We know you’re adopted,” Sheriff Ron added.

“Did Brody and Brenna tell you?” I asked.

“Your parents did,” said Sheriff Ron. “It seemed like a touchy subject so we didn’t ask much about it.”

My adoption was a touchy subject for my parents? Gee, there was a shock.

“Do you remember anything at all about your birth parents, Dillon?” Sheriff Ron asked.

I shook my head. “All I know is I was found abandoned in an ER waiting room when I was only a couple weeks old.”

“And this was in Los Angeles?” Mr. St. Clair asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

Mr. St. Clair turned to Sheriff Ron.

“At least it’s a place to start,” said Sheriff Ron.

“I agree.”

“Start what?” I asked.

“There are no known packs living in Southern California,” said Sheriff Ron. “We tend to stay in rural areas. But I’ll still check with the other packs, see if any of their members dispersed to the L.A. area.”

Mr. St. Clair nodded. “I have a number of contacts in Los Angeles as well. I’ll ask if they know of any young lupoi couples turning up twelve, thirteen years ago.”

“Wait. You mean, my birth parents could still be alive? They could still be out there?”

Sheriff Ron and Mr. St. Clair exchanged a nervous glance.

“There’s always a possibility,” said Mr. St. Clair.

“You don’t sound real confident,” I said. “Don’t sugar coat it. Please.”

Sheriff Ron and Mr. St. Clair glanced at each other again.

“He does know about Julian and Patrick,” said Mr. St. Clair.

“And you’re right,” Sheriff Ron told me. “We shouldn’t sugar coat anything. This is a dangerous world. There are creatures out there that would harm us simply because they can. That’s why most lupoi prefer to live in packs, close to one another.” He grinned at Mr. St. Clair. “And if we do disperse, we try to find allies.”

Mr. St. Clair raised his glass. “To safety in numbers.”

“I hate to say it, but it doesn’t really seem that safe with vampires living in town,” I said.

Both Sheriff Ron and Mr. St. Clair frowned.

“That’s a rather complicated matter,” said Mr. St. Clair. “Julian and Patrick are the wards of Nikolas Kesler.”

“This Kesler guy’s a vampire too?” I asked.

Sheriff Ron nodded.

“Just how many vampires are living in this town?”

“Four,” said Sheriff Ron. “But others visit Nikolas on business.”

Business? I could only wonder what that meant.

“You boys are in no danger from Nikolas, I assure you,” said Mr. St. Clair. “He’s been a friend of my family’s for over a hundred years. Nikolas has been a wonderful ally. Being as old as he is, he has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of all things supernatural.”

“How old is Kesler?” Miles asked. Up until then, he’d been sitting quietly, just listening.

“Ah. Miles. Welcome to the conversation,” said Mr. St. Clair. “And to answer your question, Nikolas is somewhere between five and six hundred years old. Not that he celebrates birthdays anymore, mind you.”

“And he’s been living in Harmony all this time?” Miles asked. “And he doesn’t age?”

“As he once told me, in the early days, it was quite a chore to keep that concealed,” Mr. St. Clair continued. “He’d have to use glamour spells to appear to age and then fake his own demise only to return some years later as a long lost heir who just happened to bear an uncanny resemblance to his predecessor. Of course nowadays, with the popularity of holistic medicine and plastic surgery, he has an excuse for appearing much younger than he actually is.”

“What about Julian and Patrick?” I asked. “What’s their story?”

Sheriff Ron let out a sad sigh. “Patrick was turned last year. A vampire abducted him. His family thinks he’s dead.”

Whoa. I didn’t see that coming. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

“What about Julian?” I asked.

“Nikolas found him a couple years ago living on the streets,” said Mr. St. Clair. “He has no idea when Julian was turned, and according to Nikolas, Julian has been less than forthcoming about his history.”

“Nikolas is hoping to teach them how to assimilate,” said Sheriff Ron. “Unfortunately, that hasn’t been going as smoothly as he hoped.”

“Rest assured, and Nikolas has agreed, that if either Julian or Patrick cause any more trouble, they will no longer have a home in Harmony,” said Mr. St. Clair.

Sheriff Ron nodded in agreement.

Mr. St. Clair went on to tell us more about the history of Harmony. He was part of a long line of sorcerers. They came from France and still had family there. One of Mr. St. Clair’s ancestors arrived in America in 1790 and settled in upstate New York. There was a whole other branch of the St. Clair family still living there.

In 1855, Mr. St. Clair's great-great-grandfather left home, traveled west, and eventually founded Harmony. He intended it to be a safe haven for sorcerers like himself to live and practice without fear of persecution. Over the years, Harmony became home to a variety of supernatural individuals.

Sheriff Ron also told us more about the lupoi, how there were packs living all over Europe and Asia. They began visiting America centuries ago. According to him, there were lupoi among Leif Ericson's crew, a Viking explorer who found North America five hundred years before Columbus did. There were already Native American lupoi living in America, and a lot of the Viking lupoi stayed behind and married into those packs.

More lupoi began coming to America during the 1600s. In Europe, during something called the Inquisition, people were tortured and killed for practicing witchcraft and committing heresy. Werewol – I mean, lupoi were targeted too. They were hunted down by the hundreds and thousands. The survivors escaped to America.

Unfortunately, they weren't safe here either. As more settlers came, there were fewer places for them to hide. A lot of them got wiped out.

I couldn't quite figure that out at first. I mean, a lupoi could easily overpower a normal human being. But Sheriff Ron reminded me how humans outnumbered us. And how they feared what they didn't understand. That made people do crazy things. He said, back in the day, humans would burn down an entire forest just to get at a handful of lupoi.

Only the smartest and strongest were able to survive. Many of the European lupoi married the ones already living in America and formed new packs. They tried to stay hidden, but every now-and-then someone would see one of them. Those sightings gave birth to local legends about half-human, half-wolf creatures like Wisconsin's Beast of Bray Road, the Dog Men of Michigan, and the Loup Garou of Bayou Goula in Louisiana.

Sheriff Ron said they weren't too worried about the press they got. Most people these days dismissed those stories as nonsense. But he said they still didn't take any chances.

“Which brings us to you, Miles,” said Mr. St. Clair.

Miles shot up in his seat. “Me?”

“I must be blunt, but you weren't supposed to know any of this,” Mr. St. Clair continued. “Unfortunately, that little incident with Julian and Patrick forced our hand.”

Miles squirmed and glanced at me from the corner of his eye. I didn't know what tell him.

“No normal person in Harmony knows our secrets,” said Sheriff Ron. “You're the first.”

“I won't tell anyone,” said Miles. “You can trust me. I swear.”

Sheriff Ron grinned. "We know."

Miles stared back at him confused.

"Brody said he already mentioned how our kind have a way of reading people, the same way an animal can," Sheriff Ron explained.

"I, of course, have my own means of telling whether people are trustworthy or not," Mr. St. Clair added, obviously meaning his magic.

Miles let out a sigh of relief and slumped back onto the couch. He looked proud of himself now, being the only normal person in town who knew the secrets of Harmony. It had to be a huge boost to his ego.

"So where do we go from here?" I asked.

"Well, like I said, we want to see if you have any blood relatives out there," said Sheriff Ron. "We'd also like to teach you what it means to be a lupoi and help you learn how to control your Changes."

"You can do that?" I asked.

Sheriff Ron nodded. "The reason why you're unable to control the Change is because you're torn, conflicted about your nature. It's all over your scent."

"Due, no doubt, from the isolation you've experienced growing up," Mr. St. Clair added. "Feeling different from others and not knowing why. Then, after your first Change, I imagine part of you must have relished it. The power, the freedom, how natural it felt. But on the other hand, I imagine you also felt ashamed. Of being a monster."

A lump rose in my throat. Everything Mr. St. Clair said was so spot on, it was scary. It was like he was looking into my soul.

"Your parents know, don't they?" Sheriff Ron asked.

I nodded. "I didn't tell them at first. I knew they'd freak out. But one night, when I was going to Change, Dad woke up and saw me. He said he called after me, but I didn't pay any attention to him. He and Mom thought I was sleepwalking or something. They followed me, making sure I didn't get hurt. Then, they saw what I became. That same night, I chased after some guy leaving a party. Luckily, he got to his car before I could get to him.

"Other people saw me though. Someone took a picture on their phone. It ended up in the paper. It was kind of blurry, and no one could really make out what it was. The police and animal control still got involved. Mom and Dad freaked. Next thing I knew, they were putting the house up for sale, and Dad was applying for a transfer to his company's San Francisco office."

Sheriff Ron gave me a sympathetic look. “If it makes you feel any better, we don't hunt humans. He ran. You chased. It was instinct.”

“But if I caught him, I could have hurt him, couldn't I?”

Sheriff Ron nodded. I appreciated the fact he was being so straightforward with me.

“That's why those lupoi who do live in cities leave for a national park or somewhere else remote when they want to Change,” he said.

“Those of them who can control it,” I reminded him.

“That'll be you too before you know it,” he assured me.

I smiled. “So the reason why I can't control the Change is because I'm so conflicted,” I said, wanting to make sure I understood.

Sheriff Ron nodded again. So did Mr. St. Clair.

“Is that why I couldn't recognize any of you as being werewol – I mean, lupoi?”

Both Sheriff Ron and Mr. St. Clair grinned. They seemed impressed I put that together on my own.

“That's exactly why,” said Sheriff Ron.

“We figured when you finally learned you weren't alone, that there were other lupoi,” Mr. St. Clair added. “It might trigger something in you. And it has, hasn't it? Your senses have been opening up. You were able to detect the subtle magic I used earlier on Miles.”

“So there's hope for me yet?” I joked.

Mr. St. Clair smiled. “The prognosis looks good. I have a spell that might help you.”

“Can we do it now?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, it takes some preparation.”

Mr. St. Clair stood and buttoned his suit coat. Sheriff Ron got up and collected the glasses and our empty soda cans.

“I think we've gone over enough for one day,” said Sheriff Ron. “Besides, Michelle and the kids are home.”

He was right. I could hear them in the kitchen through the walls, at the other end of the house. I could smell Mrs. Sullivan's perfume. Other things too. Fish, cheese, milk, fruit, vegetables. They must have gone to the supermarket. It was like Mr. St. Clair said, my senses were starting to open up, even in human form.

When the four of us got to the kitchen, we saw Mrs. Sullivan unloading the groceries with Brody, Brenna, and Gabby's help. She greeted

us with a smile.

“Hi, boys, how did it go?” she asked.

Me and Miles looked at each other before answering.

“Good,” I said.

“Yeah, good,” Miles added.

Mrs. Sullivan looked relieved. “You two want to stay for dinner? I'm making salmon.” She glanced at me. “It's good for you. Keeps your coat nice and shiny.”

We all chuckled, except for the twins who sort of groaned.

“I can't believe you actually said that,” said Brenna.

“For once, I'm going to agree with her,” Brody added.

Mrs. Sullivan went on, ignoring them. “Miles, I was going to make a pasta salad to go with it. Gluten free noodles of course.” She showed off the package. “There'll be plenty of it.”

Miles looked to me. He definitely wanted to stay. So did I.

“Yeah. Let me call home,” I said.

Me and Miles got out our phones. Mr. St. Clair approached Gabby, who met him with a hug.

“Gabby, if you'd like to stay for dinner, that's fine with me,” he said.

“I'm not going home with you?” she asked, sounding disappointed.

“I've got to prepare Dillon's spell. I also have some coven business to attend to.”

Gabby nodded, pretending she was okay with it, even though I could sense she wasn't. I knew the winery, vineyard, and the other family investments kept her parents busy enough. Now they had coven business on top of that? It sounded like they barely had any time for her at all.

Mr. St. Clair gave her a kiss goodbye and said he'd see her later tonight. Gabby joined Brenna at the sink and helped her wash the vegetables for the pasta salad.

Miles' mom gave him permission to stay for dinner. So did mine. And why wouldn't she have? I'd stayed at the Sullivans' house for dinner a bunch of times. It was a completely normal thing for me to do.

Chapter 9

When I got home, I tried to act like nothing unusual had happened, like it had been a regular, boring old day. Man, that was hard. Not just for me but for Miles too.

He called me later that night. I was happy to have someone around who was as new to all this as I was. We talked until Mom and Dad came in to tell me it was time for bed. I hung up but got back on the phone once I was sure they were gone.

I wasn't tired. Or at least I didn't think I was. But a few minutes after Miles hung up, I fell into a deep sleep almost immediately. It felt like only a few minutes had passed when my alarm blared, and sunlight peeked through the gap in my bedroom drapes.

It was a normal enough morning. Me, Mom, and Dad had breakfast. Miles and his mom came to pick me up for school. Miles looked edgy, like he was still trying to get a grip on all this supernatural-stuff. His mom didn't seem to notice anything was wrong with him. That's parents for you. She dropped us off in front of the school and told us to have a good day.

We stopped by our lockers first then caught up with Brody, Brenna, and Gabby at our usual hangout spot, one of the lunch tables outside of the cafeteria. They all had the same look of concern on their faces.

“How are you guys holding up?” Brody asked.

“Good,” I said.

Miles hesitated then said, “Yeah, I'm good too.”

“I can't imagine what you're going through,” said Gabby. “I mean, we grew up with all this. It's always been part of our lives.”

Miles glanced at the other tables. “Sorry, but should we be talking about this? With so many people around?”

Brody and Brenna grinned and turned to Gabby.

“Don't worry,” said Brenna. “We got it covered.”

“You're working a spell, aren't you?” I said.

Brody, Brenna, and Gabby looked at me impressed. Miles was confused.

“I can feel it around us,” I continued. “It feels like it did when your dad was doing his magic yesterday. That and the stone in your necklace, it's glowing. Just like your dad's ring.”

“Not bad,” said Gabby. “I've got a glamour going right now. Usually a glamour changes your appearance, but the one I've got working is disguising what we're saying. As far as anyone else is concerned, we're just having a normal conversation.”

“Nice,” said Miles. He seemed a little more relaxed now, like he might be able to get used to all this.

“Are you feeling anything else right now?” Brody asked.

“Smells seem a lot stronger. Sounds too,” I told him.

“That's your wolf aspect. You're starting to build a stronger connection with it.”

“It'll get even stronger after Gabby's parents do their thing,” said Brenna.

“Do you know any more about what they're going to do?” I asked Gabby.

She shook her head and made a *sorry* face.

Brenna grinned, showing her teeth. “Don't worry, you big baby. I'm sure it won't hurt — that much.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. You're hilarious.”

“I know,” Brenna replied smugly.

“So your senses are sharper, and you're able to detect magic. Anything else?” Brody asked me.

There was something. I'd just started noticing it a few minutes earlier.

“I don't know how to explain it. It's like I feel this warmth, this energy coming off people.”

“That's the Spark,” said Gabby.

“The what?” I asked.

“The Spark,” said Brenna. “It's a natural energy all living beings possess.”

“It's fainter with most people,” I said, glancing at Miles out of the corner of my eye. “But with you guys it's — wow.”

“The Spark comes from our connection with nature,” Gabby explained. “It allows people like me to do magic.”

“Our Spark is even stronger,” said Brenna, meaning her, me, and Brody. “Because we're descended from the Great Hunter, an actual nature

spirit.”

Gabby gave Brenna a playful shove. “Bragger.”

“Can you develop your Spark?” Miles asked hopefully. “Make it stronger?”

Brody and Brenna deferred to Gabby.

“It's possible,” she said. “There are these guys in India called yogis. After years of meditation, they're able to build their Spark and do some amazing things.”

“Years?” said Miles.

“Sorry,” said Gabby. “You've got to be born into it. My family's full of sorcerers, on both sides, going back forever. They said the first of us, the original shamans, were chosen at birth by the spirits and blessed with their abilities.”

Miles frowned, obviously disappointed he couldn't learn magic — at least not as quickly as he wanted to. All of us had supernatural abilities except for him. And there was no way he'd be able to get one. He had to be feeling left out.

“Anything coming off of Julian and Patrick?” Brody asked.

I turned my attention to them and their clique at the far end of the quad. “They don't have a Spark. They give off more of a coldness.”

“That has to do with their power,” Gabby added. “You see, vampires don't really feed on blood. Not exactly. They feed on life force. Blood is just a vessel for that.”

“Not everyone in their clique are vampires,” I noticed. “The rest of them are human.”

“Vampires have a natural charm,” Brody added. “They draw humans to them and get them to do whatever they want.”

“It's how they attract their prey a lot of times,” said Gabby. “Like some snakes do.”

I nodded, taking it all in. My attention was then drawn to another group of kids hanging out on one of the big concrete planters that decorated the quad. They all had the Spark too.

I'd seen them around before. They weren't hard to miss — the jerks. They enjoyed picking on Gabby and Brenna. They called Gabby *Flabby Gabby*, which I couldn't understand because she wasn't fat. Well, maybe compared to them she was. Those girls looked like they hardly ever ate. They'd also make barking and growling noises around Brenna, which I

didn't understand either. Well, at least not until now. It had to be about her being a werewolf – I mean, a lupoi.

Brenna noticed who I was looking at. “You see the blonde in the middle, holding court? That's Sarah Dupre. She thinks she's all that 'cause her dad's the mayor. The two girls next to her are Natalie and Lori. The two boys are Dominic and Frank. Their parents are all part of the coven, you know, the group of sorcerers Gabby's parents lead.”

“That's only five,” I said. “What about the rest of them?”

“Most of them are normal,” said Gabby. “Some are sorcerers too. Their parents aren't part of the coven though. They're solitary practitioners who've been allowed to practice in Harmony. They brownnose Sarah and the others big time. Their parents probably tell them to do it.”

“Why?” I asked.

Gabby rolled her eyes. “Don't even get me started. There's so much politics in the magic world. It's ridiculous.”

“Shouldn't they be trying to brownnose you?” I asked. “I mean, your parents lead the coven.”

Gabby scoffed. “They try. But I don't put up with it.”

“Wait. I don't get it.” Miles cocked his head towards Sarah and her clique. “You three used to be really tight with them back in elementary school. At least it looked that way.”

Brody and Brenna frowned. Gabby let out a sad little sigh.

“Yeah. We used to be friends,” said Brody.

“What happened?” I asked.

“It started over the summer. After Brenna and I Changed for the first time.”

“They knew it was going to happen,” said Brenna. “It's not like we kept it a secret from them or anything.”

“But when it did,” said Brody. “They got weirded-out around us. Said we were different. They didn't want to hang out anymore.”

“Sorry. That sucks,” I said.

“After that, Sarah told me I had to choose,” said Gabby. “Between her and the others and Brody and Brenna.” She smiled. “No way was I going to ditch my bestest buds.”

Brody smiled back at Gabby. Brenna reached for her hand.

“Sarah told Natalie and Lori the same thing,” Gabby continued, her voice cracking a little. “She said they couldn't be friends with both me and

her.” She stared across the quad at them one last time. “They made their choice.” Then she returned her attention to us. “I made mine.”

Chapter 10

The last bell rang, and I met the others at the front gate. I got the front seat of the minivan for once, probably because it was a special day for me.

“You ready?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

I nodded. All I could think about the whole day was the spell Mr. St. Clair would be doing. Would it work? When he was done, would I actually be able to control the Change?

“Nervous?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

I was about to say no, but somehow I knew Mrs. Sullivan would be able to tell I wasn't being honest. And I didn't want to lie to her. She deserved better than that.

“Yeah. A little.”

“It's going to be all right, you'll see.”

I glanced behind me to see Brody and Miles playing Gameboy. Brenna and Gabby shared earbuds, listening to music on Gabby's phone, dancing in their seats and singing along to a song by One Direction.

“I talked to your mom earlier,” said Mrs. Sullivan. “I told her I was dropping you guys off at the St. Clairs' this afternoon and would pick you up around five, in case she or your dad call to check in on you.”

“Did she ask why we were going there?”

“No. Why would she?”

“I don't know. I just — never mind.”

Mrs. Sullivan smiled. “You're one of a kind, Dillon. A kid who actually feels guilty about lying to his parents.”

“We're not really lying, are we? We're just not telling them the whole truth, which is — basically the same thing as lying, isn't it?”

“Unfortunately, it's something we have to do to survive. I know plenty of humans — wonderful people — and I'd love nothing more than to be able to tell them the truth about us. Only I can't.”

“Does it get easier? Lying to people? Keeping secrets?”

“I wouldn't say it gets easier. You do get used to it. But not completely. It picks at you. When it does, you have to remind yourself

you're doing it for all the right reasons, to protect yourself-" Mrs. Sullivan glanced in the rearview mirror at Brody and Brenna. "- and the people you love."

We arrived at the St. Clairs' mansion. Mrs. Sullivan knew the security code. She punched it into the keypad, and the big wrought iron gate opened for her. The mansion was huge. It had this sort of castle-thing going on with its turrets and gargoyles posted on each corner of the roof.

Mrs. Sullivan pulled the minivan onto the circular gravel driveway. Mrs. St. Clair was waiting outside for us. She looked just like Gabby. Same round face. Same thick brown hair. She was talking out loud as she walked toward the minivan. I thought maybe she was speaking to some spirit or faerie. Then I noticed the Bluetooth in her ear.

Mrs. Sullivan and Mrs. St. Clair exchanged greetings. As we exited the minivan, I couldn't take my eyes off the mansion. I could feel the magic radiating from it, not just from the building but from the land itself. I was so mesmerized that Mrs. St. Clair startled me when she said hello.

"Sorry, Dillon," she chuckled. "It's a big day today, are you ready?"

I nodded.

"I'll see you guys later." Mrs. Sullivan turned to me. "Relax. You're in good hands."

"I know. Thanks."

I watched Mrs. Sullivan drive away as I followed the others into the mansion. An old woman met us inside. She was tiny with gray hair and a sweet but mysterious smile. She wasn't human though. I could feel her Spark. It was more powerful than any of ours.

"Dillon. Miles. This is Ms. B," said Mrs. St. Clair. "She runs the house and was also Gabby and her brother's nanny growing up. She's served the St. Clair family since they first arrived in Harmony."

"Wait. What?" Miles asked.

Mrs. St. Clair smiled and returned her attention to Ms. B.

"It's all right," she said. "You may show them."

Ms. B nodded. "Yes, Madame."

A shimmer rose around her. Ms. B shrank to about three feet tall, her ears became pointed, her eyes were larger and brighter, and her smile seemed even wider now. Me and Miles exchanged a look of astonishment.

"Ms. B is a ban-tee," said Gabby. "A form of faerie."

"I thought faeries were tiny with little wings," said Miles.

Ms. B rolled her eyes. “A common misconception started by one Mr. J.M. Barrie.”

“Faerie is actually a generic term for all nature spirits,” said Gabby. “They come in all shapes and sizes. Some actually do look like Tinkerbell. Some don't.”

“We have many different faeries working on the estate, on the vineyard, and in the winery,” Mrs. St. Clair added. “They can take human form, like Ms. B, so our human employees don't notice them.”

“Can we introduce them to the boys now?” Gabby asked her mom. “Please, please, please.”

“Who are the *boys*?” I asked.

“Come on,” Gabby continued to plead to her mom. “Dad said we could show them everything.”

“And we will,” said Mrs. St. Clair. “In the backyard, where there's less chance of them being spotted.”

Gabby pumped her fist. “Yes!”

“Who are the *boys*?” Miles asked this time.

Brenna giggled. “You'll see.”

We followed Gabby and her mom through the house, out onto the patio, and kept walking. We finally stopped on the lawn, on the other side of their humongous swimming pool.

“Is this good enough?” Gabby asked her mom.

Mrs. St. Clair nodded.

Gabby clasped her hands. “Can I do it? Please, please, please.”

“Oh. Go ahead,” said her mom.

“Sweet.” Gabby held up her hands, wiggling her fingers.

“Must you always make those ridiculous gestures?” her mother asked. “You know they aren't necessary.”

“It's my thing,” Gabby whined.

Mrs. St. Clair let out a frustrated sigh. “I swear you're as bad as your father.”

I looked to Brody, wanting some clue as to what was going on.

He just grinned and said, “Watch the roof.”

I did, and so did Miles. All I could see were those creepy gargoyle statues. I glanced back at Gabby and noticed the black stone in her necklace was glowing green.

Miles tapped me frantically on the shoulder. His mouth hung open, and he pointed at the roof. I looked and — well, it was impossible to miss. The gargoyles were moving.

They stirred and stretched like they were waking up from a long nap. Their wings snapped open, and they launched themselves into the air, circling and spiraling, before coming to a graceful landing before us.

At that point, my mouth was hanging open just like Miles'. Brody and Brenna laughed. Gabby and her mom smiled.

“Dillon. Miles,” Mrs. St. Clair started. “It is my honor to introduce you to — ” She pointed to the smallest gargoyle who had a large horn sticking out of the top of his head. “Enric.”

The gargoyle nodded. “*Bon jour.*”

Mrs. St. Clair then pointed to the two gargoyles with eagle heads. “Valentin and Pascal.”

Like Enric, they nodded.

“Pleased to meet you,” they said in unison.

“And finally,” Mrs. St. Clair gestured toward the largest gargoyle, who had two large ram horns jutting from his lion’s head. “Last but definitely not least, Silvain.”

Silvain bowed. “The honor is mine.”

Mrs. St. Clair pointed to me and Miles. “I would like to introduce you to two of our newest friends, Dillon Howell and Miles Coen .”

“Hi,” I said.

Miles opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, he just waved to the gargoyles. We both looked to Mrs. St. Clair for an explanation.

“Like Ms. B and the other faeries, Silvain and his friends have served the St. Clair family for generations,” she said. “They can be called on at any time to help protect the estate.”

“Wow.”

I approached Silvain and the other gargoyles and could see now they weren't just statues that could walk and talk and let's not forget fly. They were actual living stone. We're talking stone eyelids blinking over stone eyeballs. Stone lips curling over stone mouths filled with stone teeth, stone gums, and a stone tongue. Stone muscles rolled smoothly beneath their stone skin.

They were easily the most amazing thing I'd ever seen, and judging from the expression on Miles' face I could tell he felt the same way.

I reached my hand out to Silvain. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," he replied.

I placed my hand on his shoulder. "You're warm."

"*Oui*," he replied. "My brothers and I were carved from stone but blessed by the St. Clair family's magic. We think and feel and fight with the passion of the noblest *chevaliers*."

The other three gargoyles chimed in. Miles and I stared at each other, still in disbelief. Then again, I was a werewol – I mean, lupoi, so were the Sullivans, and Gabby and her family were sorcerers who had faeries for servants and a quartet of gargoyles at their beck and call. I guess I'd better start getting used to this kind of thing. This was my life now.

"Is there anything else we can do for you at this time?" Silvain asked Mrs. St. Clair.

"No, Silvain. Thank you. I just wanted to introduce you to Dillon and Miles."

"Very well, Madame," said Silvain. "Monsieurs Dillon and Miles, it was nice meeting you." He nodded to Brody and Brenna. "Monsieur and Mademoiselle Sullivan, it was a pleasure to see you again as well. For now, my brothers and I shall bid you *adieu* and return to our posts."

"Take care, guys," said Brody.

"Yeah. Good seeing you," said Brenna.

Sylvain and the other gargoyles launched themselves into the air. Within moments, they were back on the roof. They resumed their former positions, still and motionless.

"So? Were they cool or what?" asked Brody.

I grinned. "Very, very cool."

"Definitely," added Miles.

Mrs. St. Clair put her finger to the Bluetooth in her ear. "Yes. Yes, they're here. Is everything ready? Very good. We'll be right down."

"Was that Dad?" Gabby asked.

Mrs. St. Clair nodded. "He's in the sanctum. He says he's ready for us." She turned to me. "Are you ready?"

Nervous, I nodded and said, "Yeah."

Mrs. St. Clair smiled. "Follow me then."

Chapter 11

We followed Gabby and her mom through the house. According to Mrs. St. Clair, Brody and Brenna were supposed to take part in the spell by “lending their energy,” whatever that meant. She said Miles could come along and watch. I could tell he was a little upset he wouldn't be able to help.

We reached the end of a hallway and stopped in front of a huge wooden door. Mrs. St. Clair gripped the handle. It didn't budge. I guess it was locked. But then the stone in her necklace started to glow. With a click, the handle turned, and she opened the door.

“Magic lock,” Gabby told me. “Only a St. Clair can open the door to the sanctum.”

“Nice,” said Miles.

“Go ahead and lead your friends, Gabby,” said Mrs. St. Clair. “I'll close up behind us.”

Gabby waved for us to follow her. About ten feet inside, there was a staircase going down. There weren't any windows. This place should have been pitch dark. Only it wasn't. I couldn't see any lamps or anything. You'd think it would have been cold too, but the temperature was perfectly comfortable. How was that possible? Then it hit me. Magic. Duh!

We followed Gabby down the stairs, which wound around a bit, to the bottom.

“Whoa,” said Miles.

Whoa was right. The sanctum was an underground cave. It had bookcases filled with old, musty books, worktables set up with bottles and vials of herbs and potions, and racks full of crystals and crazy looking artifacts.

Miles grinned, trying to take in everything at once.

“Now we're talking,” he said.

“I know. Isn't it great?” asked Gabby. “Totally old school.”

Mr. St. Clair stood in the middle of the room. There was a five pointed star painted on the floor. The empty spaces were filled with some

sort of strange writing.

“Sweet. Heavy metal.” I stuck out my tongue, made a devil sign, and started headbanging. It was a joke. Okay, it was a bad joke. “Sorry.”

“Could you be any more cliché?” said Brenna.

“Give him a break,” said Brody. “You make bad jokes when you're nervous too.”

“I do not! My jokes rule. You're the one who's not funny.”

“Enough. The both of you,” said Mr. St. Clair.

Brody and Brenna fell silent.

“I'm sorry,” I told Mr. St. Clair. “I didn't mean to offend anyone.”

Mr. St. Clair smiled. “That's quite all right, Dillon. A quick lesson on the significance of the five pointed star, a powerful magical symbol. When the tip is pointing up, it represents a man. See the head, arms, and legs? When it's inverted, it resembles a devil, and unfortunately some people have abused this symbol. The five points also represent the known elements: earth, air, fire, water, and the spirit. The circle surrounding it represents the universe.”

“So the five pointed star shows how man is connected to the elements,” I said. “And the universe.”

Both Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair looked impressed. So did Gabby.

“Not bad,” she said.

Mr. St. Clair turned his attention to Miles. “What is Miles doing here?”

Miles shrank away.

“Way to go, Dad,” said Gabby with her arms crossed. “Make Miles feel welcome.”

“As sensitive as always, dear,” her mom added.

Mr. St. Clair appeared slightly flustered. “Well, I know I agreed he could come to the mansion. I didn't think you'd bring him into the sanctum.”

“Well, he's here,” said Mrs. St. Clair. “So he might as well stay.”

Mr. St. Clair sighed. “Fine.” He pointed across the room. “Take a seat over there, Miles.” Then added in a life-or-death tone. “And don't touch anything.”

Miles nodded and just about tripped over his own two feet as he hurried to find a place to sit. Mr. St. Clair turned to me.

“Are you ready to begin?”

I took a breath and said, “Yes.”

“Sit in the middle of the star.” Mr. St. Clair turned to Mrs. St. Clair, Gabby, and to Brody and Brenna. “Each of you sit at one of the points. I’ll sit at the top.”

We followed his directions. Once we were in place, Mr. St. Clair lit a bushel of dried herbs. He blew out the flame. A sweet smelling smoke rose into the air.

He walked around the star, waving the smoldering herbs. There was a candle at each point of the star. As Mr. St. Clair passed each one, the wick ignited on its own, creating a bright flame. Miles watched fascinated. Mr. St. Clair sat at the top point of the star.

“Close your eyes and breathe in the incense,” he told me. “Relax and try to empty your mind of all thoughts.”

Brenna snickered. “That shouldn’t take long.”

“Shut up, Brenna!” I fired back.

“Silence!” Mr. St. Clair commanded.

Brenna and I settled down. I did as Mr. St. Clair said. Deep breaths. Slowly, my whole body became relaxed. My head felt heavy. For a moment, I thought I might flop over and fall asleep.

Next thing I knew, I was no longer sitting on the hard stone floor. I felt grass and dirt beneath me. A breeze brushed my face. What was going on? I flung open my eyes and – I was no longer in the St. Clairs’ sanctum. I was in a forest. A dark, creepy forest. Like something out of a Grimms’ fairy tale.

“Hello?” I called out as I stood up. “Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair? Gabby? Brody? Brenna? Miles?” I swallowed. “Anyone?”

The dense brush rustled. I heard heavy footfalls and labored breath. Something was racing towards me. I didn’t know what it was. And I didn’t plan on waiting around to find out. I ran. Oh, man. I wished I could Change.

I kept running until my lungs burned and my sides ached. I fought past the pain and kept going. I had to. That thing, whatever it was, was closing in.

It wasn’t alone either. Red eyes watched me from the shadows.

Wait. Whatever was watching me wasn’t *in* the shadows.

They *were* the shadows.

A terrible shrieking filled my ears. Hideous faces formed in the shadows. I saw wings and claws and mouths full of fangs. These shadow

demons flew at me, trying to snatch me.

I screamed and tried to dodge them, only I ended up tripping and falling flat on my face. The shadow demons swarmed me. I lashed out with my fists and feet, but it didn't do any good. There were too many of them. They were too powerful.

A ferocious growl echoed through the air. The shadow demons shrieked and began scurrying away. A brown wolf, the size of a horse, leapt from the brush.

It grabbed a demon in its jaws and shook it violently. The demon went limp. The wolf tossed the body aside and pounced on another one. It was dead before it hit the ground. The rest fled. They may have outnumbered the wolf, but they still feared it and couldn't get away fast enough.

I pushed myself up into a crouch but froze when the wolf turned to face me. It had been so ferocious before, but now its features had changed. They were soft, even gentle and caring.

I locked eyes with the wolf, and a flash of recognition filled me. This wasn't just any wolf. This was *my* wolf. We were inside my head, like in a dream or a vision.

“You were what was chasing me, weren't you?” I said. “Only you were trying to protect me — from those things.”

The wolf seemed to nod.

“Part of me has been afraid of you, hasn't it? I've been afraid to really accept you, that you're a part of me. But I shouldn't be afraid, should I?”

The wolf let out a soft whine. It padded toward me slowly. I was still afraid but determined to overcome my fear. I was now face-to-face with the wolf. It sniffed me with its cold wet nose. Its mouth opened revealing those huge sharp fangs.

It kissed me, running its tongue up one side of my face then the other. I giggled like a little kid who'd been given a puppy for Christmas. I reached out and petted the wolf, running my fingers through its soft fur.

The wolf kissed me again as I laughed. I heard the St. Clairs, Brody, and Brenna calling my name. No. Not calling — *shouting* my name.

The wolf and the forest faded before my eyes. I was back in the St. Clairs' sanctum. The St. Clairs, Brody, and Brenna were on their feet frantic. Miles was standing too, staring at me wide-eyed, his jaw almost on the floor.

Why? Because I'd Changed.

Chapter 12

I growled, scanning the room. Miles was the most scared. I honed in on his scent, but before I could take a step towards him a force field rose from the circle on the floor, trapping me. I snarled and glared at Gabby and her parents. They were the ones doing this.

Brody and Brenna darted in front of me.

“Dillon, you've got to Change back,” said Brody. “You're not getting out until you do.”

“You can do it,” added Brenna, who was surprisingly supportive. “Brody said you've done it before.”

She was right. I had done it before. I should be able to do it again. I started thinking about the sensations that came with Changing back into human, bones and muscles shrinking, claws and fangs retracting, fur retreating beneath my skin.

As soon as I imagined it, it started to happen. It took a couple minutes, but I Changed back into my human form. It was even easier than it was the last time.

The St. Clairs dropped the force field. My legs buckled, and everyone rushed to catch me before I hit the floor.

“Miles, bring him a stool to sit on,” said Mr. St. Clair.

Miles hurried to follow his order.

“I'm okay. Really,” I said and sat down without any help.

“Our spell worked,” said Mrs. St. Clair.

She and her husband smiled. So did Brody and Gabby. Miles still looked sort of stunned. Brenna, on the other hand, held her hand over her mouth and snickered.

“What?” I asked.

“Hulk smash,” she said.

Brody and Gabby stared at her, then at me, and started to laugh. Miles did too. After examining my torn clothing, I finally got the joke. I did look like Dr. Bruce Banner after one of his famous transformations.

“Great. My mom and dad are going to kill me,” I said.

“Not to worry.”

Mr. St. Clair's ring glowed. The rips and tears in my clothing began stitching themselves back together. Within moments, they were as good as new.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You can thank us by helping clean up,” said Mr. St. Clair.

Sure, I had no problem with that. Neither did the others. Within a few minutes, we were finished and following Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair back upstairs.

I wanted to go outside. Gabby, Miles, Brody, and Brenna went with me. Mrs. St. Clair said something about sending us some snacks, but I wasn't really paying attention. For the first time, me and the wolf were one. Even though I was human again, I still felt transformed.

Brody and Brenna walked beside me. From their expressions, I could tell they were picking up on the changes I was experiencing.

“How you doing?” Brody asked.

“I feel amazing,” I told him. “I feel so powerful, but at the same time there's this calm, this peacefulness, inside me. Is that how you guys feel?”

Brody nodded. So did Brenna. I caught Gabby smiling. She was happy too. As for Miles?

“You okay?” I asked him.

Miles forced a smile and nodded, but I could tell he was still kind of freaked-out. Once we got outside, I didn't feel like staying on the patio.

My senses were jacked, not quite at wolf level but pretty darn close. There were so many new scents in the air. The gardens with their flowers and herbs and fresh vegetables, the distant cedars and evergreens, and the vineyard with its different crops of sweet smelling grapes.

I had to go exploring. Gabby led us down a foot trail that wound through the gardens and into the forest.

“This is awesome.” I turned to Brody and Brenna. “All the smells and sounds. You guys experience this too? Even when you haven't Changed?”

Brody nodded.

“I'm going to be able to keep it under control, right? I'm not going to start sniffing people's butts, am I?”

Everyone laughed.

“Let's hope not,” said Brenna.

“You'll be more sensitive to people's emotions too,” said Brody. “You'll have stronger responses to aggression and fear. We can help you adjust.”

“Thanks.” I stopped short and gazed into the distance.

“What is it?” Miles asked.

I turned to Gabby. “There's something out here. Something old. Powerful.” I pointed toward a grove of trees. “Over there.”

Brody, Brenna, and Gabby exchanged a look of surprise. Before either of them could say anything, I was running down the trail. I couldn't help it. Whatever this thing was, it was drawing me to it. Brody and Brenna chased after me. I could hear Miles complaining, telling us to wait up. He couldn't run because of his asthma so Gabby stayed behind and walked with him.

I could see it up ahead. There was a circle of standing stones in an open field surrounded by giant oak trees. The trees were ancient in their own right, but I had a feeling they were babies compared to these stones. I slowed down and approached them in awe.

There were seven stones. Each one was at least twelve feet tall. They'd been worn down over the years, but I could tell they'd once been smooth with perfect edges and corners. In the center was a smaller stone, about waist high and flat on top, like a table. No, not a table. An altar.

Brody and Brenna hung back. They'd obviously been here before. They let me check it out on my own. A few minutes later, Gabby and Miles caught up with us. Like me, Miles stared in wonder at the standing stones.

“Pretty cool, huh?” said Gabby.

“It's like Stonehenge,” Miles said. “You've got Stonehenge in your backyard!”

Gabby shrugged. “Yeah, well.”

She and the twins joined me and Miles in the center of the circle.

“There are megaliths like this all over the world,” Gabby explained. “Each stone stands on a ley line.”

“A what?” Miles asked.

“A ley line. It's like a current of magical energy that runs through the Earth.” Gabby pointed to the stone altar. “Seven ley lines meet here at this spot, creating a vortex of energy. It's a place of power. This is where the coven meets to celebrate the sabbats, days that mark the changing seasons and other turning points in the year. They're special occasions for sorcerers and other supernaturals.”

“There’s one coming up in a few days,” said Brody. “It’s called Candlemas. A time of reawakening.”

“So you and the coven will be out here that night?” I asked Gabby. She nodded. “What about you guys?” I asked Brody and Brenna. “Do you go out on the sabbats?”

“We come here too,” said Brody.

“Cool. You think I could go with you guys?”

Brody, Brenna, and Gabby turned to each other with worried looks on their faces.

“We should probably ask our mom and dad first,” said Brenna.

“Yeah,” said Brody. “Listen Dillon, I know you’re anxious to try to see if you can control the Change, but you’ve got to promise not to go out at night on your own.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not safe,” said Gabby. “There are *things* out there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, you met Ms. B., and we told you about the other faeries on the estate,” Gabby continued. “There are more faeries living in the forest. And not all of them are as cool as Ms. B.”

“Then there’s the Host,” said Brenna.

“The what?” I asked.

“Monsters, Dillon,” said Brody.

I glanced at Brenna and Gabby. They nodded, confirming what he said and were just as serious as he was. I noticed Miles was looking kind of wobbly.

“There are monsters in the forest?” he asked, his voice shaky.

Brenna grinned and held up her hands like claws. “Big, scary ones.”

Miles shrank away from her.

“Stop it, Brenna,” Brody ordered.

“How come no one’s seen these things?” I asked.

“Because of us,” said Brenna.

“Well, our parents actually,” said Brody. “We patrol the forest at night, during the hours before dawn. That’s when the Host are at their most active.”

“Back in the day, humans used to call those the Hours of the Wolf,” said Brenna.

“Back when they thought we were the ones hunting them, instead of protecting them.”

“So we’re heroes then,” I said.

Brody and Brenna looked at each other. I don’t suppose they thought of it like that.

“It’s what we do, Dillon,” said Brody. “We protect our territory. It’s instinct.”

“I should be out there too, shouldn’t I?” I asked.

Brenna made a face. “Dummy. Weren’t you just listening to us?”

Brody shushed her then said to me, “Seriously, Dillon. Promise us you won’t go out in the forest by yourself.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

Chapter 13

Mrs. Sullivan was there to pick us up by the time we returned to the mansion. She was happy the spell worked but repeated Brody and Brenna's warning to me.

"Wait. I went out that one night and nothing happened."

"You got lucky," said Brenna.

Mrs. Sullivan and Brody nodded in agreement. I let out a frustrated sigh.

"Look, we'll work something out," said Mrs. Sullivan. "We'll find a way so you can go with us. So you'll be safe."

"How are we going to do that? My parents won't let me spend the night, because they're too afraid I might Change. And it's not like I can tell them about the St. Clairs' spell."

Mrs. Sullivan frowned. "We'll work something out."

"What if I sneak out?"

I figured I could pull it off. The last time I Changed, a couple weeks ago, I let my parents put me in the basement. They trusted me now. They didn't check up on me anymore at night.

"I suppose," said Mrs. Sullivan. That was probably a hard thing for a parent to agree to. But what other choice did I have?

"Can we go tonight?"

"No, Dillon!" said Mrs. Sullivan. "This is serious business. We're talking life-and-death. There's a lot you need to know before you go on patrol with us. Do you understand?"

I sighed and nodded. Just like Brody, Mrs. Sullivan made me promise not to go out on my own. We said our goodbyes to Gabby and her mom and followed Mrs. Sullivan to the minivan.

I walked next to Miles. The poor kid was still looking pretty shaky. He was trying hard to be brave, but all this supernatural stuff was really getting to him. It was one thing to read about it in comic books or see it in movies and TV or play it online. But it was another thing to live it.

Mrs. Sullivan dropped me off first. My senses were still so sharp. My head buzzed with all the smells and sounds. I opened the front door and could hear Mom and Dad talking in the living room, at the other end of the house.

“Who are we kidding?” said Mom. “There’s no way he’s going to be able to have any kind of a normal life. Not with his ‘condition.’”

“If he learns how to manage it properly-” Dad started to say.

Mom cut him off. “How? By locking himself in a basement every time the Change comes? Is he supposed to continue doing that when he’s an adult?”

“You’re getting a little ahead of yourself, aren’t you?”

“I’m just saying, what kind of life is that? For anyone?”

Mom’s voice trailed off into tears.

“Look, we don’t know what’s going to happen in the future,” said Dad. “Maybe we’ll find a better alternative. For now — we’re just doing the best we can.”

I let out a long sigh. If I only I could tell them about the St. Clairs and the Sullivans. If only I could tell them about everything that had happened in Harmony.

I let the door slam shut, hopefully loud enough for them to hear. “I’m home!”

Mom and Dad went quiet. Dad then called out from the living room, “We’re here, son!”

I dropped my backpack by the stairs. They met me in the hallway. Dad smiled while Mom wiped away her tears.

“Mom, you okay?” I asked.

She forced a smile. “I’m fine, sweetie. It’s nothing. How was school?”

“Never mind that. How was St. Clair mansion?” asked Dad. “I bet it was pretty sweet.”

“Yeah. It was — nice,” I said.

“Next time, see if you can get us an invite.”

I managed a slight smile. “I’ll see what I can do.” After a moment of awkward silence, I added, “I got a lot of homework to do.”

“Okay, son,” said Dad.

I started towards the stairs but stopped when Dad called out to me.

“Dillon. You’ve done such a great job since we came to Harmony. You’ve made friends. You’re getting great grades. Your mom and I are real

proud of you.”

Mom forced a smile.

“Thanks.”

I continued to my room. On my way up the stairs, I heard Mom and Dad talking.

“Do you think he heard us?” Mom asked.

“No. He couldn’t have,” said Dad.

A couple hours later, Mom called me down for dinner. At least it was mac’n’cheese and not some weird eggplant or bean dish. We sat at the table and talked about our day as we ate. In other words, we pretended to be a normal family. I could barely stand it.

After dinner, I went to my room to finish my homework. I was almost done when I got a call from Miles.

“Can you talk?” he asked, sounding upset.

“What is it?”

“It’s my dad. He’s been drinking again. He’s been yelling at me and my mom all night.”

“Are you all right?”

Miles scoffed. “Yeah. Just great.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

We went on and talked for a while longer. To be more specific, Miles talked while I just listened. That seemed to do the trick though. He sounded like he felt a lot better.

“Thanks, Dillon,” he said. “For being my friend.”

I smiled. “I’m here for you, buddy. Any time.”

I wished there was something I could have done to help him take his mind off his problems, even for a little bit. You know, show him some fun. Some excitement.

Maybe there was something I could do.

“Hey, Miles, you up for sneaking out tonight?” I asked.

“In the forest? Didn’t you hear Mrs. Sullivan? She said it was dangerous.”

“Don’t worry, you big wimp. I’ll be there to protect you. Come on, what do you say?”

There was silence at the other end for a moment.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

I could almost hear the smile on Miles' face.

Chapter 14

The TV in Mom and Dad's room shut off around ten. An hour later, they were in a deep sleep. I made it outside and into the forest. Now I had to try to Change on my own.

I remembered how I managed to Change back to human form those two times. It was probably the same process, just the other way around. I imagined the sensations. My bones and muscles shifting. My face reshaping. Fur sprouting through my skin.

Just like that, it started happening.

I did it! I could control the Change. I wanted to howl for joy, but I was still too close to home and didn't want to risk alerting Mom and Dad. I ran to Miles' house and Changed back again when I reached his backyard.

He must have been watching from his window, because by the time I got there he was sneaking out the back door and hustling to meet me. He climbed the fence. When he got to the top, he fell the rest of the way and almost knocked me down when I tried to catch him.

Miles congratulated me on being able to control the Change. He looked me up and down, in my sweat shorts and oversized t-shirt.

"And you wore those clothes?" he asked. "They didn't rip or anything."

"No. They're loose enough."

Miles hesitated for a moment then asked, "What's it feel like? You know, the Change?"

"It used to hurt like you wouldn't believe. Now it doesn't hurt at all. And it happens fast now too. Before, it felt like it took forever."

"Probably because it hurt so bad."

"Probably. Back then, it was like my body was fighting it. But now, after the St. Clairs' spell and facing my fears about who I am — what I am — it's like I'm finally free."

Miles smiled. "I'm happy for you, dude."

"Thanks. You ready to go?"

"Go where?"

“For a run.”

Miles’ eyes widened. “You were really serious about that?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“You know why not.”

Miles obviously meant the monsters. What did Brody call them? The Host.

“They’re not supposed to come out for hours, almost until dawn. We’ll be home by then.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on.” I grinned. “I’ll protect you. That’s what us lupoi do.”

Miles chuckled. “All right. Let’s go.”

I Changed and crouched down, urging Miles to climb on my back. Once he had a good grip, I took off running. He yelped, and his arms tightened around my neck. I ran slowly at first but then gradually built up speed.

It wasn’t long until I was running flat out, leaping and bounding. Miles laughed and hollered with joy. We ran for a long time. I finally slowed to a stop. Miles slipped from my back, and I Changed back into human form.

“Why are we stopping?” Miles asked.

“Because I’m tired. I’ve been running as fast as I can for who knows how many miles.”

I sat on the grass. Miles plopped down beside me.

“Thanks. That was fun,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

Miles scanned the forest. Some brush rustled, and he leapt to his feet.

“What was that?”

“A raccoon.”

“How do you know?”

“I can smell him. Hear him skittering around.”

Miles gave a frustrated sigh. “You don’t know how lucky you are, Dillon. I’d give anything to be like you.”

“What? A monster?”

“You’ve got strength. Powers. You’re not weak and pathetic like me.”

“Stop.”

“It’s true.”

“That’s your dad talking.”

“Yeah, well, maybe he’s right.”

“He’s not. So you’re not some jock-jerk like him. Big deal. You’ve still got a lot of good things going for you. You’re smart. You’re in all the advanced classes. You’re good with computers. And I’ve seen some of those comic book drawings you do. They’re great.”

“You think so?”

“Of course I do.”

Miles smiled. “Thanks.”

The brush behind us rustled. I shot to my feet.

“What was that?” Miles asked.

“Get up!”

“Why? What is it?”

“I don’t know.” But I could tell by its scent, it wasn’t friendly.

I Changed. Miles scrambled behind me.

“Fiddlee dum, Fiddlee dee,” a voice called out. “What do I see before me?”

A second voice called out from another direction. “Why it’s a boy and his dog. Out alone at night.”

I growled and bared my fangs, hackles raised.

“Listen to him. He wants a fight,” a third voice chuckled.

“Then a fight we’ll give him. We’ll strike him down dead. Then use his blood to stain our caps red.”

A small, stocky man stepped into view. He was dressed like some medieval peasant with a red cap. No, this wasn’t a man. His scent wasn’t human. He had to be one of the Host.

Two more of these Red Caps stepped from the brush. All three wielded giant scythes that gleamed in the moonlight. They may have been small, but their Spark was powerful. I needed to be careful. These guys were no joke.

They strolled toward me, like they were in no hurry. They were totally confident me and Miles couldn’t escape. At once, all three leapt at me, their scythes raised. I swatted one away then another. But the third cut a deep gash in my arm with his scythe.

The three Red Caps laughed maniacally as they attacked again. I blocked their strikes the best I could, but their blades cut my shoulders and arms. One of them got lucky and slashed my stomach.

I threw myself at the Red Caps, swiping at them with my claws. They continued to cut me, but I ignored the pain. I raked one Red Cap's face with my claws. He shrieked. I caught another one's scythe between my jaws and ripped it from his hands.

Miles screamed. The third Red Cap was rushing towards him. I ran to help him, but the other two Red Caps jumped on my back. They dug their fingers into the cuts on my shoulders. I snarled in pain. I tried but couldn't throw them off.

The third one leapt towards Miles, his scythe raised. A dark blur streaked through the air, nailing the Red Cap and driving it to the ground. The Red Cap shrieked and cried out in agony.

It was a lupoi, big with thick black fur, wearing a flannel shirt and sweat pants. I knew him immediately. It was Sheriff Ron.

The other two Red Caps slid off my back and ran, screaming wildly, into the forest. I turned to see three more lupoi. One was blonde and also dressed in a flannel shirt and sweats, and the two smaller black ones wore oversized t-shirts and basketball shorts. That had to be Mrs. Sullivan, Brody, and Brenna.

The four of them Changed back into human form. I Changed back too. When I did, I noticed my wounds had immediately healed. Not that I had a chance to celebrate this or anything.

The Sullivans surrounded me, giving me looks of anger and disappointment.

"What do you think you're doing, Dillon?" Mrs. Sullivan asked. "We told you it wasn't safe."

"You said the Host didn't come out until later. Not until before dawn."

"That's not what we said, moron!" Brenna jumped in. "We said that's when they're at their most active."

Oh, great.

"You promised me and Brody you wouldn't go out without us, Dillon," said Mrs. Sullivan. "You not only broke your promise, you put Miles' life at risk."

I glanced at Miles. He sat hunched over, gasping and wheezing, while Brody helped him with his inhaler, which he'd luckily brought with him. I wanted to check on Miles, but Sheriff Ron stepped in front of me.

"Go home, Dillon. We'll take care of him."

"But – "

“Go, Dillon.”

My heart sank. I took my time going home then cleaned myself up and crawled into bed. I couldn't sleep, thinking about what had happened. All I wanted to do was show Miles a bit of fun. Instead, I ended up almost getting him killed.

On top of that, I upset the Sullivans. I felt sick. I wouldn't blame any of them, Miles or the Sullivans, if they never spoke to me again. I was so stupid.

I laid awake in bed until the sun rose. Even then, I didn't want to move but knew if I didn't get up Mom and Dad would come get me. So I got ready for school, headed downstairs, and ate some cereal.

The doorbell rang, and I immediately remembered it was Mrs. Sullivan's turn in the carpool to drive us to school today. Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no.

Mom told me to hurry up and finish eating. When I did, I grabbed my backpack and walked slowly to the front door, where Mrs. Sullivan and Mom chitchatted like it was a normal morning.

“I should let you know Deb called to say Miles won't be going to school today,” she told me and Mom. “He's not feeling well.”

“Oh, poor thing,” said Mom.

I caught the look of blame in Mrs. Sullivan's eyes. I deserved it. I said goodbye to Mom and followed Mrs. Sullivan out the door. Her minivan was parked in the driveway. Brody and Brenna watched me from the windows. I lowered my head, unable to make eye contact.

“I hope you realize now how serious our duty to this town is,” said Mrs. Sullivan.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“It's not anything to be taken lightly.”

“I know that now.”

Mrs. Sullivan stopped. “You have a lot to learn, Dillon. About being a lupoi. And about the supernatural world you live in.”

“I know.”

Mrs. Sullivan managed a smile. “Good. Because we start your training today after school.”

I tried not to look too excited. “Thank you. For giving me this chance.”

“Don't thank me yet. You've got a lot of hard work ahead of you.”

“I’m up for it. I won’t let you down again. I promise. I swear.”

Mrs. Sullivan’s smile brightened. “Come on. We don’t want to be late for school.”

Chapter 15

I tried calling Miles while I was at school. I left a couple voicemails and waited for him to get back to me. At the end of the day, he sent me a text: *i dont blame u*

Man, that was a huge relief. I called him again after school. This time, he picked up. He was still pretty shook up but said he'd come back to school the next day. That was great news.

I started my training after school that day feeling a bit better about myself. Once I was done with my homework, instead of playing Xbox with the others, I sat down at the kitchen table with these old, leather-bound books.

Mrs. Sullivan explained they were journals kept by her and Sheriff Ron's families and had been passed down through the generations. They told stories about encounters with faeries and the Host and included sketches of all the different creatures they'd seen.

When I wasn't learning everything I could from those books, I was out in the forest practicing tracking with Mrs. Sullivan, Brody, and Brenna. I learned how to sort through all the scents in the forest, hone in on one, and follow it to the source.

Mrs. Sullivan, Brody, and Brenna then took it a step further. They'd go through a stream or roll in dirt to hide their scent. Sometimes, they'd leave false trails for me to follow. They taught me how to do these tricks too, in case I was ever tracked by someone — or *something*.

I'd already found out our wounds healed when we Changed, but I also learned we could heal in our wolf form by licking them the way an animal would. The torn flesh and skin would heal almost instantly. This came in handy, because it wasn't long until I was meeting Sheriff Ron at night for fighting lessons.

He didn't hold back. He'd cut me with his claws or bite me with his fangs just enough to draw blood, so it was helpful to be able to heal up between sparring rounds. I learned a lot, like the importance of being aware of my environment, how to use my opponent's momentum against him, and how to roll with an attack in order to minimize the damage.

Most importantly, I learned to trust my instincts. Sheriff Ron liked to say we were a race of warriors, that fighting was in my blood, and I'd be surprised at what I was capable of.

Soon, it was the night of the sabbat, Candlemas, and the Sullivans invited me to go with them. I sneaked out and met them in the clearing where I normally Changed.

From there, we headed into the forest toward the St. Clair estate. Sheriff Ron led the way. Mrs. Sullivan ran behind him, then Brody and Brenna, and finally me, the newcomer.

We moved like one being. Whenever Sheriff Ron changed direction, the rest of us followed, smoothly and fluidly. We owned the forest. I swore there were moments when it seemed to bow before us, creating a path for us to travel.

I'd never Changed on a night like this. I didn't know what to expect. As usual, the forest was alive, teeming with scents and sounds. But there was more going on. Much more.

The night air crackled, charged with energy. My heart pounded in my chest, and if I had had a tail it would've definitely been wagging. I could tell the Sullivans were excited too, especially when all sorts of faeries emerged from their homes to celebrate this special night with us.

Green skinned gillie-doods leapt from the trees like monkeys while gnomes and goblins emerged from holes in the Earth. Tiny sylphs fluttered through the air on butterfly wings. They were joined by even tinier pillywiggins who rode on the backs of bees. These were just a few of the different kinds of faeries I saw. There were so many, I couldn't possibly name them all.

We slowed our pace as the faeries rushed to greet us. They were especially curious about me, who they'd never seen before, but since I was with the Sullivans that apparently meant I was okay. Each faerie's scent tickled my nose. I yipped and squealed excitedly. I was about to dart after one of the sylphs when a growl from Sheriff Ron held me back.

I heard music in the distance. Tiny horns, drums, and flutes. I smelled more faeries approaching. A lot of them. They soon appeared up ahead, a procession led by over a dozen elves riding on the backs of tiny red speckled horses.

Each elf looked like a small human. They were maybe four and a half feet tall at the most and dressed in greens and browns, like characters from

one of those Renaissance Fairs. Their features were wild, almost animal-like, but at the same time, there was an ancient wisdom in their eyes.

The one in the middle had to be Arduinna, their ruler. She carried herself like nobility. Instead of a horse, she rode on the back of a boar, with an ivory bow and a quiver full of arrows slung across her back. Her crown looked like a star that had been plucked from the night sky.

The elf riding at her side, his hair and beard the color of a fox's pelt, had to be Robyn Redd, her enforcer and consort. As short as he was, Robyn still looked pretty tough, like someone had shrunk some big screen action hero in a washing machine. He definitely had a don't-mess-with-me look about him.

The faeries that had greeted us hurried to join Arduinna's procession, which was already pretty long. Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan told me about this earlier. We wouldn't be joining them, but we would stop to pay our respects. I did exactly what they did, dropping to one knee and bowing. Arduinna turned our way. She smiled and bowed her head in return, a show of respect.

Once Arduinna had passed, we stood up. Sheriff Ron led us on a path parallel to the procession. We'd see the faeries later. We were all headed to the same place. The megalith.

I flashed back to what Gabby had said about ley lines. They were veins of mystical energy that ran through the Earth. We were running along one as we headed toward the megalith. The sensation was kind of weird, like when you lick your finger and touch a battery, except I felt it through my whole body.

Familiar scents greeted me, telling me we were on the St. Clair estate. The megalith was close. We arrived at the same time as Arduinna and her procession. They surrounded the megalith but stayed back in the forest. Sheriff Ron led us to a rocky outcrop that overlooked the proceedings.

A half-moon hung over the megalith. Some tall torches had been stuck in the ground, outside the stones, to provide extra light. The members of the coven and their children stood in a circle. They were all barefoot, the girls and women in long white gowns, the boys and men in loose white pants and tunics.

Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair stood in the center at the stone altar, which had been decorated with candles and animal skins. There was also a knife and a chalice and incense burning in a censer.

I listened to Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair as the coven began their ritual. They took turns chanting in what Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan had told me was ancient Gaelic, the language they spoke in France back when it was called Gaul.

Mrs. St. Clair raised the chalice over her head. Mr. St. Clair placed his hands on it too. They both bowed their heads, and the members of the coven clasped hands and bowed as well.

A low hum rose in my ears and continued to grow steadily louder. I peered over the edge of the outcrop. The energy of the ley lines rushed towards the megalith.

Up above, more mystical energy coursed through the heavens and gathered like a storm. The sylphs, pillywiggins, and other air faeries launched themselves into the sky and circled the megalith.

They started to glow, a pale green light, so did Arduinna and the faeries who'd stayed on the ground. According to what Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan told me earlier, they were blessing the coven's ritual, adding their energy to it.

The coven members began to glow, each one of them adding their own energy. It rushed towards the altar just as the energy from the heavens poured from the sky. It all converged in the St. Clairs' chalice, which lit up with an almost blinding light then settled into a warm glow.

Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair sipped from the chalice then presented it to one of the coven members who took a sip and passed it to their right.

I watched the chalice make its way around the circle. The wind then shifted and blew a new scent my way. It was foul and terrible. I leapt to attention, my hackles on end.

A growl rose from the back of my throat. My lips curled around my fangs in a snarl. It wasn't just me either. The Sullivans were growling and snarling too.

This scent filled me with an anger I'd never experienced before. It was even worse than when I was around Julian and Patrick. My muscles trembled. I flexed my claws and gnashed my teeth, wanting desperately to track this scent to its source, to find whatever creature this was and tear it to shreds. This had to be one of the Host.

Mrs. Sullivan, Brody, and Brenna fell in behind Sheriff Ron. I was about to follow them when they growled and bared their fangs. They weren't going to attack. This was just a warning. A very stern warning.

They told me to stay behind and not to follow them. I whimpered and pleaded, but all four continued to growl and snarl. I let out a groan of resignation and sat down, my ears pinned back, watching them run off to deal with whatever creature had invaded the forest.

I turned around and peered over the edge of the outcrop. The coven had finished their ritual. The St. Clairs stripped the altar of its decorations, and a number of men extinguished and pulled the tall torches out of the ground.

Arduinna and her faeries returned to the forest. I decided to follow them and to be careful not to fall for any of their pranks.

I bounded down the outcrop and stood upright when I reached the forest. My nostrils quivered. The scent of the faeries was all around me. The magic of the coven's ritual lingered in the air as well. But all I could think about was the Sullivans.

I picked up their scent — and the creature they pursued. I whined, thinking about how they warned me not to follow them. I knew I should have stayed away like they told me to.

But Harmony was my home now. It was my territory, and I wanted to protect it.

My nose told me they'd begun fighting. I smelled blood. The creature's was foul and rancid. I smelled the Sullivans' blood too. Each of them. Sheriff Ron, Mrs. Sullivan, Brody, and Brenna. They'd been wounded but were still fighting.

I growled. My hackles stood on end. I told myself the Sullivans could handle this. They'd done this kind of thing before. They'd be fine.

Still, I needed to be sure. I dropped to all fours and sprinted as fast as I could through the forest, racing to catch up with the Sullivans.

Chapter 16

The creature's scent grew stronger. So did my rage. I could barely keep it contained. To be honest, I didn't want to hold it in. I wanted to unleash it.

A deep roar brought me to a halt. It was so loud it made the trees shake. I heard the Sullivans' snarls and growls. There were ripping sounds too — the sounds of flesh being torn by claws and fangs.

The fight was on the other side of some trees. Did I really want to do this? It wasn't too late to turn back. The ferocity of the battle picked up, and I heard a high-pitched yelp. It was Mrs. Sullivan. I growled in response. Next thing I knew, I was charging ahead.

I could see the Sullivans now. And a troll. I recognized it from one of the books the Sullivans showed me. Man, was it ugly. And talk about huge. It was as tall as a tree and twice as thick.

But that didn't stop the Sullivans. They worked like a unit. Brenna darted around in front of the troll, keeping it distracted, while Sheriff Ron, Mrs. Sullivan, and Brody bit and slashed its legs, trying to bring it down.

The troll staggered but wasn't ready to fall yet. When it turned its attention to one of the Sullivans, the others attacked it from behind and from the sides. Brenna leapt at the troll's throat, but it swatted her away. She yelped and flew through the air, crashing into a tree trunk.

I ran to help her. Glassy-eyed and half-conscious, she stared up at me.

The troll bellowed and roared. It lashed out in a frenzy, sending Brody tumbling. One of its massive fists dropped Sheriff Ron. Another one knocked down Mrs. Sullivan.

The Sullivans were back up quickly. They were on the defensive now as the troll swung at them wildly. I growled and took off running. Not away. But around. In a wide arc. I then ran at the troll as fast as I could and launched myself into the air.

The troll grunted when I landed on its back. I buried my fangs into its neck. The troll cried out as my jaws clamped around its spine. It reached

back and grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and tried to pull me off, but I wouldn't budge.

Mrs. Sullivan and Brody both grabbed the troll's other arm and yanked it back. Sheriff Ron leapt at its throat. He tore it away, clean, with his fangs. The troll let out a rasping breath. It fell to its knees then face forward onto the ground with a loud crash.

I stood there triumphantly, only to find the Sullivans staring at me, including Brody and Brenna. They still looked wound-up from the fight.

I shrank away from them, my ears pinned back. I whimpered and whined, thinking they were upset at me for disobeying. If I could have spoken in wolf form, I'd definitely have apologized. I would have also pointed out that with my help they were finally able to bring down the troll.

That had to count for something, right?

The Sullivans began to relax. Their eyes brightened, and each of their mouths opened into a broad lupine grin. They bounded towards me, knocking me to the ground and began licking my face enthusiastically. I smiled back at them, yipping excitedly, while halfheartedly trying to fight them off.

When they were done, Sheriff Ron let out a long howl. Moments later, ravens swooped down from the sky, dozens of them, like black clouds. He'd told me earlier that night how they were our helpers. They disposed of our enemies' bodies so no humans ever discovered them.

The ravens swarmed the troll's corpse. I couldn't see it anymore beneath all those black, feathered bodies. They ripped at flesh, bone, and entrails with their beaks and talons then gobbled it all down. It was easy to imagine there'd be nothing left by dawn.

While the ravens worked, the Sullivans licked their wounds. The torn flesh knitted itself back together almost instantly. Once everyone's wounds were healed, we followed Sheriff Ron to a nearby stream, where we drank and washed and swam around for a bit.

When I emerged from the water, Brenna darted towards me and nipped my hind leg. It wasn't an attack. She didn't even break the skin. It was an invitation to play. One I happily accepted. I chased after her, and Brody ran after me. I thought he was on my side, but the next thing I knew he and Brenna had me cornered and tackled me to the ground.

I fought them the best I could. Brenna halted in mid-attack. She had a mischievous gleam in her eye. Me and Brody instantly knew what she

wanted to do. So did Mrs. Sullivan. She scrambled out of the way as we charged Sheriff Ron.

It took all three of us to bring him down, and that was only for a couple seconds. He was soon up, fighting us off. I don't know how he did it. It all happened so fast. But suddenly, he had Brody and Brenna pinned to the ground. Their necks were beneath his massive clawed hands. He grinned, daring me to do something. I let out a whimper and lay down on my belly.

Sheriff Ron released the twins. We then caught a faerie's scent and tore off after it. Brody and I raced to keep up with Brenna. Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan ran behind us, allowing us our space but at the same time keeping an eye on us, making sure we didn't get in any trouble.

We never caught the faery. Its scent slipped away from us. Sheriff Ron uttered a low growl and motioned for us to follow him into a clearing. The moon hung directly above us.

Maybe it was because of the magic of the night, but the stars seemed extraordinarily bright. The five of us crouched onto the cool, damp grass. Sheriff Ron raised his muzzle and let out a deep, melodious howl. Mrs. Sullivan joined him, followed by Brody, Brenna, and finally me.

They told me earlier that we howled for a number of reasons, to communicate with other pack members or with neighboring packs. We howled in joy and in sadness and to celebrate births and to mourn the dead. Sometimes, we howled simply because it felt good. It was our way of celebrating nature and our place in the world.

We kept howling until the Hours of the Wolf. It was time to patrol. We stayed close to the edge of town. It was quiet, eerily quiet, at first. I was on edge, waiting for some action.

That moment finally came when some ravens alerted us to potential trouble at the far end of town. In addition to getting rid of monster corpses, they also served as the Sullivans' early warning system. That was how they learned me and Miles were in trouble that one night.

We followed the ravens to some houses not far from where Miles lived. The ravens perched on some overhead branches and watched as we fought three nucklavee.

It was a silly name, but those things were seriously creepy. They were skinless guys with huge heads who rode skinless horses. In fact, it was hard to tell where the horses ended and the riders began.

The nucklavee breathed poisonous gas, so we had to use hit-and-run tactics. Sheriff Ron handled one by himself while Mrs. Sullivan took on another.

I wasn't expected to sit out this fight. I jumped in and attacked the third one along with Brody and Brenna. We worked as a team, one of us distracting a nucklavee while the other two attacked, until we finally brought it down. We then helped Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan bring down the other two.

It wasn't long after that when the first rays of sunlight rose over the horizon. The Hours of the Wolf were over. The Sullivans ran with me back to the clearing near my house. I Changed and headed home. I crept into the backyard, to where I had some wet wipes stashed so I could at least clean my hands and feet before going inside.

By that time, the adrenaline rush that had been carrying me the last few hours had faded, and I started thinking about everything that had gone on that night. I lingered over my hands as I cleaned them. Not that long ago they'd been claws. Claws that ripped and tore through flesh.

I probed my teeth with my tongue. Teeth that had been fangs, which had tasted blood. We may have drunk from the stream after that, but the taste still lingered. I remembered how it felt when my fangs tore through the troll's flesh and then the nucklavee's.

I hurried and cleaned up, not wanting to run the risk of Mom and Dad finding me. I sneaked inside, up to my room, and stashed the clothes I wore deep in my closet. Mrs. Sullivan said she'd wash them for me later.

I crawled into bed and tried to sleep but kept reliving my battles from earlier that night. Eventually, I did fall asleep. Luckily, it was Saturday, and I could get away with sleeping in. My phone woke me up around eleven thirty. It was Brody inviting me over for lunch.

Mrs. Sullivan welcomed me with a smile but could immediately tell something was wrong. I followed her into the kitchen and sat at the table with her, Sheriff Ron, Brody, and Brenna.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about what happened last night," I started. "Not just the ceremony or seeing Arduinna and the faeries. That was great. But later, the fight with the troll then the nucklavee."

"You made your first kill," said Brenna. "That's huge."

My stomach twisted up a bit. Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan gave me these sympathetic looks.

“She's right,” said Sheriff Ron. “Normally, the first kill is important for us.”

“But you weren't brought up in a pack, Dillon,” Mrs. Sullivan added. “We understand this is still new to you.”

“Don't get me wrong. I'm glad I was able to help you guys.” I swallowed a lump that had risen in my throat. “But I've never killed anything before. Not like that. I remember back in L.A. when I chased that guy. Deep down, I knew I didn't want to hurt him. This was different. Tonight – I wanted to kill. It'd be easy to say it wasn't me. That it was all the wolf. But I know that's not true.”

“It's a scary feeling when that urge to kill overtakes you the first time,” said Sheriff Ron.

“How do you deal with it?” I asked.

“This is going to sound weird,” said Sheriff Ron. “But you give in to it. Trust it.”

“Trust it?”

“We only feel that way when we're threatened,” said Mrs. Sullivan. “When we're facing another predator, like one of the Host – who wouldn't hesitate to kill any of us.”

“We do it to protect our territory,” said Sheriff Ron. “And everyone who lives in it.”

I managed a smile. “I guess it's going to take some getting used to.”

Sheriff Ron squeezed my shoulder. “We're here for you, kiddo. Anything you need, just say it.”

I smiled at all four of them. “Thanks.”

“So can Dillon come on patrol with us all the time now?” Brody asked.

“I don't see why not,” said Sheriff Ron.

Brody smiled excited. Brenna too.

“I guess that means I'm part of the pack now,” I said sort of joking.

The Sullivans looked at each other. Uh, oh. Had I said the wrong thing? Was it rude to say you're part of another lupoi's pack? Man, I still had a lot to learn.

Mrs. Sullivan smiled. “We've considered you part of our pack for a long time now, Dillon.”

The others smiled in agreement. I didn't know what to say. I'd never felt prouder. Or happier.

Chapter 17

After lunch, we invited Miles over. We filled him in on everything that went down last night, except for how close the nucklavee came to his house. We didn't want to scare him.

We decided to see a movie that afternoon. Brody had his phone handy, so he checked online for the show times. Mrs. Sullivan would drop us off at the theater. Brenna called Gabby, who said she'd meet us there. We had a couple hours to kill so Brody fired up the Xbox, and we played the new Street Fighter game. He and Brenna were up first.

A couple minutes into their game, Sheriff Ron strolled into the room.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything too important," he said.

Brody and Brenna didn't answer. They were focused on their game. Besides, it seemed like Sheriff Ron was talking to me anyway. He stood there, waiting for me to answer.

"Just waiting for my turn," I told him.

"Okay. 'Cause I was thinking you and I could take a little trip together."

"But we're going to the movies," said Brody.

"Don't worry. We'll be done by then."

"Done with what?" I asked.

"Well, you know all there is to know about us, and you've met the St. Clairs and seen Arduinna and her people. There's one other important figure in Harmony you need to meet."

My mouth went dry for a second. "Kesler?"

"The vampire?" Miles added in a hoarse whisper.

Hearing Kesler's name made Brenna turn her head for a moment. Brody took advantage and struck a critical blow to her game character.

"What?! No! That's not fair!" she screamed.

"Ha! Ha! Die, evil sister!"

The two continued playing furiously. Me and Miles watched them for a moment then returned our attention to Sheriff Ron.

“I’ve already called Nikolas,” he said. “He’s expecting us. When we’re done, I’ll drop you off at the theater in time to meet the others.”

I hesitated. Julian and Patrick would be there. They lived with Kesler. They were his wards. They hadn’t bothered us at school, not since that day. But they still gave us the stink-eye every time they saw us, walking through the halls or in the quad. I don’t think they’d be too happy about us dropping by their house.

Then again, it really wasn’t *their* house, was it? It was Kesler’s, and he’d invited us. And from what Sheriff Ron and Mr. St. Clair said, Kesler was okay. He was an ally.

“Okay then,” I said, getting up from the floor.

Miles sprang to his feet. “I’m going with you.”

Sheriff Ron shot him a surprised glance, so did Brody and Brenna. Poor Miles. He sounded so confident at first. Now, with everyone looking at him, he shifted nervously.

“I mean, can I come too?” he asked. “I’m part of this, right? I got to go see the St. Clairs and learn about what they do.”

Sheriff Ron agreed. We followed him downstairs to the garage. It looked like we’d be taking his Mustang. Sweet! To Miles’ disappointment, I called *shotgun* before him. No way was I going to miss out on riding in the front seat of that beauty.

We drove toward the south end of town, passing all the other houses and turning onto a private road, sort of like the one that led to the St. Clairs’ mansion.

Sheriff Ron hit a button on the intercom next to the gate. He exchanged a few words with someone inside, there was a buzz, and the gate swung open. All the way over, I kept imagining Kesler living in some dark and gloomy castle with dead trees in the front yard and a black cloud hanging overhead 24/7. Cue the thunder and lightning. Don’t forget the fog.

Instead, it was a beautiful stone mansion, almost the same size as the St. Clairs’, not quite as old, but just as regal looking. The front lawn was a healthy shade of green, so were the trees and shrubs. It looked like the last place in the world you’d expect to find a vampire. Maybe that was the point.

Sheriff Ron pulled his Mustang up to the front steps. Miles looked a little clammy. There was a bit of fear in his scent, and his heart was beating pretty fast. Then again, so was mine.

I kept reminding myself that Kesler was supposed to be a friend, and Sheriff Ron and Mr. St. Clair were cool with him so I should be too. We reached the front door. Sheriff Ron rapped on the door with a big brass knocker three times and waited. Moments later, the door opened, and a very large man in a dark suit appeared.

He was the size of a linebacker. His shaved head, black goatee, and the single gold ring through his left ear added to his already intimidating appearance.

Miles slid behind Sheriff Ron. I had to admit I was ready to do the same. It was because of his scent. It was like Julian and Patrick's, and instead of a Spark he had a coldness inside him, just like they did.

Sheriff Ron wasn't the least bit flustered. His pulse and scent remained calm. He nodded respectfully to the large vampire, who nodded back.

“Boys, this is Rolfe,” said Sheriff Ron. “He's Mr. Kesler's butler.”

Rolfe turned his attention to us and nodded. Me and Miles both nodded back.

“He's not as scary as he looks,” Sheriff Ron added.

Rolfe stepped aside and waved us in. Sheriff Ron strolled past. Me and Miles walked quickly, not wanting to let Sheriff Ron get too far ahead. As Rolfe followed us, he made a point of keeping his distance, like he was trying to put me and Miles at ease.

Up ahead, I noticed someone walking down the stairs. He was tall, lean and stylishly dressed. He reached the bottom of the stairs and flashed me and Miles a gleaming white smile.

This had to be Kesler.

“Good evening,” he said in a cheesy Transylvanian accent. “So glad you could – ” He couldn't finish whatever he was going to say, because he started laughing. “Sorry,” he said in what I assumed was his actual voice. “I couldn't help myself.”

“At least you didn't wear a cape,” said Sheriff Ron.

“I was going to.” Kesler held up his thumb and index finger. “I came this close.”

“I applaud your restraint.” Sheriff Ron turned to me and Miles. “Boys, Nikolas Kesler.”

Kesler extended his hand. “Dillon. Miles. It's good to finally meet you.”

I hesitated, just a bit, before taking his hand. Kesler seemed a little hurt but covered it with a smile.

“I hope Julian and Patrick have been behaving themselves,” he said.

“Yeah. No worries.” I looked to Miles, who nodded.

“Good. Let me know if they give you any more trouble. I mean it.” Kesler sounded sincere. “Why don't we go out on the patio. It's such a lovely morning. I'd hate to miss a minute of it. Rolfe, will bring us some refreshments? I've got a nice A positive. Or would you boys prefer O negative, the universal donor?”

The color drained from my face. Miles looked like he was about to puke.

Sheriff Ron chuckled. “He's kidding, boys.”

Kesler showed off a sly grin. “Well, sort of. But I do keep my fridge and pantry well stocked in case we have company of the non-blood drinking variety.”

I breathed a sigh of relief but still couldn't get completely comfortable. Both Kesler and Rolfe's scents made me uneasy, like I needed to keep my guard up. Sheriff Ron seemed aware of this and patted my back reassuringly.

We stepped onto the patio. Kesler stared into the distance and smiled. “Isn't this an amazing view? I fell in love with this spot the moment I saw it all those years ago.” He turned to me and Miles. “You do know my kind can tolerate sunlight, right? We don't burst into flames the way movies and TV say we do.”

“Yeah, we know,” I said. It was all in the books Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan had me read. “At least you don't,” I started to chuckle. “Sparkle.”

Miles chuckled too. Sheriff Ron grinned. Kesler rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“I can't tell you how much I loathe those wretched books,” he said.

Yeah, we definitely had that in common.

“I still thought you'd be, I don't know, paler,” Miles added.

Kesler let out a hearty laugh. “Yes, it's true. Our kind don't tan well. I use a good bronzer.”

Miles chuckled. I did too. I had to admit Kesler was pretty funny. We sat down at the patio table. Rolfe came out with a tray of refreshments, a pitcher of lemonade and some glasses, a plate of sandwiches, and another plate with chopped fruit and veggies.

“So Dillon, how are you enjoying our little town?” Kesler asked.

“It's definitely like nowhere else I've ever been.”

“Yes, I can imagine. And you, Miles, I hope you've come to appreciate how fortunate you are. To be shown what's ‘behind the curtain’ so to speak. To learn the secret machinations of the world and how the line between reality and fantasy is a purely human construct.”

“Yeah, it's been something else,” said Miles rather self-consciously.

Kesler eased back in his chair. “So boys, what have Ron and Leo told you about me so far?”

“Just the basics,” said Sheriff Ron. “How you came to Harmony. That you run the vampires in this region.”

“They said you're a friend,” Miles interjected. “That you're a good vampire.”

Kesler's eyes widened. He let out another hearty laugh. Miles glanced at me and Sheriff Ron, probably wondering why he was laughing.

Kesler soon settled down and took on a more serious tone. “Forgive me, Miles. I didn't mean to offend. It's just that – well, looking back over my five-hundred-odd years of existence and the atrocities I've committed, being referred to as a ‘good vampire.’” He smiled warmly. “I'm flattered, to say the least.”

“You've done a lot of good since you've come to Harmony,” said Sheriff Ron. “You've helped us out a great deal. And what you're trying to do for Julian and Patrick.”

“Yes, well, thank you, my friend. But as I've told you before, my actions are motivated out of guilt more than good will, in a vain attempt to make up for my past transgressions. The road to redemption is indeed a rocky one. As for Julian and Patrick?” Kesler shook his head. “They're proving to be my greatest test to date.”

Then, almost as if on cue, Julian stepped onto the patio. He stopped short and glared at us. I could feel Miles' fear spike. He glanced at me and Sheriff Ron for reassurance.

Kesler turned to face Julian. “Yes?”

Julian smirked then cocked his head towards me and Sheriff Ron. “I thought I smelled dogs on the property.” Then at Miles. “And a loser.”

Kesler glowered at him. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of the killer that lay beneath his sophisticated surface. “Watch your tone, child.”

“Technically, I'm not a child,” Julian replied.

“Yet you insist on acting like one. This is my home, remember? I decide who comes. And who goes.”

That last bit was definitely a threat. The menace Kesler exuded was almost palpable. The killing rage I felt last night, with both the troll and nucklavee, began to surface. I caught Sheriff Ron giving me a look, urging me to hold it together.

Julian stood there for a moment, defiant, before finally walking back into the house. “I hope you at least put some paper down on the chairs.”

Kesler seethed and then let out a frustrated sigh, which soon turned to a sorrowful smile. “I'm sorry about that. I did Julian a favor, taking him off the streets. If he's not careful, he'll not only find himself out of my house but out of my region as well. And no longer under my protection.”

“I don't think anyone would hold it against you,” said Sheriff Ron. “You've given that boy every opportunity.”

“Thank you. But as Julian himself reminded us, technically he isn't a child. He hasn't gone into specifics about his past. Unlike Patrick, who was only turned last year, I figure Julian has been stuck at his current age for at least ten years, maybe even longer. I try to keep that in mind when I deal with him.”

Kesler sat silent for a moment but then put on the same showroom smile he did earlier. He asked me and Miles about school and Sheriff Ron about the charity fun-run he sponsored.

No offense to Sheriff Ron, but that was kind of a snore. I asked Kesler a question about how the vampire council worked. Miles jumped in and started asking more questions. He sounded even more interested than I was. He hung on Kesler's every word with a mixture of fear and fascination.

Mr. St. Clair had already explained how an elder ruled over a region. Kesler went on to add how each region was separated into what were called fiefdoms. Each fiefdom was ruled by one of the elder's lieutenants.

A police force called the Red League kept order and made sure the local vampires followed the rules, such as only feeding on willing victims. Yuck. The thought of there being people who actually volunteered to be vampire food made me a bit queasy. I could tell Sheriff Ron wasn't exactly cool with it either, but Kesler assured us these people were taken care of, both physically and financially.

“What about turning someone?” Miles asked.

“We have strict rules on that,” said Kesler. “Not just anyone can be turned. They need to be approved by an elder.”

Kesler went on to explain how he visited each fiefdom regularly and how the elders met every year in a secluded location to report the goings-on in their regions. I was about to reach for another sandwich when Sheriff Ron checked his watch and said we needed to leave and meet the others at the movie theater.

Kesler walked us to the front door. I noticed Patrick sitting at the bottom of the staircase. He stood up when we approached.

“Hey,” he said.

I braced myself, expecting trouble. Only Patrick didn't give off any sort of menacing vibe.

“What's up?” I said.

“Julian said you were here. I just – I just wanted to say I'm sorry for everything. For being such a jerk. Especially to you, Miles. It won't happen again. I swear.”

Me and Miles glanced at each other. I looked to Kesler, thinking he might have had something to do with this, but he appeared just as surprised as we were. Not to mention proud.

“Thanks,” I told Patrick.

“Yeah. Thanks,” added Miles.

Patrick gave a hesitant smile. His gaze dropped to the floor for a moment then returned to me and Miles. “I guess I'll see you guys at school on Monday.”

“Sure. See ya,” I said.

Patrick nodded and started up the stairs. Kesler watched him, still smiling proudly. “Dillon. Miles. It was nice meeting you, boys. I hope we see each other soon.”

He held out his hand. This time, I didn't hesitate before taking it.

Chapter 18

I wouldn't be training with the Sullivans after school that day. Mrs. Sullivan was in charge of putting together the Valentine's Day dance at school that night and had to get things ready.

Valentine's Day. In elementary school, that meant cheap candy and little cards with cartoon characters on them dropped into paper bags decorated with construction paper hearts. Now, in middle school, it meant dressing up and going to a dance. An actual dance.

I doubt I'd have gone if Brody and the others weren't going. Miles probably wouldn't have gone either. I was so worried about embarrassing myself that I spent every spare minute practicing dancing to hip-hop videos I found on Youtube – in the privacy of my room of course.

Not to brag, but I actually got pretty good. After some practice, I was able to do all sorts of rolls, waves, and slides and put them together into different combinations.

The day of the dance I was ready. Mom drove me and Miles to the school. From there, we followed the crowd to the gym.

Mrs. Sullivan and the other parent volunteers did a great job decorating. There were streamers and bunting, and a big disco ball hung from the ceiling. The light reflecting off it made the gym look like it was full of stars. At the far end, a DJ played a song by Kid Ink. There was even one of those Love Test machines for fun.

We spotted Mrs. Sullivan at one of the refreshment tables dishing out pizza and sodas. We were supposed to pay a dollar for each, and we had money, but Mrs. Sullivan gave us each a slice and a drink on the house.

Since Brody and the girls weren't there yet, me and Miles hung out with Mrs. Sullivan. Not a lot of kids were dancing yet. Most of them were hanging out along the walls. Some parents had volunteered as chaperones. They walked around, making sure that the kids who were dancing weren't getting too close.

Brody, Brenna, and Gabby finally showed up. Mrs. Sullivan slipped them some pizza and drinks too. By the time they finished eating, the DJ

started playing a song by Lil Wayne. More kids started making their way to the dance floor, including us.

Here it was, the moment I'd been preparing for all week. This was where watching all those hip-hop videos and practicing all those steps was finally going to pay off. But as soon as we found our spot, my mind went completely blank. I forgot every single move I'd learned.

Everyone was already dancing. I couldn't just stand there. I had to do something, so I just started to relax and move to the beat. So far, so good. At least no one was laughing at me.

After a few minutes, some of the moves came back to me. I began scuba-hopping, breaking it up with some incline waves, and then followed up with a moonwalk that got some cheers, not just from Brody and the others but from some kids around us too.

The next song began. Gabby danced towards me.

"Doesn't Brenna look great?" she asked.

I glanced at Brenna, who kept dancing. I caught a tiny smile on her face when she spotted me looking at her. Yeah, she did look pretty nice. She had on a black skirt and a turquoise top. Her hair was curled just a bit. She even had on some lip-gloss, eyeliner, and a little blush. She could've come straight out of *Seventeen* or one of those other magazines girls read.

Gabby was about to ask me something else, only I got distracted by some of the other kids who were dancing near us. They were staring at Miles, laughing and pointing. He wasn't exactly the most graceful or coordinated dancer. One kid started mimicking his moves, which made the rest laugh even more.

Miles soon noticed he was being made fun of. His whole body shook. I couldn't tell if he was going to cry or scream. He bolted from the gym. I was about to go after him, but Gabby stopped me.

"Me and Brody can take care of this," she told me and Brenna. "You two stay. Dance."

Gabby winked at Brenna then followed Brody outside to check on Miles. The kids who'd made fun of him were still laughing. They were so proud of themselves.

My fists clenched. A wolf growl rose to my lips. I wanted to rip them apart.

I then felt Brenna's hand on my shoulder and immediately started to relax.

“Come on. Let’s just dance, okay?” she said.

We stepped further onto the dance floor. I took a deep breath and swayed with the music. Brenna gave me a playful shove.

“Got any more sick moves you can show me?” she asked.

I nodded and then started doing a heel-toe puppet then a heel-toe slide. Brenna laughed, in a good way, and then started copying my moves.

The song ended. My throat was dry.

“I’m going to get a soda. You want one?” I asked.

“Yeah. Sprite. I’m going to the little girls’ room.” She pointed to a patch of gym wall. “Meet me over there?”

“You got it.”

I headed towards the refreshment table. Mrs. Sullivan gave me this funny smile.

“Having a good time?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“You and Brenna were dancing up a storm out there.”

“Yeah. She’s pretty good.”

Mrs. Sullivan stared at me for a moment, still smiling and giving me a look I couldn’t quite figure out. “Well, don’t let me keep you,” she said.

I nodded and headed off. I soon had company.

“Hey, Dillon.” It was a girl from my homeroom named Missy.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Enjoying the dance?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty cool.”

“You’re a great dancer.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Yeah, well, you know.”

Missy blushed a little. She turned away for a moment then said, “I saw you with Brenna Sullivan. I know you guys hang out a lot. Is there anything going on between you two?”

“No. We’re just friends.”

Missy smiled again. She was cute with green eyes and red hair. “Maybe you and I can have the next dance then.”

“Sure.”

I spotted Brody and Gabby returning — without Miles unfortunately. I then caught Brenna staring at me and Missy. Well, not staring. Scowling

was more like it. She locked eyes with Missy, who immediately cringed.

Brenna then turned her scowl on me full force, only her bottom lip quivered at the same time, like she was going to cry. She ran past Brody and Gabby outside.

Brody looked at me like he was trying to figure out what was going on. Gabby, on the other hand, shook her head, obviously disappointed with me for some reason.

I turned to Missy, who grinned nervously. “You sure about that just-friends-thing? I think Brenna might have something else in mind.”

Did she? Really?

Missy pointed off into the crowd. “I’m going back to my friends. It was nice talking to you, Dillon. I’ll see you in homeroom tomorrow.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

Missy slunk away. I noticed Gabby was gone again. She probably went after Brenna. Brody was still there. He just shrugged and headed over to the refreshment table.

Me? I suddenly felt the need for some air and walked outside. I made sure to go out the opposite door so I didn’t run into Brenna or Gabby.

There were other people outside too. I wandered away from them and sat on one of the nearby planters and stared at the two sodas that were still in my hands.

“I’ll take the Sprite if you don’t want it,” someone said.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

It was Julian.

Chapter 19

“Unless you’re going to drink both? That’s cool,” said Julian.

I tossed him the Sprite. He thanked me, popped it open, and took a swig. “Mind if I sit?”

“Free country.”

Julian gave me a half-smile. “You sure know how to make a guy feel welcome.”

I tensed up a bit. Even though Julian wasn’t doing anything threatening, just having him this close put me on edge. “We’re not exactly BFFs.”

Julian smirked. “Fair enough.”

“What do you want?”

The smirk faded from his lips. “I just wanted to apologize for – you know.”

I stared at Julian. He looked and sounded sincere, and if he’d been lying his heart would have skipped a beat. Then again, maybe he was a really good actor. Or a really good liar.

“You should be apologizing to Miles. Not me,” I said.

“Hey. You got it. Whatever it takes.”

It was my turn to smirk now. “Sorry, but where is this coming from? Why the sudden need to make nice with me?”

Julian fiddled with the Sprite can in his hands. “Kesler told me I’ve gone too far. If I don’t shape up, I’m out of here. I’m on my own again.”

“So you’re doing this to score points with Kesler?”

“Yeah.”

“Not because you’ve had a sudden change of heart?”

Julian grinned. “You’ve got to have a heart in order to do that.” He tried to play it off like a joke, but I caught a touch of sadness in his voice. “I’ll be honest. I was a monster even before I got turned. A vicious little brat who only cared about himself and hurt people for the fun of it.”

“So I guess becoming a vampire was kind of an upgrade,” I said.

Julian laughed. “Or a downgrade. Depends on how you look at it.” He chugged the last of his Sprite, crushed and tossed the can. “Someone told me you’re from L.A. Is that right?”

I nodded.

“Where about?”

“Hollywood Hills.”

“Could you be a little more vague? That’s kind of a big area.”

“Lakeridge Estates.”

Julian smiled. “Oh, yeah. Over by the reservoir. That had to be handy when you had to, you know ...” He howled.

I smiled back. “Yeah, it was.”

“You know Chuck Blake?”

“Chuck Blake?” I thought about the name for a moment. “I knew a Jerry Blake. I think he has a brother named Chuck. He graduated from college a couple years ago.”

Julian smiled sadly. “Right. I forget sometimes how much time has passed since, you know . . .”

An uncomfortable silence settled over us. I wasn’t quite sure what to say. For a moment, Julian no longer looked like a vicious vampire. And more like a lost little kid.

“Lakeridge Estates, huh,” he then added. “I grew up in Brentwood.”

“Nice,” I said. You had to have serious bank to live in that neighborhood.

“You ever get out to Laurel Canyon?” he asked.

“Once or twice.”

Julian got this faraway look in his eyes. “I went to a party out there, the night I got turned. Anyone explain to you yet how we turn humans?”

“You inject a venom through your fangs. Like a snake.”

“Give the man a prize. I still have no idea what happened that night. One moment, I’m standing out on the balcony getting some air. Next thing I know, I’m being pulled over the side. I landed in some bushes, fangs tearing into my throat. I never got a good look at the vampire who turned me. I couldn’t tell you if it was a man or a woman, how old they were, nothing.”

“When did you figure out, you know, what you’d become?”

“That night. The moment you get turned, you get hungry. There were these migrant workers camped out nearby. They were my first victims. After that, I didn’t know what to do, so I just went back to the party, said I

had an accident. Someone wanted to take me to the emergency room, but I said I was okay. I cleaned myself up and went home.”

“What about your parents?” I asked. “Were you able to keep it a secret from them?”

“For a while, but they eventually found out. They were scared. But I told them how I was attacked and how I couldn’t control myself, and that I needed blood to stay alive.” Julian smirked. “They felt sorry for me. Said they’d help keep my secret.”

“They did?” I didn’t even bother hiding my shock.

Julian didn’t seem to notice. Either that or he didn’t care. He just went on talking. I don’t know why I kept listening. I could’ve gotten up and walked away any time. At least that’s what I kept telling myself.

“It wasn’t long after that, the local vampire authority, this guy named Kristof, came looking for me,” Julian continued. “You see, at the time, I wasn’t too good at disposing of my victims, and Kristof had people all over the city who knew what to look for, so they eventually found me. I think Kristof took pity on me because of how young I was. He laid down the law, explained the rules, how killings had to be sanctioned, how we could only feed from willing victims, and how we needed permission to turn someone. Breaking the rules meant death, not just for me but my parents too, if they were caught helping me. I tried, at first, I really did. But – you’ve been to the zoo, right? Ever look into the eyes of a tiger in its enclosure? At first, it’s angry at being held captive, but in the end they just give up, and there’s this deep sadness in them.” Julian paused. “Let’s just say I could relate.”

“So you started killing again.”

“My mom and dad helped me the best they could, but the Red League, you know, the vampire cops, eventually caught up with us. So we ran, living off whatever money Dad was able to pull together. We’d settle down somewhere for a few weeks, a month. But the urge to kill was too strong. I couldn’t stop. And there were Red League everywhere, every city, every state. Eventually, they’d catch on to us, and we’d have to run again. This went on for years.” Julian shuddered. “They got Dad when we were hiding in Chicago. He tried to hold them off while me and Mom escaped. A few months later, they got Mom when we were hiding in Miami. She tried to hold them off while I got away – just like Dad did.”

Julian’s breath became heavy, like he was trying to hold back a sob.

“I was on my own after that. I don't know how long. Eventually, I ended up in San Jose, where I caught Nikolas' attention and – well, you know the rest.” Julian let out a huge sigh. “I can't believe I told you all that.”

“Me neither,” I mumbled.

“I've never told anyone any of that stuff.”

“Not even Patrick?”

Julian shook his head.

“Why me?”

“Because you impressed me, the way you stood up to me, to protect Miles.”

“I was just trying to be a good friend.”

Julian smirked. “Guess I've never had one of those before.”

I didn't know what to say, or if I should have felt sorry for him or not. I then spotted Brody and Brenna approaching. Gabby and Miles trailed behind them.

“Everything okay here?” Brody asked. He and Brenna looked ready for a fight.

“It's all good,” said Julian.

“My brother wasn't talking to you,” said Brenna.

All eyes were on me now.

“I'm fine,” I said. “We're just talking.”

Brody and Brenna's attention returned to Julian.

“I can tell when I'm not wanted.” He nodded to me. “See you tomorrow, D.”

He walked back to the gym. Gabby and Miles joined Brody and Brenna. The four of them stood around me.

“D.?” said Gabby. “Are you two BFFs now or something?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You two did look pretty chummy,” said Brody.

I glanced at Julian, moments before he disappeared inside. “We were just talking.”

Chapter 20

I went on patrol with the Sullivans later that night. Things were quiet until a raven alerted us to some trouble in the southern woods, near Kesler's mansion. We followed it to a dense grove of trees. On the way, we caught the scent of our targets.

A growl rose in my throat. The Sullivans growled too. We maneuvered close to one another while scanning the grove, trying to pinpoint the source of the scent.

It was coming from all around us. We were surrounded.

Six winged figures exploded from the brush, letting out these ear-splitting screeches. They were dracs, these dragon men with sharp fangs, talons, and barbed tongues that released a paralyzing venom.

Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan took on three of them. The other three buzzed me, Brody, and Brenna, trying to slash us with their talons.

A drac swiped at my face. I caught its wrist between my jaws and thrashed my head, shaking him like a stuffed animal. My fangs pierced flesh and ground through bone.

The drac shrieked as I bit off his hand and spit it on the ground. It flew around in a frenzy, clutching its bloody stump, before crashing into the brush. I thought about going after him and finishing him off when I noticed Brody and Brenna had their hands full with the three other dracs.

I charged the one Brody tangled with. Brody must have sensed me coming, because he dove out of the way as I leapt. The distracted drac had no idea what hit him as I drove him to the ground and tore out his throat.

That should have been the last of them, but soon more dracs rushed out of the grove. Fortunately, since the trees were so dense, they couldn't use their flight to their full advantage.

I faced off with my opponent, ducking and dodging its talons. I swiped with my claws, driving it back. For a moment, I thought I had him beat. The drac then spun its head at me. Its whip-like tongue shot out and pierced the side of my neck.

I let out a yelp and dropped to the ground, my body twitching and convulsing. Every nerve was on fire. I glanced at the Sullivans. They could see I was in trouble but were in no position to help me.

The drac stuck its face in mine. Saliva dripped from its jagged teeth. I swore it was smiling, gloating, knowing it had me beat.

Something landed on the drac's back.

Not something. Someone. Julian.

He wrapped his arms around the drac's torso and sank his fangs into its throat. The drac shrieked and tried to throw him, but Julian was like a pit-bull. No way was he going to let go, not unless he wanted to.

The drac began thrashing less and less. Blood gushed from its throat and ran down its chest. Julian withdrew his fangs. The drac crumpled to the ground.

Julian used his sleeve to wipe the blood from his mouth as he walked toward me. The Sullivans darted between us. Sheriff Ron, Brody, and Brenna growled and bared their fangs while Mrs. Sullivan Changed back to human form and ran to my side.

"Dillon, honey, you have to Change back," she said. "It's the only way to drive out the poison."

I whimpered and whined.

"I know it hurts, baby. But you have to be strong."

I shut my eyes and focused through the pain. The Change back took longer than usual, but I could literally feel the poison being driven out of my blood. It burned the entire time. I don't think I would have made it if Mrs. Sullivan hadn't been there.

When it was over, I sat there, trying to catch my breath. Mrs. Sullivan helped me to my feet. Once I was up, I could stand on my own. Sheriff Ron, Brody, and Brenna still faced down Julian, who didn't try to fight back or even run away.

He smirked. "I thought I'd at least get a thank you for saving your boy's life."

Sheriff Ron, Brody, and Brenna glanced at me and Mrs. Sullivan. We both nodded, encouraging them to Change back. They did but still looked like they were ready for a fight.

I stepped forward and offered Julian my hand. "Thank you."

Mrs. Sullivan was next. Sheriff Ron shook Julian's hand but still eyed him suspiciously. Brody and Brenna just stood there, tense, like they were

ready in case Julian made a move.

“You mind telling us what you were doing out here?” Sheriff Ron asked.

Julian pointed off in the distance. “I live just over there, remember?”

“That’s not answering my question.”

Julian sighed. “I was out hunting.”

Sheriff Ron looked as if he didn’t like the sound of that. Neither did the other Sullivans.

“Chill,” said Julian. “My prey these days are strictly four-legged.” He smiled proudly. “Got me a mountain lion. Man, was he tough.”

“You mind telling me where I might find this mountain lion?” Sheriff Ron asked.

“About a quarter mile from here, heading toward town. I guess that’s two good deeds I did today.”

Sheriff Ron looked Julian up-and-down. There was dried blood on his sweatshirt, beneath the fresher drac’s blood. It could have come from the mountain lion he mentioned.

“Am I free to go, Sheriff?” Julian asked sarcastically.

Sheriff Ron bristled, obviously not appreciating his tone.

“You can go,” he said. He turned to Mrs. Sullivan. “You and I’ll stay, make sure this gets cleaned up.” To Brody and Brenna. “You two take Dillon home.”

The twins nodded. I was about to Change when Brenna smiled at me and said, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

I smiled back. “Thanks.”

At least she wasn’t angry at me anymore.

The three of us made it home without any problem. I sneaked inside, showered, dressed, and was downstairs in time for breakfast. Mom drove me and Miles to school. We met up with Brody, Brenna, and Gabby at our usual hangout spot.

Gabby rushed up and hugged me. “Oh, my God, Dillon. Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Thanks.”

Brody and Brenna must have told her about what happened. Miles looked at us, like he wondered what was going on. We sat down, and I told him all about it. He seemed a little upset that he was the last to know, but I

mean, come on, it's not like I could've told him earlier when my mom drove us to school.

"Julian saved you?" Miles seemed stuck on that particular detail.

"I know. That's – weird," said Gabby.

"And that whole part about him out hunting?" added Miles. "I don't believe it. That's too much of coincidence."

"No. My dad did find the mountain lion Julian was talking about," said Brody. "It was exactly where he said it was. And drained of most of its blood."

Miles fidgeted. "I still wouldn't trust him."

"He's right," said Brenna. "He probably saved you so he could get something in return."

Brody and Gabby each nodded in agreement. What they said did make sense. The other night, at the dance, he did say he was being nice in order to earn points with Kesler.

But still, he saved my life. No matter what his motivation was, I owed him.

I checked the time on my phone. Only a couple minutes until the first bell, and I needed to use the bathroom. I said see-you-later to the others, and as I walked through the quad, I passed where Julian and Patrick and their friends hung out. Julian nodded, hello. Patrick too. The rest of their group stared at them, wondering why they were even acknowledging my existence.

After using the bathroom, I noticed Julian's reflection in mirror as I washed my hands. I turned to face him.

"That's something else movies and TV got wrong," he said. "We *can* see ourselves in a mirror." Julian approached and stood face-to-face with his reflection. "A lot of us wish we couldn't. Reflections make you *reflect*, and it's hard looking at yourself after thinking about the things you've done." He turned to face me. "How you doing? You okay?"

"I'm fine. Thanks. Again."

"I was glad I could help." He spotted the questioning look on my face. "You don't believe me?"

"At the dance, you did say the only reason you were being nice was to earn points with Kesler," I reminded him.

"True. And when he checks in with Sheriff Ron and finds out I saved you, that's going to earn me even more points. But that wasn't the only

reason why.”

“Okay. What was your other reason?”

“Uh, I didn’t want to see you die? Although, you’re starting to make me regret that.”

I sighed. “Sorry.”

“It’s cool. I understand. I am a big, evil vampire.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you were thinking it. I didn’t ask to be this, Dillon. I got turned against my will. I’d think you could relate. You didn’t ask to be a lupoi, right? You had no idea what was going to happen to you.”

He had me there. “But I’ve never-”

“Never what? Killed someone? A lot of someones? But you might have. Ever think about that? If you hadn’t ended up in Harmony, met the Sullivans, learned how to control the Change?”

A chill ran through me. I thought back to that night in L.A. when I chased that guy down and what could have happened if he hadn’t gotten away in time.

“You’ve got someone who wants to help you now,” I reminded him. “Kesler.”

Julian returned his attention to the mirror. “Yeah. Let’s hope it’s not too late.”

The first bell rang. I could hear kids moving through the halls, on their way to homeroom. Julian stood in front of the mirror, unmoving.

I started towards the door. “I got to go.”

Julian didn’t respond. He just continued to stare at his reflection.

Chapter 21

I saw a lot more of Julian that week. We'd talk in the halls on the way to classes, stuff like that. It really seemed like he was making an effort to be friends.

Patrick too. Me and him had Social Studies together. Before, we barely talked to each other. But now we worked on assignments in class together and had a pretty good time doing it. I began to imagine the two of us actually becoming friends.

On Saturday, Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan took a day trip to San Francisco. We were on our own. Unfortunately, we had nothing to do. We'd seen all the movies at the theater and didn't feel like playing video games. Me, Brody and Brenna, Gabby and Miles kicked back in the living room. We had the TV on, but no one was really watching it.

Brenna was lying on the couch. She quickly sat up and chucked a pillow at me.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"Cause I felt like it. This is pathetic, you guys. Mom and Dad are going to be gone all day. And what are we doing? Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Gabby glanced up from her iPhone. "If you've got any bright ideas, I'm all ears."

Brenna flashed a wicked grin. "How about we go ghost hunting?"

Gabby and Brody whipped their heads toward Brenna.

"What?" they said simultaneously.

"You heard me. This is the perfect opportunity."

"Wait. Ghosts?" Miles looked just as surprised as me. "There are ghosts in Harmony?"

"How come none of you ever said anything about this before?" I asked.

Brody frowned. "There's a good reason."

"Ghosts have a reputation for being unpredictable," Gabby added. "I mean, coven members contact spirits every now and then, usually our

ancestors. They're plugged into the universe and know things beyond the reach of us mere mortals."

"Aren't ghosts and spirits the same thing?" Miles asked.

Gabby shook her head. "Spirits live in a different world but visit this one. Technically, faeries and the Host are spirits, but ghosts are stuck in this world for one reason or another. They tend to haunt the place where they died or somewhere that was special to them in life."

Brenna rubbed her hands together. "Those are the ghosts I'm talking about."

"Do you know how much trouble we'd get in?" Brody asked.

"Dummy, Mom and Dad aren't going to be back until six. They'll never know."

Gabby shrugged. "I'm in."

She and Brenna turned to me and Miles. Talk about your peer pressure.

"I'll go," said Miles, trying to hide the quake in his voice.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

Miles launched himself from the floor where he was sitting.

"Let's do this," he said, sounding overly eager, like he had something to prove.

Brody sighed. "Guess I better go too. Make sure nothing happens to you guys."

"Sweet!" yelled Brenna, leaping from the couch.

Gabby pointed in the air. "To the Mystery Machine."

That got a laugh from all of us. As we left the house, we discussed who would be what member of the Scooby-Gang. Brody was Fred of course. Brenna wanted to be Daphne, which was sort of a shock, unless she meant Daphne from the live-action movies who knew karate. Gabby was happy being Velma, the smart girl.

That left me as Scooby and Miles as Shaggy. I was cool with that. I mean, Shaggy and Scooby got the most screen time out of all of them. But Miles was upset. I don't think he liked being associated with one of the most cowardly characters on the show.

"So where are we going?" he asked rather gruffly.

"There's a house about a half hour from here," said Brenna. "On Steiger Road."

"I had a feeling you'd pick that one," said Gabby.

“What? It's close, and it's been abandoned for years. The ghost who lives there is supposed to be our age. I looked it up online. Back in the sixties, this family, the Evans's, used to live in the house. Mom, dad, and two kids. The son, Shawn, just up and vanished one day without a trace. No witnesses. Nothing. After a few years, they gave up looking. They thought Shawn was dead, so they sold the house, moved out of Harmony, and never returned. Since then, all sorts of people have lived in the house. But let's just say they never stayed long.”

“How come you can't put this much effort into your schoolwork?” Brody asked.

Brenna slapped his shoulder. “Because I'm not a big nerd like you.”

Brody fired back. The two went at it for a few more minutes before finally settling down. Maybe it was the excitement of seeing an actual haunted house, but the thirty-minute walk went by awfully quick. We were soon there.

The house was old, with high arched windows and doors. Most of the windows were broken and boarded up. The wood in the walls looked rotten, and the roof sagged in places. I wasn't so scared about ghosts anymore and was more worried about the house falling in on us if we went inside.

The only relatively new things about the house were the “NO TRESPASSING” and “KEEP OUT” signs posted all around. Brenna didn't even glance at them. Neither did Miles. He looked just as eager as her to find a way inside.

“I still think this is a bad idea,” said Brody.

“I heard you the first dozen times,” said Brenna.

She managed to wrench open the gate to the backyard. Brody stood watch as we slipped through. He joined us a moment later. At the same time, Brenna found an open window.

The inside of the house didn't look much better. There were holes that had been kicked and punched in the walls and graffiti everywhere. The carpets were soiled, and there were empty bottles and cans, and rotten food all over.

“So now what?” I asked Brenna.

“We start looking around. What do you think?”

“Stay together,” said Brody. “No one goes off on their own.”

“Whatever,” said Brenna.

“Whoa.” Gabby clutched her arms, shaking. “Is it me or did the temperature just drop like a bajillion degrees?”

Miles was shaking too. I opened my mouth to speak but stopped when I saw my breath.

The window we’d crawled through slammed shut. All five of us jumped then looked at each another.

“The first person to say ‘that was just the wind’ gets smacked,” Brenna declared.

“This was your idea, remember?” I told her. “Can you pick up anyone or anything else in the house?” I asked Brody. “Because I’m getting nothing.”

“Me too,” he said.

“Uh, hello? You think a ghost is actually going to have a scent?” scoffed Brenna. “Get real you two. Gabby?”

Gabby held her necklace. The stone glowed brightly.

“There’s definitely something here,” she said, her voice trembling a bit. “Whatever it is, it’s powerful. I mean, really powerful.”

“Can you get a lock on it?” I asked. As I stepped back, I bumped into Miles, almost knocking him over. He’d been standing right behind me, as close as he possibly could.

Gabby’s eyes darted around the room. “I don’t know. It’s like it’s everywhere.”

The windows shook. The cupboards and cabinets in the kitchen opened and slammed on their own. Miles yelped. I offered some reassurance but had to admit I was kind of freaked-out myself, so were Brody, Brenna, and Gabby. It was unnerving facing someone or something that not even our heightened senses could detect.

A voice echoed through the room. “You shouldn’t have come here,” it said in a harsh whisper, almost like a hiss. “You shouldn’t have trespassed on my domain.”

Gabby shrieked as bottles and cans and gobs of rotten food started flying at us. Brody, Brenna, and I started to Change. Not completely. We were just a bit wolfy, with claws and fangs to protect ourselves.

“Guys, get close!” Gabby ordered.

“Where’s Miles?” I asked.

I picked up his scent. It was heavy with fear and led through the kitchen and outside. I wanted to go after him, but Brody and Brenna

dragged me to Gabby.

Her necklace lit up again, and a circle of green flame surrounded us. It formed some sort of barrier. Bottles and cans bounced off it. Judging by the strain on Gabby's face, I wondered how long she'd be able to keep this up.

"Feel my power," the voice continued. "Feel my wrath! I am the cold hand of death! The creature in the pit! The devil of the deep!"

A spectral image appeared, hovering before us. A huge reptilian beast that looked like it could swallow us whole.

"I am the lizard king! I can do anything!"

The flames in Gabby's circle flickered. She obviously wasn't going to be able to protect us much longer.

"Wait!" another voice called out from the stairway. A voice I recognized.

It was Patrick.

"It's all right," he said. "I know these guys. They're cool."

"Really?" The voice sounded different now, like a boy our age. "Oh, wow."

All the garbage that had been swirling through the air dropped to the floor. The spectral beast vanished. In its place was a skinny African-American boy our age with a big afro. He wore a white t-shirt with a denim vest and jeans that flared at the knees and were decorated with colorful patches.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I wasn't going to hurt anybody. I just wanted to scare you. I was going to let you go. Honest."

"You're him, aren't you?" said Brody. "You're Shawn Evans."

"In the flesh." Shawn laughed. "Oh, bummer. Guess I can't say that anymore, can I?"

Patrick joined us now. We all looked to him for some sort of explanation.

"I heard the stories about this place. About a month ago, I decided to check it out. Got the haunted house treatment too. But everything's cool now. I hang out with Shawn whenever I can."

"Yeah, Patrick totally blew my mind when he told me he was a vampire, you know, like Christopher Lee in *Dracula*." Shawn pointed to me, Brody, and Brenna. "And you guys, you're werewolves, right? Like Oliver Reed in that movie — what's it called?—*Curse of the Werewolf*." To Gabby. "And you, you're a witch, right?"

“I prefer *sorceress*,” said Gabby.

Shawn smiled and nodded like a bobble-head. “Cool. Right on. I totally dig.”

Everyone started introducing themselves. In that moment, I realized I had forgotten about Miles. I excused myself and went after him, following his scent outside.

I found him in the backyard, hiding behind some bushes.

“Miles? It's me, Dillon. Everything's okay. You can come out now.”

The bushes rustled. Miles peered out from behind them. His eyes were red and puffy. He'd definitely been crying. As I approached, he stood up and dusted himself off. I told him about Shawn and how he was just trying to scare us.

“I can't believe I ran away like that,” said Miles.

“It's okay. I don't think the others will hold it against you.”

“Yeah, it's not like I could have done anything to help.”

“Miles – ” I struggled to find the right thing to say. “Look, we were all scared. Even Brody and Brenna.”

“At least you guys can do something about it. You've got power. All of you have something. I've got nothing.” Miles wiped his eyes. “I hate it, Dillon. I hate being scared all the time. Scared of my dad. Scared of going to school. Now there's all this supernatural stuff. I really thought I could handle it. But I can't. It's just another thing to be scared of.”

“Miles. We're here for you. We won't let anything happen to you.”

“I know. It's just – I'm sick of it.” Miles started walking away. “I'm sick of being scared all the time.”

Chapter 22

I caught up to Miles at the front gate. It took some effort, but I managed to talk him into coming back inside the house. Everyone was still in the living room, gathered around Shawn.

He held up his hand to Brody. “Up high.”

Brody's hand hit Shawn's with an audible slap.

Shawn then held his hand at waist level. “Down low.”

Brody went to slap Shawn's hand again. Only this time, it passed right through.

“Ah! Too slow.”

Patrick had obviously seen that trick before, but Brody was amazed, and so were the girls. I was too. I turned to Miles to get his reaction, but he just looked confused.

“What's going on?” he asked.

“You can't see him?” I asked.

Miles shook his head.

“Yeah. Normal people can't see me unless I want them to,” said Shawn. “But I can only do it for a little while.”

Gabby approached Miles.

“Here, let me try something.”

Her necklace lit up, and she passed her hand over his face. Miles shook his head and blinked rapidly. “Whoa. He's — ” He pointed at Shawn. “I mean, he's — he's right — ”

“I take it Miles can see him now,” said Brenna.

Miles nodded. Shawn flashed him the peace sign.

“And people can touch you too,” I stated in disbelief. “Brody's hand hit yours.”

“Oh, yeah. I can totally control it. Normally, I'm like this.” Shawn passed his hand through the wall then pulled it back out again. “I can make myself solid but only for a little while.” His hand went for the wall again. This time it rested against it. “I can move stuff around too, take on different forms — but you've already seen that. It takes a lot out of me though.”

“What did it feel like?” I asked Brody.

“Cold. But other than that like normal flesh,” he answered.

“I got to tell you, I'm loving those jeans,” Gabby told Shawn.

Shawn smiled and stuck out one leg at a time. “Thanks. I did the patches myself. So how about it? What do you say we take this party upstairs?”

We all glanced at one another.

“Sure. Why not?” said Brody.

“Groovy.”

And like that, Shawn vanished. We then heard music coming from the back of the house. Loud guitar rock. We turned to Patrick for an explanation.

“I'm still getting used to him disappearing like that.” He waved for us to follow him. “We're set up in one of the rooms upstairs. In case people drop by unexpectedly.”

“Does one of you keep lookout?” Brenna asked.

Patrick shook his head. “No need. Shawn's connected to this house. He can sense when people arrive. That's how he knew you were here.”

We headed upstairs.

“So Julian's cool with you hanging out with Shawn?” Brenna asked.

Patrick frowned. “I don't have to run everything I do by Julian.”

It got real quiet after that for a moment. I assumed that meant the two of them had a fight or something.

“So you've spent a lot of time with Shawn?” I asked.

“Yeah. He's a little younger than us. He just turned twelve before he died.”

“That was over forty years ago,” said Brenna. “Technically, he's like fifty-something, right?”

Patrick grinned. “I guess. But you've probably noticed he doesn't act like it.”

“Has he told you anything about, you know, how he died?” I asked.

The others gathered around. I guess they were eager to know too.

Patrick turned real serious. “He hasn't told me. To be honest, I haven't asked him either. Trust me, the way you die — it's not something you really want to talk about.”

We all glanced at one another, knowing Patrick was talking from experience.

“I just thought if we learned how he died, it might help him move on,” I offered.

Patrick shook his head. “That only works in movies and TV. Truth is, no one knows why ghosts stay behind. Not even the ghosts themselves. Some think it’s because they’re scared to move on, because they don’t know what’s on the other side.”

“It’s true,” Gabby added. “The spirits the coven have contacted, they’ve said they’re sworn to secrecy not to reveal what happens after we die.”

“Sworn to who?” Miles asked.

Gabby shrugged. “They won’t tell us.”

We all stood there, quiet, letting this sink in. According to the Sullivans, when the lupoi died, they joined the Great Hunter. On the Night of the Wild Hunt, the Great Hunter was supposed to ride across the sky, followed by the spirits of deceased lupoi. Other than that, we had no idea what happened after we died. I guess some things were always meant to remain a mystery.

“What’s keeping you guys?” Shawn called out.

We headed into what must have been the master bedroom. It was empty, except for a stack of comic books and a portable DVD / CD player. Patrick told us he brought that stuff over so Shawn wouldn’t get bored.

Music leapt from the speakers. Shawn rocked out, playing air guitar, to a song that sounded like it came off the classic rock station Sheriff Ron liked to listen to.

“Wait. This is the best part.”

He cranked the volume up in time for the guitar solo and wailed away, even harder. All we could do was look at each other and laugh. For a ghost, Shawn was definitely full of life.

When the song ended, Shawn turned down the volume and joined us. “Do you guys have those crazy phones like Patrick does?”

We each nodded. Shawn insisted on seeing them. He picked mine up and studied it. I was ready to catch it in case he went intangible again.

“Wow. Can you listen to music and play games and watch TV and movies on it? And go on, what’s that called again?” he asked Patrick.

“The internet.”

“Yeah,” said Shawn. “That’s so far out. It’s like we’ve boldly gone where no man’s gone before.” He held my phone up to his ear. “Beam me

up Scotty. Set phasers to stun. Fire photon torpedoes.”

We all looked at one another, not entirely sure what Shawn was talking about.

Patrick grinned. “*Star Trek*.”

“You mean, *Star Wars*?” asked Brenna.

“No *Star Trek*,” I said. “They’re kind of old but pretty cool. I think they’re probably on Netflix.”

“Yeah, the guy who played the captain was really good in the Wonder Woman movies,” asked Gabby.

“Oh yeah. That’s right” I said.

Now it was Shawn's turn to not know what we were talking about. He looked to Patrick for an explanation.

“I haven't shown Shawn the new *Star Trek* movies yet,” said Patrick. “I've been picking up the DVDs. We're still watching the ones with the original cast.”

“You mean there were other *Star Trek* movies before those?” I asked.

Shawn shook his head. “Man, those guys got so old.”

“Well, it’s probably been a while,” Brenna pointed out.

“That's true,” said Shawn, who suddenly looked very lost. He was probably thinking about how much time had passed since he'd died. How much he'd missed.

“So who are we listening to?” I asked, hoping that would cheer him up.

It did the trick. Shawn immediately came back to life — well, figuratively speaking. “This is my man, Sly, and his band, Sly and the Family Stone. My uncle took me to see them in San Fran’. They’re the best, right up there with my man, Jimi. That’s J-I-M-I. Hendrix, that is. I saw them at Woodstock. I went with my uncle and his friends. We drove across the country in his van. Talk about far out! All those great people. All that amazing music.”

We all nodded and pretended we knew what Shawn was talking about. I had to admit the band we were listening to sounded pretty good. Really funky and easy to dance to.

There was a stack of CDs Patrick had checked out from the library. As I sifted through them, Shawn talked about each of the bands. He'd seen a lot of them live. It turned out his uncle was a musician and took him to a lot of concerts and inspired his love of music.

Shawn was curious about how Harmony had changed over the years. He sounded relieved to know some old landmarks still remained. He said he got out of the house a few times and tried to explore, but it was all too weird and “blew his mind,” so he chose to stay inside.

The whole time, I kept checking on Miles. He was quiet. He didn't join in the conversation unless someone said something to him first. Patrick was being especially nice to him. No doubt he wanted to make up for all the times he and Julian bullied him. That definitely earned him points with me — and with the others too by the looks of it.

Brody checked the time on his phone. “We need to go.”

“What do you mean you got to go?” Shawn asked. “Come on. It can't be that late.”

“Our folks said they'd be back by six,” said Brody. “It's almost a quarter past five.”

Shawn's smile wilted. “Oh. Okay.”

“I need to leave too,” said Patrick.

“Yeah. Sure. No problem. That's cool.” Shawn forced his smile back into place, no doubt trying to pretend everything was okay. But obviously it wasn't.

“You need anything else before I go?” asked Patrick.

“No, I'm cool,” said Shawn. “I got my tunes and those movies you picked out. Thanks for the comics too.”

Suddenly, I felt bad about leaving him. I think we all did.

“I'll try to stop by tomorrow,” said Patrick. “We'll hang out for a while.”

“We can come by too.” I glanced at the others. Everyone nodded. They seemed to like the idea. We said our goodbyes to Shawn and left the house.

As we headed down the block, Gabby tugged at Brody's sleeve. We all turned around. She hiked her thumb toward the house. Shawn was watching us from an upstairs window. As soon as he noticed us, he smiled, waved, and quickly disappeared from view. We all frowned, feeling bad for him all over again.

“I appreciate what you guys said,” Patrick started. “But you don't have to come back if you don't want to. I know Shawn's kind of different.”

I shrugged. “Aren't we all?”

Brody chuckled, so did Miles and the girls. Patrick smiled.

“We should get Shawn a phone,” Gabby suggested. “Do you think he could text us?”

“He'd have to learn first,” said Patrick. “And you probably noticed he hasn't quite gotten a grip yet on modern technology.”

“What we should do is encourage him to leave that house more,” said Brody. “You heard him. He said he could do it. And it's not like we can keep going back there.”

We were all in agreement there.

“Is Nikolas sending Rolfe to pick you up?” Brody asked Patrick.

“Yeah. I'll probably call from somewhere in town.”

“Why don't you come back to our house, hang out for a while?”

“You sure?” Patrick asked.

Brody nodded. One by one, we all did. Even Miles. Patrick smiled brightly.

We got back to Brody and Brenna's house with plenty of time to spare. We raided the fridge and pantry, pulling out Vitamin waters, chips, cheese and crackers, and fruit.

I was a little startled to see Patrick grab a handful of chips. He told us vampires could eat regular food. But only blood really nourished them.

The garage door rumbled open, and we all looked at each other. We'd talked about what we were going to do. Brenna insisted we say nothing, a simple but brilliant plan.

The only hitch was how do you play it cool around two parents who could literally smell the guilt on you and literally hear a lie in your voice? Brody had the same concern. Brenna still insisted we could pull it off. Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan met us in the kitchen.

“Hey, guys,” said Brenna. “How was San Fran'?”

Mrs. Sullivan's gaze narrowed. “What did you do?”

“What – I – what do you mean?” asked Brenna, desperately trying to play innocent.

Brody stood up from his chair. “We made contact with the ghost that lives in the house on Steiger Road.”

“You what?” Sheriff Ron bellowed. I swore the room actually shook.

“And who's bright idea was that?” Mrs. Sullivan added.

We all glanced at Brenna.

“Traitors,” she mumbled.

“Like we wouldn't have figured out it was you, Brenna,” said Sheriff Ron.

“She came up with the idea, but we all went along with it,” Brody continued. “We're all responsible.”

Patrick spoke up. “It's not as bad as you think. Shawn's actually a nice kid.”

“Shawn?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

“That's his name. Shawn,” Patrick continued. “He was only twelve when he died. He's been haunting that house for over forty years.”

“And that's one reason why ghosts can be dangerous,” said Sheriff Ron. “All that isolation. All that detachment. It messes them up.”

“I don't mean any disrespect, Sheriff Ron, but Shawn's not dangerous,” I said. “He's a little kooky, but he's a good kid. He's really into music too. We listened to Sly and the Family Stone. He liked this guy called Jimi Hendrix too.”

“That's J-I-M-I,” said Brody. “He was really clear on that.”

“He also said he went to something called Woodstock,” I added. “Was that some sort of big concert or something?”

“He went to Woodstock!” Sheriff Ron's eyes were the size of plates.

Mrs. Sullivan elbowed him. “Honey, we're supposed to be angry at them, remember?”

“Right.”

“Shawn's really lonely,” Brody continued. “You can totally tell. He needs friends. And aren't you always telling us we should reach out to people in need?”

Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan turned to each other. They were definitely thinking about what Brody said. I swear he should become a lawyer when he grew up.

“We'll think about it,” said Sheriff Ron.

Chapter 23

The next day, Mrs. Sullivan agreed to drive us to Shawn's house so she could meet him for herself. We were wondering how this was going to work, with the house being boarded up and all. We seriously doubted Mrs. Sullivan would climb through the back window like we did yesterday.

Turned out we didn't have to. As we were getting out of the minivan, Shawn appeared on the front lawn, right in front of us, smiling and bouncing around like he was moving to a song only he could hear.

“What's going on, guys? I felt you approaching.” He offered his hand to Mrs. Sullivan. “You must be Mama Wolf. It's nice to meet you, ma'am.”

Mama Wolf. The rest of us chuckled – until Mrs. Sullivan shot us a look out of the corner of her eye. I don't think she quite knew what to make of her new nickname.

“Thank you, Shawn. It's nice to meet you too.”

Shawn hiked his thumb towards the house. “You want to come in? Hang out for awhile?”

We all looked to Mrs. Sullivan eagerly.

“Actually, Shawn. I'm not very comfortable letting the kids spend time in an old, abandoned house.”

“Mom, that's his home you're talking about,” said Brody.

“Yeah, way to go, Mom,” added Brenna.

“No, no, it's cool. I understand,” said Shawn, hanging his head.

“What I was going to say,” Mrs. Sullivan continued. “Is why don't you come with us?”

Shawn's head whipped up. His eyes widened. “Really? You mean it?”

We all glanced at Mrs. Sullivan, surprised that Shawn had won her over so easily. Then again, we understood. He was very likable and had a sort of goofy charm. But beneath that, you could tell he was lonely. He needed friends.

“We've got to go to the grocery store first. After that, we'll head back to our house.”

“You're going into town?” Shawn didn't look that excited anymore.

“I know you got weirded-out the last time you went,” I said. “But it’ll be different this time. We’ll be with you.”

The others nodded, showing their support. Shawn hesitated at first but then managed one of his goofy smiles.

“All right. Sure. Why not?”

We led him to the minivan. Mrs. Sullivan opened the side door with her keychain remote. Shawn stopped dead in his tracks.

“Whoa! How'd you do that?!”

“The magic of modern technology,” said Gabby.

We climbed inside. Shawn stared all around as he took a seat near me.

“Wow. It's like being inside a spaceship.” He pointed to the screen suspended from the ceiling. “What's that?”

“That's so we can watch DVDs,” said Brenna.

“Really? Wow.” Shawn pointed to the buttons on the door. “What's this button do?”

“It adjusts the window,” said Miles. “Up and down.”

“Really? Wow.” Shawn pointed to another button. “What does this one do?”

“It locks and unlocks the door,” I said.

“Really? Wow.”

“Seatbelts, everyone,” said Mrs. Sullivan.

“Even Shawn?” Brody joked.

Shawn reached for his seatbelt. “No, no. That's cool. I don't want to be treated any different than anyone else.”

I caught Mrs. Sullivan smiling in the rearview mirror. Yep, it definitely looked like Shawn had won her over. She pressed the button on the dash, starting the ignition. Shawn leaned forward in his seat.

“Whoa! You started it by just pressing a button! That's amazing!”

I glanced at the others. Like me, they were trying not to laugh. They were probably afraid of hurting Shawn's feelings like I was. But it was just so cute how he was so in awe of everything.

“Warp speed, Mr. Sulu!” Shawn shouted as we pulled away from the curb.

As we drove through town, Shawn stared out the window at everything we passed. He looked kind of nervous and kept glancing at us, like he was making sure we wouldn't disappear or anything. When we

entered the grocery store, he didn't say a word and continued to stare all around. At the people. At everything.

“We'll be over at the magazines,” Brenna announced.

“Uh. No,” said Mrs. Sullivan. “You and your brother will be coming with me. The others will be at the magazines.”

Brenna was about to argue but ended up keeping her mouth shut. She followed Brody and their mother into the produce section while Shawn followed me, Gabby, and Miles to the magazines. We had to keep waiting for Shawn, because he kept getting distracted by almost everything and everyone he saw.

“Whoa!” He pointed at some girl passing by. “Look at all her tattoos! And she's got an earring in her nose! And one in her lip too! Far out!”

I cringed and was about to tell him to be quiet when Gabby reminded me no one could see or hear Shawn but us. Eventually, we made our way to the magazine aisle.

“These are all magazines?” Shawn picked one up. “Whoa. It's so smooth and shiny.”

I snatched the magazine from his hand and glanced around, so did Gabby and Miles.

“What was that for?” Shawn asked.

“No one can see you, remember?” I told him. “We don't want anyone wondering why that magazine was floating in mid-air.”

Shawn hung his head. “Oh. Yeah. Sorry.”

“It's cool,” said Gabby. “No one saw.”

“Just be careful, okay?” Miles added.

Shawn nodded. “Will do.”

He kept his hands off things after that and was content reading over our shoulders as we looked at movie and video game magazines. About a half hour later, Mrs. Sullivan, Brody, and Brenna came for us. Mrs. Sullivan paid for the groceries, and we helped load them into the back of the minivan.

As we drove through town again, Shawn seemed a lot more relaxed. When we got to the Sullivans' house, he went exploring, walking through the walls, from room to room, while the rest of us helped put away groceries.

We were ready to head into the living room to play video games when the doorbell rang. Mrs. Sullivan went to answer it and came back with

Patrick.

“Hey, Pat!” Shawn shouted. “What's up, man?”

Patrick waved nervously. “Hey. I went by Shawn's, but he wasn't there. I thought maybe he might be here.”

“You thought right,” said Shawn. “Come on, join the party.”

Patrick glanced around hesitantly. We all smiled, making him feel welcome.

“We were going to play Xbox,” said Brody. “You play Street Fighter?”

Patrick smiled. “You kidding? That's my game.”

He followed us into the living room. Brody and Patrick were up first. Wow, Patrick was good. He wasn't kidding when he said Street Fighter was his game. He actually managed to beat Brody, who was usually able to whip all of us.

As we continued playing, Shawn stared at the screen the whole time, amazed by what he saw. Miles was up next. A few minutes later, Sheriff Ron strolled in and said hello to everyone.

“You must be Shawn,” he said, extending his hand.

“You must be Papa Wolf. Nice to meet you, sir.”

Sheriff Ron nodded. Unlike Mrs. Sullivan, he seemed to like his new nickname. The two talked for a couple minutes about music before Sheriff Ron invited Shawn into his den to listen to some records. He followed Sheriff Ron out. Later, we heard Shawn shout.

“Whoa! El Dorado, city of gold!”

Me, Brody, Brenna, and Gabby glanced at each other. This we had to see. When we got to the den, we saw Shawn staring at Sheriff Ron's record collection. He looked like he was about to fall to his knees in worship. He and Sheriff Ron sifted through the records.

“You got the Stones, the Doors, Jimi. Can we listen to something?”

“Absolutely,” said Sheriff Ron. He set an album on the record player and turned it on.

Shawn stood by the speakers.

“Oh, man. Listen to those crackles and pops. It's so alive. Yes!”

Shawn yelled as the music started. He alternated between air guitar and air drums. Sheriff Ron watched him. He was as amused as we were. I had to hand it to Shawn. He was so uninhibited and not the least bit self-conscious. I don't think I had the guts to pull that off.

Halfway through the album, Shawn finally started to settle down. He and Sheriff Ron talked music. Shawn was upset to hear how someone named Jim Morrison had died, along with Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and a bunch of other people whose names I didn't recognize.

Miles soon came in and told Brenna it was her turn to play Patrick at Street Fighter. Me, Gabby, and Brody made our way back into the living room.

We let Shawn stay behind. He was having way too much fun hanging out with Sheriff Ron, and we didn't want to interrupt them. He eventually rejoined us and was even willing to try playing Street Fighter. He didn't do too bad for someone who'd never played video games before.

About an hour later, Kesler came to pick up Patrick. We paused the game and followed him to the door to say goodbye. Kesler thanked Sheriff Ron and Mrs. Sullivan for letting Patrick stay and seemed pleased that he was making friends with us.

"Nikolas?" Patrick started to ask. "Can we –?" He glanced off to the side, indicating he wanted to talk in private.

Kesler followed him. The two talked quietly and glanced back at us. We wondered what that was all about. Finally, they rejoined us. Patrick stood tense. Kesler too.

"You all know what happened to Patrick," Kesler started. "How he was abducted by a vampire and turned."

We all nodded, one after the other. Patrick bowed his head a little. The look on his face – it was like he was remembering everything that had happened that day.

"Well," Kesler sighed. "It's been several months. I'd like to take him to his hometown so he can see his family and friends one last time. I'm hoping it will provide him some closure. It would be in secret of course."

"And you want the kids to go with you?" Mrs. Sullivan asked.

"That was Patrick's idea." Kesler smiled. "I'm glad he's been spending some time with you. I know all of you will be a wonderful influence on him."

I couldn't help feeling flattered. The others were too, by the looks of it. Brody and Brenna turned to their parents.

"Is it okay?" Brody asked. "I think we'd all like to go."

He glanced at us. We each nodded. Miles was the last to agree. He still didn't seem all that comfortable around Patrick, but since we were all going I guess he didn't want to be left behind.

"I better come with you then." Sheriff Ron cracked a half smile. "Help keep these little animals in line."

"Thank you," said Kesler. "I really appreciate this."

Chapter 24

The trip was planned for the following Saturday. That morning, Mrs. Sullivan picked me up, then Miles, and then Shawn. The St. Clairs' driver dropped Gabby off. She was just in time to enjoy a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice and one of Mrs. Sullivan's warm-out-of-the-oven blueberry muffins with the rest of us.

Kesler and Patrick arrived. And Julian was with them.

"Gee. You all look so happy to see me," he said.

Everyone fidgeted nervously except for me. I stepped up and held out my fist for Julian to bump. "How's it going?" I asked.

"Good."

Sheriff Ron then approached and shook Julian's hand. Brody and Brenna begrudgingly followed, as did Gabby. Miles stood where he was.

Julian smiled. "Miles, how's it going?"

Miles grumbled a reply. Julian seemed a little put off but didn't make a big deal over it. He smiled to Shawn.

"You must be Shawn." Julian glanced at Patrick. "Nice to finally meet you."

"We should head out now," said Kesler.

Sheriff Ron turned to the rest of us. "Why don't you all pile into the minivan. We're going to follow Mr. Kesler."

"Shawn, you're welcome to ride with us," Kesler offered.

Shawn nodded and followed him, Patrick, and Julian to Kesler's Mercedes. Rolfe held the doors open for them as they sat inside.

Brenna called *shotgun* and hopped into the front seat next to her dad. Brody and Gabby got in next. I was about to follow when I noticed Miles just standing there, staring at the ground.

"Come on, Miles. We got to go," I told him.

"I can't go. Not with Julian around."

"He's not going to do anything. Not with all of us there, especially Kesler."

That wasn't enough to convince Miles.

“Look, Julian saved my life, remember? I think he wants to change. He really does. Do it for me, okay?”

Miles grumbled then said, “Okay.”

Me, Brody, Brenna, Gabby, and Miles got into the minivan. Sheriff Ron followed Kesler's Mercedes. We took two freeways south toward Patrick's hometown, Los Gatos. It was a long trip so we stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant. The vampires had already *fed* but ordered food anyway and ate, so they didn't look out of place.

We were soon back in the car. When we finally arrived in Los Gatos, we stopped at a gas station. Kesler insisted on paying for gas like he did our lunch. He also gave us money to buy drinks at the station's mini-mart. Brenna ran ahead of us but stopped short. Something on the bulletin board outside the door caught her eye.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” said Brenna, even though she was obviously trying to hide something.

Brody pushed her aside.

Brenna gasped. “Rude much?!”

Brody was about to say something back to her. Instead, he froze. We gathered around to see what he was looking at. It was a picture of Patrick on a faded missing poster.

“Oh, wow,” said Gabby.

We looked to Patrick. He stared at his image on the poster and shuddered. We were concerned, but he forced a smile and waved us off.

“I'm okay,” he said and headed back to Kesler's Mercedes.

Our first stop, after that, was the local mall where Patrick's friends liked to hang out. Gabby cast a glamour on Patrick, changing his appearance so he could see his friends without them recognizing him. After that, we stopped at a park where his little brother, Davy, was playing basketball with some friends.

The whole time, Patrick looked so distraught, especially when he saw his brother. He trembled and looked like he wanted to run up and tell him who he was and that he was still alive. I rested my hand on his shoulder. Patrick smiled appreciatively.

The others did their best to show their support too. Except for Julian. He might have had good intentions when he said he wanted to come with

us, but he seemed so uncomfortable, even agitated. It was like he had no clue how to deal with the emotions Patrick was experiencing.

From the park, it was a short walk to Patrick's house. His mom and dad were pulling weeds in the front yard. A yellow lab lay curled up on the porch.

We walked past the house, trying to act like we were out for a stroll or on our way to visit someone. The yellow lab's head shot up. Its ears perked. He must have recognized Patrick's scent, because he raced over, tail wagging and barking excitedly. Patrick stopped and smiled as the lab rested its front paws on the picket fence and began kissing his face.

Patrick's mom came over. "Lucky! Silly boy. What're you doing?"

"It's okay," said Patrick, his voice hoarse like he was holding back tears.

Patrick's dad approached, smiling just as friendly as his wife. "I don't know what's gotten into him. He's usually shy around strangers."

"I know," Patrick let slip. He caught himself a little too late.

We all exchanged worried glances. Patrick's parents looked puzzled.

"Are you new to the neighborhood?" his dad asked.

"Just passing through," said Kesler.

"Okay. Well, enjoy your stay."

"We will. Thank you."

Patrick's mother was strangely silent. The way she stared at him – it was almost like she recognized him through Gabby's glamour, but – no way. That was impossible.

Kesler put his arm around Patrick and gently led him away. Patrick forced himself to follow. His mother stared at him as we walked off. Lucky whimpered and whined, wanting Patrick to return. Patrick looked like he was trying to keep from running back to his parents, just like he did with his brother.

When we finally got back to the park, Patrick couldn't hold it in any longer. He burst into tears. Kesler gave him a fatherly hug. The rest of us stood by, showing our sympathy and support – except for Julian, who I swore looked disgusted.

"Let's go back to Harmony, please," Patrick said once he'd composed himself.

The cars were parked nearby. We drove back without stopping. In the minivan, all we talked about was Patrick. None of us could imagine what he

must've been going through. We all hoped he'd be okay.

I also thought about Julian and the way he was acting. What was up with that? Why was he so upset?

We stopped at Kesler's house first. Patrick thanked us for going. We could tell it meant a lot to him. We traded phone numbers and said to call or text us whenever he felt like it.

Julian stared at us, as disgusted as he was earlier. "So you got to see your family," he told Patrick. "Good for you. Can we get on with our lives now?"

We all stared at Julian in shock. How could he say such a thing?

Julian then sneered and added, "If I'd known you were going to act so pathetic, I'd never have gone with you. Seriously, I'm embarrassed to call you my friend now."

Patrick lunged forward and punched Julian in the mouth. Julian staggered but didn't fall. Me and Brody grabbed Patrick, who looked like he was about to take another swing. Kesler and Sheriff Ron stood in front of Julian in case he tried to attack. He didn't. He just dabbed blood from his lip and smiled, showing off red-stained teeth.

"Didn't hurt," he said.

Patrick tried to get at Julian again, but me and Brody had a tight grip on him. Kesler steered Julian towards the front door. "Inside. I'll deal with you later."

Julian pushed Kesler's arm away. "What are you going to do? Kick me out of Harmony? You might as well." He glanced at us, me especially. "I don't belong here."

We watched Julian disappear into the house. Kesler turned towards us, forcing a smile.

"I'm sorry you had to witness that. Thank you again for coming with us. I just wish the day could have ended on a better note."

"That's all right," said Sheriff Ron.

We said our goodbyes then headed toward the minivan. On the way, I noticed Julian watching us from an upstairs window. His gaze was so intense I could feel it, even that far away.

Chapter 25

The next Monday, at school, we were hanging out before the first bell rang when Patrick approached – along with Julian. Julian stopped short, looking nervous. Patrick urged him forward. Julian walked the last few steps toward us and – he apologized. He actually apologized.

The others seemed cool with it. But now I was the one doubting Julian's motives. I kept thinking about the way he mad-dogged us, me specifically, when we left Kesler's house on Saturday. But I wasn't getting a menacing vibe off him. Neither were Brody or Brenna, so I guess things were all right.

Julian and Patrick stayed and hung out with us until the bell rang. They even walked with me and Brody on our way to homeroom.

During Language Arts, we discussed the latest novel we were reading. I was on my game that day. I had answers for every question Mrs. Walker asked. She looked impressed which, believe me, didn't happen very often.

"Hey fellas. What's up?" said Shawn, appearing out of nowhere.

Me and Brody both jumped in our seats. Everyone turned our way. Mrs. Walker gave us an evil look.

"Sorry," said Brody, swatting at an imaginary insect.

Mrs. Walker resumed her lesson. She shivered and so did the rest of the kids in class. A couple of them complained about how cold it had suddenly gotten. That happened whenever Shawn was around. Being lupoi, me and Brody weren't as effected as much as they were. We even enjoyed the cold like wolves did.

"Wow, I can't believe I'm actually here," said Shawn. "All I did was think about you guys. Next thing I knew, here I am. Whoa, is that Mrs. Walker? She taught here when I went to this school! Man, she was old even back then! She's got to be like a hundred now!"

"Will you keep it down, please?" I whispered to Shawn.

"What? Oh, yeah. You guys need to concentrate. I get it. Education's important." Shawn giggled. "Man, I'm so glad I don't have to go to school anymore."

He quieted down after that. After Language Arts, he joined me, Brenna, and Gabby during Bio' but got bored and left. I didn't see Shawn again until about lunchtime. He caught up with me and Brody as we headed to our lockers.

"Stop it! Leave me alone!" we heard Miles cry out.

We ran to see what was going on. A group of boys surrounded Miles. A sixth grader named Jon held his arms while a seventh grader named Chaz tried to shove half a sandwich into his mouth.

"Don't! Stop!" Miles begged.

"What was that? Don't stop?" Chaz laughed. "Okay."

"Get away from him, Chaz!" Brody ordered. "Now!"

"What, we're just conducting a little scientific experiment," said Chaz. "We heard Miles can't eat meat or dairy or wheat. We just want to see what happens when he eats this sandwich."

I slapped the sandwich out of his hand. "Experiment over."

Chaz glared at me. "You shouldn't have done that."

"You need to back off now," said Brody.

"What are you going to do about it? Tell your dad?"

"I don't need my dad to help me handle someone like you," Brody answered.

I stood at his left, ready to back him up.

"Are you serious?" asked Chaz, who towered over me and Brody. "There's five of us and two of you."

"Five to three," said Brenna, who moved to Brody's right side.

Chaz and his friends laughed at her.

"Really?" he asked.

"She's tougher than she looks. Trust me," I said.

Brenna grinned, obviously appreciating the compliment.

"You want to know how tough I am," she told Chaz. "Ask Jon. I kicked his butt real good in fifth grade."

Chaz and his friends stared at Jon, who got immediately flustered. "I'd been sick. I just got over bronchitis."

Brenna mimicked him. "*I'd been sick. I just got over bronchitis.* What a girl!"

Jon got enraged. It looked like it was on.

"Jon. Chaz. Step off."

We turned to see Julian and Patrick standing behind us. Chaz and Jon settled down quick.

Chaz grinned. "Hey, Julian, Pat, what's up?"

"Leave Miles alone from now on, got it?"

Chaz, Jon, and the rest of their friends stared at each other confused.

"Got it?" Julian repeated.

Chaz led Jon and the others away. We went to check on Miles.

"You okay?" I asked.

Miles nodded then looked to Julian. "Thanks."

"No need," said Julian. "I owe you. Big time."

Miles smiled appreciatively.

Julian and Patrick had lunch with us. Brody invited them to hang out after school. Patrick looked like he wanted to go. All we got from Julian was, "We'll see."

At the end of the day, we all met up at the front gate as usual. No Miles though. I caught up with a kid named Chris. He was in the same Geometry class as Miles and told us he'd gone home sick.

We tried to text Miles, but he didn't reply. I tried calling him but got his voicemail. Brody convinced me not to worry. This wasn't the first time Miles had gone home sick.

"He'll call us later," said Brody.

It was just me, Brody, and Brenna that afternoon. Gabby had to help her parents with some coven business. Patrick said he'd swing by our house after he'd fed. Shawn decided to wait with him then come over later.

Since it was just the three of us, we decided to get in some training by playing our version of hide-and-seek. I was "it." It seemed like I was always "it." I gave Brody and Brenna a five-minute head start. They Changed and dashed into the woods.

Once time was up, I Changed and set off after them. Brody and Brenna were good at hiding their scents, so when I easily caught Brody's I knew something was up. It was either a false trail or he was trying to lead me into an ambush. Either way, I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

I picked up Brenna's scent a little later. It was faint, but I was able to follow it. It led to a dense grove of trees. I soon lost her scent and sniffed around, trying to find it again. A shift in the breeze and I caught it. She was right above me.

I looked up in time to see Brenna drop from a tree branch. I dove out of the way and came up in a fighting stance. Brenna landed on all fours. We locked eyes, snarling and growling at each other.

I waited, and as expected Brenna, who wasn't exactly known for her patience, charged me. I went down low, came up, and drove her to the ground.

Brenna rolled and used my momentum to throw me. I recovered and turned to face her. She slashed with her claws. I felt the wind off them as I ducked. She slashed at me, again and again, not giving me a chance to regroup. I had to keep dodging and evading until I could find an opening.

She finally gave me one when she overextended one of her strikes. It left her off balance. I tackled her to the ground. She struggled to get up, but I turned her over and pinned her arms and legs to the ground. My jaws clamped around her throat. Brenna ceased fighting, admitting defeat. She Changed back into human form. So did I.

I grinned, wanting to gloat. Instead, all I could do was stare at Brenna, her hair wild, her cheeks flushed, her eyes dazzling and bright. Brenna stared back at me. My face hovered inches over hers. Our hearts pounded. We were both breathing raggedly.

“Dillon! Brenna!”

We leapt to our feet. It was Shawn. He'd “popped-in” out of nowhere again. Brenna and I were both annoyed – until we noticed the panicked look on his face.

“What is it?” I asked. “What's wrong?”

“It's Patrick. He's in trouble.”

Shawn was too flustered to go into any detail. I told him to go back to Patrick. We'd be there as soon as we could. Shawn nodded then “popped-out.”

We Changed and raced to the southern woods, near Kesler's mansion, close to where we'd fought the dracs. We caught Patrick's scent and followed it. Shawn was helping him up. He was hurt and could barely make it to his feet. Me and Brenna Changed back to human form and ran to help him.

“What happened?” I asked.

“It was Julian. I knew he was up to something. He – he turned Miles.”

Me and Brenna exchanged a frightened look.

“When I got here, it was already too late. Miles just laid there, his neck bleeding. I lost it and attacked Julian. He kept saying Miles wanted him to do it. We fought. I had him down, but then Miles got up and hit me from behind. They both attacked me. Knocked me out.” He sniffed. “Why would anyone want to be turned on purpose? Why would anyone want this?”

I didn't know either. I knew Miles had been feeling scared and powerless. But to have Julian turn him into a vampire – what was he thinking?

I looked to Brenna, not knowing what to do.

“You should find them. See if you can help,” she said. “I'll get my parents and Brody.”

Her hand brushed mine. It made my skin tingle.

“Be careful,” she added.

I already had Miles and Julian's scents. I Changed and followed them. My paws devoured the earth as I ran. Miles and Julian left an easy trail to follow. Either they didn't count on being tracked or they didn't care.

I soon found myself in familiar territory. Miles' house was up ahead. He and Julian were inside. I could hear the screams and smell the fear coming from Miles' parents.

And from my parents too.

Chapter 26

Dang. Of all the afternoons Mom and Dad could have visited the Coens. I circled around the back of the house and vaulted over the fence into the backyard. There were screams and the sound of crashing furniture and breaking glass. The smell of fear was almost overpowering, so was the rage coming from Miles.

I crashed through the patio door. The room was a mess. Furniture had been tossed around and shattered glass was everywhere. Mom and Dad and Mrs. Coen huddled in a corner. Julian stood over them, with crimson eyes and a mouth full of jagged fangs.

Mr. Coen lay at the other end of the room, weeping like a baby. Miles loomed over him. He turned to face me. I barely recognized him. He grinned at me, showing off his new eyes and fangs.

“Hey, Dillon. Guess what I did today.”

Behind me, Julian laughed while Mrs. Coen cried. I glanced at my parents. They stared at me numb. I returned my attention to Miles and Changed back into human form.

“Miles. Don't do this.”

“Why not? He's done nothing but make me miserable! Harassing me! Putting me down! Insulting me in front of people! Yelling at me! Yelling at my mom! Making me scared in my own house!” Miles snarled at his dad. “Now he knows what it feels like.”

Mr. Coen was crying and almost hyperventilating. “Miles. Son.”

“Oh, now I'm your son?!” Miles screamed. “After all these years of acting like you were ashamed of me, now I'm your son?!”

Miles hurled a chair at his dad. He missed intentionally, but Mr. Coen still cried out. He covered his head with his arms and wept uncontrollably.

Mrs. Coen pleaded. “Miles. Please, don't do this — ”

“Shut up! Just shut up! You're as bad as he is! You let him treat me like garbage! You did nothing to stop him!”

Mrs. Coen shuddered and sobbed. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

“Too late.” Miles sneered and returned his attention to his dad.

“Miles!” I roared, getting his attention.

I gazed into his eyes. There was barely a glimmer of the kid I knew, and that glimmer was flickering, threatening to die out. Years of pent-up rage had rushed to the surface. It was almost as if his new vampire power, not to mention the hunger for blood, was amplifying his rage and causing it to consume him whole.

“Listen to me,” I said. “You don't want to do this.”

“Yes, I do!” Miles yelled. “I don't understand you, Dillon! The power you've got, if it's anything like mine — why do you let your parents treat you the way they do? Like an animal?”

Miles' aggression fed mine. I fought to keep it in check.

Miles cocked his head toward his dad then his mom. “Once I'm done with them, I'm going after everyone who's ever hurt me.”

And with that, I saw the last bit of Miles' humanity vanish. I Changed. Mom screamed. I turned in time to see Julian leaping at me from across the room. I was ready to defend myself. But Miles jumped on my back. He dug his talons into my shoulders and went for my throat, but I turned away. His fangs sank into my neck muscles instead.

I bellowed in pain, trying to shake Miles off, but he clung to me. Meanwhile, Julian just stood where he was, watching me and Miles fight.

I battered Miles against a wall repeatedly until he let go. He dropped to the ground but leapt at me like a cat. I was barely able to dive out of the way. Miles was seriously fast now, faster than me. The only advantage I had was I knew how to fight, and he didn't.

Miles slashed wildly with his talons and snapped at me with his fangs. I ducked and dodged until I finally got an opening. My claws raked his thigh and brought him down.

I stood over Miles. He was no longer in vampire-mode. His eyes had returned to normal, and his fangs had retracted. He ignored his leg wound. He was in the grip of an even worse pain.

He held himself, shaking. “Oh my God. Dillon, what did I do? Help me!”

I stepped back. Miles was fighting against the effects of the vampire venom flowing through his veins. My friend was still hanging in there, trying to stay human. But what could I do? How could I help him?

Julian screamed as he flew at me. He was too fast. I couldn't avoid his talons completely and had to settle for rolling with the attack to minimize

the damage.

He followed up quickly and slashed my stomach. He was relentless. All I could do was roll with his attacks. I soon had cuts all over my arms and upper body.

I managed to land a couple good shots, but they weren't enough to bring Julian down. I tried to dodge another of his attacks but found myself off-balance. My legs went out from under me, and I landed on my back. I scrambled to my feet but suddenly felt weak from blood loss.

Julian cast a glance at Miles as he stalked towards me. "I had plans for Miles. He was going to be the first member of my new gang. You see, I'm leaving Harmony – for a while. I'm going to put together a crew, recruit on a massive scale. I'll come back and take over this town. I'll start with Kesler, then the St. Clairs and the Sullivans." He licked the tips of his fangs. "I'll make sure to take my time with Brenna."

I growled. A new strength filled me. I no longer felt my wounds. I lunged at Julian, catching him off-guard. He fought back, slashing with his talons. I held up my arms to protect myself.

With a roar, I threw all my strength and energy into my next attack and managed to knock Julian to the ground. He screamed as I buried my claws into his shoulders, pinning him down. I reared my head back, ready to tear out his throat — only I stopped short when I spotted my parents' reaction out of the corner of my eye. The look of horror on both their faces was too much for me to take.

Julian snarled at me. "Do it! Come on!" He stared at me, daring me to finish him. Then his lips trembled. He started to cry. "Do it. Please. Do it."

I pulled my claws from Julian's shoulders and stood up.

"That's good, Dillon," said Sheriff Ron. "We've got it from here."

He'd just arrived along with the St. Clairs, Kesler, and Rolfe. I Changed back and went to check on Mom and Dad, to see if they were okay, but they cringed and shrank away from me.

Sheriff Ron came to check on me. My wounds had healed when I Changed back, but patches of my t-shirt were soaked with blood. There were also bloodstains all over the Coen s' living room from my fight with Miles and Julian.

Kesler and Rolfe were mesmerized by the blood. Their eyes turned to crimson orbs. Their lips parted, revealing their fangs. I stepped behind Sheriff Ron.

But apparently Kesler and Rolfe had a lot of practice resisting their hunger. Both forced their eyes away. Their features returned to normal.

Next thing I knew, a green light swept across the room. The blood stains vanished, so did the blood on my shirt. You couldn't even smell it anymore. I knew who to thank for that.

“There now. That should remove any possible temptation for our Nosferatu friends,” said Mr. St. Clair.

Kesler smiled in relief. Rolfe nodded, expressing his thanks.

“Someone please tell us what’s going on,” Mrs. Coen begged.

“Don’t worry, dear,” said Mrs. St. Clair. “We’ve got the situation well under control.”

The stone in her necklace glowed. The Coens and Mom and Dad immediately fell asleep. Rolfe retrieved Julian, who didn’t try to fight or run away. He just stood there looking meek and pathetic.

“Miles!”

I ran past the adults to his side. He still lay on the floor, clutching himself and shaking.

The St. Clairs and Kesler gently pushed me aside. Mrs. St. Clair healed his leg wound.

“He’s only recently turned,” said Kesler. “The venom hasn’t been metabolized completely.” To the St. Clairs. “There’s still a chance.”

Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair each took one of Miles’ hands. His body glowed as they flooded him with healing energy. He twitched and jerked. I tried to run to him, but Sheriff Ron held me back.

Miles went completely limp.

“His heart has stopped,” said Mrs. St. Clair.

Mr. St. Clair placed his hand on Miles’ chest. His ring glowed. Miles’ body jumped, like in a hospital TV show when they applied those electric paddles to a patient.

His eyes popped open. He drew a huge breath.

“Is he?—” I asked.

Mr. St. Clair nodded. “He’s fine. We purged his body of the vampire venom.”

I sighed with relief and knelt next to Miles. “How you doing, buddy?”

“Okay.” With a sad smile. “Never thought I’d be so happy to be my old self.”

I chuckled. Tears gathered in Miles’ eyes.

“Dillon, I’m so sorry.”

“Forget it. You weren’t yourself.”

Sheriff Ron helped Miles to his feet. “I think you should probably rest awhile, kiddo.”

Miles nodded. Sheriff Ron walked him upstairs. Kesler turned to Julian, who shrank from his glare. “You won’t have to worry about this one anymore. I can promise you that.”

He and Rolfe started for the door. Rolfe steered Julian. His catcher’s mitt of a hand clutched the back of his neck.

“Mr. Kesler,” I called out.

He stopped but told Rolfe to take Julian to the car.

“I’m really sorry about Julian,” I said.

Kesler smiled. “Don’t be. It’s not your fault.”

“I think he really tried. I think, for a while, he wanted to be good.”

“And perhaps given more time, he could. But he was right, what he said the other day, he doesn’t belong here.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” I asked, fearing the worst.

“I’ll send him to San Francisco. He’ll be in the custody of the Red League.”

“The vampire police?”

Kesler nodded. “Don’t worry, Dillon. I haven’t given up on him yet. After all, if a monster like me can find the path to redemption, anything’s possible.”

I smiled and offered him my hand. He shook it then left to catch up with Rolfe and Julian. The St. Clairs used their magic to clean up the damage done to the Coens’ living room. It only took a few seconds. When they were finished, you’d never have known anything had happened there at all.

“So what’s next?” I asked.

“We’ll wipe their memories,” said Mr. St. Clair. “They’ll have no recall of what happened here today.”

I looked to my parents. “Do we have to wipe their memories? Can we give them a chance? Please?”

Sheriff Ron looked to Mr. St. Clair. “It’s your call.”

Mr. St. Clair turned to his wife.

“We could always wipe their memories later. If we need to,” she said.

Mr. St. Clair pointed at my parents. His ring glowed. Mom and Dad woke up almost immediately. They rose slowly to their feet.

“What? What happened?” asked Dad. “What's going on? Miles – that other boy.”

“Why don't we have a seat?” said Mrs. St. Clair. “We have a lot to tell you.”

Mom and Dad stood where they were, trying not to look at the Coens, who were still asleep on the floor. I sat with Sheriff Ron and the St. Clairs, who began telling them about Harmony and everything that had happened since we moved here. As they did, Mom and Dad's legs buckled a bit and they found themselves sitting on the nearby loveseat.

Dad shook his head. Mom stared out the patio doors, her face expressionless.

“All this time you've been sneaking around behind our backs?” Dad finally said to me.

My gaze dropped to the floor. Sheriff Ron rested his hand on my shoulder. I glanced up and caught him glaring at my parents.

“Maybe Dillon wouldn't have had to lie if you and your wife had been more accepting of who he really is,” he told them.

Mom and Dad were ruffled by this remark. Mr. St. Clair jumped in, “And because Dillon was a lupoi, he was able to save your lives today.”

“A what?” asked Mom.

“A lupoi,” said Sheriff Ron. “That's what we call ourselves. Not werewolves.”

“Obviously, you have a lot to learn,” Mrs. St. Clair added.

Dad rose from the loveseat. Mom too. “That won't be necessary,” he said. “We'll be leaving Harmony as soon as possible.”

I shot up from my seat. “No!”

Sheriff Ron and the St. Clairs stood up too.

“That's not necessary,” said Mr. St. Clair. “Now that you're aware of everything, there are provisions we can take to ensure your safety.”

“You've got to be out of your mind!” Dad yelled.

Mr. St. Clair grimaced, obviously trying to maintain his cool. “I'm afraid leaving Harmony won't solve the problem. The supernatural exists everywhere. No matter where you go Dillon could easily be targeted, simply for being a lupoi.”

Mom suddenly looked horrified. She moved beside Dad, leaning against his shoulder as he draped his arm around her.

“Stay in Harmony,” said Sheriff Ron. “Like Leo said, we can protect you.”

“Dillon’s proven he can protect you as well,” said Mrs. St. Clair.

I smiled proudly.

“And he's happy here," said Sheriff Ron. "He's with people who understand him and accept him for who he is.”

Dad stared at Sheriff Ron in disgust, and so did Mom.

“People? You have no right calling yourselves *people!*” he yelled. “You're freaks! You're monsters! All of you!”

“So am I, Dad.” All eyes turned to me now. “I'm just like Sheriff Ron and his family. Am I a freak? A monster? Is that what you really think about me?”

Mom and Dad looked at each other, suddenly ashamed. They stood there silent for a moment. I thought Mom might cry.

Instead, she straightened her shoulders and said, “We’ll stay.”

“What?” Dad exclaimed.

“We’re staying. We have to try. We owe Dillon that much.”

Dad opened his mouth as if he was about to argue. He then sighed and said, “Fine.”

My eyes were wide. My smile practically reached from ear-to-ear. I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. After everything that had happened, my parents were still willing to stay in Harmony.

And they were willing to do it for me.

Chapter 27

Mr. St. Clair worked his hands like a puppeteer. The Coens stood and walked across the room like marionettes. He sat them on the big sectional sofa, their heads draped over the back like they'd fallen asleep.

Mom watched fascinated. Dad tried to watch but ended up turning away.

“I’m afraid you’ll need to stay,” said Mrs. St. Clair. “Do your best to act as if nothing happened. Then excuse yourself early. Leo and I will meet you at your house after we’ve gone home and gathered what we’ll need to cast a protection spell for your house.”

Mom nodded okay, looking relieved. I couldn’t tell what Dad was thinking.

Before I left, Mr. St. Clair stopped me. “Dillon, I just want to let you know that when I wipe the Coens’ memories, I’ll ‘reprogram’ Mr. Coen a bit. Make sure he’s kinder to Miles and his mother. Normally, I don’t like doing such a thing. But considering the circumstances, I’m willing to make an exception.” He winked.

I thanked him and knew Miles would too when he found out. Sheriff Ron drove me back to his house. As soon as I got through the door, Brenna threw her arms around me.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” she told me.

I put my arms around her. It was nice. I didn’t want her to let go. Mrs. Sullivan looked happy to see us together. Sheriff Ron and Brody, on the other hand, looked a bit uncomfortable.

I headed upstairs to clean up and change my clothes. Mrs. Sullivan made me a couple turkey sandwiches. Brody and Brenna sat with me at the kitchen table while I ate and told them about what had happened with Miles and Julian.

Brenna stared at me the entire time. She told me how brave I was and how happy she was that my parents decided to stay in Harmony. The whole time, Brody kept giving us these weird looks.

I finished my last sandwich when Mrs. Sullivan came in to tell me she'd drive me home. Brody said goodbye but stayed behind in the kitchen. Brenna walked with me. We trailed behind Mrs. Sullivan, who disappeared into the garage.

“So ... um ...” she started to say.

“Uh ... yeah ...” was my brilliant response.

We both giggled. Next thing I knew, Brenna planted a quick kiss on my lips. My body lit up. My brain shut down for a moment.

Brenna laughed. “You look like such a dork right now.”

“Shut up.”

I moved in to kiss her. Brenna stood still and closed her eyes. I did too. Mrs. Sullivan cleared her throat. Me and Brenna both jumped. Her face was bright red. So was mine.

“Dillon? Are you ready?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

I nodded and hurried to catch up with her.

“Can I go with?” Brenna asked in a perky voice.

Mrs. Sullivan shook her head and mouthed the word no. Brenna pouted then gave me a playful wave. I waved back. Mrs. Sullivan grabbed my sleeve. “Let's go, Romeo.”

On the way to the car, I built up the nerve to ask, “So you're really okay with me and Brenna, you know, that we ‘like-like’ each other?”

Mrs. Sullivan reached for my hand. “I trust you, Dillon. And I trust my daughter. But if you break her heart, I will rip your throat out.”

I swallowed nervously. I mean, she could actually do that.

Mrs. Sullivan laughed. “I'm kidding.”

I sighed in relief. “What about Sheriff Ron and Brody?”

“To be honest, I think we all saw this coming. Ron and Brody'll get used to it. Just treat her right. They'll come around.”

I smiled. “Deal.”

Mrs. Sullivan drove me home. The St. Clairs were just leaving when we arrived. We passed them as they were pulling out of the driveway. Mrs. Sullivan came inside with me. She had an interesting chat with Mom about the protection spell the St. Clairs had cast around the house. Mom sounded fascinated.

She then asked to talk to Mrs. Sullivan in private. They disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me and Dad to stand there in an awkward silence.

Finally, I held up my backpack and said, “I should go drop this off upstairs.”

“Right. Did you get your homework done?”

“Yeah. Before the – you know, big fight.”

“Right. Good. Say, uh, for dinner tonight. Why don’t I head to the store, pick us up some steaks? I think we can finally get off that stupid vegetarian diet.”

I smiled. “That sounds great.”

We had an awesome dinner, steaks, baked potatoes with everything on them, and corn on the cob. Man, I couldn’t remember the last time we ate like that.

After dinner, we watched some TV. Mom and Dad even let me pick the program. We didn’t stay up too late. Mom and Dad were pretty exhausted. I didn’t blame them. They’d had a lot thrown at them.

It took me a while to fall asleep. I laid in bed, watching some *Family Guy* reruns until I finally dozed off. I woke up at around two in the morning. It was almost time to meet the Sullivans for patrol. I crept from my room and headed downstairs.

“Dillon,” Mom called out.

She and Dad stood at the top of the stairs in their robes and pajamas.

“Are you going – out?” Mom asked.

I nodded, waiting for them to tell me to get back to my room.

“All right,” she said.

Wow. Really? So they were cool with this? No more sneaking around.

“Stay safe,” said Mom.

“I will.”

I continued towards the patio door when Mom called out to me again.

“Dillon, can we – can we see you Change?”

Dad shot her a look like she was out of her mind. I had to admit it was a strange request, but at the same time I was touched. She was really trying to get used to this. And accept me for who I was.

Mom and Dad followed me outside, pulling their robes tighter against the cold. This was weird – Changing in front of them. As I did, Mom and Dad looked on, shocked and uneasy. I felt their fear spike.

When I finished, I stood there, allowing them to get a good look at me in the moonlight. I could hear Mom’s heart pumping like crazy, but she still

stepped forward and stroked the fur on my muzzle. I nuzzled her hand in return.

Dad turned around and headed back to the house. He couldn't get away quick enough. Mom looked just as disappointed in him as I did. She returned her attention to me and smiled.

I growled softly and began to run. Mom stayed and watched as I leapt over the back wall. From there, I ran across the field and into the waiting arms of the forest.

THE END

CHAPTER ONE
Blank

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 bought him up as one of their own.

Follow him at:

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